Two years passed before Hikaru admitted, reluctantly, that possession by a spirit seemed to have long-lasting side effects which probably wouldn’t go away on their own.
Chapter 1

It took two years for things to truly begin to change, and it began with his holiday.

Hikaru booked off the week of May 5th two months in advance, making certain that the Institute would schedule nothing official for him in any way during those seven days. This meant that when people bugged him to attend the Go Institute festival occurring at the start of the month, he could shut them down as thoroughly as he wanted. Over the weeks leading up to his time off, Hikaru had to do this frequently and insistently, as people refused to believe that he would miss any sort of easily accessible Go event. This was to be expected, considering normally you couldn’t keep Hikaru away from Go events any more than you could bully a river into flowing the wrong way.

Waya was the one who initiated the fuss. He was also the one to escalate it into a disproportionately large fuss. It began with a simple, somewhat haughty question: “Are you teaching at the festival?” He asked, following it with “I hear Touya is. But he’s, you know, five dans higher than you, so…” The boy smirked at him, apparently happy to ignore that he was the same official rank as Hikaru and therefore just as many dan grades inferior to Touya.

“He’s not going to be that many grades ahead for long.” Hikaru vowed fiercely. After a moment he remembered the original question, and added “But nah, I’m not teaching.”

“So what, you’re just going to wander around criticising other people’s games again?” The boy crossed his arms, looking half amused and half annoyed. Hikaru was good at provoking that expression.

He grinned at the words, because that was pretty much his standard operating procedure at Go events where they’d failed to enlist him as a teacher. He’d invite himself to the games between amateurs and bully them into noticing the flaws in their hands, with the players often torn between getting very offended and getting very appreciative. Half of them tended to leave the event calling him ‘Shindou-sensei’, and the other half bitched at him to stop interrupting their games, sometimes very loudly. He’d even accidentally got one guy thrown out of the event once, by annoying him into making too large of a disturbance.

“I would totally do exactly that,” He agreed, preparing himself to drop the bombshell. “if I were actually going to the festival. Which I’m not.” He sat back and waited for the inevitable reaction.

Waya stared at him uncomprehendingly. As expected, he seemed entirely unable to register the possibility at all. “Don’t be stupid, of course you’re going to the festival.”

“Nah.” Hikaru refuted.

“You go to every damn festival in Tokyo, no matter how stupid or insignificant. Of course you’re going.” He sounded very certain.

“Noope.”

“Shindou, don’t you lie about something so dumb, there’s no way you’re not going!”

“I’m totally not.”
He pretty much spent the entire lunch break reciting variants of ‘no’, ‘nope’, and ‘hell no’, chasing Waya away so that he could go back to the match the scheduling guys had managed to cram in around his holiday time. The whole thing had amused him so much that he spent the entire second half of the game grinning maniacally, tapping his fan against the goke rapidly. His opponent seemed more than slightly disturbed by it and didn’t play nearly as well as he had before, which was disappointing, but oh well.

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Waya sure as hell didn’t stop bugging him, which meant that word spread, which meant that Touya heard, and of course his rival flatly refused to believe that he would miss any Go event. This disbelief was compounded by the fact that the Young Lions tournament was approaching, and apparently, Hikaru would never dream of missing it.

As such, Touya remained very confident in his assessment that Hikaru was simply lying, and made certain to say so whenever they saw each other, which these days was reasonably often. His surety on the matter lasted approximately four days, dying a swift death after Hikaru’s name failed to appear on the match listings for the Young Lions tournament. After this, the nanadan became belligerent and suspicious and started demanding his reasoning and did not stop.

“What could you possibly be doing? I checked with the Association, you have the whole week booked off!” They were, as they often were, in his father’s Go salon. This time, however, they’d not even started playing before they started arguing. The other patrons watched with interest, aware that this was a break from the usual routine, and perhaps one which wouldn’t end with innocent Go stones being flung.

“Well, you see, sometimes people go on holiday, Touya.” Hikaru explained slowly and kindly. “And, you see, pretty much everyone who works is allowed time off for holiday. Especially in Golden Week. That’s kind of the point of Golden Week, actually.”

“What could you possibly want a holiday for?” Touya demanded, sounding honestly baffled and indignant at once. Hikaru would call him a Go-obsessed freak for not understanding why anyone would want a holiday, but that would be slightly hypocritical of him. Just a little.

“I’m going on an epic journey.” Hikaru replied instantly.

“To where?”

“Wherever the wind takes me.” He proclaimed, enjoying the sight of his rival getting steadily more and more riled up.

“Shindou! Just tell me why you’re taking holiday time!”

“I have to find myself.” He answered, solemnly.

There was a pause. Then, with a spectacularly flat expression, his rival said “That doesn’t even make sense.”

“I’m going on a beautiful journey of self-discovery.” Hikaru declared. “It will change me. I will come back an enlightened man, in touch with my innermost self and the forces of nature.”

Touya looked enraged. It was beautiful. “You are doing no such thing,” he accused. “You’re going off to do something ridiculous and you’re being reticent because you know it’s idiotic. That’s it, isn’t it?”
“Touya,” Hikaru said, slowly. “I didn’t know you hated enlightenment so much, and that’s very sad. But you shouldn’t let your hatred hold other people back from attaining inner peace.”

An incoherent snarl emerged from Touya instead of words. It was a very satisfying sound.

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Hikaru was very good at annoying people. He was also quite good at bullshitting. These skills combined nicely to deflect all attempts to get him to attend the festival or to question him on his holiday. Hikaru stuck firmly to his claim that he was going on a week-long journey to ‘find himself’, interspersed with occasional commentary about cosmic forces and the bounty of nature, as well as the occasional proverb about self-knowledge.

Most people were very easy to deflect, on account of the aforementioned skill Hikaru had at being annoying. Some were a bit savvier. Ogata asked about his holiday time, once. Upon being promptly greeted with the now well-practiced enlightenment explanation, the title-holder rolled his eyes and didn’t ask again. His mother asked, and being well used to his bullshit, nagged him until he admitted that he was going to a couple of places, Kyoto included, and was staying with Yashiro in Osaka. This was, of course, mostly true – he was staying with Yashiro for a day, but that was pretty much a decoy.

Akari, also being very used to Hikaru’s bullshit, went straight to his mother and found out about his travel plans, and would only be sworn into silence in return for the admission that he was planning on spending basically the whole week in Kyoto. When questioned about his plans for the city, Hikaru promptly went straight back to the enlightenment spiel, adding for flavour that he planned on visiting many shrines, which was actually true.

Being the she-devil that she was, Akari demanded daily assurances that he was alive, as well as photographic evidence that he was visiting at least three different shrines. As she could inform at least one of his friends about his destination, and therefore set the combined might of the Kansai branch upon him, he reluctantly agreed to her terms and shooed her out of the house.

As the days leading up to his trip went on, the people who actually knew Hikaru discovered precisely how stubborn he could be, being regaled repeatedly with the reasoning behind his decision to seek enlightenment. He became pretty damn good at it, and even discreetly visited a library to leaf through a few books for verbal ammunition. Enough so that he could keep an entirely straight face while he bullshitted and appear very resolute while he did it.

“I’ve realised lately that I don’t know how to live in the present.” Hikaru said solemnly to the latest person to ask him about the festival, a new first dan who hadn’t come through Insei. She was pretty good for some random former-outsider, and nice too, but probably too gullible to survive interacting with him for long. “I can never just enjoy the moment, you know? And there’s some other stuff as well…even if a week isn’t enough time to reach enlightenment, I can still get some advice on how to start trying.”

“O-oh,” The shodan, who was named Yamada Suzume, said. She looked a bit confused. “That’s… nice? I’m happy for you.”

“Shindou, you are so full of shit.” Waya informed him, having arrived with Isumi a minute before. He turned to Yamada and told her “don’t listen to this guy, everything he says is a lie.”

Hikaru frowned at his friend. “Waya, I don’t understand why you’re being so weird about this! What’s so bad about me trying to improve myself?” He managed to sound a little indignant and hurt. All the bullshitting was good for his acting skills.
Yamada looked between them, also frowning a little. “Waya-san,” She said, hesitantly. “It’s not very nice to belittle people who are trying to better themselves. It’s not my place to say, but...maybe you should be more supportive of your friend.”

Hikaru’s expression became somewhat fixed as he tried desperately not to laugh.

“Oh my god.” Waya said, staring accusingly at Hikaru. “This is unbelievable.”

Yamada looked like she was going to comment, but Isumi stopped her, smiling very kindly. “Yamada-san,” He said, and the girl pinked a bit. Maybe she had a crush on Isumi; such was not an uncommon occurrence among young Go-enthusiast ladies. “I assure you, Shindou-kun enjoys tricking people and is not telling the truth in the least. Even so, it is very kind of you to say such things. If you would leave us with Shindou-kun for a few minutes?” The young man was exceedingly polite, easily charming the poor gullible girl out of the conversation and over to a nearby colleague, where he swiftly arranged a game between the two, and left them to it.

“Isumi, that was obscene.” Waya said to their friend, and then to Hikaru: “And you, you are way worse.”

“It’s very sad that you’re still not over this. I’m starting to think you’re worried I’ll get too enlightened and leave for a monastery.” Hikaru replied, considerably less straight faced than he’d been before.

Isumi, who was encountering this for the first time, raised an eyebrow and glanced at Waya questioningly. The brown-haired boy looked back and nodded. “Yeah, I told you.”

Hikaru had recently realised that many of his friends were as stubborn and belligerent as he was. He wasn’t entirely certain how that had come to pass, but was starting to believe that to get good at Go one had to be stubborn and occasionally belligerent about it. Waya demonstrated this stubborn belligerence, by saying, with relish “Isumi said this might be a Hokuto cup thing! That you were so humiliated by the memory of your defeat that you couldn’t stand to be here on its anniversary!”

“Waya, that is not what I said.” Isumi sighed as Hikaru stilled a little. He did not enjoy the memory of that loss, occurring as it had on the anniversary of losing Sai. His expression soured.

“It’s totally true though, isn’t it?” Waya asked, unperturbed. “That’s why you’re not doing it this year.”

“It totally isn’t.” Hikaru disagreed, feeling a little thrown-off.

Isumi and his un wholesomely sharp eyes moved to him, seeming intent. “Actually, I thought what happened two years ago might be more relevant.” He said, and Hikaru...tried not to react, and simply fixed his expression in place. It felt quite artificial. “That was when you retreated from Go for months, if I recall.”

Hikaru, after a moment, rallied admirably and declared “exactly right! That’s what I’ve been talking about! If I can’t take my mind off my past mistakes, then how can I appreciate the present? I need to spend time in contemplation to come to terms with who I am, or I will never be at peace.”

“You wouldn’t know the meaning of peace if it came up to you and slapped you in the face with a live fish.” Waya said. “So if it’s peace you’re looking for, you might as well give up, cancel your holiday, and come to the festival. You’re doomed to failure.”

“I suppose none of us can truly understand what peace is,” Hikaru mused, deliberately ignoring the bulk of his friend’s statement. “It’s something I will have to meditate on at length on my journey to
enlightenment.”

Waya, easily distracted, was successfully derailed from the line of inquiry. Isumi, however, was watching too sharply – but he didn’t say anything, and that was good enough, really.

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Finally, Hikaru’s stubbornness paid off and he reached May 1st with only his mother, Akari, and naturally Yashiro aware of any part of his travel itinerary. His time off was Thursday to Thursday, leaving him with a good few days before the anniversary itself. His bullet train was quite early, so it was half-asleep and bleary-eyed that he dragged his nearly empty suitcase to the station and boarded. He promptly fell asleep and didn’t wake for the vast majority of the journey, the rest of which he spent playing NetGo under his nick of 5, which he was still amazed had been available. The internet version he could access from his phone was absolutely appalling, but it was better than nothing on long journeys.

The login details for sai were used only often enough to ensure the account didn’t get deleted, and every time Hikaru logged in was a punch in the gut that he preferred not to dwell on.

The train arrived in Osaka just after midday, and Yashiro was actually waiting for him. He hadn’t expected that.

“What, you thought I’d waste time letting you wander around that you could spend playing Go?” The other boy asked when he mentioned his surprise. “You’re only here for a day, Shindou.”

It was more or less inevitable that a pro Go player would be surrounded by people just as obsessed as they. Hikaru had pretty much resigned the first day of his holiday to the cause as soon as he knew he’d be staying with Yashiro, and honestly he was perfectly okay with that. Yashiro might not be a second dan yet, but he had a tendency for really eclectic plays which were lots of fun to deal with. It was a bit like playing himself, actually. They were both tricky bastards.

“Yeah, yeah. Let’s get on with it. You have a goban at home?”

“It’s a pretty cheap one, but yeah.” Yashiro grimaced. “My parents are still weird about the Go pro thing, so they won’t let me buy a better one.” He reached for Hikaru’s suitcase experimentally, and blinked. “Have you actually packed anything, Shindou?”

“No a lot. I’m planning on buying some stuff in Kyoto.” He answered. “Sucks about your parents, though. Don’t they know how much money you’re getting already?” It wasn’t like theirs was the highest paying job in the world, but it certainly wasn’t bad.

“Of course they do. They’re making me put it all in a savings account. Dad’s even talking about investing.”

“Sucks for you,” Hikaru said sympathetically. “Now, how are we getting to your place?”

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Hikaru discovered several things that day: Yashiro’s goban really was cheap, his parents really were very dubious about Go, and Yashiro really had improved since they last played in person.

On the parents’ insistence, they were playing in the sitting room. The goban itself was an exceedingly old table-top folding sort and the stones were all glass, a couple were even chipped. It did the job though, and within minutes of nigiri both he and Yashiro were staring intently at the board. Hikaru got out his fan almost automatically, flexing it absent-mindedly as potential hands
streamed through his mind. Neither of them were unduly distracted by their audience – it was just something you got used to pretty early on, even if most audiences did tend to be much more Go-savvy than this one was.

The room was quiet except for the exchange of hands, stones clicking onto the board. It wasn’t as satisfying a feeling to play on this sort of board when he was getting used to kaya, but it was alright. They lost their audience at some point near yose, but neither of them cared in the least.

Hikaru won by five-and-a-half moku, feeling thoroughly satisfied. He sat back and stretched, saying “Good match. Want to discuss it?”

“Yeah, definitely.” His opponent agreed, and they cleared the board to replay the game from memory.

Their audience returned five minutes into the discussion, at least half of the audience anyway, and that half asked incredulously “Are you replaying the game you just did?”

“Nah, mum, we’re just discussing it.” Yashiro replied, looking up.

“But you remember the whole thing. All of those moves.” She said, sceptically.

“Yeah, but that’s nothing special at our level.” He confirmed. Hikaru considered saying something, but decided against it. He was too much of a smartass, and didn’t want to accidentally piss off Yashiro’s mother and make her swear a blood feud against Go or something.

“Hmm.” The woman pursed her lips. “Well, dinner will be in an hour. Be sure to have the table cleared before then.”

Hikaru turned to Yashiro. “Discuss the game, or speed go?” He asked.

The other boy considered it. “Discuss.” He decided. “We can play speed go after dinner.”

They nodded, and returned to what they’d been doing.

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The next morning was an early one, though not as bad as the one before. Hikaru bade farewell to his gracious hosts and allowed Yashiro to escort him back to the Osaka station.

“What are you even doing in Kyoto, anyway?” Yashiro asked as he helped him onto the platform.

The response was damn near reflexive by now: “I’m on a journey to get in touch with my inner self, and understand how to be one with the universe.”

Yashiro rolled his eyes. “Yeah, sure.”

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Kyoto was more or less just as cliché and historical as he’d expected, and also completely packed with tourists. He stared around like a bit of a tourist himself as he navigated towards the cheap hostel he’d booked a room in, reflexively noting the presence of two Go salons along the way. One he noticed while on the bus, the other wasn’t far from his accommodation, and he probably wouldn’t be visiting either of them. Probably. Maybe. He might do? But only if he had time.

When he booked into the hostel and paid his deposit, he was informed of when he had to be back at night, when breakfast could be obtained, and what was forbidden. Among the forbidden activities
was smoking, but incense wasn’t mentioned, so score! The bathroom for his section of the hostel was shown to him, and there were two old computers that could be used to access the internet. Hikaru signed his agreement to everything, quite impatient, and was shown to his room and presented with the key.

The room itself was small and very basic. The bedframe was a cheap metal one, and the mattress quite thin. There was a small desk and a window, with a stool beside it. Hikaru removed the stool and set it next to the bed as a bedside table of sorts, then put his suitcase under the bed. He checked himself for wallet and mobile phone, and left the hostel.

Hikaru visited his first shrine on the way to somewhere the maps claimed was a shopping district. It was a very small thing, pretty much just a really old tree with the traditional rope around it and a basic Shinto-Buddhist structure nearby. Hikaru couldn’t take any pictures of it on account of not having bought a camera yet, but maybe he would on his way back to the hostel.

After a moment of hesitance, he located the kannushi and did what he came to Kyoto to do, pretty much. Making an uncharacteristic effort to be polite, he said “excuse me?” and the kannushi turned to see him. The clothes were…startling. He’d seen them from behind, of course, and that was bad enough, but…

The shrine-keeper looked at him dubiously. Hikaru was fully aware that the bleached bangs and bright clothing did not especially fit in at a shrine, and were found on delinquents more often than respectful do-gooders. The expression on the man’s face was, therefore, one he was very familiar with. Hikaru was still a bit distracted by the clothes. It wasn’t as if they looked the same – the colours were all wrong, to begin with, and there were several small differences in style – but it was certainly a greater similarity to Sai’s apparel than he tended to see in Japanese formal dress.

“Yes, young man?” The kannushi asked politely.

Hikaru considered his words, and decided it would be odd to dive straight in to what he wanted to ask. So instead he said “Can you tell me a little bit about this shrine?”

The man looked somewhat surprised. “I certainly can.” He said. “It’s good to see a young person like yourself taking an interest. Now, you see this tree here…” For a while, Hikaru listened and half tried to take in the information about the shrine’s history and the tree kami it had been built for. It did take around five minutes, but the kannushi did conclude his ‘brief summary’, and smiled at him.

“Was that what you wanted to know?”

“…Yep,” Hikaru answered, his considerable experience with bullshit making him sound actually sincere. He paused before asking what he’d actually come there for. “I was also wondering, though…what can you tell me about spirits?”

“Spirits? Are you referring to the kami?” The kannushi asked, startled.

Hikaru hummed doubtfully. “No, not really. Sort of. A lot of kami started as ancestor spirits, right? So they used to be human?”

The man didn’t seem to understand what he was getting at. “I suppose some of them were, yes.”

Hikaru went for it. “So, would you say it’s possible for humans to become spirits?”

The kannushi stared for a moment, and then sighed. “You are asking about ghosts, aren’t you?”

“…Yeah, pretty much.” Hikaru admitted.
The shrine keeper looked away, and was silent for several moments. “Young man,” He said, at last. “I believe it is possible that humans, even today, leave lingering spirits. But if they do, I know of no way to detect them, or communicate with them, and I have heard no plausible story of any who does.”

It was pretty much what Hikaru had expected. “I guessed as much.”

The kannushi hesitated. “If you have lost someone, I am truly sorry for you.” He said, and the words were unexpectedly painful. Hikaru flinched, and swallowed quickly. “But as far as communicating with their spirits...I can only suggest visiting the grave, or perhaps praying at a household shrine.”

“Pretty much what I’d planned.” Hikaru sighed. “Well, thanks for your time, anyway.”

“You are very welcome.” The kannushi said, now looking quite sad. Hikaru turned and left without looking back, stepping under the torii and back into the town.

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He hadn’t been lying; praying at a household shrine was definitely something he had in mind. Or something close to it, anyway. He’d wanted to for a while, but something like that wasn’t exactly easy to do at his house. His mother would notice, Akari would notice, and everyone would want to know who he was mourning. It would be a huge pain in the backside.

Here, though…

It took a while to find what he was looking for in full. The cheap incense burner was easy, as were the candles. He smelled a variety of incenses, dubiously, not really sure what he was looking for there. The place he got the burner was kind of small, with little variety in incenses, so he left the incense unbought. He could always come back for some later.

It was in a much larger shop that he found the right incense, as well as the rest of what he was after. The contents of the store were predominantly wooden – carvings, sculptures, even some furniture. There were a lot of items with a distinct Shinto feel to them, and many more clearly Buddhist. A large section of the room was set aside with rows and rows of incense, some elaborate incense burners nearby, and there was even a corner of the room with a number of interesting bowls. He approached them and inspected them, discovering that they all seemed to have batons next to them, and the storekeeper approached him shortly.

“Is there something I can help you with?” The woman asked him, eyes running over the hair with curiosity. Shindou Hikaru was never something people expected, especially not at shrines or in stores like this.

“I was sort of wondering what these were.” He replied promptly, picking a bowl up. It was metallic, and very very gold. The gleam of it was intense, though the surface wasn’t perfectly even.

The storekeeper held her hands out for the bowl, and he passed it over. She placed it back on the small cushion he’d taken it from, took the baton, and with a practiced motion hit the baton lightly against the side of the bowl.

The sound rang out, clear and resonant. “A bell?” He asked, surprised.

“Of a sort.” She agreed. “They are sometimes called ‘singing bowls’. Some of them, if you stroke the baton around the edge, make a high ringing sound that can become very loud.”
He listened to the sound fade out. “Pretty.” He commented. “Not what I’m here for, though.”

“What can I do for you, then?” She asked, lips quirking.

He glanced around, back to the wood carvings. He wasn’t sure she’d have any, but…oh! “There!” he said, and strode briskly over. There were a number of kamidana there, some impressively large and elaborate.

“The kamidana?” The woman asked, having followed him. “What size were you looking at?”

Hikaru pondered them, musing on the size of his suitcase. “It’ll have to be small.” He said. “I’ll need to get it in my suitcase. One of these, maybe?” He touched one of the second smallest ones – not the miniaturised thing that the littlest was, but still a lot smaller than some kamidana could be. This one was still smaller than a lot of the household ones tended to be, being only about forty centimetres wide, but it would still take up the vast majority of his suitcase. He inspected it, carefully. It wasn’t just an imitation, it had the beautiful golden inlay and everything. It was probably hideously expensive. “How much is it?”

She answered, and he winced. It could have been worse. It wasn’t that bad. But it was still more money than he usually spent on things.

It was worth it, though.

“Yeah, I’ll have it. I’d like to look at the incense you have as well, though.”

“That’s great,” The storekeeper smiled. “Will you be needing ofuda for the kamidana?”

“…I don’t think so. It would need to be pretty specific.” He declined, after thinking. Ofuda were, pretty much, protective charms that called to certain gods. He wasn’t asking for protection, and he wasn’t asking any gods, either.

“Of course. Let me know when you’re done.”

Hikaru nodded to her, and wandered over to the incense. There was seriously a lot of it. So many different scents – it was outrageous. And he still had no idea of what to buy. There was actually a specific section for ritual incenses, even those suitable for use as funerary incenses. He had a look and sniff at all of them, but still wasn’t sure what he was looking for. He might get one of those if he didn’t find anything else, though.

He wandered down the display, inspecting the various containers. One actually stood out to him – in the woody section, there was one called kaya, meant to evoke the scent of that particular wood. Hikaru laughed a little, and took a box of the kaya incense, having a sniff. It wasn’t as though he went around sniffing gobans, so he wasn’t sure how accurate it might be, but the scent was sort of nice and woody.

Hikaru turned to go to the cashpoint, kaya in hand, but paused. He glanced at what had caught his eye, and went still. In the section dedicated to flower scents, there was an innocuous row of boxes labelled fuji. Wisteria.

Hikaru paused, then hesitantly reached out to take a box. He sniffed it, and nearly swayed in place as memory hit him like a tidal wave. It wasn’t like it was exact, the smell was a bit too sweet for that, but it was familiar. Maybe it did smell like wisteria, and that was the smell he recognised, but he didn’t really give a crap about that because it smelled like Sai, and he’d completely forgotten what that was like.
He’d read something once about smell being more strongly connected to memory than any other sense, but he’d never really felt it so keenly before. For a disorientating second, it was almost as if Sai was there, pouncing on him in excitement as he’d often done. Hikaru lowered the incense box from his face and inhaled the smoky, many-scented air of the shop to clear out the whiff of the fuji. It took a few deep breaths before he gathered himself, and reached for four more boxes of the incense. He wasn’t sure what his mum would think of all the incense burning, but she’d learn to cope.

Somewhat impressed that he’d managed to keep composed through that, Hikaru made his way to where the storekeeper lady had been wrapping his kamidana for transport, his hands straining around one tube of kaya and five of fuji.

“These as well, please.” He said, handing them over for her to scan. She nodded, and six beeps later, she read him the somewhat painful total. He was glad his mum didn’t micromanage his finances like Yashiro’s did. “Thanks.” Hikaru told her, putting the handles of the paper bag of incense over his wrist so that he could carry the kamidana’s box properly.

The walk back to the hostel was much more annoying than the walk from it, while toting the damn box with him, but that was life.

The receptionist at the hostel gave him an odd look as he walked in, but obligingly gave him his key, the ring of which he hooked around a pinky finger for the remaining distance to his room. He had to put the box down to open the door, but he managed to clatter into the bare accommodation eventually. He put the box and the bag on the desk, and fished the long box with the incense burner out of his back pocket as well. He stared at the lot with consternation, not sure what to do with the stuff now that he had it, and slowly decided that he’d set it all up on the actual anniversary, and not before.

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Hikaru woke with a sore shoulder, graciously bestowed upon him by the lumpy mattress, and set about his Saturday with single-minded determination.

It was a Saturday filled with entirely too much commuting for his liking, but that was how getting around a large city worked, unfortunately. True to his pact with Akari, he purchased a cheap disposable camera early on and meticulously photographed all of his destinations.

These destinations were, without fail, shrines. All of the shrines. All of them. Hikaru systematically went through every shrine he could find listed in Kyoto, though naturally he wouldn’t be able to do them all in one day. Maybe not even the whole week. In every case, he took photographs, and harassed the kannushi about spirits. In some cases, the kannushi were too busy, so he spoke to the miko while he waited for an opportunity to interrogate the priests. In other cases, the kannushi were too busy to be waited for, so that was a colossal waste of time.

None of them seemed to have any better insight into ghosts and spirits than the first had, so it wasn’t looking good. Maybe he really would have to start trying for exorcists and ‘spiritual masters’ once he ran out of shrines.

Late in the afternoon, armed with a full camera worth of photographs and no useful knowledge whatsoever, Hikaru got some ramen from a nearby stall and headed back to the hostel to play NetGo on its computers. He ran into Waya online, gleefully immersed himself into a proper game that he naturally won, and then completely ignored the post-game bitching the other pro sent at him for ‘disappearing like that’ in what was meant to be the post-game discussion.

It was a pretty good evening, even if the day hadn’t really been all that fruitful.
Sunday’s mission was twofold: one, go on all the touristy tours of the Imperial Palace he could manage, and two, investigate the shrines on the Palace grounds if that was possible. Hikaru pondered his agenda shortly before 10am, having hastily made his way to the hostel cafeteria just before its breakfast window closed. He successfully absconded to a table with a pastry, some toast, and a mini-packet of butter, setting about his meal with relish. It might not have been anything fancy or even all that good, but it was food.

He finished in good time and set off to buy a new camera before heading for the Palace. Having done a lot of walking and commuting the previous day, Hikaru felt somewhat more familiar with the city, and arrived at the Imperial Palace with very little fuss. However, upon arriving there he discovered that there weren’t actually any tours on Sundays, so he was very much out of luck for both of the day’s missions.

Hikaru stared at the tour schedule and booking sign with disgust, half annoyed at his poor planning and half annoyed at the schedule itself. Feeling thoroughly put-out, he made his way to a nearby tourist memorabilia type place and bought some information books on the Palace, which he sat down with on a bench to read while he sulked.

The material therein was actually somewhat surprising. Turns out, the Imperial Palace that you could tour in Kyoto wasn’t actually what had been used in the Heian era – that one had been abandoned, and had burnt down in the 1200s. It was unexpectedly jarring. Hikaru had always sort of assumed that he would be able to come to Kyoto and walk on the same ground that Sai had, a very long time ago. Maybe even see the same buildings. But…apparently not.

What a waste.

Day’s plans ruined, Hikaru toured a couple more shrines throughout the city and then located a reasonably large library, where he located books on the Heian era and distractedly leafed through them for several hours. The boring political stuff didn’t stick with him at all, but some other stuff did. Somewhat unsurprisingly, ‘Fujiwara’ was in basically all of the history books. The Fujiwara clan, as he had sort of been aware of, had been anything from hugely powerful to outright ruling Japan throughout most of the Heian era. He wasn’t sure whether Sai had been the same sort of Fujiwara as that, but considering he’d had access to the emperor’s court in that era…it seemed likely.

He tried to look through some Fujiwara family trees but they were pretty useless, he couldn’t make heads or tails of them. If Sai had been a Fujiwara, either his name hadn’t been recorded, or it wasn’t easy to find. Considering he’d been disgraced, and killed himself so young…well, maybe there weren’t any records left to say that he’d ever existed. It was the same result as he’d had not long after Sai had disappeared, when he’d tried to find records. Damned depressing, that Hikaru might be the only person who knew that Fujiwara no Sai had once lived and breathed.

The whole thing had depressed him enough that, screw everything, Hikaru went back to the area of the city he was staying in and made a beeline for the Go salon he’d noticed when he arrived.

It was mid-afternoon by then, and most small Go salons weren’t always populated at that time – it often tended to be more of an evening thing. It was a Sunday, though, so there was a surprising number of people in the place, despite how smoky and tiny it was. He looked around curiously as he walked in, eyeing the patrons as they eyed him. The admittance guy, who’d apparently been watching a game in the corner, came over to peer at him. He was old and pretty fat.

“You here to play, kid?” He asked, clearly wanting to go back to watching the game. “It’s 400 yen for children.”
Hikaru was sorely tempted to advertise himself as the pro he was, because this guy at least clearly didn’t recognise him, but he was sort of looking forward to shocking some old guys with curb-stomp matches, so… “Yep.” He nodded, and handed over the yen.

“All good.” The man muttered, quickly counting the money and putting it away in a nearby box. “What level are you? Do you know?”

Hikaru paused for a moment, though to hell with it, and said “Nidan.” Second-dan amateur was by no means the same level as second-dan pro, but…it was at least honest.

“Yeah, right. I’ll put down twenty kyu, alright? And don’t cry to me if you get beat.”

And yeah, okay, Hikaru could feel himself cheering up more by the second. This was going to be hilarious. “Sure, whatever you want.” He agreed, and walked into the salon. “Anyone not playing?”

One of the spectators of a game in the corner snorted at him, amused. He was actually reasonably young for this sort of place, only thirty or so. “If you’re twenty kyu, I might be a bit strong for you.” He said.

Hikaru grinned, and said “Bring it.”

The poor sucker tried to give him a handicap, but Hikaru wasn’t quite cruel enough to allow that. He insisted on nigiri with every ounce of stubborn brat he had in him, and eventually managed it, his opponent sighing. Hikaru got white, which was a small mercy for the other guy, and set his goke next to the cheap folding goban. The bow and “onegaishimasu” were basically instinct by this point, but the formality did seem to surprise the guy a little as he bowed back.

Hikaru watched the guy more than the board, because it was funny as hell to watch as he steadily realised how monumentally outclassed he was. It was this look of confusion, to begin with, then consternation, and a few flavours of disbelief mixed in, and then finally the guy looked at him with a suspicious grimace. Hikaru grinned at him impudently, and the game went on.

The guys in the corner finished their game and came to watch. The younger of the two, a forty-something guy with premature balding, whistled as he saw the board. “You’re white, kid?”

“Yes.” Hikaru nodded, drawing out the word with satisfaction. It was much more amusing to dominate games in person than on NetGo, because the reactions could get excellent.

“You’ve already lost, Yamakawa.” The older of their spectators observed. “Might as well resign now before it gets embarrassing.”

Hikaru’s opponent scowled. “He’s just a kid!” He protested.

“He’s a pro, you idiot.” The old guy retorted. “Honestly, am I the only one who reads the magazine in this damned place?”

Several sets of very startled eyes went to Hikaru. He grinned at the lot of them, noticing that the five other guys in the room had heard and were also looking.

“…What?” His opponent, Yamakawa, uttered weakly.

“I remember seeing his Shin Shodan picture a couple years back.” The old guy explained. “The hair’s pretty distinctive. Don’t remember your name, though.” He turned to Hikaru on the last comment.
“Shindou Hikaru, second dan.” Hikaru introduced himself, enjoying the muffled curses going around. “I’m on holiday, but eh. You want to discuss the game?” he asked his poor, hapless opponent.

“I…I’ll leave it, thank you.” Yamakawa said, looking somewhat shell-shocked.

Hikaru shrugged. “Suit yourself.” He looked around. “Anyone want some shidou-go? I’ve got a couple of hours to kill.”

In fact, everyone wanted shidou-go, and so his afternoon concluded much more pleasantly than it had begun. The owner also gave him his admittance fee back in thanks, which was a nice bonus.

Hikaru left the Go salon in the late afternoon, and procured a burger from a nearby fast food place to have for dinner. The hostel did breakfast, but you only got dinner there if you cooked it yourself. Hikaru, being a fifteen year old with a doting mother, did not have cooking experience, and had no wish to get any at this point in time.

He commandeered the hostel computer for another evening foray into NetGo, this time encountering Yashiro’s nick on there, and had another very enjoyable match that lasted pretty late. Trying very hard not to think about the impending day, Hikaru brushed his teeth, sent his obligatory ‘still alive’ text to Akari, and made every effort to fall asleep quickly.

He did not succeed.

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Hikaru woke up early, feeling barely rested.

He’d done a pretty good job, these last two years, of bull-headedly focusing on things, anything he could, to distract himself. Go really was a miracle in that regard – if he spent all his time playing, and really immersed himself in the games, it almost felt normal. But he couldn’t do that today.

Today was May 5th.

The desk by the window was too low for traditional kamidana placement. They were supposed to be above eye level, if possible, but it couldn’t be helped. Hikaru hardly thought Sai would have minded, anyway.

Hikaru blinked rapidly as he unpacked the kamidana from its box, picking away the packing material meant to pad it during transit. He set it far back on the desk, arranged a couple of candles around it, and put the incense burner to the side, too. In place of the shintai, the object containing or representing the kami to be venerated, he opened the paper fan he carried with him everywhere and carefully balanced it there. It was the best physical representation he could manage.

He placed the tube of fuji near the burner, but didn’t place a stick or light it. He lit the candles, using a lighter he’d pilfered from home, but suspected the scent of the incense might mess him up magnificently and he didn’t want that just yet.

With all of the objects positioned, Hikaru sat down on the floor in front of the desk in seiza, which was now so familiar to him.

“So.” He said aloud, in an attempt to clear his head a little. He wasn’t sure it worked.

He had come to Kyoto this week for a reason. To remember and respect Sai, of course, but not only that. He had come to Kyoto, on the anniversary of Sai’s disappearance, because he was starting to
suspect that something was wrong with him.

Hikaru knew that grief was normal when you lost someone close to you, and Sai had certainly qualified. Even if he’d been a brat about it, there wasn’t any way to avoid becoming seriously attached when you spent two years in the constant presence of someone as kind and genuine as Sai. It only made sense that he felt the absence, that he grieved. And even without the grief, it wasn’t easy to adapt to being alone when you’d literally never been apart from someone for that long.

Those first two months had been an absolute nightmare. He’d spent every moment with Sai’s absence screaming at him. When he looked around, there wasn’t a white-robed figure there, not anywhere. Many times, he reflexively commented on things aloud, even addressed comments to the ghost, and there was no reply. There was nothing. Even worse was when he thought at Sai, as he’d been doing for years – the spirit was possessing him, after all, and had always been able to hear targeted thoughts. Hikaru shuddered, remembering intensely the sensation of reaching out with his thoughts for someone who wasn’t there.

It had been just...completely awful. Everything felt wrong – desolate and heavy in a way time hadn’t allowed him to forget. He’d been so horribly guilty for Sai’s absence, as well, convinced it was his own selfishness that had exiled the spirit. Every waking minute was evidence, again and again and again, that Sai wasn’t there, and he just hadn’t been able to cope at all.

Hikaru was very thankful to Isumi to helping him snap out of that mess. Once he’d found that vestige of Sai’s presence in his own Go, once he’d thrown himself into games again…it had been better.

He had, over months and months of practice, made an art of avoiding certain thoughts and emotions. Intense immersion in passing moments, in games, in anything he could find were invaluable in helping him cope. Especially early on, when he still had the habit of speaking to Sai or reaching out with thoughts.

It was easier now that those habits had faded, and he didn’t expect to see Sai whenever he glanced to the side, and had no impulse to speak to someone who wasn’t there.

But Hikaru still felt it, dammit. It wasn’t like it only hurt whenever his thoughts wandered to Sai, or he was reminded of Sai, or anything like that. The emotional pain was pretty much constant, and the best he could do was try to distract himself from it. He woke up every day with something missing, he passed every minute of every hour of those days trying not to let himself dwell on the constant aching absence of Sai. He could feel it, always, no matter what he did. It was impossible to forget that Sai wasn’t there, and the only reason he’d managed to cope so well was his single-minded determination to not think about it.

Sai was the only person Hikaru had really lost, so it wasn’t like he was an expert in grief and mourning. But he was pretty sure that, two years later, it should be better than it was. It should hurt when he thought of Sai, sure, but this incessant pain? It wasn’t normal. It couldn’t be. His method of coping had pretty much ensured he’d not really thought about it before, but…it was time to. Because it wasn’t getting better on its own.

Hikaru breathed deeply, well aware that he was trembling but not especially capable of stopping it. Sai had been a ghost, a spirit. He had possessed Hikaru. Maybe not in the conventional sense – it wasn’t as though he’d destroyed Hikaru’s mind or controlled his actions or anything, but Sai had been connected to the world through his occupancy of Hikaru’s soul. It was a pretty old memory, but he did remember passing out when it happened, and he remembered vomiting at first when the sensation of Sai’s emotion overwhelmed him, and it had felt so weird in the beginning. That hadn’t lasted, though. Eventually, Sai’s presence with him had felt natural. Familiar and comforting, even. It had been normal to have that presence at the edge of his mind, which he could reach out to with a
It made an uncomfortable amount of sense that, having adapted to the presence of Sai in his soul, Hikaru was now…missing something, somehow. Was there such a thing as spiritual scarring? Spiritual phantom ‘limb’ pain? What if Hikaru’s own spirit had changed so much to adapt to Sai’s that it now couldn’t function properly without him? Had he become dependent on Sai to the point where it was impossible to adapt?

It wasn’t easy to think about Sai at all, it was really difficult to sit there in seiza and actually dwell on the yawning pit of emptiness in his mind where, even now, he expected there to be something. But he kind of had to, because it was time to acknowledge that he might not actually be capable of accepting or moving on from Sai, whether it be mentally or spiritually or whatever. And of course, since he couldn’t move on, he was still stuck solidly in grief so fresh he might as well have lost Sai a day ago, rather than two whole years. He didn’t even want to move on from Sai, because that screaming emptiness in his head insisted that Sai should be there.

He needed to stop grieving for Sai but couldn’t, and because he couldn’t stop grieving he didn’t want to stop grieving in the first place, and so he was always grieving and always having to cope by distracting himself and it was just a huge, huge mess.

Frankly, Hikaru considered himself exceptionally awesome for managing so well that his friends and family had barely seen any of his issues, though he knew Akari had noticed things, probably Touya and Isumi as well.

So, he was here in Kyoto. Partly to grieve properly for Sai, and pay him respect, because he couldn’t afford to do that back home where people might notice. And also, to see if he could find someone who might know something about spirits, and spiritual injuries. Kyoto, where Sai had lived and died, seemed a good place to do both things.

The shrines were a good place to start, so he’d exhaust those first. If he had time left in Kyoto he’d look for exorcists and spiritual specialists, and if he still found nothing he’d start a tour of shrines and exorcists and miscellaneous spiritualists back home in Tokyo. If that still didn’t work, he could tour the internet and try phoning more faraway people. The point was, there was something he could do, even if it seemed futile and hopeless at best.

There were a number of things that might help. Maybe it was possible to heal whatever wound Sai had left him with when he’d disappeared. Maybe it was possible to fill the absence with some other sort of power or energy.

But the solution Hikaru wanted, more than anything, was to find some way to communicate with spirits, with Kami, with anyone, and find some way to get Sai back to him.

Hikaru stood, briefly, and lit a stick of incense. The smell only hit him once he’d sat down again, and he shuddered in the face of it, it was so familiar. He could almost believe Sai was beside him, robes and hair flicking about whatever perfume it was that made him smell like wisteria incense.

I’ll do it, Sai. Hikaru thought, intentionally reaching out into that horrible, empty void where his friend should be. He shook in place, fists clenching. I’ll find you. Somehow, I’ll find you.
This was written for Esama's Random Hikago Event and was first published on my tumblr, tenspontaneite. Minor revisions have been made for this version. The first couple chapters of this are a bit slow, mainly because Hikaru can't stop being a brat and, it being a hikago fic, Go keeps happening.

Historical note: Incense and perfume were very popular in the Heian era, and robes were often perfumed. I don’t consider it impossible, therefore, that Sai’s robes would be scented with something like wisteria, especially considering the association with his clan’s name. The exact scent wouldn’t have survived a thousand years, but it’s certainly possible that there would be similar ones available in modern times.

Psychological note: the sense of smell really is connected very powerfully to memory. Probably a mechanism that aided us in surviving in ye caveman times, etc.

Miscellaneous note: The sort of hostel for travelling youths I’ve depicted here is something I have experienced in South America only. I have no idea if there are equivalents in Japan, but a 15 year old kid wouldn’t be uncommon in that sort of place. He’d have to provide address and emergency contact details etc, but it wouldn’t be unusual.

18/09/16: Minor edits made - mentions of Hokuto cup, Young Lions, Golden Week. Akira's rank corrected. Other small edits.

Edits on 30/05/18 –
Stylistic edits. Some paragraphs reworked.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Hikaru returns home.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hikaru had expected that he would lose track of time. Had planned for it, even, leaving several very annoying alarms on his phone to remind him to eat, and one for later in the day to reassure Akari that he was still breathing.

The first one went off at 12pm, with a high and exceptionally startling ringing that became louder by the second. Hikaru, who had been in something of a laconic stupor since quite early in the morning, jumped half-way out of his skin at the sudden noise, scrambling out of seiza in basically the most undignified way possible; he’d been sitting there for hours, and as soon as he tried to get up the lack of blood-flow in his legs made itself very plain. Hikaru promptly faceplanted into the side of the cheap bed, hitting his collarbone painfully on the frame as the stringent wail of the alarm continued.

Cursing, Hikaru reached for the stool-turned-table at the bedside and removed his phone from it, glaring at the lit-up screen of the cheerfully ringing device. The name of the alarm, which he had set on Saturday, read ‘eat something, you moron’. He knew himself too well.

The silence in the room sounded like ringing even after he turned off the alarm. It wasn’t actually silence – in this hostel, the walls were all basically as thin as screen doors, and it was not at all difficult to hear residents and staff going about their business in nearby rooms. The distinct sound of hoovering echoed from at least two hallways down.

“Shit.” Hikaru muttered, realising he’d missed breakfast by a margin of several hours, and probably wouldn’t even have had lunch if not for the alarm. He stared around the room for a moment, noting that the incense had burned out at some point, though he wasn’t sure when. He’d been pretty out of it. With practiced skill, he carefully did not think of anything, allowing only asinine and pointless trains of thought into his head. Things like Waya would probably love to mention how good I am at not thinking of things and I look like I didn’t even sleep and fuck, I’m hungry.

The last one proved to be quite safe to focus on. Hikaru concentrated wholly on the disgruntled grumbling of his stomach, and the mild weakness of a body that had gone over fifteen hours without food, to distract himself as he went back to his room to retrieve his wallet. And, while determinedly not allowing himself to think about it, he removed the fan from the kamidana and slipped it into his pocket. He would have to be in far more dire straits to go anywhere without it.

Lunch was just a sandwich, picked up at the corner shop closest to the hostel. He sat on a wall to eat it, and discarded the cardboard box it had come in at the nearest bin. He sat back on that wall for a
while, staring blankly at the sky. It was a beautiful day. There weren’t any proper clouds, just a fine white haze which suggested real clouds might form at some point later in the day. There was a pleasant breeze, too, chasing away the humidity of early summer.

Two years ago, it had been a beautiful day, too.

Irrationally bothered by the incongruity of the weather to his state of mind, Hikaru retreated to the hostel and disappeared back into his room. He replaced the fan at the kamidana, and stared at it for a while, weighty apathy sinking into his body. He wished he’d bought a goban of some sort with him – it might have been nice to replay a game or two in front of the fan. Sai, if he could see or hear any of this, would have liked that.

Hikaru lit another stick of incense, sat down in front of the kamidana, and allowed himself to fall back into remembrance and regret.

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The second alarm went off six hours later, and Hikaru had difficulty caring about it this time. After a minute or so of listening to it, he sort of got used to the painful sound and it wasn’t all that jarring. Not much longer after that, though, someone in the next room thumped thrice on the wall in protest.

Slowly, Hikaru got to his feet, leaning on the wall to support his dead legs as he disabled the alarm. He didn’t look at the screen.

Feeling heavy and lethargic, Hikaru took the fan and headed to the bathroom to splash cold water on his face. He looked even crappier now, and felt worse. He was hungry, horribly thirsty, and had the mother of all headaches brewing behind his eyes. Sai would smack me with his fan for getting like this, he thought, and went to get some tap water from the kitchen. He forced two glasses of it down his throat before he stopped, then left the hostel in search of food, one hand on the fan in his pocket.

He procured some ramen and sat down with it in the corner of the tiny restaurant. He stared at the broth as he contemplated heavy topics that he spent the vast majority of his time avoiding. It was actually a little easier to grieve like this now that he’d admitted that it probably wasn’t his fault in any way. When you spent as long as he had in mourning that never seemed to improve, it was more or less natural that you’d start to wonder if you were just emotionally weak, maybe even psychologically unwell. Hikaru couldn’t claim that those weren’t still concerns, but…at this point, it seemed far more likely that this was a spirit-thing, a soul-thing even. It wasn’t as though Hikaru had been in possession of any sort of spiritual knowledge back then, or would have had any hope of preventing what happened even if he did know something. It couldn’t be his fault, surely.

Absently, Hikaru wondered if Sai had known there might be consequences to his possession. He thought it was very unlikely – after all, Sai had only ever possessed Torajirou before, and that guy had died while still with Sai. The ghost probably had no way of knowing what would happen if he actually left. He’d probably burst into tears if he ever found out about it, the big wuss.

The thought bought an involuntary smile to Hikaru’s face. Sai had been so weird, hadn’t he? It was easy to forget all those quirks while he was so busy wallowing like this. No one would ever be as obsessed with Go as Sai was, ever, or take the same childish delight in every game.

Hikaru exhaled, thinking, and took out his phone. He texted Ogata, saying ‘hey, you up for a game on NetGo?’

Sai would have wanted Hikaru to play Go, to have great games.
It was a few minutes later that he got a message back, saying only ‘When?’

Not quite able to summon a grin, Hikaru just smiled, and responded ‘30 minutes?’ When the affirmative came, he finished his ramen in record time and walked back to the hostel, texting his still-alive message to Akari as he did. Both computers were occupied, but the guy on the left one seemed just to be sending an email, so Hikaru loitered conspicuously in wait, receiving an eye-roll for his trouble when the older boy signed out of his email and left the computer.

Hikaru was on that chair and logged into NetGo in a matter of minutes. He rejected about six challenges while he waited, one even from Touya, who was undoubtedly outraged at the response. Then seiji logged on, and Hikaru challenged him at once.

The two of them did play from time to time. Ogata remained probably the most sai obsessed person Hikaru knew, and had made a ritual of asking for an introduction or a game. Hikaru, in turn, had become more and more practiced at denying his capability to procure either thing. He knew he made a good showing in their games, particularly for a nidan, and he also knew that Ogata was reluctantly impressed with the rate of his improvement. Hikaru always lost, but they always had good games….and the margin that Hikaru lost by was shrinking all the time.

This one would not be a good game as the others were, Hikaru was certain. He would make sure of it.

He always immersed himself in his games. Always completely submerged himself in tactics and predicting and reading the influence as it spread across the board. He was always persistent in his games, and invariably canny, but today he was more than that. Today, Hikaru played viciously, throwing every ounce of his will and spirit into the game, meeting Ogata’s challenges all the while he spun traps into the stones, ploys lying in wait like venomous snakes for their chance to strike.

It was about ten minutes in that Ogata’s play shifted in response, cutting Hikaru far more ruthlessly, an intensity coming into the game that had been missing before. It was exhilarating.

Hikaru thought each and every move into the dark space in his mind, sent every thrill at territory taken and vicious anticipation of traps laid and indomitable belligerence when Ogata checked him. Nothing responded, nothing ever responded, but that wasn’t enough to hold him back from the game.

In the end, Hikaru sat back in the chair with a long sigh, feeling absolutely exhausted and absolutely satisfied. As he’d promised himself, it hadn’t been a good game at all – it had been an excellent game.

He had lost by only five and a half moku, and had actually pushed Ogata into playing more seriously.

The message from Ogata in the discussion section came through as ‘aren’t you a vicious little bastard today?’, except NetGo had a profanity filter now so bastard was actually ******* , but Hikaru could guess well enough.

‘Yep.’ Hikaru typed out in response. ‘Now, let’s discuss my awesome game.’

Later, he returned to his room, replaced the fan, and narrated every move of the game to the kamidana while a stick of fuji streamed fragrant smoke through the room.
Hikaru concluded May 5th far more positively than he had expected. He was grieving, yes, and the empty space in his mind still seriously hurt, but he’d sort of managed to push through all of that without really avoiding it to play one of the best games he’d ever played. The majority of the day had been exactly as he’d expected – he’d wallowed, and wallowed hard, becoming so immersed in depression that it had been difficult to pull out of it again. But the evening, that match with Ogata?

…Maybe he’d be able to remember Sai properly, now.

On the morning of Tuesday 6th, Hikaru got up and sat in front of the kamidana for the length of time it took the incense to burn – around ten minutes. The grief and loss were no less intense than they’d ever been, and the absence of Sai still felt terrible and wrong, but when the last of the ashes fell Hikaru stood up and went on his way regardless. He was trembling a little as he washed up in the bathroom, and much less composed than he would risk being around the people back in Tokyo, but…he could do it. Shuddering, Hikaru stared at himself in the mirror and transformed his despair into resolve. The loss hurt, it hurt terribly and it would probably never go away on its own, and Sai wasn’t there. But…

If Sai wasn’t there, and if that wasn’t something he could ever come to terms with or accept, then the solution was obvious.

Get Sai back, Hikaru thought to himself, with grim determination, and channelled every ounce of pain and loss and emptiness he had into that goal.

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Tuesday was spent, naturally, working through more shrines. He went to that big and intensely famous one, the Fushimi Inari shrine, and…yeah, it was impressive. The number of torii and fox sculptures was just outrageous, and the whole thing was as ostentatious a place of reverence as any major kami could ask for. Naturally, though, the kannushi had absolutely no time for him at all, and the miko weren’t nearly as approachable as some in the other shrines were.

He snapped a number of pictures of everything, because Akari would be expecting it, but couldn’t help the stab of frustration and disappointment at his ongoing failure to find anything of use. Hikaru responded to this by focusing, intently, on the sensation of not right/empty/Sai-is-missing that emanated constantly from the hole in his mind. He focused on it until the idea of not getting Sai back was so reprehensible, so unthinkable, that the incipient despair withered to nothing. He would find Sai, even if it took him the rest of his life. No other possibility was acceptable.

Hikaru repeated this with every shrine-visit that yielded no results, with every attempt his stupid brain made at hopelessness or resignation, and did not push away the chronic grief no matter how frequently he had to go somewhere quiet to breathe deeply for a bit. It became a bit easier, and a bit more practiced, the more the day went on. The worst part of the whole never-ending loss thing was the heavy part, the depressive part, the part that was oppressive and slow and dragged him into a mire of despair. If he could ignore or brute-force his way through that aspect of grief…the rest was sort of manageable. If he focused, it could be a force for determination, for change.

Commuting around a big city was time consuming, and so Hikaru didn’t get through all of the shrines on Tuesday. As was becoming habit, he got some fast food before heading back to the hostel to play NetGo, where he mercilessly destroyed several amateurs.

He didn’t get through all of the shrines on Wednesday either, and looking at the list, resigned himself to the fact that he just plain wasn’t going to manage them all. He’d been to all of the big ones, and the ones which tended to appear on tourist lists, but the tiny shrines you tended to find here and there
which sometimes didn’t even have an official kannushi? Yeah, there were way too many of those.

Hikaru mercilessly extinguished his disappointment beneath a flood of **will absolutely find Sai** as he packed up the kamidana on Wednesday evening, carefully covering it in the packing material the shopkeeper had put on it and closing the lid of the box. He appropriated some heavy-duty packing tape from the receptionist, who seemed to be using it to keep one of his chair’s legs from falling off, and sealed the box very thoroughly before he squashed it into his suitcase. The other things fit in alright along the sides, but the kamidana in its box took up basically the whole thing, and he had to sit on the suitcase to zip it up once his clothes were in.

He didn’t play any NetGo that evening. He just sat, and pondered the week. It wasn’t like he’d achieved much, except a really fantastic game against Ogata, and maybe a way of dealing with his potential spirit-wound thing that wasn’t just ignoring it in the hopes it would go away, but….he felt bizarrely accomplished, anyway. He had a goal, and he had a place to start on his road to achieving it.

The next morning, Hikaru slept in a little, got up just in time to get breakfast, and passed the time until his train on NetGo. At around half past eleven, he dragged himself and his considerably heavier-than-before luggage to the train station, and boarded the train back to Tokyo at 1pm.

It wasn’t like he’d found any solution to his issues in Kyoto, or was any closer to figuring out how to find Sai. Nonetheless, it felt like the week had been worth it.

All the way back, Hikaru sat remembering times he’d spent with Sai, and steadily diverted his grief and pain into a determination more powerful than any he’d felt before.

Those times weren’t just memories. They weren’t all he had left of Sai. He **would** find that crazy ghost someday, and there was nothing that could stop him.

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Hikaru trudged up the path to his house later that day, his arms grumbling at him for his decision to haul a kamidana all the way from Kyoto. It wasn’t as if they were hard to find – he could easily have found one in Tokyo. But…well, Kyoto seemed a more meaningful place to source one, so that was that.

He let himself in, calling “I’m home!” as he yanked the suitcase through the front door. There was a startled sound in the next room, and then his mother was coming through.

“Welcome home!” Shindou Mitsuko said, happily, hugging him. “Did you have a good time in Osaka with your friend?”

“I did.” Hikaru said truthfully, with a rueful grin. “I played lots of Go.”

“I’m not sure why you needed to go all the way to Osaka to do **that**, Hikaru.” His mother said fondly, with a little laugh. “But I’m glad you had fun. Are you hungry?”

He brightened. He’d not had a home-cooked meal for, like, six days. “**Yes,**” He said, as emphatically as he possibly could.

His mother laughed again. “I needn’t have asked, really.” She commented, and headed to the kitchen. “I’ll get started on a nice big dinner, then.”

Hikaru sang her praises all the while he pulled his suitcase upstairs and into his room, stopping once he’d closed the door. He opened the suitcase and consigned the clothing therein to the laundry
basket, and returned to withdraw the kamidana in its box. He put it on his bed and stared at it, not really sure where to put it. For lack of any better thoughts, he pushed the box under his bed, and then put the rest of the stuff into a drawer with his shirts. The incense burner was the only thing he didn’t put in with the clothing, since it was still a bit ashy and he didn’t want it staining anything. After a moment of consideration, he put it next to a pair of old shoes at the bottom of his wardrobe.

Having packed away the spoils of his trip, minus two disposable cameras which needed to have their film developed, Hikaru really wasn’t sure what to do next. It wasn’t as though there was enough time left in the day to continue his epic quest, but he didn’t really have time for NetGo before dinner either.

After some deliberation, Hikaru headed to the usually-vacant study of his usually-absent dad to turn on the computer which was basically his now. He sat down with a search engine, some pen, and paper, and meticulously started writing down the locations of Tokyo’s shrines. As in Kyoto, he’d get through the well-known ones before he started scouring maps and address books for the smaller types. He’d managed to get a fair sized list down before he got called for dinner.

It was later in the evening, after Hikaru had devoured the magnificent thing that was his mother’s cooking, that his neighbour dropped in. Presumably via a highly sophisticated network of covert agents, and perhaps electronic monitoring equipment, Akari always seemed to know when he was home. He had accused her of being a spy in the past for this suspicious behaviour, and would not be dissuaded from the truth no matter how many times she told him “Your bedroom light was on, Hikaru, it’s not like it’s hard to figure out!”

“Tell me why I shouldn’t tell your mother that you spent precisely one day in Osaka.” Akari demanded, more or less the instant she’d managed to bully her way into his room and close the door.

“Because I kept to our pact and took lots of photographs?” Hikaru suggested, indicating the two cheap cameras on the dresser. “And also I didn’t die, which I think was part of the deal too.”

Akari pondered that for a moment, and said “I will keep my silence, but if the photographs are not as agreed, this may change.”

“I’m pretty damn sure they’re as agreed, so there.” Hikaru assured her, rolling his eyes.

“We’ll see.” Akari answered dubiously. “So, what did you actually get up to in Kyoto?”

“Visited loads of shrines, failed to visit the Imperial Palace, had an epic NetGo match with Ogata, and trampled some guys in a local Go salon.” He summarised, after a moment to think. “I got some guidebooks for the palace, though, even if I didn’t manage to get on a tour.”

“I didn’t think you would. Getting onto the palace tours requires you to actually plan ahead.” She said dryly.

Hikaru glared. “Oi.”

“It’s better than nothing, though. Where are the books?”

Hikaru blinked, remembering he’d not actually taken those out of the suitcase’s front pocket yet, and went to retrieve the suitcase from the cupboard he’d stashed it in. He spent the evening listening to Akari demonstrate that she knew more about history than he did. It was riveting, really. He absolutely could not imagine a better way to spend his evening. Nope, not at all.

He regained his ground when, later on, he withdrew his goban and heckled her into a teaching match. She wasn’t a dedicated player by any means, but usually humoured him when he insisted on
playing her. It wasn’t like many people got free lessons from pro players, after all, and she was sensible enough to take advantage of it.

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The main thing that occurred the next day was that Hikaru returned to work. He’d been scheduled for a game that day, with the organisers clearly wanting to get it in before the weekend, so he was at the Institute bright and early for the commencement of his pro match.

He’d read through some kifu of his opponent’s previous matches, and they were pretty good. Hikaru was reasonably sure he could beat her, but would reserve judgement for the game. He thought of his intense, vicious match against Ogata consideringly, not sure whether that sort of aggressiveness would actually be useful as a long-term addition to his strategy, or whether it had just been enough of a surprise to Ogata that it worked that time. He wasn’t certain he wanted to risk an official match on it, but…he would see.

The match started as they all tended to, with a bow and traditional pleasantries. Hikaru dove into the game as intently as he usually did, allowing his focus to drown everything else out. He played perhaps more aggressively than usual, but not largely so. By the midgame, they seemed a bit more even than he preferred, so…carefully, Hikaru immersed himself in a little of that indomitable will that had carried him through his match with Ogata. He concentrated, thinking of what he knew of his opponent’s style and favoured hands as he considered what she might play next. He found that, when he approached the game from that place of will and certainty, he saw much more clearly than he usually did.

It wasn’t like the game he’d played on May 5th. Not even close. But it was different, and Hikaru stared at the board searchingly after accepting his opponent’s resignation.

Maybe he’d found something new in his Go.

After the match, it was a bit late in the day to go about doing any proper shrine visiting, so the most Hikaru did on his way home was go to a print shop to get his photos developed. He selected a few to show his mother, a number which wouldn’t seem suspicious, and shoved the rest at Akari when she inevitably came to bother him in the evening. She stayed for dinner, which was a pretty common occurrence, and watched over his shoulder as he sat down for a nice few NetGo slaughters.

Most of the guys were way too weak to practice new strategies and styles on, so he just settled for flattening them more quickly and ruthlessly than he usually tended to. Most of them were so easy to predict that he found himself narrating their likeliest moves to Akari as he played, and she listened with fascination as he used the boring matches as an opportunity to teach her a bit more. Finally, about four very quick games in, Yashiro appeared, bringing with him the prospect of a real match. Hikaru accepted the challenge with relish, and told Akari not to bother him as he got down to business.

Sai would have liked Yashiro. The other boy’s Go was interesting, it used hands that just weren’t standard in the least. Yashiro had made a style out of bizarre plots and unpredictable moves, but he tended to fall short against Hikaru because he was a similarly deceitful bastard in-game, which gave him a certain insight into weird plays that most people lacked. Yashiro might have made his style out of unpredictability, but Hikaru was making it into an art form.

Hikaru grinned as the match progressed. Playing against Yashiro was just fun, it was unusual and different and Sai would have been delighted by it, even if he could flatten them both at record speed. He reached out to the empty space, thinking are you watching, Sai?
The world falling away, Hikaru clicked his stones into place.

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Almost invariably, weekends were totally free of official matches. Hikaru was pretty grateful for this time, since his mother had only allowed him to drop out of school on the condition he study to take his exams in his own time. So, pretty much, he had a hell of a lot of independent work to do at weekends, and his mother checked to make sure he was doing it.

That weekend, Hikaru elected to kill two birds with one stone, and took his study materials along to the first shrine on his list. After trying and failing to consult with a kannushi there, he promptly took himself and his study materials away again, because the shrine was popular and crowded and not at all a peaceful studying environment.

The second shrine was better. Hikaru had a talk with the kannushi, confirmed he wasn’t useful in the least, and sat down on a nearby bench to study for an hour. It ended up actually being forty-five minutes, because Hikaru didn’t really have a good attention span for things that weren’t Go, and then he left to the next destination. He repeated this procedure twice more before it was getting to mid-afternoon, and past time to head back.

The next day, Waya came with an amused Isumi in tow to commandeer Hikaru from any plans he might have had.

“If you’re going to disappear for a week for bullshit reasons, then you need to make up lost game time!” Proclaimed Waya, as exhibit A of how he was just as obsessed with Go as one tended to expect of pro players. “And you’re not getting out of it, either!”

“I wouldn’t want to.” Hikaru said cheerfully, dragging the both of them upstairs to his room. His poor goban didn’t get nearly enough games. “I need to try out some stuff I came up the other day.”

“Something you came up with on your journey of self-discovery?” Isumi inquired, lips quirking.

Hikaru nodded. “Yep.” He set up the goban, providing pillows on either side of it, and set both pots of stones to the side. “Who’s first?”

Waya answered by inviting himself to sit on one of the proffered pillows, staring expectantly at Hikaru. Isumi sighed and sat down in seiza to observe.

Once Hikaru was seated, they guessed stones for nigiri, and he ended up with black. Very advantageous. He bowed his onegaishimasu in time with Waya, and sat back to contemplate. He thought of the game, and he thought of the empty void in his mind.

Reaching out in some bizarre way he couldn’t really quantify, Hikaru perched on the verge of a great abyss. The abyss was empty, when even now Hikaru couldn’t help but expect there to be the shifting sense of a lively mind, flashes of excitement and interest inevitable at every game of Go. The absence was as jarring as it ever was, and came with the horrible grief that had become so familiar. Hopelessness reached, as it always did, but Hikaru wouldn’t let it near. With his eyes open, his thoughts skirted the edge of a void which should not exist within him, and promised himself that one day, he would be whole again.

Let’s play, Sai.

Hikaru placed his first stone.

He was very familiar with Waya’s style. They played often, and Hikaru won far more often than he
He usually had the upper hand, but Waya was a good player, and wasn’t to be underestimated. Nonetheless, he was used to Waya, he knew how he thought and how he operated. It made him a very good opponent to really go to town on. Anticipation unfurling in him, Hikaru went on the offensive and, for the most part, stayed there.

Two hours later, Waya gaped at the black-and-white evidence of how poorly he’d fared, and instead of thanking Hikaru for the game, said “What the hell have you been eating?” It was an odd enough thing to ask in reference to sudden improvement at Go that both Hikaru and Isumi were silent for a moment.

“Cosmic power.” Hikaru decided, after a brief pause. “And universe juice.”

Once he managed to deflect Waya from his affront, they sat down to replay and discuss the game. Hikaru mercilessly pointed out where Waya hadn’t really managed to stand up to him, but didn’t spare himself either, pointing out where the shift in his style was still rough and left openings. Openings that Waya hadn’t noticed, apparently, but they were there. Isumi contributed as well, helpfully noting some parts they’d both missed, as well as his own assessment of Hikaru’s playing.

“It’s interesting, what you’ve done with this match.” He said, peering at the stones. “But it’s risky, and definitely needs some polish. If you weren’t so good at reading ahead, it wouldn’t have worked nearly as well. It might not work as well on opponents you’re not used to, either.”

Hikaru accepted the comments with a nod. “Yeah, knowing Waya’s style made it a lot easier.” He acknowledged. “I do definitely need to practice. But the first time I tried playing like this, a few days ago, was against Ogata. And it was awesome, even though he’s way stronger than me and we don’t even play that much.”

Two sets of eyes glinted with interest. “Replay it?” Waya asked.

“Sure.” He agreed, and cleared the stones to begin. A game like that wasn’t one you forgot quickly, especially when you’d narrated it to a kamidana soon after concluding it.

He placed his and Ogata’s stones, explaining as he went his reasoning behind the various moves, and what he’d thought Ogata was up to in various areas. He had a very attentive audience, both of them clearly rapt as they watched the hands play out, whistling at a couple of points where Hikaru’s plots had really paid off. He knew Ogata would be far more watchful the next time they played, so he likely wouldn’t do nearly as well, but he was still pretty damn proud of this game. He’d played it for Sai.

Once he was finished, all three of them admired the board. “You’re right, Shindou. That was a pretty awesome game.” Waya decided.

Isumi nodded. “If anything, after watching this, I’d say you weren’t aggressive enough against Waya.” He said. “It seems like your traps work better if you’re keeping your opponent focused on the more obvious aggressive plays you do. I can see you’ve got a lot of different plans going, on different levels, to counter Ogata’s or to trick him. I still say that this only works because you can read ahead so well, but…with some practice, I can see this sort of playing really improving the standard of your games.”

“What he said.” Waya agreed. “I’m not sure you should be giving him too many ideas though, Isumi.”

The young man smiled. “We’ll see.” He turned back. “Shall we play?”
A while after his friends had left, Hikaru replayed their games on his goban with interest.

Isumi had been right when he said that playing like this was a step forward. It was just like his preferred mode of playing, but more aggressive, with more levels to the traps. And, he agreed, it wouldn’t work at all if he couldn’t read his opponent’s moves so well.

Reading ahead had been a strength of his from quite early on. There were so many ways for someone to play out a single strategy, and so many strategies, that trying too hard to predict what an opponent would do could seriously mess up your game. But Hikaru…didn’t have that problem, as much as other people did. He tended to be good at guessing which possibilities his rivals would favour, and therefore he would plan accordingly.

So, what was different now? How come being a bit more of a vicious bastard made so much of a difference?

Even after multiple replays of his games against three people, he wasn’t certain. His best guess was that he was trusting his intuition more, now. Taking more risks than he had before. That would probably end badly for him at some point, so he did need more practice to see how often that risk-taking worked out for him. He supposed he would see.

After all that playing, his day was pretty much done for. He ate dinner, and once back in his room, hesitated.

He didn’t want to do what he’d been doing for so long, for two years. He didn’t want to avoid any thought of Sai just because it caused him pain. Sai had been too important for that; he deserved more.

After a lengthy pause, Hikaru retrieved the items he’d bought in Kyoto. He set the kamidana, the candles, and the incense burner atop his chest of drawers, and locked his door before lighting the incense. He opened a window, just to be safe. Finally, the fan found its place in the kamidana, and Hikaru sat down in front of it with his goban. The goban he and Sai had shared so many games on, that Sai had been so outrageously excited over.

It might not be a thick kaya board, with stones of the highest quality shell and slate, but it was important. This was the board upon which Sai had first trounced him, and then trounced him again so many times more. This was the board whose arrival had sent the ghost into such a state of effervescent excitement and joy that it had actually radiated out from his mind and into Hikaru’s, a bemusing sensation that boosted his own mood a fair bit in response.

Hikaru grinned a little at the memory, and looked up. “…Hey, Sai.” He said, softly so as not to alert his mother. “I played some games with Waya and Isumi today. I don’t know if you heard, or saw. In case you didn’t, I’ll play them out for you again. You’d better be listening this time. Or watching. Whatever. Anyway, I’ve been trying to play more offensively since that game with Ogata…”

He might just be speaking at nothing, but he didn’t care. If Sai was out there, and could hear him somehow, then that was great. If he couldn’t hear him, it made no real difference. If he could talk to Sai like this, even if he wasn’t listening, then it was less like giving up. More like believing that he’d be back someday, and he could recount all of this in person.

The empty space would never stop causing him pain, or radiating grief, and it was harder to acknowledge those feelings than to push them away. But…it was worth it. Sai deserved more than to be put out of Hikaru’s mind because it was uncomfortable to remember him.

Hikaru talked Sai through the day’s games, for a fair while after the incense had burned out. Afterwards, he packed everything except the incense burner away, deciding that it probably wasn’t
feasible to hide an incense-burning habit.

The fan, as always, stayed with him.

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Over the next few weeks, Hikaru settled into a new routine. He went to his scheduled games, and played it reasonably safe in the first few, well aware that he needed more practice before he got too confident. He visited Touya Koyo’s Go salon frequently, pretty much because it was the best place to play Touya. His rival had been more than slightly peeved at his yet-unexplained week away, and took it out on him in their games.

This worked just fine for Hikaru, as he was using every worthwhile unofficial game he could to practice being more aggressive and decisive in his play.

Usually, he and Touya were pretty evenly matched. Touya tended to win more games, but not by much. Slowly, though, the scales were tipping.

Two weeks after Hikaru had returned, Touya sat back from their concluded game, staring at it critically. “You improved, after that ridiculous holiday.” He commented. “I’ll have to step up my game as well.”

“Makes you wish you were taking a week long mystery journey, right?” Hikaru asked, and was quite certain that the only reason he didn’t receive a stone to the face was that Touya respected his equipment too much.

He was certainly improving. Rather than the steady, gruelling grind that it usually took to get better, Hikaru found himself slipping into a style of playing which was as sneaky as it was aggressive. He trusted his intuition about an opponent’s strategy more, and was rarely mistaken. Stronger players, like Touya and other higher dans, could throw him off by changing plans or just plain outsmarting him, but there was no denying that Hikaru’s skill was on the up.

Meanwhile, when he had time, Hikaru worked down his list of shrines. He was getting to the bottom of the tourist list, and would probably have to start looking at maps and address books soon. He studied for his classes when he could, but frankly Go took the priority there and he wasn’t going to pretend otherwise.

Every Sunday, Hikaru procured a few hours to set up his kamidana, light some incense, and tell Sai about the week, replaying his favourite games of the last seven days. On the third Sunday, Hikaru got tired of always packing the kamidana away, and built a discreet shrine in his wardrobe, perching the kamidana and its accompaniments on one of the wide shelves. This had the side effect of making all of his clothes smell like incense, something which did not go unnoticed.

“You’ve been burning incense, Hikaru?” His mother asked, not long after he got back. “Where did you even get it from?” Overall, though, she was slightly bemused but accepting of the fact that her son now seemed to like incense, only cautioning him not to leave it burning unattended.

Akari also noticed very quickly. “It smells smoky and flowery in here now, every time I’m here.” She told him. “You’re actually using incense? Did all those shrines actually influence you a little?” Akari mocked him for it a little, because he’d certainly criticised her perfumes in the past, but otherwise just wanted to know what the scent was.

Waya initially thought he was wearing perfume and laughed, provoking a rather long and heated squabble which was only concluded by Isumi commenting that the smell was too smoky for
perfume. Touya, who came from a pretty traditional family, also had no difficulty identifying the smell and seemed vaguely confused by it, as everyone agreed that burning incense wasn’t something you’d expect of Shindou Hikaru.

Nonetheless, everyone got used to it, and life went on.

He’d fallen into such a comfortable routine that, one day, when Akari located his list of shrines, she surprised him a little.

“You’re still visiting shrines, Hikaru?” She said, surprised. “You must actually like them.”

He considered his answer. “I don’t really. I mostly like bothering the kannushi.” It was even mostly true.

She rolled her eyes. “So, are you only going to the big touristy ones? Because you know there’s a nice little shrine not ten minutes from your grandpa’s house.”

Hikaru, who was pretty much at the end of his list of larger shrines, blinked at her in surprise.

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His grandpa lived pretty close to them. Not close enough that it wasn’t a pain to walk there, but really not bad. Despite that, Hikaru rarely visited, having been put off the last two years by his adamant avoidance of anything Sai-related. But that didn’t really apply anymore, did it? Maybe it would be a good idea to look at Shusaku’s goban again.

So, a weekend about five weeks past his trip to Kyoto, Hikaru went to visit his grandfather.

Shindou Heihachi had been living alone for a while now. His wife, Hikaru’s grandma, was unfortunately not quite as healthy as him, and spent most of her time reading in an armchair, and did not leave the house very much. Heihachi, on the other hand, did frequent Go salons, even if he didn’t compete in amateur tournaments like he did in his youth. He certainly kept up with Go news, pleased in the extreme that his brat of a grandson had become a professional player.

“I’ve not seen you for months, you brat.” Heihachi greeted him at the door. “What in hell have you been doing?”

“Oh, I dunno, playing Go?” Hikaru suggested, inviting himself in by ducking under his grandpa’s arm. The elderly man swiftly pursued him as he added “It’s sort of my job, you know.”

“Well, you’re clearly not doing it well, if you’re still second dan. You need to stop lollygagging and make your way up the ranks!” His illustrious forebear informed him, brushing past to open the door to the sitting room.

“I’d like to see you beat any of the guys I play.” Hikaru muttered in response, a little sourly. He, too, was a bit annoyed he’d not advanced yet. It should be soon, but still…

“I know full well that’s beyond me. And on that note, you’ll be giving me a game before you go. What are you even here for, anyway?”

Hikaru paused. “I wanted to have a look at those gobans you have stored away.” He said, eventually. “I remember you had some pretty good ones sitting there, going to waste.”

Heihachi paused, and eyed him. “Not that old kaya board, I hope?” He asked archly. “I heard some damned weird stories about that thing, and given the way you collapsed on it however many years
ago, I’m tempted to believe them.”

“Grandpa, your ghost stories are dumb and no one believes them.” Hikaru told him imperiously. “Now, let’s have your game already. I want to go poke through your stuff.”

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It still sort of weirded Hikaru out when he beat his grandpa at Go. It wasn’t as though he didn’t beat lots of old guys on a regular basis, but it was much stranger when it was his own grandfather. After all, the man had been competing in amateur tournaments before Hikaru had even been born. He’d been learning and playing Go for longer than Hikaru had been alive, and yet here he was, totally outclassed by his grandson. It was just...really odd to think about, sometimes.

The match was a reasonably short one, and was followed by a post-game constructive bitching session rather than any genuine discussion. Heihachi was an argumentative old codger and Hikaru was an argumentative young brat, so really they were far too alike to interact without getting very argumentative about it.

As a result Heihachi was belligerent enough that he insisted on accompanying Hikaru on his foray into his storage, and would not be dissuaded however much the boy moaned and complained at him.

“You are far too superstitious.” Hikaru informed his grandfather as they entered the dusty room. “One of these days, your superstition will kill you. You’ll see a curtain blowing in the wind, think it’s a ghost, and you’ll just die of fright because you’re old and your heart can’t take it.”

“I stand by my concerns, you ignorant ankle-biter.” Heihachi groused. “Will you get on with your looking around so I can stop wasting my time?”

“It’s your own fault you’re wasting your own time.” Hikaru muttered, looking up the steep steps with trepidation. If he remembered correctly, it was up there he’d found the goban which had changed his life. Carefully, he made his way upwards, looking around until he found the thing under a dust cloth. Gently, he removed the cover, and stared at the gorgeous polished surface, free of any blemish. It really was a work of art...but he did wish that the wood bore the tears and blood which had started it all.

He touched the empty space in his mind, hesitantly. Called a wordless query into the shapeless void. He waited for several moments, and sighed.

“You done yet?” Heihachi hollered up at him.

Hikaru stroked the surface of the goban, once. “Yeah, I’m done.”

Business concluded, Hikaru squashed his disappointment and made his farewells, leaving the house in the direction of this supposed shrine.

Chapter End Notes

This is the second chapter of four that was posted on tumblr for the Random Hikago Event. Minor revisions have been made for Ao3 release. The two remaining prewritten chapters will be revised and posted over the next few days. New chapters will likely be posted in their somewhat rough form on tumblr first,
so that's the place to go if you don't want to wait any longer. Reminder, it's tenspontaneite on tumblr.

Note: the shrine near Heihachi is made up and does not actually exist. To my knowledge.

Thanks to all of the guys from tumblr who swiftly migrated here to give Paper Cranes their love. Welcome as well to those who are reading Paper Cranes for the first time, your support is greatly appreciated. Reading everyone's comments allows me to appreciate my fanfiction from the perspective of a reader, rather than an over-critical author, and has been invaluable to my motivation. I am positively charmed by the response to this story. If anyone has questions, I'm happy to answer.

18/09/16: minor edits made.
09/10/17 – Hikaru’s grandma isn’t dead, as of end of canon.
30/05/18 – minor stylistic edits.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Hikaru encounters a mystery at his local shrine.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The shrine was small, with only a single lonely building to its name. There was a torii, of course, but aside from that the only indication that it was a shrine was the fox statue beside the building. An Inari shrine, then – unsurprising, as they were the most common sort in Japan. After seeing the behemoth of an Inari shrine in Kyoto as well as a number of larger ones in Tokyo itself, this one wasn’t particularly impressive. It was quiet and pretty enough, he supposed, surrounded by trees as it was, but overall pretty boring.

But...wait. Was that...?

Intrigued, Hikaru traversed the shrine’s modest clearing and went to inspect some sort of colourful vine growing up a post and then onto one of the trees. There were a number of small purple flowers, and they looked like the stylised image on his fuji tubes. They were growing pretty high up, so it took some stretching to get his face level with one to smell it.

It...was a faint scent. Much fainter than in the incense, and a lot fainter than what he remembered from Sai. It smelled the same, though.

Hikaru stepped back, looking at the wisteria vine with a little bemusement. Fancy that – the closest shrine to his grandpa’s place, and presumably the closest to his as well, had a damn wisteria vine in it. That was...almost suspiciously coincidental. Or it would be if he thought the plant wisteria had anything to do with Sai himself. Or if he hadn’t seen similar vines growing in several people’s gardens. As it was, it was probably just a plain old coincidence. He might as well find the kannushi, though, if a place this small even had one. He glanced around.

Kannushi were pretty distinctive in their garb, and as such, it was not at all difficult to spot this one. He was younger looking than a lot of the guys tended to be. Hikaru had learned more or less by necessity that it tended to be a family thing, with sons of kannushi also training to be kannushi and so on. Maybe this guy was the same, or maybe he’d been at it a while. His age was a bit hard to guess, but he was probably in his mid-thirties. Maybe.

He was also giving Hikaru the weirdest look.

It was half confusion, half grimace. It shifted a few seconds in to a mild sneer of distaste, and an incongruent sort of concern. The guy was probably worried he was going to go around wrecking the place. Hikaru hadn’t witnessed that standard of stink eye for a good while, but this was definitely a contender for the ‘most hostile reaction a stranger had to Hikaru’ award. He was almost outright staring, and looked nearly offended.

Hikaru felt an impulse that had lain dormant for ages. It was an ancient and noble impulse, calling him to action against injustice: it was the impulse to go forth and profoundly annoy someone.
Namely, the guy who had taken such exception to his presence.

Unfortunately, he didn’t have any good priest annoying gear on him. A bit of litter might have worked nicely, these guys tended to get tremendously pissy about that sort of thing. He had basically nothing with him, though. And also intentional littering was probably one of those things that professional Go players such as himself should avoid. Damn.

Well, maybe he could come back and be a bother some other day. It was only a twenty-something minute walk away, after all.

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It was, in fact, two months before Hikaru returned to his local shrine.

July was a good month for festivals. So was August. There were all sorts of outdoors fair type things, trying to raise awareness for the game and get some new players interested. There were a couple of actual fully-fledged events, one of which Hikaru was asked to teach at. The rest he gate-crashed and taught at anyway. He liked teaching, even if his students didn’t always approve of his methods or even ask to be taught in the first place.

A big gathering was made out of a match between Kuwabora and Kurata, who was an eighth dan now. Hikaru bullied and negotiated his way to a good seat in the room they were televising it in, with some Kansai branch rokudan providing commentary in front of the projected image of the goban. Hikaru sat down, fixing his eyes onto the game with enough intensity that anything that tried to obstruct the screen would probably catch on fire. Kuwabora was an opponent whose every kifu Hikaru had studied, because he seriously wanted the old guy’s title. ‘Honinbou’ was a piece of Sai, and he was the only one who knew it and appreciated it for what it was…so he would claim the title from the old bastard if it was the last thing he ever did. He’d made no secret of his aspirations, and accordingly his companion to this event, Touya, only shook his head at him.

Hikaru would show him, though. He would show everyone, and the damned title would be his!

...at any rate, there was a lot on in July and even more in August, so it was understandable that Hikaru had been busy. Especially since he was now sure his ranking to third dan was incoming, and he needed to practice more than ever to be ready. And it wasn’t like trolling some random judgemental priest was all that high on his priority list, anyway – he had a lot of shrines to visit in his increasingly scarce free time. He had completed the tourist list and was now working his way through the smaller shrines in proximity to his house and the Go institute, so really, going back to a shrine he’d already visited wasn’t an efficient use of his time.

One Sunday afternoon, though, Hikaru paused in his narrative to Sai’s shintai with a sudden thought. It was too late to commute to any of the further shrines, but…. “You know, it’s early enough still that I could totally go to that shrine and freak out the kannushi a bit.” He mused, half to the kamidana and half to himself. “You’d probably tell me off for it, wouldn’t you?” he asked the absent ghost. “Or maybe you wouldn’t.” Sai had sometimes become very incensed when he felt that something untoward was going on; their occasional encounters with fraudsters had demonstrated that well enough. He wasn’t certain if a priest giving him some major stink eye would have got Sai’s hackles up, but eh.

Hikaru considered his plans for the afternoon. He had to study anyway, so... “Yeah, I think I’ll go.” He decided. “Talk later, Sai.”

He threw away the ashes of the incense, snuffed out the candle flames, and concealed the kamidana on its wardrobe-shelf using a strategically placed coat. He checked his book bag briefly to make sure
it had all the essentials, and set off for the shrine.

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The kannushi wasn’t there when Hikaru arrived, which was bizarrely disappointing. He’d been hoping to rile the guy up a bit by pretending to litter, eating noisily, and that sort of minor irritating thing. Shrugging, Hikaru figured he might as well get some work done so as to placate his mother, and went to sit down near the wisteria. There weren’t many flowers, now – lots had withered and fallen off. He supposed its flowering season was ending, or something like that. Still, it was a nice little grassy corner to sit himself in, so sit himself there he did.

He was a short way into his English verb conjugations, detesting how little of a pattern they had, when he heard a clattering sound and looked up. It transpired that the kannushi was there after all, apparently inside the little shrine building. Hikaru noted the broom and dustpan which had been unceremoniously dropped onto the ground, and raised an eyebrow at the kannushi. Who was staring at him, looking so profoundly astonished that Hikaru couldn’t help but snicker a bit. This did not go unnoticed, and the kannushi’s shock swiftly transformed to a sort of wary ire. Hikaru watched him for a few seconds, observing as the man stiffly picked up his cleaning implements and disappeared from sight around the back of the building.

Amused, but also perplexed at the reaction, Hikaru returned to his verbs. In the space of a few minutes he was mentally cursing the English and their damned inconsistent language. It was just inconsiderate to have basically all the often-used verbs be irregular in some way, forcing innocent foreigners to have to memorise things rather than relying on easy patterns.

Damn you, English. Hikaru shook his fist at the vocabulary for dramatic effect. Why must you be the language of the internet?

When did ‘to ring’ conjugate in the past tense as ‘rung’ and when as ‘ringed’, or even ‘rang’? What was the difference between ‘sneaked’ and ‘snuck’? How on Earth did one lay down in the past tense in English? Was it ‘lied down’, which could be confused with some sort of untruthfulness? Was it ‘laid down’, which could also be used to describe the action of laying bricks? And why did everything to do with laying down have to specify the direction it laid in? It should just be ‘laid’, for a simpler verb of ‘to lay’...except maybe not, because Hikaru remembered that ‘to lay’ was some sort of English sex euphemism. God, he hated English.

Hikaru grimly battled his way through the accursed language exercises, looking up from time to time as the kannushi went about his business, raking leaves and inspecting the shrine. He really seemed to dislike Hikaru, since whatever he did he seemed to have an eye on him, with that same half-offended expression on his face.

Seemed he didn’t actually have to rile the guy up at all, as the man was managing it perfectly well on his own.

Hikaru finished six far-too-long grammatical exercises in his English workbook and then couldn’t bear to do anymore. He spent the remaining twenty minutes of his study hour duelling with the concept of simultaneous equations, which he found significantly easier.

An hour after he had sat down, Hikaru packed his stuff and stood up, stretching. He noticed the kannushi staring watchfully from beside the shrine building, eyes narrowed. Hikaru grinned mockingly, and left through the torii, finding himself somewhat intrigued.

His first impression of that kannushi had been of some judgmental asshole who looked at the bleached hair and thought delinquent. He’d attributed the suspicious and watchful looks to worries
that Hikaru would desecrate the shrine in some way, maybe by littering or – Inari forbid – spray painting.

That impression didn’t quite hold up any more.

He’d been studying, for god’s sake. He’d just sat there and studied, maybe not peacefully, but quietly and without being a dick to his surroundings. And yet the kannushi spent the whole time overtly or covertly staring at him as he went about his business, expression ranging from suspicious to worried to outright scowling. He was either just a monumental dickhead, or had some other reason to hate Hikaru on sight.

Hikaru found himself very curious to know what exactly this priest’s problem was. Hikaru was not good at restraining his curiosity.

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The third time Hikaru returned to the little Inari shrine was only four days later, quite late in Thursday’s afternoon.

This time the kannushi spotted him coming, looked almost panicked, and disappeared into the shrine building. It was thoroughly unusual.

Hikaru stared at the building as he navigated to his spot by the wisteria, setting out his history books to do the required reading. He didn’t do a very good job of this reading, on account of being so damned curious about the priest – he couldn’t stop glancing at the building for any hint of movement.

Much to his disappointment, the kannushi didn’t emerge from the building for the entire hour. Hikaru packed his books away, shouldered his bag, and made his way out through the torii’s red archway.

Though he hadn’t seen very much of the guy this time, disappearing into the shrine like that was also pretty suspicious. It was almost like he was hiding from Hikaru.

It was weird, and Hikaru couldn’t resist that sort of crap in the slightest.

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The fourth time Hikaru went to the shrine was a week after the second, reasonably early on the Sunday. He decided to leave his ‘Sai time’ for the late afternoon or evening, and have a longer than usual shrine study session in the hopes of learning something about that weird priest.

The weird priest in question saw him coming through the torii, and vanished at once into the shrine proper.

It was sort of annoying this time, actually. Hikaru wouldn’t be able to figure out what was up with the guy if he just hid in the shrine every time he was there.

Perplexed, intrigued, and irritated all at once, Hikaru elected to do some English exercises. It was fitting accompaniment for such emotions.

The thing with the kannushi abruptly became far weirder and more interesting when, half an hour after he’d disappeared, the priest emerged with his priest baton thing, the shaku, and started touring the shrine. Hikaru couldn’t figure out what he was doing at first, until he saw the man stop at the fox statue and move on – he’d left something stuck to its bib. He watched with fascination, feeling almost as if he was observing the behaviour of a bizarre alien beast, as the priest determinedly made his way around and then disappeared into the honden again.
Hikaru tried to resist. He really did. But in the end, it only took about a minute after the kannushi had gone inside for him to walk over and inspect the fox.

On its chest was an ofuda. An ofuda. Hikaru stared at it incredulously, and then irreverently peeled it off, reading what looked like freshly-inked script with his eyebrows raising.

The ofuda, quite unremarkably, asked for protection from a kami, in this case Inari. This was normal, expected even, given that it was an Inari shrine. Much more bizarrely, it was specifically asking for protection against malevolent spirits and spiritual harm.

Hikaru stared at the paper in his hand, not entirely certain he was seeing correctly. He read it again and again and one last time for good measure, but nope, that definitely said what he thought he had. He left the fox and walked around the shrine, finding similar ofuda on the shrine building, assorted trees, a bench, a rock, and one on each of the torii’s legs.

He was inspecting the torii’s pair with consternation when he heard the kannushi emerge from the shrine. Hikaru looked over at him, beyond baffled, and noted that there was now an ofuda hanging around his neck, and the baton was still present.

The kannushi looked around swiftly, eyes landing first on where he’d been sitting and his books still were, and for a moment looked profoundly relieved. Then he looked the other way, and saw Hikaru. He froze and stared straight at him, looking very much like a deer caught in the headlights of an oncoming vehicle.

And, okay, that was more than enough. Hikaru couldn’t take this shit anymore, it had become far too weird. He approached the kannushi, intent on opening a dialogue with the perplexing priest.

The kannushi promptly started panicking, if his jerky movements and the expression on his face were any indication. He retreated a little, clutched at his baton, and stared wildly at the approach of Hikaru as if he were regarding the approach of a dragon rather than that of a fifteen-year-old boy.

When Hikaru was only a few metres away, and about to open his mouth to ask ‘what the hell’, the kannushi lost it and brandished the shaku at him, eyes wide. Hikaru stared at the baton with absolutely no idea of what was going through the man’s head, until the priest shrieked “Begone, foul demon!” and with his other hand threw a handful of ofuda at him.

Most brushed lightly against Hikaru before flopping uselessly onto the ground. A single one clung lightly to his shirt, fluttering gently in the breeze.

Hikaru looked down at it, and then up again at the trembling priest. Because what. “What the hell.” Hikaru said, feeling like he’d said it far too late, and that it wasn’t nearly enough for the kind of bullshit he had found himself in. The kannushi continued to stare at him, looking actually sort of terrified, as whatever he had expected to happen did not happen. Tentatively, Hikaru peeled the ofuda from his shirt and brought it up to read, only managing to confirm that it seemed the same as the others before the priest absolutely freaked.

Abandoning any pretence of knowing what was going on in his life, Hikaru watched a grown man flee from him in terror.

Hikaru watched the door of the shrine building for a while, even went back to do his studying so he wouldn’t be spending the time uselessly. He only studied sporadically, but he still stayed there for a good two hours, maybe more. The shrine’s honden wasn’t something the public were allowed inside, only the kannushi and miko could go in, so it wasn’t as though he could legally follow the guy. A couple of times Hikaru caught the door opening slightly and the priest peering out, to see if he was
still there. It was absolutely stupid, and confusing, and so very very ridiculous.

He was stubborn, but there was only so long he could wait. After about three hours, Hikaru packed his things and left the shrine, feeling quite thoroughly flummoxed.

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When he got home, Hikaru greeted his mother and went immediately to his room, feeling all sorts of confused and thoughtful. Because it was kind of comforting, and also because he wanted someone to discuss this idiocy with, Hikaru commenced his Sunday Sai-time by opening the wardrobe, unveiling the kamidana, and lighting the candles and incense. Once the wonderful, familiar, heartbreaking scent of wisteria was wafting pleasantly throughout the room, he placed the fan and got down to business.

“Okay, Sai.” He said. “The weirdest thing just happened.” The impulse was there to immediately begin narrating the entire encounter, as well as the one on Thursday as Sai hadn’t heard that yet. But there were too many thoughts running through his head, so Hikaru sat silently for a few minutes to let it all process before speaking again. “So, that priest,” he mumbled, pensively. “He’s…probably not being a judgemental dick. If it was that, he wouldn’t have tried to throw a load of ofuda at me. He actually seemed scared, Sai. I mean, what the hell?”

Hikaru brought up his hands and rubbed at his temples. It was weird, there was no mistaking it. The kannushi had started off just being really suspicious and displeased at his presence. By the third encounter, he’d seemed more worried, and had gone to hide for at least an hour. By the fourth, he was actually frightened, and had thrown ofuda at Hikaru. Hell, he’d stuck them all around the shrine, and even worn one around his neck. He had done this with hand-made ofuda asking not for the standard general protection, but for protection against malevolent spirits.

It was outrageously weird, and yes, suspicious.

Many people had, in the past, looked at Hikaru and immediately dismissed him as showy, a delinquent, beneath their notice, or even a troublemaker. This was not that. This was something else. Hikaru liked to think that nothing about him screamed ‘demon!’ or maybe ‘evil spirit here!’, and certainly none of the other priests or the miko had behaved in even slightly the same way.

That made this kannushi suspicious…and not, actually, in a bad way.

It was…sort of hopeful.

“He thinks I’m an evil spirit. Or a demon. Or maybe possessed by an evil spirit or demon.” Hikaru said slowly, ponderously. He quashed down the parts of him which were getting far too excited far too quickly, and exhaled. “I’m pretty sure I don’t look like a demon or an evil spirit, and it’s not like I was behaving so bad that he, I dunno, concluded that I’m pure evil. I was just studying.” To be fair, no one had guessed that Hikaru had been possessed even when he had been, they’d just thought he was weird. But still. He took a deep breath, and uttered the natural conclusion: “so…maybe, I’m on to something here.” He said, the words all rushing out of him.

It was hard to hold back that surge of hope and excitement and exultation. He had to have visited over a hundred shrines, and the kannushi hadn’t known anything and hadn’t shown any sign of getting weird vibes from him at all. But this guy? This guy had been suspicious of him on sight.

What if this guy knew something about spirits? Something worthwhile?

Okay, so he thought Hikaru was a demon. So what? If he could detect some sort of paranormal
residue hanging around him that was more than enough of a place to start! It was certainly way more than he’d got from anything else he’d done so far.

Hikaru was officially excited. Excited, and full of so much energy that he squirmed in place. “Okay, Sai, I’m really trying not to get my hopes up here.” He told the fan. “But you have to admit, this sounds…well, hopeful.”

Frustratingly, he probably wouldn’t have a chance to follow up until next Thursday. The beginnings of each week were always way too crammed with games and practice, and on Monday afternoons there were the Serizawa study sessions. Not to mention the Touya study sessions on Tuesdays, or the routine official matches that were scheduled for most lower-dans on Wednesdays. He knew that this would absolutely eat at him for the whole time, he knew it.

Hikaru sat and stewed in excited frustration for a good five minutes instead of talking or doing anything productive. Finally, though, he huffed. “Okay, that’s enough of that. Here, Sai, I played an interesting match of NetGo against Yashiro on Tuesday…”

He set out the stones, and replayed the match.

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On Monday, the excitement and the hope were still dominant in the maelstrom of mad emotion that Hikaru was experiencing. He positively bounced with energy that alternated between cheerful and nervous, and it had an excellent effect on his games. Hikaru played quickly and impulsively, confusing the hell out of Waya with his weird plays and annoying Touya by fidgeting too much during their game, but ultimately putting forth a great few games.

On Tuesday, impatience truly began to set in, and Hikaru poured all of his irritation and fretting into demolishing his opponents as though they had personally affronted him. They sort of had, being so inconsiderate as to want games with him when he wanted to be investigating a potential lead. He was more ruthless with his students than usual, and got into a bitching contest with Akari when she blamed his poor mood on his ‘period’, which she knew full well wasn’t something he was physically capable of.

On Wednesday, Hikaru was nervous. He was distracted and fidgety and couldn’t stop worrying. The kannushi had been seriously freaked out. What if he brought other priests? What if he brought friends and family? What if he brought exorcists? It wasn’t like they’d be able to exorcise Hikaru anyway, but the fear was there. Worse, what if the kannushi was so freaked out by him that he skipped town, or transferred to some other shrine? What if he got a restraining order?

A consequence of channelling all of the pain, loss, anguish and grief of Sai’s absence into getting Sai back meant that when he felt that this goal was threatened, it messed him up. In the end Hikaru allowed himself to sink slightly into depression and apathy just to make his head shut up a bit. His play vacillated between terrible and awful, and it was truly unfortunate that he had an official match that day because he lost to basically everyone. He lost to Waya, he lost to Isumi, and he sure as hell lost to Touya, who seemed perfectly outraged at his inability to focus and give him a good game. And, for that matter, he lost to the sandan he had his match against, too. When he finally got home in the evening he locked himself in his room and sequestered himself in front of the Sai-shrine, desperately needing the bittersweet familiarity of the closest thing he had to Sai’s presence.

He sat for over an hour before the kamidana, lighting new sticks of incense as they burned out rather than leaving it at just the one. He sat there breathing in the scent and did his best to relax, and not panic, and not come up with absurd worries, and he was actually almost starting to succeed when Akari came over.
When he heard her voice downstairs, greeting his mother, Hikaru did not feel very charitable towards it at all. He stared vengefully at the wardrobe-shrine, feeling profoundly slighted by the sound of footsteps on the stairs.

When she knocked, he refused to answer until she started getting belligerent and noisy, whereupon he snuffed out all of the burning things, leaving a stick of incense half-expended, and concealed his wardrobe-shrine in the traditional manner. Then he unlocked and opened the door, just as Akari was giving it a good shove, meaning that she fell into the bedroom with basically no grace at all.

“Finally,” She snapped, once she had herself upright. “I was starting to think you were just going to ignore me until I gave up!”

Hikaru stared at her. “I let you in, didn’t I?” He responded, hand reaching into his pocket. It found nothing. He did a double-take, checking the other pocket as well, but nope. He’d left the fan on the kamidana. Damn. His fingers were pretty much twitching for it.

“After leaving me waiting there for ages, perhaps.” Akari sniffed. Then she paused, looking suddenly curious. “Hikaru, your room is basically full of smoke. I should probably close the door so you don’t set off the fire alarm.” Without waiting for a response, she did precisely that, sniffing the air as she did so.

“It’s just incense.” He muttered, not feeling very sociable at all. He was worried, damn it, and because she’d caught him in the middle of some unscheduled Sai-time he was feeling far more emotional than he tended to prefer when other people were around. And he didn’t even have the fan to mess with.

“I know you’ve been mad on the stuff since you came back from Kyoto, but I’ve never caught you burning it before.” Akari said, glancing around. “Where’s the burner? I don’t think I’ve seen it before.”

“I put it away,” He explained, but suddenly she wasn’t listening. She was looking at the thin line of smoke wafting out from the wardrobe door. Before he could do anything, the door in question had been wrenched open.

“You’re burning incense in your wardrobe?” She asked incredulously, rifling about in search of the burner. “No wonder your clothes all smell of it!”

“Get out of my stuff, you witch!” Hikaru demanded, not pleased in the least because she was about to-

Akari found the kamidana. Akari stared. Hikaru resigned himself to his fate.

There were several moments of silence. Quite a lot of them, actually. It would be more accurate to say that there was a good minute of silence involved, which was an unusually large space of time when both Hikaru and Akari were occupying the same space.

Finally, the many moments of silence ended. “Hikaru,” Akari said, disbelief colouring her tone. “Have you discovered religion?”

…Somehow, Hikaru had never expected that she would make such an assumption. “What?” He asked, flatly.

“Oh my god, you have.” Akari said, rapidly skydiving to her false conclusion. “It explains everything. All of those shrines – no, Hikaru, you will not convince me that over a hundred shrines is because you like bothering kannushi – and the incense, and why you’ve been acting so weird since
you came back from Kyoto—"

“I have not,” Hikaru protested, stung. He hadn’t, had he? If he had been acting discernibly different, Akari would certainly be the first to notice, but…

“You have found religion.” Akari said, rapturously. “You are absolutely the last person I would ever expect to have found religion. This is crazy!” She looked thrilled.

“Oh my god I don’t know you.” Hikaru insisted, hoping desperately that she wouldn’t be spreading this shit around, because he knew very well that he would not be able to convince her she was wrong at this stage of her certainty. “I don’t know you, what are you even doing in my room, get out of here.” He made a token, unsuccessful attempt to shove her out of his room.

She batted him away and inspected the kamidana more closely. “You’re getting all into Shinto stuff, then? If there’s a kamidana?” She asked, as though actually expecting an answer. “You have a household shrine already, Hikaru, you could have used that, you know. This must have been horribly expensive. And then you wouldn’t have to use a fan for your shintai.” She made to reach out and touch it. Hikaru objected immensely to this idea.

He plucked the fan away before she could reach it, folding it defensively against his wrist. “Don’t disrespect my worship,” he snarked at her, figuring that as long as this was what she’d decided on he might as well roll with it.

“A fan, Hikaru?” She asked, sceptically.

“The fan is an artefact of great personal significance.” He told her imperiously.

Akari peered at it as best she could when he was hiding it from view. “It’s that fan you always carry around with you, isn’t it?” She said, phrasing it like a question when in reality it was more like a statement. “You never would explain what that fan was about.” She looked at him as if she expected him to spill all of his secrets on the spot.

“It’s mine. My own. My precious.” Hikaru informed her at a deadpan. They’d gone to see The Lord of the Rings movie as soon as it had been subbed for a Japanese audience, and the second one had been released and subbed the year before, so she recognised the reference immediately.

“You are a pain.” Akari declared. “A huge pain. I’m convinced that putting up with you for all these years is a symptom of insanity, and a sign that I should probably seek counselling.”

“I couldn’t agree more.” Hikaru supported, solemnly.

She rolled her eyes. “I know full well what you’re like.” His life-long best friend claimed. “You bought your own stuff and worship in secret because you’re a cagey little moron who cares far too much about what other people think and know about you.” In this, she was actually probably right, though naturally he would never admit anything of the sort. “But I, for one, am very supportive of your faith, Hikaru.” Akari announced, continuing self-importantly. “So I will not tell anyone.” She smiled. “Probably.”

He smiled back at her, just as insincerely. Now that she’d found out, Hikaru found that he actually didn’t care so much. He’d hid the kamidana mostly because he’d thought that it would be interpreted as mourning, which would raise far too many questions. He’d somehow never realised that, given his shrine visiting and so on, religion might be the conclusion people would come to.

Most Japanese followed Shinto practices as a matter of course— it wasn’t so much a religion as just something people did. There were naturally people who followed the traditions much more closely
and seriously, primary among them the actual priests, and they could be considered religious…but
him, as one of those people? The people who actually worshipped, rather than just burning some
incense on holidays or leaving offerings at public shrines? What a weird thought.

Hikaru didn’t especially mind the idea of that getting out. In fact, it would probably be very funny. He
was certain that Waya would dismiss it all as bullshit no matter what anyone else said, and insist
that the shrine was just Hikaru taking his stupidity to all new heights. He suspected most of the
people who knew him even slightly wouldn’t have any idea of what to believe. Touya might even
get affronted by the whole thing – Hikaru knew his family were very traditional, and might even be
among the number of those who were on the religious side of the Shinto spectrum.

“I am so thankful for your kind support. I don’t know what I would do without you.” Hikaru
deadpanned, and they exchanged some very false pleasantries and kind words before he finally
managed to evict her from his room on grounds that she was interrupting his worship.

Once he’d re-locked the room, he set to re-lighting the incense and candles as well, listening to Akari
cheerfully explain to his mother that he was being a brat today so she was leaving him be. He rolled
his eyes, and flipped his middle finger at her through the floor, before sitting down with the shrine
and ignoring everything.

Annoyingly, he actually felt far better now. Even when Akari was being a supreme pain in the
backside, she somehow managed to cheer him up. That was the hazard of growing up with someone,
he supposed. Especially someone who grew up to be as sly and tricky as Akari had.

“Did you hear all that, Sai?” Hikaru asked, settling to breathe in the incense. “She thinks I’m
religious now.” He paused, a thought occurring to him. “Then again, maybe I am.” He mused.
“After all, here I am talking to a kamidana with no idea whether or not you, Sai, are actually
listening. And I suppose you could be a minor kami. Like an ancestor spirit. Or the kami of Go.”

Hikaru grinned, suddenly. He knew precisely what he’d be saying if this thing thing ever got out and
people started asking.

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The next day, Hikaru had returned to a slightly effervescent blend of excitement and nervous
anticipation. He gathered enough mental focus to absolutely dominate a match with Waya, leaving
the boy looking somewhat shell-shocked as he watched his terrible loss unfold. It was very
satisfying.

 Afterwards, Hikaru made his way with all due haste back to his residential area and then power-
walked all the way to the local shrine.

Once the torii was in sight, he slowed and snuck his way forwards. In the shadow of a nearby tree,
Hikaru observed the kannushi. He was raking leaves from the shrine’s grass, looking about him
periodically. He looked nervous and slightly unkempt, with such dark circles beneath his eyes that
Hikaru could see them from over ten metres away. He observed this with incredulity, and maybe a
little guilt. Had he freaked the guy out that badly?

Cautiously, Hikaru made his way into plain view and entered through the torii. As the priest was
maintaining a keen eye for his surroundings, he noticed at once, standing up straight with fright. He
actually shrieked a little, and scrambled backwards as Hikaru approached, rummaging in his
clothing.

Holy shit, he really had spooked this poor bastard. “Hey,” Hikaru attempted, approaching more
quickly. He didn’t want the guy to just run and hide again. “I don’t know exactly what you’re thinking, but you’re probably wrong.”

The following moment saw a crucifix being brandished in front of him. Hikaru stared at it, no longer even all that shocked, and looked at the trembling priest. “Stay back, foul spirit!” The kannushi cried, pale and wide-eyed.

“Okay, this is just dumb.” Hikaru said. “I am not a spirit. I’m pretty sure I’d have noticed.”

“I will not listen to your lies!” The man declared, and ran for it.

Hikaru stared dumbly for just a second too long. By the time he started pursuing, the guy was already well on his way to the shrine, and slammed the door in his face just as he caught up. “Dammit.” Hikaru muttered, and then raised his voice. “Man, you’re being a total wuss!” He called. “Even if I was a spirit, this would be a totally crap way of dealing with it! You’re just hiding!”

There was a pause. Hikaru heard rustling behind the door.

“I never knew Shinto priests were so cowardly!” He said loudly.

The rustling came again, more rapidly. “If I knew an onmyouji powerful enough, demon, I would have had you exorcised already!” The kannushi shouted angrily, voice muffled through the door.

Hikaru stopped at that response, perplexed. “What, do you think I’m a major evil spirit, or something?” He asked, half worried and half amused. “Some sort of unholy demonic terror?”

There was no response for around ten seconds. Then: “The ofuda did nothing! Ofuda, with Inari-sama’s holy protection upon them! Even the crucifix was worthless!”

“And that means I’m some sort of arch-demon, then?” He questioned.

“Yes!” The priest said, emphatically.

“One too powerful for any of the exorcists or monks you know?”

“Yes!” He repeated. Then: “I will not bring good men here for you to slaughter!”

Hikaru exhaled, slowly, and shook his head. He could hardly believe that this shit was happening. “If I’m such a powerful demon, then why am I just standing here instead of breaking through the door?” He asked, quite reasonably.

Another pause. When the kannushi replied, he wasn’t shouting anymore, but spoke firmly enough that he was clearly audible. “This is the heart of the shrine,” he said. “One of Inari-sama’s many hearts. Even evil such as you cannot penetrate into such a holy place.”

He stared. That was why the guy had run and hid in the shrine? “Oh, that is so stupid.” He insulted. “I’m not repelled by the shrine, or some dumb crap like that! I just haven’t tried to get in because it’s illegal!”

The pause this time was quite long. It stretched for about twenty seconds, and Hikaru was starting to get impatient when the voice came again, venturing “illegal?”

“Yes.” Hikaru said, now very exasperated. “It’s not a public building and trespassing is illegal. I know what I look like, but I’m not a delinquent.” Much. Anymore. He added internally.

There was another long silence. “That is exactly something a demon would say.” The kannushi said,
but he sounded less certain.

“What do you want me to do to prove I’m not some evil spirit?” Hikaru demanded. “I have a mum. I have a dad, even if I hardly ever see him. I have friends and I even have a job. I live in a house and sleep in a bed just like any other fifteen-year-old guy. I am very definitely human.”

“The tricks of demons are legendary.” Said the kannushi, pensively. Hikaru was preparing to shout at him again when he said “I will unlock the door, and you will open it. If you can enter the shrine, then either you are not a demon, or you are powerful enough that the shrine cannot stop you and you are only playing with me. If you are repelled, I will know you for what you are.”

“Thank you,” Hikaru said, feeling rather incensed by the whole ordeal. “And, you know, you won’t have me arrested for trespassing when I get in?”

There was a click as a lock turned. “I will not, if indeed you are not a demon.” The kannushi sounded almost amused now. “But to be clear: I am not inviting you in.”

“What, you think I’m a vampire now?” Hikaru asked, mockingly, and reached out to open the door.

“I am not about to discount any possibilities.” The priest’s voice was more distant. As Hikaru opened the door and looked inside, he saw why: the man had retreated to the heart of the shrine, and was watching him warily.

Rolling his eyes, Hikaru stepped easily over the threshold. As the priest’s eyes widened, he took three more steps for good measure. “There.” He said. “Satisfied now?”

He was stared at for a while longer. “I prefer to believe that you are human,” said the kannushi. “Because the alternative is that you are a demon powerful enough to violate Inari’s sacred space, and frankly I do not even want to consider that.”

“Good.” Hikaru nodded, tension starting to ease off. “Now, can we leave and talk outside? I don’t want to attract divine retribution or something for trespassing.”

“Wise.” Came the reply, now hesitantly amused. “You leave, first.”

He rolled his eyes, but complied, turning to exit the holy structure. Once he was out on the grass, he turned and watched expectantly, and surely enough, the kannushi emerged. He did not look especially comfortable while he did it, but he did proceed out of the building with far more dignity than he had entered. Apparently there were rituals to be observed when opening and closing the door under ordinary circumstances, because the priest bowed to the door before finally walking out to join him.

“Working under the assumption that you are a human,” The kannushi said. “I realise that my actions have been bizarre, irrational, and unnecessarily extreme. For that, I apologise. However, if you had been a demon, I would have been perfectly justified in my responses.” Sorry but not sorry, he seemed to say.

“Yeah, yeah, I get it.” Hikaru said, shuffling in place. Finally he could get to the point.

“Perhaps we should start again.” He suggested. “I am Utagawashi Kichirou, kannushi for this shrine to Inari-sama.”

“Shindou Hikaru.” He introduced himself, taking a deep breath. “Now that that’s over with…why in hell did you think I was a demon?!”
This is the third of four chapters submitted to tumblr for Esama's Random Hikago Event. Minor revisions have been made for its posting here. Chapter 5 is still ongoing and is giving me a hard time, but it shouldn't be too much longer until it's on tumblr.

This chapter, number three, is currently my favourite. For the most part, it was easy and highly entertaining to write. Akari's reaction to the shrine more or less wrote itself, I hadn't planned it at all.

Thanks again to everyone who has read, kudos'ed, subscribed, commented, and so on. The attention has been marvellous. I'm pretty terrible at sticking with stories, but I'm making a serious effort this time for you all.

Linguistic note: The OC introduced here is Utagawashi Kichirou, 疑吉郎, Suspicion, fortunate, son. ‘Utagawashi’ is a potential reading of that first kanji, but in all likelihood you would probably need が (ga), わ (wa), し (shi), and い (i) for it to be actually read ‘Utagawashi’. Abbreviated to that one kanji for the purposes of it looking like a name.

Cultural note: information on what is inside the honden, or main shrine building, is somewhat hard to come by. I therefore did not describe it.

18/09/16: Edited portrayal of Shintoism in Japan. Assorted minor edits.
09/10/17: minor edits, edits to stated scheduling of week events : serizawa Monday, Touya Tuesday, official matches Wednesday, nothing in particular Thursday (Morishita?). Outcome of that week’s official match changed to a loss.
30/06/18: very minor stylistic edits
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Hikaru finds some answers.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The kannushi offered nothing but a lengthy pause, looking rather embarrassed. He opened his mouth twice to speak and closed it both times without uttering a sound. Hikaru watched impatiently as Utagawashi visibly gathered his words, fully prepared to do a convincing imitation of a demon if the man decided to clam up now. He’d been searching for leads for far too long to allow this one to escape.

“Well.” Utagawashi said. “It is not something I tend to speak about, but…” he hesitated, shoulders hunching a little as he looked at Hikaru. “…I have a certain degree of spiritual sensitivity. You… stand out, to that sensitivity.” He cleared his throat awkwardly, apparently rather uncomfortable with the topic. He didn’t exactly shuffle or fidget, but he was certainly not the most confident priest Hikaru had ever spoken with.

A thrill of elation shot through him, undaunted by the man’s anxiety. He stilled, thoughts torn between ‘Yes!’ and ‘jackpot!’ as he tried to get a hold of his excitement. He bypassed the issue of how the guy had detected him entirely, asking eagerly “Have you ever met spirits before?” He waited with bated breath.

The priest grimaced. “Once that I am certain of.” He answered. “When I was ten, a tsukumogami tried to eat me. It was not a pleasant experience.”

“…tsukumogami?” He inquired. He’d heard the name, but wasn’t familiar with all the legends and folk stories to that extent. Weren’t they demonic objects, or something like that? He might have to do some actual mythological research, if any of it turned out to be accurate.

“A hundred-year spirit.” The kannushi said. “Certain items can gain a life of their own if they are left for long enough. They can be malevolent or beneficent, but are usually malevolent. My attacker was an antique mirror which tried to absorb me into its surface. Thankfully, my father, who is also a kannushi, was on hand and procured the ofuda from the household shrine to save me.”

“Man,” Hikaru said, somewhat impressed. “That’s scary. Did it attack you because you’re spiritually sensitive?”

“I am spiritually sensitive because it attacked me.” Answered the man, dryly. “Or so the evidence suggests. I have not personally dealt with many spirits, but I have met many who have.”

Hikaru blinked. “How does that work?” He asked, frowning. “Getting attacked by spirits makes you sensitive to them?”

“In almost every case that I know of.” Utagawashi agreed, looking at him inscrutably. He twitched a little, from time to time, and still looked like he’d smelled something particularly foul. “I’m surprised
you are asking. With how you feel to my senses, you should be the most spiritually sensitive person I’ve ever met.”


The kannushi scrutinised him, looking vaguely puzzled. “…Perhaps we should find somewhere to sit down,” he suggested. “I suspect this talk may be a long one.”

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There were a few benches in the vicinity of the shrine, but sitting beside a stranger with whom you were conversing on the topic of spirits turned out to be quite awkward, due to the difficulty in facing each other and making eye contact. This might not impede the conversation of friends, but it made a fairly substantial difference to interactions between wary acquaintances. As a result, Utagawashi reluctantly invited Hikaru to his flat, which was only a five-minute walk away.

“If you turn out to be a crazy psycho, I will hurt you.” Hikaru promised as they approached the small apartment building. It was a quiet residential area – high-rise buildings weren’t the style around there, so a building such as this one with maybe four floors wasn’t too unusual, though houses were more common.

The priest sighed, unlocking his door. “Duly noted.” He said, and held the door for Hikaru, looking remorsefully into his apartment.

After a moment, Hikaru entered, keeping a wary eye on the priest. Just because he was desperate for answers didn’t mean he’d lost all common sense. Once he was in, however, he stopped and stared a little – there were spiritual protection ofuda everywhere, on every wall, most pieces of furniture, everywhere. “I must be horrifying, really.” Hikaru quipped, inspecting the one on the door as Utagawashi entered. “I bet you’ve even been lying awake every night, terrified of a fifteen-year-old teenager.”

The look on the man’s face was quite sour as he closed the door. “Yes, well, nearly being eaten by a spirit in one’s youth does not tend to endear you to the idea of a spiritually-induced demise.” He commented, and okay, fair enough. “Also, it is hardly my fault that you feel so repulsive to my spiritual senses.”

Hikaru blinked. “Rude.” He said, a little astounded. Even slightly impressed; adults were so rarely forthright about things, after all.

Utagawashi shrugged. “It is the truth.” He said. “Would you like some tea?”

“Nah.” He decided, after a moment. Common sense dictated that he probably shouldn’t risk being given a spiked drink.

He nodded. “I will make myself some tea. While I do, find a seat. I suspect we have a lot to talk about.” With that, he disappeared through a nearby door, presumably into a kitchen of some sort.

Hikaru looked around. The front door of the apartment seemed to open into its living and eating area. There was a small sofa and coffee table at one side of the room, with no television in sight. The walls were mainly lined with bookcases and display cabinets, while in the centre of the room was a four-seat dining table made of a light wood. It was a simple, fairly homey, and thoroughly boring room.

He had to admit, it was sort of what he’d expected of a priest’s living space.
Furtively, Hikaru approached the front door to test his emergency escape route. The door proved very openable, so he closed it again and went to find a seat at the table, incidentally the one closest to the door. He checked the time on his phone, confirming that he had a good hour until he would have to head back.

A minute or two later, Utagawashi emerged from the kitchen with a small cup of tea. Hikaru wasn’t sure what kind, exactly, but it smelled very aromatic – definitely not a black tea. The cup was placed carefully on the table, settling with a gentle click. Utagawashi sat down, and for a moment it was profoundly disorientating to look at him – a man in kariginu, in an ordinary household setting. Hikaru’s gut lurched briefly with painful familiarity.

He waited as the priest settled himself, and then spoke. “So, then.” He began. “We were discussing spiritual sensitivity, weren’t we?”

“Yeah.” Hikaru nodded. “You said that being attacked by spirits makes you sensitive to them. And that I should be really spiritually sensitive.” He was having so many feelings about this whole mess, it was insane. He was nervous, excited, worried…there were too many emotional reactions for any of them to sit comfortably, and so he had the uncomfortable physical sensation of his gut churning with it.

He really, really hoped this didn’t turn out to be just some crazy guy with a head full of nonsense.

“So I did.” Utagawashi nodded. “You see, from what I have learned, there are many ways that a human can interact with a spirit, and they all serve to make the human more sensitive to spirits and spiritual phenomena. Generally, the more violent and traumatic the encounter, the greater the influence. Someone who has been harmlessly pranked by a trickster spirit, for example, merely stands out to me in a crowd. If they work at it, they may be able to detect spirits slightly in the future.”

“What about you?” Hikaru inquired.

He paused. “I was attacked by a spirit. Our souls are highly susceptible to spiritual damage, and so I will bear the scars of that encounter for the rest of my life.” He said. “Those scars, spiritual in nature, allow me to be more aware of spirits in turn. My sensitivity is quite minor – I have never seen a spirit, aside from that tsukumogami, and have never heard one; only detected their presence. But others more damaged than I can see the more powerful spirits. Speak to them, even, and hear their replies. It isn’t an enviable skill – generally, the more violent and traumatic the encounter, the greater the spiritual wounds.” At this, he peered at Hikaru meaningfully.

“…I’m wounded, then.” Hikaru said, neutrally. On one hand, this was valuable information, especially since he’d already suspected he was spirit-damaged in some way, and he was naturally delighted to finally get somewhere after months of nothing. On the other hand, though…

“You are mangled.” Utagawashi said, bluntly. “You have easily the worst spiritual injuries I have ever encountered. When I sensed you, it was so disturbing and unsettling that I became convinced you were a powerful malefic spirit, perhaps wearing the body of the poor soul you had savaged.” He looked somewhat revolted, but pitying as well.

Hikaru stared. Mangled? Well, okay, that wasn’t good. But it also didn’t make sense. “That can’t be right, though.” He objected.

An eyebrow raised beneath the eboshi. “And why is that?”

“You said that it’s the most violent encounters with spirits that cause the worst wounds.” Hikaru
stated, frowning. “And if my…spirit…is all that bad, then I should have been fighting for my life. But that’s not what happened. Not at all.”

Utagawashi leaned forwards, looking very interested. “What on Earth happened, then?”

Hikaru clenched his fists. Avoiding any mention of Sai or ghosts or anything along those lines was such an ingrained habit by now that it was actually really hard to break. It felt unnatural to gather his words, to intend to say them, to finally say “I met a ghost. Just a weird, lonely ghost who’d been trapped in a goban for too long.” He had to take a calming breath after saying it, some ingrained impulse panicking at having said too much, even though he’d said precisely what he meant to. Secrecy was a hard habit to break, it seemed.

The kannushi seemed more than slightly sceptical. “That’s it?”

He shook his head. “No. He came with me, and stayed with me for two years. Then he…disappeared.” His throat felt a little thick at the admission.

The fascination on the man’s face was transforming to frustration. “That doesn’t make sense. A simple haunting, even one of that length, could not have damaged you like that. You should merely stand out, like other people who have had amiable encounters with spirits.”

“Well, that’s all that happened!” Hikaru said, defensively. “Sai…Sai was nice. He wouldn’t hurt anyone. One time he accidentally knocked me over and burst into tears over it.”

“You could touch him?” Utagawashi sat up straighter, looking freshly excited. “I wasn’t aware that human ghosts could be that powerful! But, you said…” He frowned, suddenly. “You weren’t aware of meeting any other spirits before him?”

“Can’t remember any.” Hikaru affirmed. “He realised I could see him when I mentioned the spiritual stains he’d left on the goban – and then I heard him talking, and he came out of the goban and latched onto me, and I passed out.” He shrugged to cover his discomfort at the topic. It wasn’t easy to think about Sai, though he was getting more practised at it. But talking about Sai wasn’t something he was used to at all. Hikaru shook his head, and then noticed that Utagawashi had been silent for a while. He looked up.

The priest had gone deathly pale. His grip had become white-knuckled around the teacup.

“…What?” Hikaru asked, uneasily.

Utagawashi gaped for a few moments, soundlessly, and then managed “’latched on’ to you?” He swallowed. “Surely you don’t mean he possessed you?” His tone was almost imploring.

Hikaru stared at him, taking in the facial expression, the paleness, and the tone. “…I guess possession is bad?” He said, steeling himself.

“Bad?” The priest squeaked, degenerating into the somewhat frenzied mess from earlier.

“Really bad?” He tried.

Utagawashi visibly took several deep breaths to calm himself, and then stated with emotion “Possession is probably the most invasive and damaging thing a human soul can experience.” He trembled a little. “And, you said…you said two years.”

They fell into an uneasy silence. Hikaru exhaled, with a distinct sinking feeling in his gut. He’d been right, then. The possession had damaged him. He broke the quiet with a question. “If possession is
such a terrible, damaging thing,” He started. “Then why was it only when Sai…disappeared…that I noticed something was wrong?”

Utagawashi was staring at him with a sort of horrified pity. “I will try to explain it to you.” He said, slowly, and took a deep breath. “Imagine a pot of soil, if you will. If you place a plant within it, some soil will be moved around or displaced to fit the plant. This is the initial damage that possession does to a soul – the rearranging of its structure to better fit the spirit. If the spirit is exorcised quickly, then this is all the damage that is done. It is still a terrible wound, but not too heinous.”

“…Two years,” Hikaru reminded him, and watched the shudder.

“The true peril of possession itself, to speak nothing of the malevolent spirits that typically do it, is when it is allowed to persist.” He explained, after a moment. “I have never heard of a possession lasting so long, because most spirits that possess humans tend to get bored and devour their host before long. But a month or two is not unheard of. In which case…in our metaphor with the soil and the plant, the plant begins to put out its roots. It hooks itself into the soil, more and more the longer it is there. Now, what happens when you pull out that plant?”

Hikaru shook his head. He could guess, but didn’t want to voice it.

“The soil comes with it.” Utagawashi said, voice a little unsteady. “Not all of the soil, but the more roots there are and the more firmly hooked…the more is torn out when it leaves. The victims of long possessions often are more damaged and traumatised than any other spiritual victims. I suppose no one ever found out what damage a two-year possession could do when concluded, because benign spirits, as a habit, do not possess humans.” He sighed. “And malignant spirits who possess humans are too impatient to keep their host intact so long.”

Hikaru stared down at his hands, on the table. “He didn’t know.” He said, voice uncommonly serious. “I know Sai, and he’d have stayed in that goban if he’d known what would happen. He possessed one guy before me, but he died from disease at a young age. He couldn’t have known.”

Utagawashi looked at him. “I will be honest; I find that somewhat difficult to believe.” He said. “But...two years is a long time to spend with anyone, let alone a spirit. Perhaps you are right, and this unusually powerful ghost had no idea what damage possession does to a human soul.”

“He didn’t know.” Hikaru said again, with quiet certainty.

“So you say.” The kannushi pursed his lips, expression troubled. “I begin to understand, then, why you’ve not noticed any particular spiritual sensitivity.”

Hikaru looked up, eager for a change of subject. “Yeah?”

“We access our ability through the scars. The wounds left behind.” Utagawashi said strongly. “The more grievous the wound, the easier it is for the person to detect and work with. My scars hold a little of the fear I felt when I was attacked by the tsukumogami, as well as a hint of its chilling presence. If I…focus on those scars, extend through the sensations, I can begin to meaningfully detect spiritual phenomena. The scars and wounds tend to feel different to everyone, though there’s usually a persistent emotional echo of what you were feeling at the time the wound was being made. Hence, my fear. Your wounds…the echo must be, well. Insistent.” He looked disturbed.

He looked away, thinking of the loss and the grief and the horrific emptiness. So, in order to make good on his spiritual potential, he’d have to extend himself into that terrible void, which he’d avoided like the plague up until Kyoto. He withdrew his fan and ran his thumb over its spine, a familiar and slightly soothing gesture. “Yeah, that makes a lot of sense.” Focusing on the fan, Hikaru asked “Is
there any way to heal it?”

The answer was more or less what he’d expected. “I’m sorry.” Utagawashi said, sounding surprisingly sincere. “I’m not aware of any way to heal spiritual wounds. They can be adapted to and coped with, but never seem to go away.”

Shit, Hikaru thought, and promptly planted his forehead on the table, ignoring the surprised noise his host made. He thought. Okay, so Sai had accidentally torn his way through Hikaru’s soul on his way out. That was bad. And apparently, the mangled wreck he’d left behind certainly would not heal with time. That was worse. So, as the natural conclusion of that knowledge…Hikaru would be spiritually stuck in grief and loss for the rest of his life.

He raised his head, blinking blearily. He rubbed quickly at his face and fixed the priest with a stare. “To your knowledge, would getting possessed again fill in some of the damage?”

Utagawashi looked positively aghast. “What?!”

“That’s my goal. That has always been my goal, ever since I started touring shrines trying to find answers.” Hikaru said flatly. “I want Sai back. I’d be completely happy to be possessed by him for the rest of my life, and screw the damage, because if he doesn’t leave until I’m dead then there’s no problem anyway.”

“You are absolutely demented.” Utagawashi said, with a sort of horrified admiration.

“That’s nice.” Hikaru said, uncaringly. “I don’t care. What can you tell me about ghosts?”

The kannushi stared, and blinked, and stared some more.

And then he began to talk.

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A while later, Hikaru was walking home, thinking furiously.

He was not the best at organising his thought processes, he had to admit. And right now, there was so much to be thinking about. His head was absolutely swimming with information and emotion and frenzied thoughts, and it was giving him a terrible headache.

He spent the walk trying to organise just the information. Sure, it was possible that Utagawashi was just a madly delusional priest, and everything he’d said was part of his insanity. But…he didn’t think so. His reacting so fearfully to Hikaru, rather than just some other person, did indicate that his spiritual sensitivity existed. This was one of several reasons that Hikaru was prepared to believe that this kannushi wasn’t completely speaking out of his backside.

So. What had he learned? Hikaru flicked his fan open and shut with his right hand, the sound of paper on paper accompanying his footsteps.

He had learned that interacting with spirits changed humans, and made them more sensitive to the spiritual world. Violent encounters which caused trauma and injury ended in more dramatic changes, inflicting a sort of spiritual scarring which could be used as a conduit to enhance one’s spiritual awareness. Possession, which Hikaru had experienced, was considered by many as the most invasive, traumatic, and damaging thing a human soul could withstand. No one, to Utagawashi’s knowledge, had ever had a possession end after as long as two years. Hikaru was, accordingly, the most spiritually damaged person the priest had ever encountered.
According to Utagawashi, the spiritual wounds and scars tended to leave ‘echoes’ of particular emotions. These echoes were permanent, and tended to be experienced more intensely when one intentionally accessed their scarring for the purposes of spiritual sensitivity.

Hikaru’s *echoes* were more like *overwhelming tides*, but it still made sense. It certainly explained why he’d been unable to stop grieving even after two years.

He was in the middle of grimly contemplating the breadth of his spiritual damage when he arrived home, letting himself in and making the obligate call to his mother. She was used to him heading straight for his room and camping out there, so he didn’t hesitate.

The wardrobe was opened as soon as the door had locked, and in a now well-practised sequence Hikaru prepared the kamidana for ‘Sai’.

He sat in seiza for a few minutes without speaking, feeling more grim and worried than he had in a while. Reality would do that, after all.

Finally, he spoke. “You really messed me up, Sai.” He said, sombrelly. “I know you didn’t mean to, and you would absolutely freak out if you knew, but…if Utagawashi is right, I’ll be damaged for the rest of my life. And that *sucks.*” He clenched his fists. “But that’s not the end of it. I still want you back, that won’t ever change. Even if you hadn’t half-way ripped my damn soul apart, I’m sure I would want you back. And maybe, when I find you…it will fix something. I don’t know. It doesn’t matter.”

Sure, it would be a bit weird if he found Sai and still spent the rest of his life grieving for Sai and missing him intensely when he was *right there*. Or maybe the missing-Sai part would be fixed, and he’d just be grieving inexplicably forever. Or maybe everything in his soul would be filled in and repaired, and all of it would go, but that didn’t seem likely. Whichever way it worked, his life would be better with Sai in it, whether or not it fixed him. So that meant his goals hadn’t changed at all; he still needed to find Sai. If, after managing that, he was *still* doomed to be in spiritually-induced pain for the rest of his life, then he’d deal with it *then*, and not before.

Hikaru took a deep breath. “So. This is what Utagawashi said about ghosts.” He began, sorting through the memories in his head. “When people die, if they regret something or want something strongly enough, they can linger. How long they hang on depends on their force of will and also what they stayed on for. That’s all pretty obvious for you, Sai – you killed yourself, but you didn’t want to be dead. You just…wanted to play Go.” He cleared his throat a couple of times. “And you’re a stubborn bastard about it, too, so it’s no wonder you lasted a thousand years. But Utagawashi said that possessing objects is another way for ghosts to hang on, so who knows. Possessing humans is meant to be much harder – only strong spirits can do it. And apparently ghosts get stronger with age, so…” he trailed off. At a thousand years of age, Sai had probably been a serious powerhouse of a ghost, for all that he was an over-emotional Go-obsessed weirdo.

He powered ahead. “Anyway. I asked him, and he said that ghosts can disappear when they lose their willpower, or when their reason for staying on is fulfilled. But that doesn’t make sense, Sai!” His voice felt a bit raw. “You would never have wanted to stop playing Go, even if you did find the Hand of God! And that was what you had, wasn’t it? The willpower to stay and play Go, and the desire to play God’s hand…”

Hikaru scowled at the floor. It didn’t make sense. “I just don’t get it.” He said, frustrated. “It’s not like you’d have found God’s move in that match with Ogata when he was drunk. The last proper game you played was the one with Touya’s dad, and-“

He stopped. “…and…”
…What if the Hand of God had been in that game, somewhere? He’d thought back on it many times since Sai disappeared, and it was after that match that he started to act all weird and sad.

Did he know what was coming? Had Sai wanted to stay, but his willpower not been enough to manage it before he’d seen the Hand of God?

“…I’ve got to go find the kifu.” Hikaru said. He reached out and blew out the candles, snuffing out the incense, and rushed to the computer. Gritting his teeth, he pushed aside the flood of emotion and memory as he signed into NetGo under sai, deeply thankful for the modern ability to sign in invisibly so others couldn’t see you. sai wouldn’t be returning to NetGo until Sai returned to Hikaru.

He went swiftly to the past games window, clicking on the very last one. The kifu loaded up in front of him, and Hikaru ran his eyes over it, heart aching at the familiar Go. He printed it out, having to wrangle the printer as the paper jammed a couple of times, but after a few minutes of trying, the kifu was in his hands. He held it as carefully as if it were made of gold. The NetGo kifu prints were awful, only printing a tiny window in the corner of the paper, but…it was precious. A precious, irreplaceable relic of Sai, and the match which had meant so much to him.

Hikaru brought it back to his room, holding the paper gently. He set it aside as he re-lit the candles and incense, and brought the goban in front of the wardrobe. “You wanted this match,” he said, remembering. “You wanted so badly to play it. It was an amazing match, the best I’ve ever seen…but I don’t remember seeing God’s Hand in it. I guess you won’t mind if I replay it, huh?” Sai had never really had the chance to discuss and contemplate this game extensively, after all.

Fingers trembling, he glanced at the kifu and began to lay the stones.

It was probably the hardest thing he’d done since May 5th’s memorial. There was so much Sai in these hands, so much of that resolve, that indomitable will. He could feel the intensity in each play, each stone captured, each group thwarted – he could feel Sai in this game, this style which had defeated him countless times so familiar to him that he would recognise it anywhere. It was even more vivid a reminder than the scent of wisteria had been, and he had to stop to wipe at his face a few times through the game.

It was a beautiful game. He would never see anything else like it, he knew. This was…unique. As unique and beautiful and wonderful as every game of Go was, but this one…this game was more stunning than any other. It had been Sai’s game, and not only that, but his game against the first truly worthy opponent in a thousand years.

Hikaru placed the last hand, and stared at the board. He was so taken with emotion and awe at the game that, frankly, he could barely analyse it at all. He would have to do it again, more carefully. Hopefully he’d be able to keep a clearer head about it, next time. “This was an amazing game, Sai.” He spoke, softly. “I saw that the first time, but…not like this. Your Go…really is amazing.”

He thought he might give anything to see Sai play again.

For a few minutes, he only sat there and breathed. After a while, his head felt a little clearer, and he felt ready to start again. Clearing the board, Hikaru consulted the kifu once more as he placed the first few hands, trying his best to focus this time.

On the second replaying, Hikaru was no less awed by it than the first, but was a little less emotionally overcome. Seeing Sai so vividly in the game was painful, yes, but the game was so incredible. The hands were perfect, such a flawless battle. Sai’s moves were art, with such complex and intricate thought behind every stone, and Touya Koyo had matched them. Hikaru had never really appreciated art, or theatre, or nature, or anything like that…but if this was what people felt
about those things? He could forgive their weirdness. The game was everything a game of Go should be, and it was a marvel to see.

At the conclusion of that second replay, Hikaru still had not spotted the most perfect of moves, though. The whole game was stunning, but there was no legendary hand, no stone that completely redefined the board, no stone whose ingenuity of placement was worthy of a God.

His euphoria at the game depleting to a more natural admiration, Hikaru cleared the board and began the third time. By this point, he could remember it himself and didn’t need the kifu; he set the paper carefully aside.

This time, as he placed the stones, he watched almost with the same analytic eye as he did any other game. He would never be rid of his admiration, because this was a stunning match, but he was sure as hell thinking more clearly than the second, and definitely the first time.

It was towards the end of the game that he saw it. Hikaru paused, frowning, a stone poised between three fingers as he stared at the board. It wasn’t a move, not one that had been played. But there was something terribly familiar about it. Eyes narrowed, he continued to play out the game, eyes fixed on that point he’d noticed, mind running over the potential of that unplayed hand. He placed the last stone, and stared.

If Touya Koyo had played there, in that crucial spot, it would have changed everything. Not at once, perhaps – the next few hands were paramount there – but even so…it would have redefined the game. He would have won.

Hikaru looked harder, trying to see the lines of possibility, from what he knew of the former Meijin’s style, and what he knew of Sai’s. He breathed slowly as his pulse began to race. That move…it would have been perfect. It would have been perfectly balanced, strategy and tactics and forethought all together. It would have transformed the whole board.

His fingers shook. He remembered that spot on the board. He remembered looking over the game with Sai, and pointing it out, and saying something…it was too long ago, he couldn’t remember the words, but…

He had said it. He was sure. He had pointed out the perfect hand that Touya Koyo had not taken, the unrealised masterpiece of Go, and Sai had stilled.

Hikaru touched the spot on the Goban, wonderingly.

He had found the Divine Move…and Sai had disappeared.

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Hikaru brooded all day on Friday, and all day on Saturday.

In retrospect, it made sense. If discovering the divine move was enough to shake Sai badly enough that his worldly connection came loose, he’d have disappeared before Hikaru had ever been born. After all, Honinbou Shusaku’s ‘ear-reddening move’ had been hailed as an example of the Hand of God for ages. Sai had played with God’s hand, but that hadn’t been enough for him. Sai would always want to play Go. He had remained.

But then…Hikaru had spotted that move in the game, the divine hand that had never been played…and that made Sai disappear?

…Why?
He thought it all day. Why? He wondered, on his way to the Institute. Why, why, why all the way through the day and all the way home. How could such a thing shake Sai’s surety, his resolve?

He spent his time torn between grief and pride. He hadn’t realised, back then, what he had seen on that board. He’d never suspected that, at the age of fourteen, he had seen the Hand of God, with his insight surpassing Sai, Touya Kouyou, and every other person who had watched and discussed the match. It was an amazing feat – a point of pride that anyone would treasure. But, through that moment of brilliance, it seemed increasingly likely that Hikaru had cost himself a dear friend as well as the health of his soul. It was a terribly conflicting issue.

Hikaru was getting quite good at feeding frustration into his games, so at least his technique didn’t suffer for the conundrum. And it was so frustrating – having seen that move where no one else did showed his potential like nothing else. Hikaru knew that how good he was now would barely compare to what he’d be like in another year, or two years, or a decade. He and Touya were at the head of the new wave, and they were going to be spectacular.

Learning that his potential might have been the direct or indirect cause of Sai’s disappearance was absolutely heartbreaking.

On Saturday, Hikaru played viciously against Touya in the salon, and his rival matched him to play just as viciously in return. It was an excellent match, intense and intricate, and Hikaru won by a single moku. But at the end, when he stared at the board, he didn’t feel satisfied.

Seeing the echo of Sai in his Go had kept him going, at times when nothing else sufficed. But now, to know his Go might be responsible for losing him Sai…

Hikaru shook himself out of his thoughts, realising he’d been glaring at the board for a while, and Touya wasn’t speaking. When he looked up, the other boy was scrutinising him oddly. “What?” He asked. “Aren’t we going to discuss the game?”

“Do you even want to?” His rival returned, evenly. “You seem quite displeased with it.”

Hikaru considered the words, and shook his head. “It’s not that.” He said. “It was a good game. It’s just…my mind isn’t really in the game today, sorry.”

Touya looked at him, for quite a while. When he spoke, the words were formal and stilted, as they always were whenever Touya tried to talk about anything to do with non-Go related feelings or absolutely anything social. “Do you want to talk about it?” And seriously, his tone was exactly as professional as it was when he asked an opponent if they wanted to discuss a game, just more awkward.

A social butterfly, Touya was not.

Hikaru snorted at him, looking back at the goban contemplatively. He couldn’t help but see the finished pattern of Sai’s beautiful game, and that perfect hand that would have overwhelmed him. After a few moments, not knowing why he was talking about this, he formed the words carefully: “A couple of days ago… I was looking over an old game, and I saw the Divine Move.”

Touya perked right up, the topic of Go and presumably the mention of God’s hand pulling him straight in. “You did? Whose game was it?” He demanded, adding as an afterthought “And why has no one heard about it if the Hand of God was played?”

“Because it wasn’t.” Hikaru said, shaking his head.

His rival frowned. “You are not making any sense.” He accused.
“I am. You just don’t get it yet. Just…” Hikaru sighed, running his fingers through his hair. “Look, do you have time? If you come over to my place, I’ll show you.”

Touya blinked, and looked for the clock. “…I believe I have time.” he decided.

“Great.” Hikaru sighed, and sat up. “Let’s clear away the game, and then we’ll go.”

---

It was not the first time that Touya had come to his house, or even the second. It was, however, a relatively rare occurrence, so Hikaru’s mother was surprised to greet her son’s colleague as well as her son.

“We’re going to replay a game, I believe.” Touya said, when asked what had brought him there. He looked questioningly at Hikaru.

“Yep. That’s right.” Hikaru confirmed.

Shindou Mitsuko smiled, making a mock shooing motion. “Go on, then. Will you be staying for dinner, Touya-kun?”

“Probably not, my parents are expecting me home.” Touya answered, politely. “But thank you for offering.” He was presented with a beverage and some snacks despite his protests, and wasted a few more minutes with pointless pleasantries before Hikaru grew impatient.

He rolled his eyes, and pulled Touya towards the stairs, eliciting a yelp from the other boy as he was unbalanced and barely managed to retain his footing. “Come on, that’s enough talking.”

“Shindou!” Touya protested, slapping Hikaru’s hand away from his arm.

“If you don’t want to be pulled, then get a move on.” He answered reasonably, making his way up the stairs. Huffing, the higher dan boy followed, the annoyance on his face a very familiar breed that only Hikaru could elicit.

“What game is this, then?” Touya inquired as they entered his room, pausing as they passed the threshold. “It smells of that incense in here,” he commented. “I suppose this is where you burn it?”

“Yep.” Hikaru confirmed, reaching to position the goban in the middle of the floor. “And the game…well, it’s there.” He pointed to the kifu. He’d trimmed the paper, and hadn’t been able to stomach throwing the game record away, so he’d tacked it to the wall, just above his bed.

Touya walked over, inspecting the record for a moment. Recognition swiftly came onto his face. “This is my father’s match against sai. The one that you organised.” He said, with swift realisation. “It was an incredible match, and father retired for it. But I certainly don’t remember the Hand of God being played.”

“That’s because you aren’t listening. Or looking.” Hikaru sighed. “Just, come down here, will you? I’ve got the game memorised.”

“I’ve seen it around the house often enough, Shindou. My father replays it quite often.” Touya informed him.

“Then what I’m going to show you is even more incredible, if you or he still haven’t noticed.” He replied, somewhat surprised. But, of course the former Meijin would have replayed it. It had been such an incredible game, and life-changing for him as well. Surely he’d noticed that unplayed hand
“by now? Hikaru would get Touya to ask, once he’d seen it. “Now, shut up and watch the game.”

Touya sighed, but couldn’t exactly argue with that. Games as good as this one didn’t lose their
appeal even after many times replayed. There were always new layers to inspect, to admire, to think
about. He sat, also in seiza, at the other end of the board.

Hikaru began to place the stones. He did it at a sedate place, allowing himself and his rival to
appreciate the beauty and skill in each of the hands. Before long, both he and Touya were absorbed,
captured by the excellence of that amazing match. After a while, though, they had come to the critical
point – where Touya Koyo placed his stone here and not there, and passed by the Divine Move. He
paused for a while before, looking up at Touya. “Do you see it?” He asked, intently.

“What is it you’re trying to show me, then?”

“Okay. So at this point, your dad put his stone here,” Hikaru said, placing the stone in the indicated
spot as a visual aid. “And, right that moment, he lost the game.”

Touya stilled, frowning. He stared intently at the game, half-interested and half-frustrated. “What?
Why that stone?”

He took the stone away, paused to take a breath, and placed it with a solid click onto that perfect,
immaculate, transformative point. He felt a thrill at placing it, wondering with no small amount of
longing what it would feel like to play that hand himself. How incredible would that be, to watch the
whole board be remade around the star of his one move? What would it be like, to place that stone?
He breathed out, gustily, and then sat back. He’d seen this many times, now, and had thought about
it extensively. Touya hadn’t, so Hikaru watched with interest for his rival to see the importance of
that move.

It started as a startled blink at the placement of the stone. Then a slight frown of concentration, as he
began to consider the utility of that stone, in that place, in that moment. The concentration
transformed just as the stone had transformed the board, Touya’s eyes widening as he thought his
way through the game he had just watched. “Shindou.” He breathed, absolutely awe-struck, exactly
as rapturous as Hikaru would have expected from someone who loved Go so much. “This is…”
“It’s the Hand of God, yeah.” He grinned, unable to help it. “And your dad…he didn’t play it.” It wasn’t perhaps the ‘classic’ Divine Move like the Ear-Reddening move had been. To begin with, the stone was right at the edge of the board, rather than in a central location. Placed on the periphery, that one stone cast a very long shadow. It was almost deceptive, in how its significance failed to be immediately apparent; a silent dagger-strike to the opponents’ heart, rather than a bold sword held to their throat.

Touya didn’t respond for a while, leaning forwards intently to *stare* at the board. “That is a *beautiful* move.” He said, pure admiration in his voice, the same absolute appreciation of a masterpiece as Hikaru felt. The boy shook his head, for once in his life actually smiling. “I have to wonder if father has seen it, in the many times he’s replayed this.”

“You should ask him, when you get home.” Hikaru suggested.

“I *will.*” Touya vowed immediately, still awestruck. “But, Shindou…you *saw* this?”

“I did.” Hikaru admitted, a little ruefully. “It was actually just after the game had been played. I was discussing the game with…someone…and I just saw it, that if your dad had played there, he’d have won. It wasn’t until the other day when I replayed it that I realised what a perfect hand it was.” And, come to think of it, he was fairly sure he’d pointed it out at Morishita’s study group…it had garnered interest, but certainly not what had been warranted. Had none of them noticed what a wonder it was? Even *Morishita-sensei*? It was…honestly baffling. Maybe he could ask, at some point?

“That was more than a year ago!” His rival sounded both shocked and impressed.

“Yeah. It’s…pretty humbling, actually. I didn’t realise what I’d seen back then, but now…” Hikaru shook his head, smile fading a bit.

Touya looked up at him, eyes noting the change of expression. Hikaru could practically watch him remember that, earlier, Hikaru had seemed really bothered by this. Cautiously, he said “I don’t understand why you seemed so frustrated, earlier. Surely this is a good thing.”

Hikaru grimaced. “It is. It’s amazing, and I can’t believe I noticed this when *sai*, your dad, you, Ogata, and whoever else missed it.” He cursed himself momentarily for mentioning Sai, watching Touya’s eyes sharpen. “But…” He sighed, conflicted. It was probably a bad idea to say anything, although…it wasn’t as though Touya was a gossip. He was too socially awkward to spread rumours if Hikaru asked a weird question.

“But?” Touya repeated, now very watchful.

It was something of a difficult question to phrase. “What would you feel, if by finding the Hand of God, you caused someone you cared about to disappear? Maybe forever?” he asked, finally.

His rival’s face shifted into a soft frown of confusion. “What are you talking about, Shindou?”

Hikaru waved his hand vaguely. “Just…think about it, not about how weird the question is. You’ve lost someone important to you because you found the Divine Move.” He rephrased, feeling rapidly as though he shouldn’t have spoken. “How does that feel? Wouldn’t it make it harder for you to enjoy your Go, after that?”

He watched as Touya struggled to do as he asked, ignoring the bizarreness of the inquiry to actually answer. “…Maybe so?” He answered, uncertainly. “I suppose it would depend on *why* it caused this person to disappear.”

“They disappear involuntarily, and it’s for mysterious reasons directly related to your discovering the
Hand of God.” Hikaru clarified.

Slowly, Touya nodded. “Then…yes, that would probably cause me to feel conflicted about my Go.” He said, looking puzzled as he tried to apply the questions to the situation, probably unsuccessfully.

Hikaru slumped, feeling somewhat defeated by the statement. He wasn’t sure what to think. He knew, realistically, that if disappearing hadn’t been a consequence, Sai would have been amazed at what Hikaru had seen. Sai was always delighted when Hikaru played well, or discovered something new, or simply enjoyed the game. But, at the same time…it was his fault, wasn’t it? It didn’t exactly make him feel good about his achievement.

“Did I know that discovering the Hand of God would make this person disappear?” Touya asked, suddenly, looking somewhat baffled as he spoke. Baffled, but clearly thinking. “Or that I was discovering the Hand of God in the first place?”

He raised his head. “No, to both.” He answered, cautiously.

His rival’s face was a mixture of confusion and intense exasperation. “Then,” he said, with emphasis, “If I couldn’t have known what my accomplishment would cause, or even that I was accomplishing something to begin with…if I did start to feel conflicted about my Go, then I would be an idiot experiencing misplaced and irrational guilt, and should do my best to get over it.” His voice was heavy with intent, even if he didn’t understand the context.

Quite incredulously, Hikaru stared. It was more like dumbfounded, really, the expression on his face. He mulled over Touya’s words for a good while, eyes wide. And then he laughed. He laughed and laughed, and couldn’t seem to stop, bending over to clutch at his aching stomach as he absolutely wheezed, the laughs growing silent as air became scarcer.

“…Shindou?” Touya asked, uncertainly. His face was so wonderfully perplexed, it was awesome.

“Are you going mad? Or, well, more so than before?”

Hikaru snickered, trying to straighten his face and contain the laughter, quite unsuccessfully. It was a while before he could restrain himself enough to gasp “only you, Touya, could muddle your way through a weird question with basically no idea what you’re talking about and still manage to tell me off!” He cracked up again, because really, it was just ridiculous and embarrassing.

“You hear that, Sai? Hikaru thought at the black, painful wound in his head. Touya says to stop being an idiot by feeling guilty over things that aren’t my fault! You would love this. Sai would, at that. Actually, now that he’d been told off by Touya and started to consider it…Sai would have shouted himself silly about this – he’d have hated Hikaru getting conflicted about Go for no sensible reason.

“I don’t understand you.” Touya informed him, in tones of great finality.

“That’s okay. You’re right, I’ve been totally dumb.” Hikaru said. It wasn’t like the guilt was magically gone now, because even if it had been unintentional, he had almost certainly been the cause of Sai’s disappearance...

Really, though…trust Touya to put it into perspective. “Congratulations, you were right about something for once. Now get out of here, you need to go home and ask your dad about that move.” He stood up, making an ushering motion.

Profoundly confused, Touya slowly stood up, staring at Hikaru with a sort of baffled concern. It was a fairly obvious ‘is he actually insane?’ look.

“Go on, out with you.” Hikaru shooed. “You’ve seen the game and served your purpose here, now
you seriously need to interrogate your dad. I want to know if he saw the Divine Move and how long it took him if he did.”

“I don’t understand you,” Touya repeated, plaintively, as he was escorted briskly towards the front door. “You are not normal.”

“And you have no social skills.” Hikaru nodded brightly, eliciting an outraged sound from both Touya and his eavesdropping mother. “Go on. You know your duty.” He would treasure that look of indignant perplexity forever.

He shut the door in Touya’s face with deep satisfaction.

Chapter End Notes

This is the fourth and final chapter written for Esama's Random Hikago Event on tumblr, first published there. Revisions have been made for submission to ao3, and a fair few more than the other three chapters.
Chapter 5 has been written and has already been published to tumblr. As it's a 12k behemoth of a chapter, it will take a little longer to revise for here. Chapter 6 is around half-way done, and will be submitted to tumblr first.

I didn’t like this chapter much when I first wrote it. But after a few more reads, and the aforementioned revisions, I’m far more pleased with it. It took a few tries to get Utagawashi’s exposition section right, but I feel it’s okay now. The part with the Divine Move is something I’ll go into more detail in, much later.

On a side note...I recently began re-watching Hikaru no Go, along with a friend who has never seen it before. It has given me such intense feelings. If you, readers, are like me and haven't seen it in years...I recommend you remedy that.

Lastly, thank you to my readers. In a short space of time, Paper Cranes has received so much lovely attention. So many kudos, many comments, and many bookmarks too. It’s truly fulfilling to have one’s writing be so appreciated and well-received.

18/09/16: Elaborated on the Hand of God, added a canon detail I’d missed before. Other minor edits.
09/10/17: minor edits
01/06/18: minor edits, some paragraphs slightly reworked.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Hikaru attempts to develop a new skill.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Hikaru spent the rest of his Saturday feeling embarrassed, bored, and slightly conflicted. He kept the incense burning and his fan on the shrine, not so much actively talking to it as occasionally commenting on his various thoughts.

“I wonder what you were thinking, when I pointed out the Divine Move that could have happened.” He mused, laying on his floor and glancing up at the shrine. If he were actually worshipping Sai rather than just blathering at him as a sort of half-comfort and half-communicative thing, the position would have been very irreverent. As it was, though, there was no problem. “It must have surprised you…maybe even you didn’t see it, until then. Imagine that. Some fresh shodan like I was, spotting something that you hadn’t.” He sighed a bit, turning on his back and sprawling. When he glanced to the side, he could still see that magnificent kifu on the wall.

Hikaru daydreamed for a while, thoughts flitting between misplaced guilt and the Divine Move and, inevitably, Sai. He’d wondered a few times how the ghost would react to this shrine. That particular imagining never stopped being funny. He could just imagine how flustered the poor spirit would become – he’d probably hide behind his fan for days; it would be awesome. Hikaru grinned, and had to admit that the thought of Sai’s reaction was one definite reason for keeping up this pseudo-religious shrine stuff. Not the dominant reason, but it was definitely a part of his motivations.

He couldn’t wait to see how it would go down. Because, of course, Sai would be coming back at some point. Definitely. Though the path ahead was somewhat weird and uncertain at the moment.

After all…Utagawashi didn’t know where ghosts went once they lost their hold on the physical world, even if he suspected it was some form of afterlife. Other spirits might know more, but being only mildly sensitive, he was incapable of asking them. He knew a few people who were sensitive enough to talk to the most powerful spirits, but powerful spirits tended to be hard to come by…unless they were malicious, in which case you didn’t stop to chat with them anyway; you tended to be too busy avoiding death.

This, unfortunately, left Hikaru with one very obvious avenue to pursue.

He sighed again, staring at the ceiling. Even as he steeled his resolve to do whatever he had to, he couldn’t help but dread it. “The things I do for you, Sai.” He grumbled indistinctly to the shrine.

He was probably going to have to do this spiritual sensitivity crap. Which, on its own, could be relatively cool – but learning it from a weird priest that couldn’t stop grimacing at his spiritual wounds? Yeah, that might suck the fun out of it.

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The revolted shudder that Utagawashi greeted Hikaru with was quickly becoming familiar.

“Good to see you, too.” Hikaru said to him, mock-pleasantly, as he arrived at the shrine. As he drew closer, the expression on the priest’s face soured considerably, adopting distinct overtones of discomfort and nausea. He watched as the guy even gagged a little. “Oh come on. It can’t be that bad.” He protested.

“Shindou Hikaru,” Utagawashi greeted, looking as though he regretted every life decision that had led him to Hikaru – which, in itself, wasn’t a rare reaction; Hikaru saw that one fairly often. The profound disgust at his presence was the atypical part. “If one day you are walking in the street and a complete stranger sees you, and then promptly vomits, you will know you have met someone more spiritually sensitive than I. You make me happy to be only slightly spiritually gifted.” And to think, Hikaru had once thought kannushi were polite. To be fair, from what he’d seen, most of them were. Most of them hadn’t nearly been eaten by antique mirrors as children, either.

It was actually somewhat useful information though, so Hikaru shrugged and filed it away. “Should I expect other sensitives to think I’m a demon, too?” he asked, curious.

Utagawashi stared at Hikaru. “Very likely, yes. It might even get worse once you are accessing your own sensitivity, practice tends to intensify your…” ‘aura’, shall we call it?”

“Wonderful.” Hikaru nodded cheerfully. People potentially vomiting at the sight of him before attempting exorcism? How could he pass that up? “So. How am I going to do this?”

His teacher’s head tilted. “Tell me. Do you know how to meditate?”

…Somehow, he had not expected that. “…No?”

“Then you will have to learn.” Utagawashi said, decisively. “At its most basic, meditation is focusing on one aspect of your experience to the exclusion of almost everything else. To learn to access your spiritual sensitivity, you must meditate on your scar.” He paused to clear his throat, and continued “The sensations provoked by spiritual wounds can be difficult to isolate, and can take some practice to become aware of and focus on. Meditation is the best way to do this.” He noticed the expression on Hikaru’s face. “What is it?”

Hikaru’s initial reaction had been a deeply ingrained resistance against all things which his ten-year-old self had labelled uncool, such as meditation. However, Go had once been on that list, so technically he’d be willing to give the practice of meditation the benefit of the doubt. But the rationale? Oh, please. “Utagawashi, are you even listening to yourself?” he demanded. “I’m the most spiritually damaged person you’ve ever met! I basically am a scar! It’s not difficult for me to feel it at all, it’s right there! All the time!” If he had difficulty feeling the damn thing, it was very unlikely he’d be here!

He crossed his arms, and the kannushi blinked, looking startled as well as grudgingly sympathetic. “That…must be terribly unpleasant.” He said. “You have my sympathies. But if that is the case, you should have become spiritually sensitive more or less by accident within months of the injury.”

Hikaru glanced around the shrine. “Well, I can’t see any spirits around here. I could always check behind the honden, though, if you like? Might be hiding.” His tone was nonchalant, despite the bald sarcasm of the words themselves.

Utagawashi sighed. “Yes, thank you for being so helpful. I can tell that you’re not sensitive yet, you blasted child…Could you describe what the sensation of your scar is? Not necessarily the emotional echoes, but what it appears as in your mind. For example, mine is like…a fracture in glass. Cold, a
little jagged, and sharp. Our minds tend to translate the spiritual sensations into such things. If you can describe yours, I may be able to offer better advice.” He tilted his head, interest a spark in his eyes. He might bitch, but it was horribly obvious that the guy was fascinated by Hikaru’s horrific circumstances.

Which was understandable, given how he’d just described his own scar. A…fracture. That was it? This guy had a little fracture while he had a yawning void? Hikaru blinked, aware that his own experience couldn’t be more dissimilar. “It’s a void.” He said, grimly amused at the severity of his ‘scar’. “This massive, empty space. I can always feel it, but it’s worse when I focus on it. There’s just nothing there, and it feels nasty.”

The kannushi went very still. “…I wish I could believe you to be lying.” He mused, contemplatively. “But sadly, given what your spirit feels like, a large part of it being missing would make sense. I’m not sure how you’re even alive, let alone capable of acting like a somewhat functional human being.” He squinted. “Though, that last part is debatable.”

“You do know how to flatter a guy, don’t you?” Asked Hikaru, mockingly. He was admittedly quite entertained by the priest’s reactions to his spiritual infirmity, and he didn’t often come across an adult as happy to be rude to him as his friends. Ogata was one of them, and though he rarely spoke to him, Kuwabara didn’t really give a damn either. Some old guys in Go salons could get pretty belligerent too…actually, to be honest, Hikaru was pretty adept at provoking the little-seen argumentative side of people. Just look at Touya! So, maybe, this guy was a paragon of etiquette when talking to non-Hikaru people.

“You do not need flattery; you need a miracle. Frankly, I can only guess how to help you.” Utagawashi sighed again, rubbing at his temples. His brow furrowed as he thought. “A void. And you can feel it all the time…Tell me,” he said suddenly, commandeering Hikaru’s wandering attention. “If your wound is a void, can you cast yourself into it?”

Hikaru stared. Gaped, even. He felt immensely dizzy and disoriented at the mere words. “That is a stupid idea.” He said, alarmed at the very thought. “I’ve poked at it and ‘stood’ on the edge and reached in a bit sometimes, but…go in?” He hoped he sounded as appalled as he felt. Go in to that…spiritual chasm, or whatever it was? His entire everything screamed ‘bad idea!’ at him, loudly, while spelling out the same through interpretive dance, and maybe with sign language as well for good measure.

The priest mulled over his words. “Then, reach in further than you have before. As far as you can.”

Hikaru couldn’t help the trepidation that rose in him at the thought. ‘Bad idea!’ pushed at him again, though it was more of a nudge than a terrifying reflex-level rejection this time. He scowled, and fed his fear as fuel to the adamantine beast of will-find-Sai, bull-headed resolve surging. “If I fall over or go into a coma, I’m blaming you.” He warned, and then inhaled.

He reached for the void. Utagawashi was right in that he seemed to be, reflexively, interpreting the sensations in physical terms. The void wasn’t physical. His reach for it wasn’t, either. But it was the closest to the concept that he could come with human thoughts, and so he reached. Cold, bleak emptiness curled around his fingertips, and then his arm as well, and the sensation crawling over his skin was grief given form. Hikaru shuddered outwardly, still disconnected enough from the void to be able to tell the difference, and then he reached in further.

He ‘stepped’. A foot, then a leg, then most of his body. There was nothing in the void, it was empty and so absolutely barren that it was painful. It was a desert, more desolate than the void between stars, more lifeless than the Dead Sea, and it clawed at him, gripping at his throat, leeching away all thought and warmth and will. Grief and anguish coruscated over his being, tightening, gripping, and
there was *so much* of it, *too much,* it was overwhelming and he had, had to-

Hikaru pulled back from the abyss, gasping for breath. He blinked wildly, sensation flooding in – light and sound and smell and the feeling of grass on his skin. He stared blankly for several moments as the scene resolved itself – he was laying on his back, on the grass, with Utagawashi standing above him. The man looked very confused, but very relieved.

“I fell over, didn’t I.” He felt for a moment as though he were completely paralysed, and frantically twitched his fingers to make sure he still could, exhaling with relief as they moved.

Utagawashi nodded, hesitant. “You certainly did.” A beat. “Did you have any success?”

“Depends on what you call ‘success.’” Hikaru quipped shakily, sitting up. He felt weak, and his senses were suddenly foreign to him. Everything felt *strange.* “It felt…damn it, it was…” He shook his head, not particularly wanting to put it into words. He didn’t even want to *think* about what might have happened if he’d *thrown* himself into *that,* unprepared.

“That bad?” Asked the priest, sympathetically.

“Probably worse.” He corrected, after a moment. “I think…I might do better if I practice, though. What you keep calling ‘emotion echoes’ or whatever… I wasn’t expecting it to be so strong. Maybe…” Maybe, with practice and enough warning, he could channel that tide like he did the actual echoes that assailed him more or less incessantly. It was more intense than anything he’d dealt with before, though… “I might deal better, next time.”

His spiritual tutor nodded slowly. “Perhaps so. Do be cautious – your case is so different from any I’ve seen before; I honestly don’t know what to expect.” Waiting for a nod, he went on to ask “Will you be practicing here?”

Hikaru paused. “Nah. Don’t think so.” If he was going to fall over, maybe pass out (or worse, but he wasn’t thinking about that) he’d rather do it at home, in bed. “I’ll give you my phone number, though, just in case.”

“Write it down,” Utagawashi advised. “I have no phone with me today. Will you be back next week?”

“Maybe.” Hikaru shrugged. “If you send me a message, I can get your number from it and just send you an update like that instead. But I might come. Depends.”

The priest looked conflicted. Hikaru could pretty much guess what he was thinking – what with how repulsive Hikaru apparently was, it would probably please the man if he never returned in person at all. On the other hand, though, he was clearly itching to know how his spiritual sensitivity turned out. Hikaru snickered, removing some paper from the notebook in his book bag to write on. He handed the number to Utagawashi, who accepted it with an incline of his head.

“I will be in touch.” He said. “Remember – be careful.”

“Yes, mother.” Hikaru agreed, flicking the priest an impudent salute, and then strolled off.

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Having spent very little time at the shrine in the end, Hikaru had a large volume of day remaining to him. As such, rather than going home, he headed to the Touya salon to see if his rival was there. He wasn’t, so it ended up being a somewhat useless trip. Sulking, Hikaru remained at the salon to trounce a couple of the amateurs, who at this salon were of unusually high quality. Nothing
approaching a challenge for him, but a definite cut above the clientele of most.

Once he was done with that, Hikaru attempted to get in contact with a number of his friends and colleagues for a game, receiving several refusals and a number of ‘maybe later’ type responses for his efforts. He could always play NetGo, but he wanted challenging games, dammit! Was that so much to ask for?

Eventually ending up back home, Hikaru did play on NetGo for a bit, mercifully happening across some guy who, while not pro level, was good enough to be somewhat interesting. Whoever it was wasn’t Japanese, and didn’t seem to know the language, and as such no game discussion occurred. After that, Hikaru just logged out and went to his room, thoroughly fed up.

He could admit to himself that he was being avoidant. Messing with his grievous spiritual injuries earlier had not been pleasant in the least, and he was having difficulty summoning the enthusiasm to try again.

Hikaru sat on his bed and scowled at his hands. Surely, he just wasn’t thinking about it the right way. Touching at the wounds had become genuinely helpful to him since the trip to Kyoto – the sheer strength of the grief and loss it bestowed was so unnatural and unacceptable that the concept of it never ending could not be dealt with. Hikaru simply couldn’t conceive of living like that, with that empty space forever aching at him, and therefore he wouldn’t. Sai would be found, no matter how long it took, because the alternative simply could not be borne.

Surely, then, reaching into the abyss had the potential to be handled in the same way? He’d just been...overwhelmed, before. He’d not been expecting how bad it was. It only made sense that, next time, he would be more successful.

Blood pounding in his ears, Hikaru took a deep breath and laid down.

He reached for the void.

It was empty; it was desolate and barren, completely silent, there was nothing there. Melancholy waxed into anguish, anguish to despair, a wailing torrent against his fortitude as he ‘stood’ there, wholly shaken despite his forewarning. It was cold, not actually cold since this was all in his head, but it felt cold, it felt freezing. He was numb with it, fingers gripped tight by chilling sorrow and the wind-whisper of defeat in his ear-

But no, it was intolerable, it was all completely and utterly intolerable, it could not be borne. How could he accept that this was something he felt? How could he possibly come to terms with that? There was no way he could live like this, no way that this unnatural emptiness could stand for a lifetime, it was preposterous.

Sai should be here! Hikaru thought, madly, at the howling void. He should be here, but he isn’t! And that...Defiantly, he pushed out his resistance, his force of will, everything he could into that will change.

There was no cessation in the onslaught. He could feel himself numbing, still, in some devious spiritual way he had no defence against. His willpower held, and he kept himself half-in the void, but it wouldn’t last. It couldn’t, he couldn’t, there was only so long –

Hikaru retreated, and slammed back into awareness.

He stared at his ceiling, breathing hard, that same dizzying sensation of the world rushing back upon him again. The white ceiling, the lingering smell of incense, the feeling of the bed beneath his body,
the feeling of his body, his heartbeat and fingers and toes…

Taking a deep, shuddering breath, Hikaru flexed his limbs. The numbness hadn’t been all in his head, it seemed; there was a bit of a lack of sensation in his extremities. It was returning, sort of, leaving his fingertips and toes tingling oddly, but…hell.

Was it going to be like that every time?

“Fuck.” Hikaru swore, shakily sitting up. “This is going to take longer than I thought.”

His time with the shrine was somewhat subdued, that evening. He felt heavy and tired, and more daunted than he cared to admit.

“Hell, Sai.” He muttered, on his back again as he inhaled the incense. “This is…really not easy. I don’t know how many times I’m going to have to do that again, or if it will even help. I guess I can ask Utagawashi, but…” Groaning, he rubbed at his eyes. “It’s not like I’m some coward who just gives up the minute stuff gets hard. And like hell am I going to give up!” He scowled at the very idea. “It’s just…really not going to be easy, to do this thing.”

He had to be missing something. There had to be a trick to it, somehow. Maybe he could get in contact with Utagawashi, get some more information…

Hikaru breathed deeply, and pulled over the goban. “Well, whatever. I’ll deal with that later. Here, I’ll replay this game I had against Touya the other day, when I was feeling all moody. Maybe I’ll enjoy it more now that I’m not actually playing it.”

---

Early on Monday, Hikaru received a text message. ‘This is Utagawashi.’ It read. ‘I don’t bring my phone to work with me, so don’t expect responses during the day. I’m leaving for the shrine now.’

He added the number to his contacts and went on getting ready for the day. In the mirror, he noted that his bangs would need to be bleached again soon, and he’d need to have his hair cut as well. While he brushed his teeth, he considered what to ask the priest. He needed more information, certainly, but what? The man had already admitted to ignorance when it came to a ‘scar’ like his, so would it even do any good? It seemed pointless.

Hikaru went into work as usual, still thinking. His stomach rolled uncomfortably at the thought of trying again that evening, but it was certainly something he’d need to work at if he wanted to see any improvement. He’d have to spend the day working up to it.

As the schedulers seemed quite fond of putting official matches on Mondays at the moment, rather than the usual Wednesdays and Thursdays, Hikaru was due his that day. It was to begin in the morning, be sealed for lunch, and then concluded in the afternoon. He was eager for it, impatient even – a good game to get his mind off things and feel a little more normal was exactly what he needed.

His opponent of the day was a sandan, a man in his mid-twenties with unusually shiny hair and a pair of very large glasses. His appearance didn’t matter, though. Only his Go did. They bowed, and began the game; the cautious first colonization of the board unfolding. They tested each other’s defences, circling each other like wolves waiting for an opening. Carefully, Hikaru looked ahead, and left one.

The man did not waste it – he went straight on the offensive, lunging just like the wolf Hikaru had mentally been comparing him to. He grinned to himself, familiar enjoyment at a good game surging
even as he laid his stones on strategies going many levels down. He’d not misjudged his opponent – this guy was **merciless**, observant and very quick to smell blood in the air. Hikaru admired the style of play all the while he prepared to dismantle it. His opponent was aggressive, yes, but Hikaru… Hikaru was worse.

He waited. He waited, and bided his time. If this guy didn’t fall into the first trap, the second would take him. And when it did…

Relishing the anticipation, Hikaru prepared to strike.

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Later in the day, he solicited Waya for a game, agreeing to meet him at a Go salon that was a reasonable half-way point between their respective residences.

“You had a match today, right?” The boy asked, after they’d made the customary greetings and headed in to the salon to find a table. In exchange for letting the patrons watch their game, they didn’t have to pay, so score! “With that third dan guy, the new one. What’s-his-face.”

“I dunno his name.” Hikaru shrugged. “Unless they beat me, or come really close, I usually don’t bother remembering them.”

“You can remember hundreds of moves for hundreds of different games, but not your opponents’ names?” Waya inquired dryly as they set up their goban, preparing for nigiri.

“Exactly!” He nodded cheerfully, dropping some white stones onto the board. His friend rolled his eyes. “I’m guessing you won, then.”

“The hunt was long, and the prey worthy.” Hikaru agreed. “But I prevailed in the end.”

“I have no idea why I admit I know you.” Groused Waya, grimacing as he got white. They exchanged stones and bowed, banter falling to the side in favour of what was really important. Their rapt audience, some five random guys, shifted their seats.

“Onegaishimasu.”

---

Go against good opponents wasn’t easy. It was a battle, a back-and-forth grapple for territory and influence, and the better you got the more complicated it became. When you played someone as good as you, it was a real struggle – often you would lose ground as fast as you gained it, or you would win a huge battle only to ultimately lose the game. Playing against someone stronger than you? If you approached it the right way, it could be thrilling in its own way. If you played **dirty**, if you played **creatively**, you could be a serious pain in the backside. If you didn’t quite have the strength to meet your opponent head on, then you needed to get sneaky about it, lay traps, never make it easy to take too much of your ground at once. Play defensively and evasively, and prepare ambushes – like a predator hunting dangerous, very large prey.

The point was, Go was **not easy**. It was damned difficult. It required every bit of mental energy Hikaru could throw at it, and even then it often wasn’t enough. But that was okay, because Go was **fun**. The battles were exhilarating, the tug-of-war between clusters could manifest in so many ways, and the feeling of waylaying a much stronger opponent with his trickiness was just **awesome**.

This spirit stuff? Wasn’t easy in the least. The main difference was…it wasn’t fun, either.
Hikaru hated pretty much everything about it. The pain and grief he had to deal with every minute of every day was bad enough, but the absolutely ridiculous onslaught he got when trying to figure out his void? It was awful.

He held on as long as he could, but if there was anything to be found, too much of his attention was on resisting the grief-tide to find it. Worst of all was the moment between pulling back from the void and returning to awareness in the physical world – every time, he became more aware of it, more conscious that he was between in some indescribable way that he had no idea what to do with. It was only ever a moment, a moment of sheer disconnection from everything, and then the world slammed back in. The tidal wave of sensation and awareness only got more dizzying, and the numbness in his limbs seemed to take longer to fade away.

He spent his days throwing himself into Go, having many absolutely amazing games, and well aware that he was improving at the same meteoric rate as his rival. Waya was good, and Isumi better, but he was really starting to leave them behind. Waya basically never won any more, and he was getting almost too predictable. Isumi spent so much time thinking through his moves that Hikaru could basically map out a hundred strategies while he did. Yashiro was unpredictable, as well as a quick learner, so he still had a fair bit for Hikaru to learn from. But otherwise? Touya was pretty much the only one of his peers who stayed neck-in-neck with him.

It was only the beautiful satisfaction he got from his games that allowed Hikaru to keep doing what he did every evening. He had to psych himself up to it, every time. He still hadn’t asked Utagawashi for help, and hadn’t returned to the shrine either – only sent a text, every week, to confirm his experiments hadn’t killed him.

The contrast between his days and his evenings was just…immense. With his Go, Hikaru could feel himself getting better. Maybe not from game to game, but certainly week to week. He didn’t seem to plateau like a lot of players did – many seemed to remain at the same skill level for ages, then suddenly climb in talent for a while when something clicked for them, before levelling out again for another expanse of time. Hikaru, meanwhile, simply climbed and climbed and didn’t stop. But the spirit stuff? He made no progress, at all. Three weeks after he’d started, he felt no closer to any revelation or success than when he’d begun. If anything, it felt more difficult to withstand that void, which was certainly not what he’d have hoped for.

He probably would have to go and see Utagawashi, just to get some input. But, in the meantime…

Hikaru looked at the calendar, and grinned.

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Two things happened on the 20th of September: Hikaru turned sixteen, and he celebrated his very recent rise to sandan.

It was, of course, a birthday party as well. But the rank advancement was more important. Hikaru tried to explain this to his mother, who only sighed indulgently and asked if he wanted to invite any friends around for a meal.

He declined, having planned something well in advance – they’d booked out Heart of Stone, that somewhat seedy but mostly alright Go salon that wasn’t too far away from the Go Institute. As was appropriate for the birthday-cum-ranking party of a Go professional most of whose friends were Go-obsessed, it was going to be a very Go-centric celebration, which Hikaru had mentioned repeatedly to haggle various reticent people into attending.

His birthday being quite conveniently on a Saturday, there was actually a fair number of people
coming. Akari, of course, as well as Waya and Isumi. Hikaru contacted that former cheat Mitani, as well as Tsutsui, who was in college now. He even managed to wrangle Kaga into coming, even though the guy was much bigger on Shougi and hadn’t talked to him in ages. Yashiro was coming from Osaka, having agreed to stay with Hikaru on the Friday before and the Saturday night itself before going home on the Sunday. A number of his former Insei classmates were invited, though they didn’t all accept. He’d have invited Ochi, except he’d been doing an Isumi and studying in a foreign country for a while now.

Touya resisted. Touya resisted for quite a long time, but then again, he’d never had to withstand the unfettered force of Hikaru’s pestering for a solid two weeks before. Hikaru bitched and moaned and whined and begged and pleaded until his rival just flat-out couldn’t take it anymore, agreeing to attend if only to salvage his sanity. Hikaru was reasonably pleased with this turn of events, and thus graciously assured Touya that he didn’t have to grow a fashion sense in order to attend, he could just show up in his usual nonsense. This kind concession was not well-appreciated, for some reason.

Hikaru issued unofficial invitations to a couple dozen other people, mostly colleagues and peers who were sort of the right age and Hikaru remembered having interesting Go, though he didn’t know all of their names. Knowing the guy was weird enough that it was possible, he asked Ogata as well, who considered the idea with vague interest. “Will there be alcohol?” He asked, contemplatively.

He shrugged in response, keeping his expression neutral. “It’s a Go salon, and not one like Touya-sensei’s, either.” He answered. “Me and most of the other guys aren’t drinking age for a while yet, but you’d be able to get booze there.”

“Maybe, then.” Ogata said non-committedly. “How did you manage to rent out a Go salon on a Saturday? That’s usually one of the busiest days.”

“I’m giving free lessons to the owner and his clients for a couple of Saturdays after in exchange.” Hikaru answered, cheerfully. It was an excellent arrangement. “And one of the conditions is that the party will be open to other clients to play games with my guests. So it works out pretty well for them.”

Ogata snorted, amused. “I’ll say. It’s an amateur’s dream – lots of pros to play in one place without having to go to a festival.”

By necessity, the party began early with no set end time. People who weren’t interested in playing Go were advised to turn up later, but given that this was a vanishingly small percentage of the attendees, most filed in shortly after lunch time as arranged. The salon had been rearranged, with the Go tables arranged for space efficiency rather than for comfort and easy viewing. This left a relatively large clear floor, as well as an empty table against one wall which would later be laden with food.

“Hey, you brat!” Kaga greeted, commandeering Hikaru the moment he arrived, Yashiro in tow. “You haven’t even talked to us in over a year, and then suddenly you invite us to your birthday party?” Yashiro raised his brows at the interaction, watched for a while, then shrugged and left to mingle.

“It’s mostly my sandan grade celebration,” Hikaru cheerfully corrected, viciously pinching the arm gripping his to weave out of its hold. As Kaga cursed, he added “and you should be honoured I invited you at all! Touya’s coming, and he can shred you even better than he did before.” He remembered that the older boy had blamed the destruction of his enthusiasm for Go on Touya, so he was admittedly looking forward to the potential strife there.

Kaga looked mutinous at this. Apparently, even this many years later, he still wasn’t over his
multiple crushing defeats.

“Hikaru-san!” Another familiar voice called, and both of them turned to see Tsutsui. “It’s great to see you again!” The boy…now adult, he supposed…looked slightly flushed, and genuinely delighted as he stepped up to greet his former club member.

“Hey, you took long enough to get here.” Kaga said to Tsutsui, with the ease of long familiarity. The formerly shy boy whacked him on the arm and continued smiling. Apparently, they’d kept in touch, and were actually friends or something. How surprising.

“Hey, Tsutsui.” Hikaru greeted, a huge grin on his face. This was turning into a proper reunion, wasn’t it? “Great to have you here. You still playing Go?”

“Of course!” He huffed. “Though naturally not as much as you, or at anywhere close to your level. On that note, congratulations on your advancement! It’s amazing that you’re already sandan.”

“Touya is a nanadan.” He responded critically. “I’ve still got some catching up to do. But I know we’re pretty evenly matched as far as playing goes, so eh.”

Kaga rolled his eyes, and wandered off to bother Akari, who was having perhaps her first proper conversation with Hikaru’s next closest friends. Tsutsui did not seem nearly as bored as Kaga with the conversation, and in fact looked almost a bit star-struck. Hikaru wondered if it was the mention of Touya that did it. “Do you suppose you or he will have time to play me?” He asked eagerly.

“That’s basically what this party is for, man.” Hikaru raised his eyebrows. “What do you think all the gobans are set up for? We can play now, but let’s keep it to speed Go. We want there to be as many games as possible today.”

“Certainly.” Tsutsui agreed, somewhat bashfully, and allowed himself to be pulled to a nearby table.

“Do you want a handicap?” Hikaru asked, settling himself in the seat. “Five stones, maybe?”

“Yes, please.” The upperclassman nodded, accepting the black stones. “I suppose this will be a teaching game, at any rate…”

“Eh.” Hikaru shrugged. “Not much time for teaching, so we’ll discuss the game and all, but I won’t point much out during the game itself. That okay?” At the nod, he grinned and bowed to begin the game.

Tsutsui had improved, and a fair bit. He was solidly in amateur territory, maybe, but there was a clear and definite improvement from what Hikaru remembered of his games. He nodded approvingly at several points, adjusting his mental impression of Tsutsui’s level, and shifted his play accordingly. It was shidou-go, there was no questioning it – he was testing rather than cutting, and keeping his subterfuge to a minimum. But still, it was nice to see how far the other boy had come…and, really, how far he had come. This guy had once solidly beaten him, after all.

As requested, the game was a speedy one, but that didn’t mean a lot when it came to Go, particularly when one of the players wasn’t quite skilled enough for true speed Go. As such, the game took about an hour, whereupon Hikaru sat back and offered discussion.

“You really have improved, Hikaru-san.” Tsutsui sighed, a rueful smile on his face as he listened to Hikaru’s analysis. “That’s to be expected, when you’re a pro and play on the same level as a nanadan…but seeing it for myself is something else.”

“You’re better, as well.” Hikaru pointed out, reasonably. “You’re not hiding behind a book any
more, that’s for sure.”

Tsutsui laughed, surprised. “You know, I’d completely forgotten about that?”

He grinned. “Right, let’s clear the game and see who all arrived while we were playing. I think I saw Fuku come in earlier, but I’m not sure.”

As it happened, a good many people had arrived in that hour. A few random pros had arrived, most of whom Hikaru had invited and some he hadn’t, as well as some guys he didn’t recognise at all. Brief conversation with them revealed that they were a contingent of Insei who had heard about the Go party and been assured it was pretty much open. Hikaru heartily agreed with this sentiment, though he worried about the dwindling space in the not-spacious Heart of Stone, and continued his tour of the premises.

Some of the old guy patrons had shown up and were plying teaching matches from the various attendees, occupying a few boards. Isumi had been commandeered by one such customer and was, in his patient way, explaining the deficits in the game of…hey, was that Kawai?

“Hey, old guy!” Hikaru greeted him, barging over to rudely interrupt their game. “What are you doing here?”

“Don’t interrupt the game, brat, your friend is giving me some valuable advice.” Kawai grouched at him, not even looking over. “I’m here because of the Go party, why else? Now go bother someone else.” Isumi smiled at him ruefully from across the table, and Hikaru rolled his eyes.

“Yeah, sure, you ungrateful geezer. Remember to make your game quick, this isn’t a study session.” Hikaru grumbled back at him, but obligingly moved on.

He was promptly clawed at by a familiar red-headed guy, who certainly looked older now. It was really odd to see how much some of these guys had changed. “Now that you’re a pro, and have been for years, are we allowed to be friends now?” Mitani demanded in lieu of a greeting, stamping on all concept of personal space by getting all up in Hikaru’s face about it.

His response was to shove the boy back via a well-placed hand to the face, eliciting a muffled yell of outrage. “Get out of my face, you dick.” Hikaru told him happily, more at home in all of this bitching and bickering than he could really say. He knew so many rude and argumentative people, it was glorious. “And yeah, sure, since you’ve clearly missed me so much, I suppose I could be your friend again…”

Incensed, Mitani challenged Hikaru to a duel to the death, which turned out to be a game of Go. This ended quite well for Hikaru, who stamped over the former cheater without mercy, but happened to delay his touring of his various guests by another thirty minutes.

Even more people had arrived by then, the time approaching two o’clock, so Hikaru extricated himself from Mitani and made the attempt to continue his rounds.

He was more successful this time, though Heart of Stone was becoming uncomfortably crowded and most of the gobans were occupied now. He finally managed to greet Waya, who apparently had hit it off with Akari and now had her number. Hikaru didn’t have the heart to tell him that he’d almost certainly been recruited as a source of intel for his next-door-spymaster, rather than actually as a friend. Akari was crafty like that, and had been trying to get the phone numbers of his friend-colleagues for years.

Out of curiosity, Hikaru sought out Akari, who was chatting amiably with Fuku on the subject of
Insei. “Hey, Akari.” He said, and to the side “hey, Fuku.” He turned back and asked “how many of my friends’ numbers have you got?”

“Everyone who turned up.” She replied, pleased. “Now when I ask you what you’ve been up to, I can confirm it!”

“Good for you. I always knew you’d become a spymaster before you made adulthood.” Hikaru congratulated sincerely, dodging his way out of a flick to the face with a laugh.

He made his way around the salon, greeting guests, patrons, and gate-crashers alike. There were quite a few in each of these categories, and the turnout was actually pretty good. Still, Touya wasn’t there yet, and neither was…

Hikaru blinked. Think of Ogata, and he shall appear, apparently. He made his way over to the conspicuous man, who had stridden into the Go salon so purposefully that the crowd parted around him, various excited whispers breaking out at his presence. Apparently a good number of the guests, patrons, and assorted gate-crashers didn’t know that Ogata was ridiculous and had a vaguely amiable relationship with Hikaru.

“I hope you’re happy, brat.” Ogata said to him as he arrived, pointedly ignoring the looks being flung about at their interaction. “I’ve not been in a Go salon like this in…well, a while. And certainly not at two in the afternoon.” He directed a disgusted glance at the owner, who was shrugging non-apologetically. “No alcohol until five. What’s even the point of something like this if everyone isn’t playing drunk?”

Hikaru smiled, innocently, and received a suspicious glance for his trouble. He quickly attempted to derail the man. “Well then, might as well have a game to pass the time, right?” He cajoled, indicating the nearest unoccupied table-top board. A couple of people who had been inching their way towards it heard, glanced at each other with wide eyes, and promptly backed the hell away. Hikaru’s eyes glinted with a sort of predatory Go-induced menace as he added “though considering you barely won last time, I can see why you might want to avoid a rematch.” He waited.

Ogata growled, the blatant baiting taking its toll despite its complete lack of subtlety. Ogata’s Go pride was not to be underestimated, and was in fact a crowning reason behind his swift obsession with sai. “Alright, you menace.” He conceded, making his way begrudgingly to the table. “But if you don’t make this a good game, I’m making you buy my first drink.”

“Yeah, whatever, let’s get on with it.” Hikaru grinned, taking a seat and observing a number of spectators close ranks around the table. The people playing on the board beside them, an Insei and one of the Heart of Stone patrons, looked like they were seriously considering abandoning their game. “I won’t insist on speed go for this one, but let’s try to keep it under two hours.”

“That is speed go.” Ogata grumbled. “But alright. Let’s nigiri.”

Hikaru grinned, and obliged.

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The Shindou-Ogata match of that afternoon was an impressive, skilled, and even downright vicious match. It was well-spectated, with the adjacent table being cleared away to allow for better viewing, an impromptu study session seeming to form around the ongoing game. Ogata did not take it easy on Hikaru, this time. He maybe didn’t go all-out, but he was not pulling his punches, and some of them stung.
Hikaru watched himself lose a pretty major cluster with a masochistic blend of frustration and glee. It was a good match. It was a really good match, with Ogata being a total dick to basically everything Hikaru tried, and Hikaru being the most underhanded and tricky son of a bitch ever to darken the face of a goban. With how much harsher the Judan was being, he wasn’t doing quite as prodigiously as he had on May 5th, but he knew full well that he was still putting forth an impressive show. Hikaru could be a slippery bastard when he was totally outclassed, and he made the absolute best of it, trusting his intuition when it came to reading Ogata’s most likely strategies and attacks in order to disrupt them as comprehensively as possible.

He was very intent on the game, as one might imagine, but not so much that he didn’t notice Touya arriving an hour or so into the game, looking very out-of-place and extremely uncomfortable. Hikaru might have worried that his rival would just leave again, but as it happened, the other boy noticed the ongoing game and, apparently lured in by the siren-song of a good match, made his way over to spectate.

The game took about an hour and fifty minutes, from start to finish, and Hikaru lost by ten moku. Not half bad, considering how brutal Ogata had been. There was even a small spattering of applause from the audience when Hikaru resigned, and Ogata himself actually looked somewhat satisfied.

“Not bad, brat.” The title-holder conceded, lighting a cigarette. “Do you want to discuss it, or is that something you’re discouraging at your party?” The words were mocking.

“Discuss. Definitely discuss.” Hikaru grinned, and discuss they did. Several of the pros, Waya, Isumi and Touya included, stuck around for the discussion, but most everyone else cleared off at that point, and the surrounding gobans became significantly more populated.

Once they’d finished, his friends made appearances to comment. “That was a good match, Shindou.” Touya said, approvingly, after greeting Ogata. “You play quite differently when your opponent is more skilled than you, don’t you? I’ve not seen it for a while.”

“I have a lot of experience being totally thrashed on a goban.” Hikaru agreed. “So I picked up some tricks, here and there.” They finished tidying away the game, and left the table. “I’m glad you could make it, Touya – I was starting to think you wouldn’t show up.”

“I’m surprised you showed up.” Ogata commented dryly. “Not exactly your scene, is it?”

Touya’s nostrils flared briefly, but he kept his expression perfectly courteous. Hikaru thought it was hilarious when the boy tried to hide his inner irritable beast. “From what I’ve seen, Ogata-sensei, this seems to more or less be a gathering full of Go.” He replied. “I fail to see what about that is not ‘my scene’.”

Ogata and Hikaru shared glances. “Sure, you say that now.” The older pro shook his head. “I wonder how long that assertion will last.” Touya suddenly looked unsure, and Hikaru grinned at him. “At any rate, there’s still a while to go before I can get a damned drink. You want a game?”

Hikaru patted his rival on the back as, hesitantly, he agreed. It would undoubtedly be a good game, and he’d be back to watch it, but he should check in with his guests first. And…was that his mother?

“Mum?” he inquired, somewhat incredulously, as he approached her. She was standing off to the side, speaking with Akari. “What are you doing here?”

“I just wanted to check on how you were doing here.” She said, somewhat evasively, which meant that she’d come to verify the absence of alcoholic beverages and the presence of lots of gobans in active use. “You were in a game, though, so I’ve been talking to Akari-chan for a while. It really is a
“I think I’ve played three games already, so far.” Hikaru nodded. “And lots of other people have been playing. That’s what happens, when you invite this many Go players somewhere with gobans.”

“What are the plans for the rest of the party?” She inquired. “You said you might be back quite late, after all.”

“Party food is getting set out at around five.” He informed her. “And we’ll probably be doing Go challenges later, like multiple opponent Go, blind Go, one-colour Go, draw-forcing, and so on. I think someone brought a karaoke machine, so there might be some of that too.”

Shindou Mitsuko smiled bemusedly. “Alright, Hikaru.” She said. “I’ll leave you all to it. If you and Yashiro-kun end up staying with someone else tonight, please make sure you let me know where.”

Hikaru endured the motherly cheek-kiss as she said “Have fun, and remember Yashiro needs to catch a train tomorrow.”

With that, she left, and Akari stood beside him to watch her go. “She really doesn’t have any idea, does she?” She remarked.

“I guess she suspected, which is why she came to check.” Hikaru reasoned. “But she luckily showed up before five, so.”

“Lucky break, there.” Akari agreed. “Now, aren’t you going to watch that game?”

He remembered that, even as they spoke, Touya and Ogata were exchanging hands on the board, and battled his way through the small crowd without even a further word. He settled beside Yashiro to observe, noting that he hadn’t missed a great deal, just the opening hands of the game. The skill of the players was evident already, and he nodded with satisfaction. He rarely saw Touya playing other people, these days. Sure, he looked over the kifu of his official matches, but that wasn’t the same as actually watching.

It was a good game, too. Presumably lacking provocation, Ogata was not quite as merciless to Touya, though he certainly didn’t allow himself to be on the losing side at any point. Touya, much like Hikaru, had spent a fair portion of his life having his groups thoroughly dismantled by greatly superior opponents, and also played quite differently to usual, displaying a few robust systems and strategies which served to impede the stronger player considerably.

Their was a slightly shorter game, concluding at an hour and thirty minutes, and Touya had lost by eight moku. By this point, it was past five, and many spectators had been lured away by the table of wonders that the owner had stocked. Hikaru longed to join them, but lingered for the discussion, disappearing as soon as it concluded to commandeering himself a plateful of sandwiches, biscuits, and a couple of slices of cold pizza. He took his spoils back to where Ogata and Touya were clearing the board, declaring “food is here. And also, Ogata, it’s past five now.”

“Oh, thank God.” The Judan sighed, and immediately went in search of alcoholic beverages.

Touya watched him go. “Is he drinking?” The boy asked, somewhat disapprovingly. “At your party?”

“Well, yeah.” Hikaru nodded. “Why wouldn’t he?”

“Because you’re sixteen, and it’s a bit rude to drink at a party with so many underage people attending?” Touya suggested sardonically, to which Hikaru could only grin. “…What?” His rival asked, suspiciously, and the grin widened. “Seriously, Shindou, what is it?”
Slowly, and deliberately, Hikaru pointed to the underside of the food table. Where, surreptitiously, various bottles and cans of alcohol were slowly materialising, their sources probably related to the various bags that people left nearby for a while before taking away again.

Touya looked back at Hikaru, looking profoundly offended. “No.” He said, but it sounded like a question.

Hikaru raised his eyebrows. “No what?”

“No, you are surely not planning on drinking alcohol.” His rival clarified.

“I’m not?” He asked, amused.

“Certainly not.” Touya nodded.

“Well, if you say so, who am I to argue?” Hikaru mused. “On that note, I’m off to get a drink of what definitely isn’t alcohol. Do you want anything?”

Touya appeared somewhat flabbergasted, and said nothing. Hikaru waited to see if he would respond, but after ten seconds or so he gave up and went to make true his word, inspecting the various labels of the beverages available. With a shrug, he obtained a can of definitely-not-beer and returned to his astounded colleague, carefully balancing his plate on his arm as he opened the can.

Like a total barbarian, he drank it straight from the can. He’d had drinks a few times before, mostly with Waya and Isumi, a couple of times with Yashiro, but he still wasn’t quite used to the taste of alcohol. Nonetheless, he succeeded in taking a relatively substantial gulp of the cool absolutely-not-beer before looking up to check on the state of his rival.

The other boy seemed perfectly outraged, with a charming overlay of mortification and worry. “You alright?” Hikaru asked, amused.

“That’s illegal.” Touya protested, somewhat woodenly.

Hikaru nodded. “And because you have no social life, you’re somehow not aware that no one cares. I get it. But you know better now!” Impudently, he took another swig. The taste was…alright, he supposed. Tolerable. If he was going to be honest, he preferred the girlier drinks which tasted like soda.

The nanadan spluttered. “Shindou!”

He rolled his eyes, and gestured widely with his free hand. “Look around you. Seriously, Touya, people only pretend to care about underage drinking in this country. See?”

Warily, Touya followed his direction, undoubtedly spotting the fact that the majority of the guests were procuring some variety of alcohol, and also that the adults in attendance didn’t seem to give a shit about it. Hikaru knew that his mother disapproved of serious drinking, but was also aware that his dad didn’t see the harm in a drink or two. He was similarly aware that his father’s stance was by no means uncommon among the parent population of Japan, and that underage drinking laws were not strictly enforced at all.

“…Alcohol is bad for you.” His rival stated, a little flatly. The expression on his face said that he was aware he’d not be able to convince Hikaru of the error of his ways, and he was grimly resigned to it.

“So is smoking. But Ogata drinks and smokes, and you don’t see his Go suffering for it, since he’s sober for his official matches.” Hikaru pointed out. “And let’s be honest, you only want me for my
Go anyway, so.” He grinned, and tipped back the beer. “You want a drink?”

“No.” Touya said, firmly.

Hikaru shrugged. “Suit yourself. You want a game?”

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The afternoon progressed in this manner, steadily transforming into evening. Most of the attendees, being minors who didn’t drink often, found themselves becoming tipsy in short order. The older half of the guests played keep-away with the younger half, virtuously taking upon themselves the burden of imbibing any alcohol found on those younger than fifteen. The adults, for the most part, were drinking veterans, and watched the young get sloshed on basically nothing with amusement.

At six thirty, Hikaru called for Go challenges to start, before anyone got too drunk to play them. Boards were allocated for one-colour Go while those attempting blind Go could simply stand in a corner with their eyes closed, barking their moves at each other. Hikaru himself opted for a blind match against three Heart of Stone patrons, who themselves were using boards to visualise properly. Touya, who had been watching the declining sobriety of his colleagues with disapproval, went for an old favourite and set himself for multiple-game draw forcing.

These various challenges took them all through to nearly eight, whereupon everyone was getting to the point where their Go did not hold up against the alcohol very well. This did not prevent them from trying, with various degrees of success. Hikaru sauntered up to Touya, who was observing the diminishing quality of Ogata’s play with disgust, and told him “You need to take this shit less seriously.” He said. His head was pleasantly fuzzy, but he wasn’t really slurring yet, and could keep a coherent game going.

Touya’s glance was not friendly. It did, in fact, question everything about Hikaru’s continued presence near him, and also probably insulted his mother a minimum of four times. As he didn’t fluently speak Glance, Hikaru couldn’t be sure of the exact translation, but it was certainly rude. “And why is that?” he asked, testily. “All I see is a number of formerly respectable people becoming more and more pitiful.”

“Haaarsh, Touya.” Came a slightly slurred drawl from Waya, who had apparently been eavesdropping nearby. Touya stiffened a little, defensive.

Hikaru did not enjoy the discomfort and tension, and rested a hand on the poor bastard’s shoulder. “Hey, seriously, relax.” He said, aware that he was not the most comforting of people but trying anyway. “We’re not hurting anyone, and we’re not gonna force you to drink, or…yeah. What I’m saying is, even if we’re getting drunk and aren’t playing well, doesn’t mean it isn’t fun.” He waved a hand vaguely in the air. “That’s the point. Fun. It’s not like we’re at an official game, you don’t have to be serious. You can try out crazy shit and it won’t matter if it fails spectacularly because no one gives a shit…we’re all, like, messing around.”

Touya glared at him, though a bit more half-heartedly this time. “It just seems…pointless. Like you’re all making fools out of yourselves.”

“Maybe we are. Who cares? The point is to have fun, knowing that all the other guys aren’t going to think any less of you for it.” Hikaru pointed out. “You don’t need to drink. You don’t even need to think of drinking. If you can let yourself play stupidly without caring about it and have some ridiculous yet funny games, that’s all you need. Maybe see if you can give it a go?”

The other boy seemed vaguely thoughtful at that, though he was making an effort to hide it. “…You
stink of beer, Shindou.” He said. “Which goban are we using?”

Hikaru grinned, and punched the air in victory. He squinted around. “That one seems free, though looks like we might have to put it on the floor.” He pointed out. “You grab it, I’m getting some chu-hai.”

He wrangled his way through the increasingly raucous crowd to do precisely that, grabbing a bottle and making his way back towards the indicated goban, which Touya was positioning hesitantly beside a wall. Hikaru sat down on one side of it without hesitation, crossing his legs comfortably on the floor. Touya followed him, more slowly, but kept to seiza. “Now what?” The boy asked, uneasily.

“Now we play speed go.” Hikaru proclaimed. “Fast as you can. Try crazy stuff, don’t worry about playing seriously. Just have fun. I’ll take black.” Before Touya could protest this, he appropriated the black stones and, flippantly, played his first hand to tengen.


Hikaru opened his chu-hai and took a swig from the sweet lemony goodness. He much preferred this stuff to the beer. “Yep. Loosen up, play some crazy hands.” He said, and watched as his opponent rolled his eyes but obligingly placed a stone.

He barely paused for thought before placing the next, as it was meant to be super speed Go, after all. After a couple of false starts, Touya started to warm up to it as well, placing lightning-fast moves with decisive clicks, observing the bizarre and eclectic plays Hikaru was going for with a sort of confused interest.

At the end of the fast-paced and weird game, Hikaru was proud to say that Touya seemed to have loosened up and started to enjoy himself a little. He’d played quite conventionally and stiffly at first, but gradually began responding to his rival’s stranger moves with odd and non-standard patterns of his own, gradually relaxing more and more as whatever reprisal he’d been fearing didn’t arrive. Hikaru saw all of this in the truly unusual shape that filled the board at the end of the thirty minutes, feeling very satisfied. “That’s more like it.” He nodded to himself, pleased.

“That was odd.” Touya stated, though the words lacked any real ire. He was staring at the board’s bizarre shape with a mixture of admiration and scorn.

“Do it again, but one-colour this time?” Hikaru offered, grinning.

Touya stared at him, expression almost reluctantly amused. “Oh, go on then,” He sighed, and began to clear the board.

Hikaru was fairly drunk by this point and, given the fast pace, did not manage to hold the image of his stones with perfect fidelity. He misjudged a couple of times, and from what he could tell, so did Touya, so it wasn’t too long before both of them were abandoning any illusion of serious play and were negotiating over whose stone was whose since they’d both forgotten.

About half way in, someone started up some reasonably loud and lively music. A small dance floor formed in the bare part of the room and gained occupants, which Touya observed with the same fascinated wariness that he might a pack of hunting wolves. Hikaru grinned, watching the chaotic dancing begin, and wondered when the karaoke would start.

At the end of the second game, Hikaru was ready to pronounce Touya relatively loosened-up, and asked “So…how’s it going? Having fun yet?”
“Don’t push it.” Touya warned him, unusually light-hearted.

“Great.” Hikaru treated this response as the affirmative it was in truth. “I proclaim you ready to enjoy yourself. Go forth and be merry, no one will care. Except maybe Kaga, but he’s a dick anyway.”

Kaga, who had unwholesomely sharp hearing, shouted “Oi!” through the music and the din of many people being loud and uproarious.

He grinned, flicked a thumbs-up at Touya, and went in search of the toilet.

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He engaged in some dumb drunken-Go antics with a number of people between nine and eleven at night, all quick and stupid matches with increasingly nebulous rules and scoring. His ‘match’ with Yashiro in particular ended up being a real piece of work. Given the kinds of matches both he and Yashiro played sober, it really wasn’t surprising that they’d make such a mess of a goban once on their way to being truly hammered, but somehow the medley of shapes on the cheap board was still a surprise.

“Just…look at it.” Yashiro said, with deep admiration. “What even is it? That’s sure as fuck not a game of Go.”

Hikaru joined him in his deep contemplation of the goban. “Hell if I know.” He shrugged, tilting his head at an uncomfortable angle. The angle was uncomfortable enough that he nearly fell over, and only barely caught his newest bottle of chu-hai in time. “Fuck,” he cursed, observing the board with consternation. “Does that look like a dog to you? How does a game of Go end up looking like a dog?”

Yashiro squinted. “I don’t see it.”

He reached out and manually adjusted the other boy’s viewing angle to match his own. “See?” There was a brief pause, and then an enlightened ‘oh!’.

“What,” Came a familiar voice, “is that abomination?”

Hikaru looked up and confirmed that the lightening-up of his rival was well under way. In his own pissy manner, Touya almost seemed to be enjoying himself, and he’d even picked up his own drink somewhere. “Hm.” Hikaru hummed, the sight making him frown slightly for reasons he was having trouble remembering, while Yashiro extricated his head from Hikaru’s guiding hands and also looked up.

“At the moment, we think it’s a dog.” Yashiro explained. “But we’re not really sure.”

Touya squinted and tilted his head. “I suppose I can see that?” He said, dubiously, taking a cautious sip of his drink. That sort of reminded Hikaru of what he felt he’d forgotten.

“Touya,” he said, solemnly. “You know, you don’t have to drink if you don’t want to. Don’t give in to peer pressure. If anyone has been bugging you about it, tell me, and me and Akari will righteously smite them.” Akari might look cute and demure, but she was secretly a complete devil and more than capable of a good smiting. Hikaru was sure that there was nothing they couldn’t smite together.

“You are alarmingly verbose while drunk.” The nanadan informed him. “And also, shut up. I’ve heard enough about this drink from Ogata-san.” So, okay, the drink was probably fine.

“He can be a real bastard when he’s drunk, can’t he?” Hikaru mused contemplatively, remembering
Sai’s last full game. It put a bit of a damper on things. “And he totally sucks at playing when he’s drunk. Bet I could beat him.”

“Maybe if you weren’t completely pissed yourself, Shindou.” Yashiro said, crushing his dreams without mercy as he blinked blearily. “Fuck, I need to pee. You clear up the dog, will you?”

“But honey!” Hikaru called with outrage as his companion got up. “We made this monstrosity together, it’s our responsibility! You can’t leave me to deal with it alone!”

Yashiro flipped up a solitary middle finger, standing proud on its own, as he retreated through the crowd to the men’s room.

Hikaru turned to stare darkly at the board. “I don’t know what you are, or where you came from,” he said to the bizarre and vaguely canine shape. “But even if it costs me my life, I will end you.”

“You are not normal.” Touya sighed, but for once, it sounded almost approving.

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The drunken mania peaked at around half eleven, when some enterprising partygoer finally set up the karaoke and taped the list of songs onto the wall.

Karaoke, being a very popular activity in their fine country, immediately attracted the attention of a significant percentage of the guests, resulting in some stumbling and undignified battles to see the song list as well as a disorderly queue to speak to the self-appointed karaoke manager. Most of the patrons had cleared out by that point, with the natural exception of the owner, and Ogata remained more or less as the sole attendee over the age of thirty, occupying himself by cutting through swathes of low-rank pros in increasingly brutal drunken games.

Hikaru listened to the first singer’s decidedly-not-dulcet tones with satisfaction, the music blasting in time with his alcohol-muddled thoughts. “Yeah, that’s the stuff.” He said, pleased, as the karaoke-queue alternately danced or shouted along with the singer in question.

Akari, who’d been camping out beside him to observe, swayed a little as she asked “You like listening to bad karaoke, Hikaru?”

“Nah, not really.” He replied, gesturing vaguely with his drink. “It’s…so, most of these guys are Go nerds with no social life. Or they never get out. This is pretty much a party where they can be Go nerds with no social life but still pretend to be real boys. And girls. Real people who have fun. You know?”

“So what, I’m not a real boy?” Inquired Waya, expression vaguely stoned. He’d been sort-of discretely hanging out with Akari quite a lot over the course of the day, so he was there as well.

Hikaru considered the question, and shook his head. “Nah. But that doesn’t mean you can’t pretend to be, sometimes. And get drunk and have fun.”

“I think…I should be offended.” The boy pondered.

“You should.” Akari advised.

Waya nodded, briskly. “I’m offended.” He informed the room at large, being remarkably placid about it. He was really quite drunk.

“If it helps, I think you’re more of a real boy than Touya.” Hikaru comforted.
“I heard that.” Touya said, from behind him. Hikaru damn near dropped his drink.

“Sweet mother of Inari.” He exclaimed, twisting to regard the boy. Touya wasn’t drinking much, and as a result had retained far more dignity than the rest of them, but he definitely looked more unkempt than usual. “Where the hell did you come from?”

“I’ve been here for five minutes, Shindou.” Touya sighed.

He blinked. “Oh. Huh.”

Akari stared into the middle distance, gaze unfocused, before looking back at Hikaru. “Is that who you’re worshipping, Hikaru?” She asked, indistinctly. “I never could get that out of you.”

“Worship wha?” He repeated, not quite sure what she was getting at.

“Inari.” She clarified.

“What about Inari?”

“You worship him, right?”

Hikaru frowned. “I do?” he was fairly sure he didn’t do that.

“He does?” Touya looked at him in surprise. So did Waya, though to be fair he didn’t seem to have much of an idea of what he was being surprised at.

“I don’t.” Hikaru denied, fairly sure that this was accurate. Utagawashi did, but that was normal, he was a priest at an Inari shrine.

Akari seemed similarly perplexed. “But you’re Shinto now. You’ve got to pay respect to some sort of kami.” She pointed out.

“Since when are you religious?” Waya asked Hikaru, and this happened to trigger a few parts of his brain. Oh, right, Akari thought he was religious now, and doing Shinto things in a more dedicated manner than just lighting some incense from time to time like most people did.

“Since I went on that journey of self-discovery. Back in May. You know the one.” Hikaru informed him, and predictably the boy did not look convinced. Neither did Touya, though he at least had the decency to look somewhat thrown about it.

Akari put a hand on Waya’s shoulder, which he looked at with interest. “He’s actually not lying,” she stated, imperiously. “He spent like the whole trip visiting shrines. I made him take pictures.”

“You know where he went on that holiday?” Touya interjected, suddenly looking very interested.

“You know what, fuck this, I’m going to dance.” Hikaru stated, putting down his drink, and went forth to make merry. He was far too drunk to deal with this shit.

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He wasn’t sure how much time had passed, but Hikaru steadily became aware that a lot of people had left while he stared, hard, at the goban.

“Are you going to make a move, brat?” Ogata asked, displaying how un-classy he was by having become thoroughly soused in a gathering full of teenagers. “You’ve been staring at the damned board for ages.”
“…What game are we on?” He asked, suspiciously, narrowing his eyes at the stone in his fingers. He dropped it. “Fuck.”

Ogata frowned. “The third, maybe?”

“It’s the third.” Touya confirmed from nearby, looking very tired. He’d been watching the games, hadn’t he? Yashiro was there too, for lack of anywhere else to go, and an assortment of Hikaru’s friends were sitting around in various states of disarray. Waya was basically asleep, Isumi could hold his liquor alarmingly well and as such was supervising them all critically, and Akari was mostly staring vacantly at the wall, occasionally making a comment on whatever random thing she’d been contemplating.

“Fuck that. Why are we playing that many games? I’m too drunk for this.”

“Last time we played when I was drunk, you were much better.” Ogata accused. “I’ve been waiting for you to step up your game.”

“I wasn’t drunk that time.” Hikaru reminded him. “And, uh, you remember that?”

“Not especially well. I do remember that I lost, though.” The man scowled. Of course he’d remember that part…it was better than him remembering the distinctly Sai-like go style, though.

“You beat Ogata?” Yashiro asked, impressed.

“He was drunk as a drowned fish, it wasn’t hard.” Hikaru dismissed. “The point is, I’m seriously drunk now. Really drunk. Drunken Go is not a thing that exists like Drunken Kung Fu does. I think.”

Ogata looked bitterly disappointed. “Well, if that’s how it is, I’m going home.” He tried to stand, and managed it only unsteadily. “Shit, I need to call a taxi.” He grumbled, and looked at them all. “How are you kids getting home?”

Touya looked around at their blank expressions. “Make it a large taxi, I think.” He said, and the older pro nodded, walking away with his phone in hand.

“You guys all crashing at my place?” Hikaru asked the group at large, which consisted of Yashiro, Touya, Akari, Waya, and Isumi.

“I live next to you. That would be pointless.” Akari replied, slowly.

Yashiro rolled his eyes. “Shindou. I am literally staying with you.” He pointed out. “Of course I’m fucking crashing at your place.”

Hikaru blinked, remembering. “Oh, right.”

Isumi glanced at Waya, and answered in his place. “You live closest, so if you can manage it, it would be convenient.”

The new sandan frowned at that, forced to suddenly consider logistics. “My room…doesn’t have a lot of floor space.” He said. “But fuck it, it will work somehow.” Touya hesitated, and Hikaru noticed. “Come on, Touya, you are not heading half way across the city at whatever time it is now, while you’re drunk.”

“I’m hardly drunk.” The nanadan muttered. “Tipsy, perhaps, but not drunk.”
“Whatever.” Hikaru waved it off. “You’re staying at my house. Text your parents, it’ll be fine.” He watched with satisfaction as his rival sighed, and conceded to the inevitable.

He glanced up, and at the pretty much completely deserted Go salon. The owner was there, sorting bottles and generally cleaning up, and the karaoke machine had disappeared, but they were pretty much the only people left. “What time is it, anyway?”

Touya glanced at his wrist. “Two thirty in the morning.” He said.

“Shit.” Hikaru said, with deep admiration. “Now that was a party.”

“You’ll regret it in the morning.” Ogata promised them, apparently done with his call. “Now, get your stuff and get ready, the taxi will be here in ten minutes. Make sure you drink some water.”

“Since you are clearly the one experienced in these matters,” Touya murmured, getting carefully to his feet. “I will defer to your superior judgement.”

Ogata eyed him suspiciously. “You’re calling me an alcoholic, aren’t you? You brat.”

Hikaru stumbled upwards with very little grace, patting Touya on the shoulder. “I’m not sure what you just said, but it was bitchy. I like it.” He applauded.

Akari shook her head. “You’re a terrible influence, Hikaru.”

He tilted his head and shrugged. He couldn’t really argue with that; the evidence was all around him. He had made a pretty successful party primarily out of upstanding young Go professionals, and had even made Touya have fun.

Now that was an accomplishment.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was first posted on tumblr, and revised for posting here.

This chapter is longer than usual because the party happened and then wouldn't let me stop it. The beginning took me a while to write, due to many varied distractions, but the party itself was basically effortless. So that's nice. Chapter 6 is already finished an on tumblr. Expect it revised for ao3 within the next few days. Chapter 7 is under way and will be on tumblr in the next few days, etc.

Cultural note: from what I’ve read, Japan’s underage drinking laws are very lax. The drinking age is officially 20, and it’s also technically illegal to procure alcohol while underage or for those underage, but in practice it’s very easy for minors to get alcohol. From stores or from vending machines, though I’m told that those vending machines have been declining in recent years. At any rate, underage drinking is allegedly very common in Japan.

01/06/18 – Stylistic edits, seeded some future stuff a bit more comprehensively, updated Akira’s ranking.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Hikaru and his fellows recover from their revelry.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was at an ungodly hour that the previously quiet and peaceful street was disturbed.

The sound of engines came first; a large taxi that fell just short of being a minibus heralding the end of silence in the neighbourhood. Stopping beside a familiar house, the beleaguered driver patiently held a door open while a number of absolutely hammered teenagers staggered and swayed their way out of the vehicle. The last managed the exit with significantly more dignity, pausing to exchange a few words with the only person left inside.

“I’ll make sure he knows.” Touya promised, and Hikaru peered at him.

“Who you talking to?” He questioned, and received a number of shushes for his trouble. It was a little confusing. He didn’t think he’d spoken loudly.

Touya sighed at him. “Ogata.” He answered, stepping back to allow the driver to close the door and head on his way.

“What did you do that for?” Hikaru demanded.

The look he received was quite patient. “Do what?”

“Talk to Ogata.” The new sandan clarified. “He’s a dick.” Especially while drunk. God, the guy pretended to have class but he clearly didn’t – what kind of tool got that drunk at a predominantly teenage gathering? It was just sad.

“Maybe so.” Touya allowed, which was an unusually blunt concession for him. Maybe he was more inclined to be honest while tipsy. “However…he also just paid for our taxi fare, so we owe him.”

Hikaru thought about that, but couldn’t quite get the concept running properly. He totally did not owe Ogata, that was not a thing that could be allowed to happen. In the end he just said “he’s a dick” because no matter how drunk he was, the statement would likely remain true. Touya offered a vague hum which sounded like agreement.

“Hikaru.” Akari interjected, putting a hand on his shoulder. Since she nearly fell over with the movement, it ended up being a bit of a slap. “I’m going home. You should get in, too. Waya-san looks like he really needs some sleep.” She indicated the boy.

Hikaru looked. Yeah, she had a point. Isumi was pretty much holding him up, though since he wasn’t all that steady himself they were both swaying around like…like caterpillars, or something. Caterpillars trying desperately not to fall off of a plant. He laughed at the two of them, enjoying his drunken analogy, and nearly fell over himself when Akari removed her hand and weight from his shoulder.
“Goodnight, everyone.” She said to them all. Waya mumbled something unintelligible in response.

“It was nice to meet you, Fujisaki-san.” Touya said to her politely, his voice only slightly less clear than when he was sober.

“Same.” Yashiro agreed, indistinctly.

Isumi raised a hand in farewell, but as he and Waya were still sort of waving around like caterpillars he didn’t manage it very elegantly. “Same from me.” The older boy said.

Akari smiled at all of them. “If you want any dirt on Hikaru, you have my number.” She addressed them as a whole. Outraged, Hikaru made an aborted swiping motion at her and ended up on the ground instead.

“Ow,” he announced from the pavement.

Because Akari was a cruel and heartless beast, she only inspected him for a moment before leaving him there, sauntering unsteadily towards her front door, and fumbling in her handbag for keys.

Hikaru peeled himself from the tarmac, wobbling to his feet with some last minute aid from Touya.

He thanked the boy absently, and watched Akari aggrieve the lock of her door with muffled curses before she finally got herself indoors.

The door closed with unnecessary volume, echoing in the dark street. They stared at it.

“I guess we should go in as well?” Yashiro suggested.

Hikaru pondered the statement in light of Isumi and Waya’s ongoing caterpillaring, his exhaustion, and the fact that Touya probably hadn’t been out this late ever. “Probably.” He agreed.

Touya sighed. He liked doing that. “Keep your voices down,” he advised.

“Why?” Yashiro inquired.

“Because you’re all drunk and have no volume control.” The godan stated, as though he weren’t himself drunk. “Shindou, get us into the house already, I’m exhausted.”

“Okay, okay…” He muttered, careening over to his own front door. He successfully retrieved his keys from a pocket, but did not have much luck otherwise. He dropped them twice, couldn’t get the bloody key in the damned lock, and was starting to get pretty angry with both key and lock before Yashiro plucked the former from his hands. “Hey!” he protested, but subsided when the pale-haired boy matter-of-factly peered closely at the lock and got the key in. “…Thanks,” he said, begrudgingly, as he turned the key and opened the door.

Long-formed reflex almost had him calling ‘I’m home!’, but he restrained himself to a sort of grumbling murmur instead, grunting with satisfaction at the familiar surroundings.

“Who’s sleeping where?” Touya demanded, cutting straight to the point. Hikaru considered that question, and made his way on uncooperative legs to the stairs, gesturing at the lot of them to follow. The drunken procession made their way somewhat noisily up the stairs, and were shooed into Hikaru’s room while the owner of said space rummaged through a nearby cupboard. He evicted a number of pillows, duvets, blankets and sheets from the shelves therein, and kicked them in a disorganised pile after his guests into the bedroom.

“Start spreading those on the floor,” he advised, opening his wardrobe to rummage in there as well. His winter duvet was unceremoniously pulled down from the top shelf, along with clean bedding
such as pillowcases and duvet covers. He closed the door, and retrieved his chair in order to reach the top of the wardrobe, where slumbered a sleeping bag. This was also exiled to the floor, and set upon by a number of sleepy hands.

Hikaru left the room to raid his dad’s study, which contained the futon Yashiro had been using. Hesitantly, he took this in his arms and went back across the hallway to inspect the state of his room.

There was actually a fair amount of floor space, once you pushed everything to the side. The carpet was now completely obscured by bedding, but it did look like you could conceivably fit a few people there. Waya actually seemed to have fallen asleep already, and was in the process of being dragged to a more convenient position by the wall, rather than sprawled diagonally across the floor.

“Is he okay?” Hikaru asked, feeling himself grow a little more alert from the flash of concern. Isumi looked up, smiling.

“I’m sure he’s fine,” The young man said. “He’s snoring. And, also…” he poked Waya in the side, near his armpits, tickling a little. The mostly-asleep teenager squirmed at the sensation, making an unhappy noise in his sleep.

Hikaru grinned a little. “Okay, so he’s asleep already. Yashiro, I’ve got your futon here. Make some room on the floor for it.”

“Yeah, sure.” His guest agreed, shifting over some sheets and blankets which had been set out as padding for the floor.

Hikaru peered at the floor, tilting his head. “Looks like there’s room.” He pronounced, after a moment. “You can go next to Waya, Isumi, and Yashiro is putting his futon next to that. So you’ll be next to Yashiro, Touya.”

The least drunk of them made a face. “This is so undignified.” He claimed, without much heat.

“You’ve never stayed at a friend’s house before, Touya?” Yashiro questioned, having finished laying out the futon and claiming some bedding for it.

“…No.” The godan admitted, frowning at the bedding.

“Well, there you are then. A sleep-over is never dignified.” Yashiro nodded sagely, and got into bed. “I’m going to sleep now.” He sequestered himself beneath his sheet and promptly commenced ignoring the rest of them.

Isumi rubbed at his eyes. “I’ll do the same.” He said. “I might be the oldest person here, but I’m very tired.”

Touya glanced between him and his own designated sleeping area, clearly unused to such arrangements. Hikaru rolled his eyes, saying “Touya, you were just bitching about being exhausted. Go to sleep already.” He was, admittedly, ready to collapse himself. He watched his rival shuffle uneasily. It was a bit of a close fit on the floor, and with how reserved the other boy was…he sighed. “Oh, for the sake of…just take my bed, you moron.” He decided, stepping over Yashiro to shove Touya in the direction of his bed. “I’m not changing the sheets though, so you’ll just have to deal.”

Startled, Touya looked up at him. “What? Shindou?”

“Just take the damn bed. Shut up and go to sleep.” Hikaru, more than ready to take his own advice, situated himself on the pile of bedding on the floor and covered himself in a sheet. The light was still on, but what did that matter? Sleep was far more important.
The last thing he heard before dropping mercifully into slumber was the quiet creak of his bedsprings as Touya hesitantly conceded to the inevitable.

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“Hikaru?” A voice came, cutting through the heavy cloak of sleep. He groaned, and shifted, burying his face in his pillow. He heard rustling around him. “Hikaru? I heard you and Yashiro-kun come in during the night. Are you still asleep?”

He emitted a pathetic groan in place of actual words. He did not want anything to do with waking up.

“Hikaru!” The voice came again, and he heard the door opening. There was a pause. “Oh? Your friends came back with you?”

Some soul further from death than Hikaru sat up, saying “I apologise for imposing, Shindou-san.” It was Touya. Of course.

“That’s perfectly alright, Touya-kun.” His mother answered. Reluctantly, Hikaru rolled to the side and opened a bleary eye. He immediately regretted it, groaning again. “Who else is here? Is that Waya-kun?”

“Whazzat?” Murmured Waya vaguely from the side, presumably in response to the sound of his name.

“Yes, and Isumi-san.” Touya informed his mother. There was further rustling at this, potentially Isumi himself. Hikaru blinked, drifting closer to being fully awake than he was comfortable with. The more conscious he became, the more aware he was of the awful headache.

“Ughh.” Hikaru expressed, pathetically.

“Hmm.” His mother sounded thoughtful. “I suppose you all did get in very late…Well, Yashiro-kun doesn’t have his train until the afternoon, so if none of you have anything pressing to get to today, I suppose it’s okay for you to sleep a little longer.”

“You are amazing.” Hikaru declared, indistinctly, the words muffled by bedding.

His mother laughed. “If any of you want some food, come downstairs. If you’re not awake in a couple of hours, I’ll come back.”

The door closed, and footsteps faded away. Hikaru turned back over and promptly went back to sleep.

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Some time later, Hikaru became aware of a steady clicking sound that was very familiar.

Go, his mind told him, struggling through the haze of exhaustion. Someone’s playing Go. He kept his eyes closed for a while later, but found that the click of stones on a goban was far too intrusive and intriguing a sound to ignore. He did not want to be awake, but he couldn’t help himself. An unwilling servant to his fixation on Go, Hikaru found himself opening his eyes.

“Shiiiiit.” He said, plaintively. He’d never drunk enough before to have more than a slight headache in the morning, but now? His head was pounding, and it was far too bright. “Turn the light off?” He requested of whoever was awake.
There was a pause in the clicking sound. “It’s the sun, Shindou.” Touya said, amused. “I can’t turn the sun off.”

“You can try?” He implored hopefully.

But the gods were laughing at him, and so were his traitorous friends. Touya was chuckling, quietly, and so was – someone else, who?

Hikaru braved the terrible, terrible light and saw that it was Isumi at the goban with Touya. The goban itself was on his bed, which was neatly made, and the two were sitting on either side of it in seiza with a kind of perfect posture that looked unnatural in such rumpled clothes. Of course, everyone had slept in their clothing, so it made sense it would be unkempt. Hikaru found it hard to care about that, though, because Isumi had betrayed him.

“I can understand Touya laughing at me,” He said, profoundly slighted. “But you, Isumi? How could you? You understand my pain.” After all, Isumi was not underage and had very legally drunk himself into his own prodigious headaches in the past. Waya and Hikaru had been there for a couple of those times, and had sympathetically eliminated all offending light sources, like true friends.

Light sources. Oh, how Hikaru detested them.

“It’s because of that that I’m laughing, Shindou-kun.” Isumi explained, reasonably. “Your first experience of a true hangover was always going to be entertaining.”

Hikaru let his head fall back into the pillow with a groan. “A real friend would kill the sun for me,” he muttered, words muffled by fabric. No one answered, and after a while, he heard the stone-clicking commence again. He tried to resist. He really did.

But then the presence on the futon beside him rustled, a sleepy voice calling out “is someone playing Go?”

“Good afternoon, Yashiro-kun.” Isumi said, cheerfully. “Touya-kun and I are playing.”

Apparently Yashiro tried to open his eyes at that point, because the pitiful whimper he emitted was one that Hikaru could whole-heartedly sympathise with. “Holy shit.” The Kansai pro said, with a kind of agonised disbelief.

“Same.” Hikaru said to his futon neighbour, with feeling. He opened his eyes again, and immediately made a similar sound to the one Yashiro had produced. “I wish the sun would go hide in a cave again.” According to the mythology he’d been brushing up on, this had happened once and it had caused the sun to disappear temporarily. Hikaru could definitely get behind that idea.

“Who’s hiding in a cave?” Another voice came, groggy. Waya was waking up? Any moment now, then… “…Shit! It burns!” There you go.

“Light?” Isumi asked, sympathetically, though really his tone was deeply amused.

“Light is evil.” Waya whispered fiercely.

Hikaru nodded, and pushed himself to an upright position, his body immediately announcing its mutiny with a surge of nausea, dizziness, and a renewal of the throbbing pain in his head. “Why did I drink so much?” He lamented.

There was a pause. “You wanted to pretend to be a real boy.” Waya reminded him.
He considered that. “I guess I did.” He said, thoughtfully, and spared a despairing glance for the goban on his bed. Both Touya and Isumi were still playing, though with greater gaps between hands to observe the people on the floor. He eyed the board covetously. If he was already awake, and already enduring this torment, he might as well get some benefit out of it, right?

With herculean effort, Hikaru hauled himself from the floor and went over to observe the match. It was pretty good. Isumi and his thing with China had definitely done good things for his Go, with there being a conspicuous leap in skill every time he returned from a visit. Hikaru made an intrigued sound, rubbing his eyes to clear them a little as he watched. Apparently, the siren call of Go was impossible to resist, because in short order he was joined by Yashiro, and five minutes later even Waya hauled himself up.

As the game was pretty much in yose already, it didn’t take long for it to finish. Touya won by a reasonable margin, and they had a protracted discussion which took about five minutes. After that, Waya turned to Hikaru and demanded “Can I use your shower?”

He blinked. “Yeah, sure?”

Immediately, the boy staggered over to the bedroom door, opened it, and made his way clumsily down the hallway to the bathroom. Hikaru closed the door, bemused. “I guess we’d best start tidying this all up.” He said to the other guests, and enlisted their help in folding duvets and sheets. About five minutes in, the sound of the shower was audible from the bathroom. Another five minutes in, everything was folded and piled up on one side of Hikaru’s floor.

They stood in silence for a moment or two once they were done. Yashiro broke is, asking “Can I use the shower when Waya is done with it?”

“You have your shower stuff here already, of course you can.” Hikaru said. “I’m going first, though. Do you guys want to shower, too?” He addressed the remaining two.

“If you don’t mind.” Isumi said, polite as ever.

Touya slowly nodded, looking down at himself. He did not seem satisfied with what he found. “I would appreciate it,” he confirmed, and for once sounded sincere.

“I’d best make sure I turn the tank on, then, or all the hot water will be gone after my shower.” Hikaru mused, and briefly left the room to locate the switch in question. Before returning, he was overcome by a bizarre and unfamiliar instinct of hospitality, and obtained towels for each of his guests. He provided each of these to the occupants of his room by throwing them at their respective faces, whose appreciation of his generosity varied. “You two might as well play a speed game, since you’re last for the shower.” Hikaru said to Isumi and Touya as they arranged their towels. “You might have time.”

While they started on that, this time with the goban sensibly on the floor, Hikaru located his phone and checked the time. It was just past one in the afternoon – Yashiro’s train was at four, so they still had a while. He also noticed a couple of text messages. One was from Akari, reading ‘How’s your head?’. He replied to this with ‘light is evil’, as Waya really had put it well. The other message, surprisingly, was from Utagawashi. It read only ‘Still alive?’ Hikaru blinked in surprise at it – but, of course, he usually sent his weekly reassurance to Utagawashi on a Friday or Saturday, and he’d been so occupied with the celebration that he’d forgotten. Grinning ruefully, he replied ‘Yep. Sorry, it was my birthday yesterday.’ Just before sending, he paused and added ‘Maybe I’ll drop by later.’ Utagawashi was sure to love that.
He headed over to watch the speed match between his friends, surprised when the phone buzzed not long after he’d sat down. He looked at the screen – Utagawashi had his phone with him at the shrine? How sweet. He’d been worried. Hikaru grinned, not intending to pass up the potential taunting in the least. He opened the message – it read, briefly, ‘Joy.’ He could feel the sarcasm hit him in the face, despite the voiceless medium it had arrived by.

“Who are you messaging?” Yashiro inquired, looking over briefly from the game.

“…Akari.” Hikaru said, and it wasn’t a lie, since he had done that. He imagined she was just as hung over as him, at this point.

Watching a battle unfold in the top left corner of his goban, Hikaru mused that a good game was just the thing to wake you up, even when your brain was determinedly trying to melt you with pain. His focus wasn’t what it could be, but nonetheless…

Waya thankfully kept his shower brief, the sound of water cutting off after less than ten minutes. Hikaru perked up, alert for the sound of the bathroom door opening, and brandished his towel in readiness. They might have established their order of shower precedence, but Yashiro was a sneaky bastard and Hikaru wouldn’t put it past him to make an early bid for the bathroom regardless. Hikaru watched him suspiciously from the corner of his eye as Waya’s footsteps sounded down the hall.

When the boy entered, he was wrapped in a towel and had neglected to otherwise get dressed. Touya made an outraged sound, presumably at the impropriety or something, and made another one when Waya started rooting through Hikaru’s chest of drawers in search of something to wear. “You don’t mind if I borrow some clothes, right?” The boy asked belatedly, not sounding as if a negative answer would put him off in the least. Honestly, Hikaru had such pushy friends.

He rolled his eyes, and waved a hand. “Sure, whatever. Knock yourself out.” He said, and headed for the bathroom. There was the shrine in the wardrobe…but honestly, that hardly mattered at this point. Let them find it.

The shower was absolute heaven. If there existed anything more soothing and revitalising than that fabulous warm deluge, Hikaru might consider selling whatever remained of his soul for it, because it was glorious. With deep satisfaction, Hikaru washed away the stench and grime characteristic of a night out drinking, and once he left the shower, brushed his teeth twice to remove the disgusting taste and smell.

He towelled off, and then wrapped himself in the towel to return to his room, extracting his fan from the dirty clothes before he put them in the laundry basket. As he’d expected, the wardrobe was open with the kamidana in plain view, and it had attracted an audience. Touya and Isumi had actually abandoned their game, Yashiro was inspecting his incense burner, and Waya was standing around in Hikaru’s least bright clothes looking generally very sceptical about the whole thing.

“Since when do you have a kamidana in your wardrobe?” He demanded, as soon as Hikaru entered. The others also turned to look at him – Yashiro and Isumi with a sort of baffled interest, and Touya who looked like he couldn’t decide whether to be confused or insulted.

Hikaru unceremoniously shoved them all out of the way to procure some clothing for himself, pulling out the necessities as he said “A few months, I guess?” Surreptitiously, he checked on the kamidana, and confirmed that it had not been defaced in any way. Withdrawing from the wardrobe with his clothes, he went back to the bathroom briefly to get dressed, reappearing in his bedroom far more colourfully than before. In a gesture of spite towards his hangover and those of his friends, he’d put on the most eye-meltingly yellow t-shirt he could find.
“What are you playing at with this, Shindou?” Touya asked with deep suspicion, having apparently inspected the shrine area himself, and found it lacking.

“I swear Akari mentioned this at some point in the night.” Hikaru mused, without actually answering anything.

“Only some bullshit about you having become religious.” Waya replied, and honestly he was surprised the other pro had remembered that, considering how drunk he’d been.

Hikaru grinned. “Yashiro, it’s your turn for the shower.” He reminded his guest, who looked oddly reluctant to leave. “And put the incense burner back, you’ll get ash everywhere.”

Hesitantly, Yashiro obliged, handling the thing so carefully it might have been dynamite. “I’m going to want to hear whatever you tell these guys,” He warned, and with a glance backwards left for the bathroom.

“Shindou, there is no way someone like you has even the slightest scrap of faith in higher beings.” Waya said, flatly. “I will not believe it. Everything you say is a lie, and everything you do offends me.”

Even hungover, hungry, and dehydrated…there was no way he wouldn’t thoroughly enjoy this.

Hikaru put on his very best bullshitting hat, and got to work.

By the time Yashiro emerged from the shower, Waya was swearing vengeance against Hikaru for all the lies and suffering he had endured during the course of their association, being loud enough about it that Hikaru’s mother came to check on them to make sure everything was okay. Touya made very little comment, occasionally grimacing when Waya’s tirade became especially strident, but kept inspecting the little shrine as though he didn’t quite believe it was really there. Isumi only sat and watched, an eyebrow raised and an amused smile twitching at his lips.

Once Yashiro had returned and demanded to know what had been said, Hikaru nearly summarised the explanation for him. “On my epic journey of self-discovery in May, I discovered something amazing.” He said, earnestly. “I went to shrines, and spoke to kannushi, and in the end concluded this: there is a god of Go.”

“How’d you figure?” Yashiro asked, towelling his wet hair another time over as he spoke, sounding quite dubious.

“There are kami for everything, man.” Hikaru explained wisely. “There are kami for streams, for meadows, for bridges, for emotions, for rice, for everything. Of course there’s a kami for Go. How could there not be?”

Touya spoke, for perhaps the first time. “So, rather than hear about a kami whose sphere is Go, you decided there had to be one in the absence of any evidence to the contrary and ran with it.” His tone was very dry.

Hikaru nodded cheerfully. “Yep!”

“You do not know this god’s name. You just decided that they exist.” He went on.

He considered that. “I’m sure he’ll share his name with his devoted followers when he’s ready to.” He decided, after a moment.

Touya sighed. “You don’t know his name,” he repeated. “You don’t know how he prefers to be
honoured. You don’t know—"

“Come on, Touya. He’s the god of Go. How to worship him is overwhelmingly obvious.” Hikaru interrupted, rolling his eyes.

“…You play Go?” The godan guessed, wearing perhaps the most beleaguered expression ever to be sighted on a human being.

“You play Go.” Hikaru agreed.

“If that’s all it takes, then we’re all religious.” Waya said, unimpressed. “You’re clearly just fucking with us.”

Hikaru sighed patiently. “There is, of course, a ritual to it.” He said in tones of utmost kindness. “But I’m afraid I couldn’t disclose it to someone as faithless as you.”

Isumi coughed to hide a laugh as Waya’s eyebrow twitched alarmingly. “Shindou,” He growled, warningly.

“I made the rites myself, Waya. They are, therefore, extremely personal to me.” Hikaru continued blithely. “If you decide to pay respect to the God of Go, then maybe I will consider sharing my way of worship. But I would dishonour my kami and myself if I were to tell you now!” He finished with great passion, shaking his fist at the sky. Or, more accurately, the ceiling.

“What about me?” Yashiro interjected, cutting off what would likely have been a very angry response by Waya. “What if I want to pay respects?” He raised an eyebrow challengingly.

Hikaru regarded him pensively. “I’m sure the God of Go appreciates the sentiment, Yashiro.” He said. “But I doubt your sincerity. When you are prepared to open your heart to him, you may return to me and ask again. If I feel that you ask in earnest, I may share the rites with you.”

Yashiro nodded seriously. “Of course. I would not dream of disrespecting the God of Go with anything less than perfect sincerity.” He promised. “Maybe, one day, I will be ready.”

Waya buried his face in his hands with a groan. “Oh, god. There’s two of them.”

Hikaru grinned.

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Eventually, despite significant delays caused by squabbling, all of Hikaru’s houseguests managed to get themselves showered and somewhat presentable. Yashiro packed his bag, as he would soon be leaving, and they all reported to Shindou Mitsuko for rations.

Hikaru’s glorious mother presented them with a lot of rice, which was simple enough that it managed not to set off his nausea, and presumably that of the others’ too. It was a basic meal, perhaps, but for as many unexpected guests as he’d presented her with, they could hardly expect much more. After their late lunch, all of them except Yashiro cleared out, thanking Hikaru’s mother for her hospitality and apologising for the imposition as if they were actually polite. Well, Isumi was. But Touya often wasn’t, and Waya did not tend to be polite except in exceptional circumstances.

If his mother suspected hangovers, she didn’t say anything. When he cautiously mentioned having a headache in an attempt to procure some painkillers, she dismissively attributed it to his late night as she gave him the pills. Hikaru, however, was in the habit of assuming that his mother knew more than he often gave her credit for. He might have totally blind-sided her with the Go thing when he
was younger, but she could be remarkably observant in odd ways.

After lunch had been finished and cleaned up after, Hikaru spared a glance for the clock. “I don’t think we have time for a game.” He said regretfully to Yashiro. “Not even speed Go.”

The other boy shrugged. “NetGo, maybe.” He suggested. “I think I might be really tired by the time I get home, though.” The train journey from Tokyo to Osaka was a fairly substantial one, true – it would be reasonably late in the day by the time Yashiro arrived.

“Well, we’ll play sometime soon, anyway.” Hikaru stated with certainty. Yashiro was good, and had a lot of potential. He was behind Hikaru, but…he wasn’t standing still. He was chasing, and was very stubborn about it. Hikaru could, naturally, relate to that.

“Yep.” Yashiro glanced at the clock as well. “We don’t need to go right away, though.”

“We can just hang out upstairs for a bit, I guess.” He pondered. The nidan shrugged affably, and they returned to his room in short order.

Yashiro made a beeline for the goban. “I’ll just replay a game, if you don’t mind.” He said, reaching for the pair of goke.

“Yeah, sure.” Hikaru allowed, staring at his wardrobe. He’d kept the shrine in there for purposes of concealment, but that was pretty useless now. So…

While the tap of stones being placed commenced, Hikaru cleared the top of his chest of drawers entirely, dusting it off and inspecting it critically. After brief contemplation, he nodded to himself with satisfaction, pronouncing it a worthy surface and opening his wardrobe to begin the transfer. Carefully, he set aside the more delicate items like the candles, which had been replaced several times now, as well as the incense burner. With those out of the way, he was able to gently extract the kamidana. In the full light of his room, Hikaru realised with a little dismay that it itself had become unconscionably dusty, and set at once to cleaning it.

His work drew Yashiro’s curious eyes. “You’re taking a lot of care of that thing.” He commented. “Not enough, it’s all dusty.” Hikaru muttered, vaguely annoyed with himself. He should have realised that the dust wouldn’t be as visible in the meagre lighting of the wardrobe...

He went to the bathroom to retrieve an old toothbrush, and used it to clear out the corners and gaps which were harder to get to. After a bit of work, it did seem completely clean again, and he put it carefully to its new home on the chest of drawers. The kamidana placed, he positioned the candles beside it, as well as the incense burner, and moved his dwindling supply of incense to one of the drawers.

“You’re moving it?” His houseguest inquired, once he’d stood back to inspect the positioning.

“Yes.” Hikaru nodded absently, tilting his head to make sure it was all centred. “I mainly had it in the wardrobe so people wouldn’t ask so many questions, but that’s a bust now, so…” He shrugged. It felt better, to have it out in the open. Akari would no doubt be delighted, the witch.

Yashiro peered at him with a slight frown. “Are you actually religious now?” He asked, and he sounded so unconcerned about the answer that Hikaru found himself feeling surprisingly generous.

After a pause for thought, he said “Kind of, yeah.” It wasn’t as though he’d met any kami, or even any spirits other than Sai. But…it seemed likely that both existed in some fashion, even if not necessarily in the way that Shinto tradition held it. Maybe, once he got the spiritual sensitivity
working, he’d have something more definitive to trust. For now, though, he knew that Sai had been real, and even if he wasn’t actually worshipping him, the absent ghost was certainly worthy of being respected with some form of ceremony. And if Hikaru was going to believe that kami and spirits were real…that at least made him someone who believed Shinto claims about the world, so he could sort of be considered religious.

Yashiro absorbed that, said “huh,” and returned to recreating the game without a further word.

Hikaru liked Yashiro. He really did.

“What game are you replaying?” he asked, walking forwards to sit at the goban. He stared at it for a moment, utterly confused. It didn’t look like a game at all, but it was familiar. He was silent while his brain helpfully kicked in with the memory, and then he turned to Yashiro and glared. “How dare you disgrace my goban with that monstrosity? Have you no shame?” It was the dog game, from last night. How could he?

Yashiro grinned shamelessly, and continued to muddle his way through recreating the canine abomination that they, in their naivety and inebriation, had unleashed upon the world. “We brought this thing into the world, Shindou.” He said passionately, slapping a few more stones down. “We can’t deny that! It’s our responsibility to acknowledge the things we have done, no matter how terrible!” The devil creature was starting to take form. Hikaru eyed it with alarm.

“Our responsibility, maybe, but that doesn’t mean we have to recreate it! That will only make it stronger!” he cried imploringly. After a pause, he added “Please! Don’t do this!”

With apprehension, but also an admirable courage, Yashiro bravely regarded the goban. “Don’t be afraid, Shindou.” He said solemnly. “This is something we have to do.” Several more stones fell into place, an interminable march towards their doom. Possibly the doom of the entire world.

Hikaru couldn’t take it any longer. He reached out and took the black goke, cradling it protectively against his chest. “I can’t let you do this to us! Haven’t you thought about what you could unleash?” He demanded, dodging out of the way of Yashiro’s initial lunge. The other boy was bigger, though, and with his freakishly long limbs hooked the stone bowl away from him a moment later. “Stop!”

“Don’t worry. It might be stronger, that’s true. But…we’ll defeat it together. For good, this time.” Yashiro said grimly, holding both goke close now and fending off Hikaru’s abortive attempts at stealing them. Hikaru was almost tempted to manually disrupt the stones, but they shuddered with a dark menace he dared not approach.

Finally, it was done: with the last black stone, the beast was fully formed, its mad shape making a mockery of the board and the stones and all that was good and pure in the world.

“Nooo!” Hikaru wailed. “What have you done?”

Yashiro opened his mouth to answer, face in hard lines of resolution as he regarded the abomination they had created together-

“Hikaru? Yashiro-kun?” Shindou Mitsuko called, knocking at the door. “What are you doing? You’re being very loud, and you have to leave soon.”

The moment broken, Hikaru and Yashiro looked at each other for a moment, and near-simultaneously, started giggling like children. Amid his snickering, Hikaru answered “We’re just messing around, mom. We’ll clear up and go in a minute.”

“Alright.” His mother sighed, and left them to it.
“That was dumb.” Hikaru said to Yashiro, once he was finished sniggering.

“It was really dumb.” Yashiro agreed, looking very pleased with himself.

“Clear up the abomination?”

“Together.” The other pro nodded, solemnly.

They cracked up again not five seconds later.

Yeah, Hikaru liked Yashiro.

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They left not long after their impromptu goban drama, Hikaru feeling quite pleased with what seemed to be the development of a partner-in-bullshit. It was a shame that Yashiro lived in Osaka – he could only imagine the colours Waya’s face would achieve if they had more opportunities to team up and concoct some idiotic nonsense together.

Hikaru escorted his friend to the train station, and saw him off with a wave to the train’s window. At that point, it was past four in the afternoon, and therefore probably a bit late to go traipsing off to Utagawashi’s shrine. As such, while he headed home he composed a text, saying ‘You lucked out, no time to visit today.’

There was no response, but Hikaru imagined it was well-received anyway.

Once home, he thanked his mother for accommodating his friends, and headed to his room for an afternoon nap. This did wonders for his hangover, and so it was a reasonably refreshed sandan who lit the incense in the open. The kamidana looked good in the afternoon light through the window – it was actually pretty satisfying, to not be hiding the thing in the wardrobe any more.

He’d told the shrine about his sandan advancement, of course. It had come through on the previous Wednesday, only a couple of days before his birthday, and Hikaru had been exclaiming his achievement to the kamidana pretty much the moment he got home. Nonetheless, there was still stuff to talk about.

“Hey, Sai.” He said cheerfully, sitting down after dragging the goban over. “You might be pleased to know that the party I told you about was an overwhelming success. We all played a stupid amount of Go and got horribly drunk. Even Touya had a couple of drinks, it was awesome. Also, since a load of my friends crashed here last night, they all know about this shrine now and either think I’m bullshitting or religious, from what I can tell.” Touya hadn’t said much, so who knew what he was thinking. Isumi was similarly opaque, as he’d just looked politely amused for most of the encounter.

“At any rate,” Hikaru went on. “It means there’s no point in hiding everything in the wardrobe anymore, so you’re out of there now. Anyway, because of the party, I’ve got a lot of games to replay for you. Some of them pretty good. I might show you some of the drunk ones I remember, because a few were pretty hilarious…I can just imagine your face if you’d seen them.”

He grinned, though the expression faltered shortly afterwards. If Sai had been there, he’d probably have made some seriously funny expressions at those abominable games. If he was aware of anything Hikaru said at this shrine, maybe he was making those expressions, somewhere. But Hikaru couldn’t see them.

He wished Sai could have been there with him.
After a somewhat heavy silence, Hikaru spoke again. “I’ve not practiced the spirit stuff the last couple of days.” He said softly. “It’s been too hectic. But I’ll try tonight, and tomorrow, and later in the week I’ll go to see Utagawashi too. I don’t think he’ll be able to help, but I might as well try.”

He let the silence stretch again, for a few moments. Then he exhaled, pushing away the heaviness, and got started on the games. “Okay, so near the beginning I played this game with Ogata…”

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A week passed Hikaru by in a flurry of games and congratulations. He dropped by Morishita-sensei’s study group for, admittedly, the first time in a while, and was made to promise to come more often amongst the well-wishes of the members.

In the end, advancing to sandan didn’t change much. The quality of opponents in his official matches seemed to be higher, yes, and he lost more frequently than before. But, otherwise…it was pretty much the same. Hikaru was aware that he was in danger of getting stuck in a rut at this point, of stagnating for a while, if he didn’t do something. With a critical eye, Hikaru looked over the title leagues and their qualification schedules, considering.

Hikaru wasn’t an idiot. He knew full well that he wasn’t anywhere near the level to be taking titles. But…the title leagues took years. Preliminaries, in some cases multiple preliminaries, ran for a long while. And in three years, he was confident he could improve, a lot. Most pros at his level at least tried to enter a title league or two, so it wasn’t even that unusual a thing to do. He’d actually entered one, not long after his long-ago comeback, but had been soundly ousted not far into the first preliminary…but he was a lot stronger now.

He’d never exactly been one to pull back from challenges. Even when, reasonably, he was not at all ready…he’d always pushed himself forwards.

Why stop now?

The preliminaries for the Kisei league started in October. The preliminaries for Ouza started in December. There were a host of Japanese and International tournaments in the coming year that he could try to get into, including the Ing Cup that only ran every four years.

His problem was that he wasn’t nearly over-booked enough. Perhaps it was time to change that.

With the masochistic glee that comes from consigning one’s future self to profound suffering, Hikaru considered all of the things he could do, and how best to prepare for them.

The week passed by him as quickly as they often did. Hikaru did his best to fill his spare hours with as much Go as he could manage – he spent less time on NetGo unless he could find pros or other strong players there, and started studying the kifu for high level matches more carefully while he was at home. For the hell of it, he did most of this while in front of the kamidana, incense lit and filling the room with that familiar scent, and occasionally spoke his observations out loud as he studied the games.

Every night, Hikaru laid on his bed and set aside time to fruitlessly work at his spiritual sensitivity, but it never got any easier. He started timing how long he was out for, and it seemed to be around five minutes a try, for now. The pain of the spiritual wounds was never any less jarring – if anything, it felt a little worse – and it was never any less disorientating to pull back from that void. His fingers and toes often felt numb and cold for a good ten minutes afterwards, now, and experienced pins-and-needles for much longer as sensation returned. It was a bit worrying, honestly.
When, finally, the next Sunday rolled around, Hikaru resolved to finally drop in on Utagawashi to see if he could get any more useful information out of the guy. It had been a fair while, after all—he’d started on the spirit stuff just at the very start of September, and now it was the 28th; basically four weeks later. He’d say that the time had flown, but…it sort of hadn’t. The Go was great, of course, but there was nothing like his evening spirit-stuff sessions to cast a pall on every day.

Hikaru, feeling kind, texted Utagawashi to warn that he was coming. Unfortunately, he didn’t remember until afterwards that Utagawashi didn’t bring his phone with him to work, with only one known exception, so he likely wouldn’t receive it until too late.

Well…whoops?

---

Since the old man had been bugging his mother about it, Hikaru dropped by his grandpa’s house to be congratulated on his sandan advancement, admonished for not visiting sooner, and abducted into providing a teaching game. Hikaru kept this teaching match as short and brutal as he could manage, claiming that he was a busy pro with lots to do.

This, to be fair, was true. With all his games recently, as well as the new spiritual stuff, his school-work was seriously falling to the wayside and his mother was getting somewhat shirty about it. Frankly, though, the school stuff was his lowest priority—it wasn’t as though senior high school qualifications were actually compulsory. Very few people who failed to graduate from a senior high school tended to get meaningfully employed, but considering Hikaru was already in his choice of profession, that meant very little to him. Still, it was best to keep the parents satisfied if he could, so…

Hikaru sighed at the thought as he left his grandpa’s house, walking in the direction of the shrine. Considering all the stuff he was planning to do, it might be best to warn his mother that he wouldn’t have much time for school-work. He thought she might need to be reminded that, yes, Go was something he was planning to make a living with, and therefore having good grades was basically useless to him.

It might be a bit of a tough pill for her to swallow, but it would be kind of necessary soon. He was planning to put a lot of stuff on his plate, after all, and there was only so much he could do in a twenty-four-hour day.

Noticing the torii peeking out from behind a couple of trees, Hikaru shook himself out of his thoughts and sped up a little, peering to see if Utagawashi was visible. He caught the flash of white just as he came to the great red arch, passing through it with a call of “Hey, Utagawashi! Guess who?”

Having not seen the man or any other kannushi in a while, the kariginu was more disconcerting than usual. If not for the clear lack of long indigo hair down his back, Hikaru might easily have mistaken him, from a distance, for Sai.

Processing the grief and regret through to resolve, a now well-oiled practice, Hikaru continued approaching as the priest turned to face him. And then he stopped.

Almost the moment Utagawashi saw him, he went completely still. And then he doubled over, clutching at his mouth as his whole body shuddered. Hikaru’s first response was to run the hell over and check what was wrong with the man, but…it was probably him, wasn’t it? Did going without exposure to him for that long intensify the effects so much? If so, why hadn’t the reaction been this bad the first time the priest had seen him?
“…Utagawashi?” He called, warily, not stepping any closer. A hand, trailing a very long sleeve, came up to gesture with a finger in the universal ‘wait’ gesture, so Hikaru waited.

After a few moments, the priest slowly stood up and straightened his robes, his skin pale enough that it made him look ill. He stared at Hikaru for several long moments, took a deep breath, and beckoned him over. Cautiously, the sandan approached, watching for signs that the kannushi might be having further trouble.

“…Hey?” Hikaru greeted, uncertainly, once he’d reached acceptable conversing distance. The priest continued to stare, looking terribly shocked. “…What’s up?”

“Shindou.” Utagawashi said, voice very concerned. “What have you been doing? What happened?”

A somewhat familiar sinking feeling making itself known, Hikaru’s shoulders slumped. “Nothing? I’ve just been working, and trying to work on my spirit thing in the evenings.” He answered, wary. “Why?”

“You’ve not met any spirits, to your knowledge, since we last spoke? No attacks or encounters?” The priest demanded, ignoring his question.

Bewildered, Hikaru answered “Nothing.”

There was a tense moment of silence as they stared at each other. “You said ‘working’.” Utagawashi pointed out. “You’re…what, fifteen? Is it a part time job? What do you do?”

Hikaru blinked as he realised that, somehow, his profession had never come up in conversation before. Funnily enough, the subject matter relaxed him significantly, and he offered a small grin. “I’m a professional Go player.” He said. “I just advanced to sandan recently.”

That surprised the man. It didn’t tend to be something people expected. Accordingly, a little colour returned to Utagawashi’s face as he processed the reply. “A Go professional?” He asked, dubiously. “Really? You don’t seem the type. And…aren’t you a little young?”

“Pro players start young. I became a shodan three years ago, pretty much.” Hikaru shrugged. “I don’t go to senior high school, but I do a distance learning type thing. Mostly I play Go and study Go. It takes a lot of time.”

It was sort of fun to watch the visible struggle to parse the information. “…Right, that’s fairly unusual.” Utagawashi said, still sounding quite dubious about it. “But it doesn’t account for… well…” he fixed an unnerved gaze on Hikaru, losing colour again. He was very tense.

The cheer he’d accumulated faded fairly rapidly. Hikaru exhaled, asking “Okay, what’s wrong?”

The priest frowned, and slowly admitted “…Your spiritual wounds. They…well. It’s not by a huge amount, but…they are definitely worse than they were before.”

Hikaru gawked at him, aghast.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter, first posted on tumblr, has had minor revisions for posting here on ao3. A fairly fillery chapter, with a few set up points for future scenes and chapters. The part
with Hikaru and Yashiro getting dramatic and silly pretty much happened on its own, and is an excellent example of how characters sometimes take you by surprise. Chapter 7 was posted last night on tumblr, and will be revised for posting here.

I've had a lot of distractions lately and have been writing more slowly. I have to thank all of my readers for comments, bookmarks, subscriptions, and kudos - and my readers on tumblr for their notes. When your momentum is flagging a little, having an eager reader base really makes such a difference to one's inspiration.

01/06/18 – stylistic edits, some subtleties.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Hikaru calls in an expert.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“What, seriously?” Hikaru asked, feeling more than slightly daunted by the priest’s words. “Are you sure?”

“Very sure. You did not feel like-" Utagawashi waved his hand vaguely in his direction. “-that, when I last saw you.”


“And you definitely haven’t noticed any spirits attacking you recently?” Utagawashi checked, sounding almost pleading.

“Not noticed anything.” He replied, a little reluctantly. “Wouldn’t I have noticed if the soul injury thing was getting worse? I mean, it’s my soul.”

The stare he received for that comment was unnervingly intent. “I don’t know. Have you noticed, Shindou? I would think you would have, but you are a completely unique case.”

Becoming steadily more and more uneasy, Hikaru hunched his shoulders. “I...maybe?” He had thought that the emotions had been especially poignant lately, and the post-session numbness and disorientation did seem to be lasting longer than in the beginning, but…surely that didn’t mean anything?

Utagawashi stepped in a little, expression serious. “Describe what you’ve been noticing, since you started trying to access your spiritual capability.” He commanded. “Has anything changed? Has anything new happened? When do these things happen? Anything you can think of.”

Hikaru was tempted to get defensive and deflect everything – it was his standard response to personal inquiries these days, but…well, it was probably important to be truthful here. “The...’emotional echoes’...might have been worse lately.” He said, carefully using Utagawashi’s term for it, since it was much more impersonal. “But since they’re usually so intense anyway, it’s hard to say.” He’d been pretty tired lately, too…but it was hard to say if that could be blamed on this or not. It could be a lot of things.

The priest waited for him to say something more, but he didn’t especially want to go into detail, and kept quiet. After a few seconds, he sighed. “Well, it seems to me like whatever you’ve been doing to try to access your capabilities is actually dangerous.” He observed, heavily. “In all cases I’ve heard of, the way forwards was to use the wound. I have never heard of the wounds worsening. It’s...very troubling.”

Hikaru waited for Utagawashi to continue, but he only stood there, regarding him with pronounced concern. “…So, what can I do?” He asked, once he’d grown impatient. It did not sound good that
this thing was getting worse, but it wasn’t as though he knew of something else to try. “If this way isn’t working for me, is there something else I can try?”

The look he received did not exactly fill him with confidence. Voice worried, and very tentative, the priest said “I…don’t know of anything, personally. This way worked for me, and I haven’t heard of any other…” He hesitated, eyes regarding Hikaru warily.

Trepidation building, the new sandan eyed the priest right back. “What is it?” He questioned, almost warningly. Surely, this kannushi was not going to suggest what Hikaru suspected. No. Nope. Definitely not.

Utagawashi visibly gathered his resolve, took a breath, and spoke: “I think you should stop.” Once he had said it, he exhaled explosively, as if it had been a great effort, and watched cautiously.

Hikaru couldn’t really manage a verbal response, not just then. He held up a finger, biting at his lip to stem what might have been an incoherent scream of denial, and breathed deeply and rapidly to try to calm down the instant and volatile frenzy his emotions had just become. The moment those words had fallen on the air, every part of him was screaming no, bubbling and frothing with denial and fury and he could not-

He breathed. He breathed, to hold in some sort of very angry response which he knew he’d regret. It was really fucking difficult, though, and when he finally managed to gather enough of his wits to speak, the words were strained with fury. “Fuck. You.” he spat, desperately trying to flatten down the surges of aggressive despair that were coursing through him at the mere hint of defeat. His pulse was racing, fast enough he felt almost dizzy from it, and he clenched his fists so hard that he could feel the sharp points of his nails.

Utagawashi looked…worried. Nervous, too, with a stubborn edge of steel-

Hikaru couldn’t stand to look at him standing there, clearly about to try convincing him to give up, it was pissing him off far too much. He abruptly turned and marched away, over to the spot by the wisteria vine, and sat down in seiza with his back to the priest, the coolness of the grass seeping through.

Breathe, Hikaru thought to himself, trembling with the heightened emotions. Breathe, he thought again, withdrawing his precious fan and clinging to it like a lifeline. He spread it, dipping his head until its edges brushed against his brow, and breathed. Carefully, inhalation and exhalation, focusing on the sensations of it to the exclusion of that which was overwhelming him.

Slowly, he began to calm a bit. The priest didn’t try to approach him, and a good thing that was. He…hadn’t felt that intensely angry in a long time. He got annoyed, sure, and pissed off by some things…But the strongest emotions he tended to feel, since Sai’s disappearance, were the grief and emptiness attributable to his spirit-wounds, and after that the excited enjoyment of a really good game, and enjoyment of other stuff as well. Anger…well, it had been a while since he’d been properly angry.

After a while of cooling off, Hikaru felt saner. He ran through his emotions, his reactions, the gut-deep response that Utagawashi had unwittingly provoked, and breathed his way through it.

Eventually, he closed the fan, keeping it in his right hand as he stood up. He turned, finding that the priest was where he’d been before, watching him guardedly.

One more inhalation and exhalation, and he walked over. Slowly, deliberately. He walked over until he was standing in front of Utagawashi, and paused a while to gather his words. The priest seemed apprehensive.
“…No.” He said, eventually. “Just...hell no. No, no, not ever. I am not going to give up. It’s not even an option. If what I’m doing isn’t working, suggest something else. But I am never going to give up on this, so don’t even try.” The last words were angry, again, and Hikaru reined himself back in. Breathed. Focused on the fan in his hand. Sai wouldn’t want him to beat up a priest, especially not on his behalf. But if this guy even tried to suggest he give up on Sai-

“Alright, then.” The words broke Hikaru out of his spiralling thoughts, and he refocused his attention on the kannushi’s face, surprised. The man’s expression was nervous, resigned, and still very worried. “I won’t say it again.”

Hikaru studied him suspiciously. Despite everything, he seemed sincere. “Good?” He said, in an unintentionally questioning tone.

Utagawashi sighed and fixed a more piercing stare on him. “You understand, though, that continuing may mean you get even worse.” He said, bluntly. “I am not an expert on how spiritual injuries interact with a human body, but I do know that mental issues are not where it ends. Most people with severe spiritual wounds experience physical symptoms, as well. You likely have some, whether you’ve noticed them or not. If your wounds get worse, your echoes certainly will. Your mind and body could degrade. Literally anything could happen, it’s so unpredictable and unknown. Continuing on as you have been is reckless, reckless and stupid in the extreme.”

He…sort of had a point, there. But hadn’t Hikaru said to himself that it wasn’t acceptable to live as he was, even as it already stood? If he had to endure a bit more damage to reach his goals…that was okay. Maybe then it would be better. Maybe it wouldn’t, and everything would be worse. He didn’t know, but he had to try.

Hikaru wasn’t an idiot, though. He felt, with certainty, that he’d made no progress with the spirit thing since he’d started. Hearing that he’d actually made things worse made a macabre sort of sense. He stood quietly for a few moments, running over Utagawashi’s words. “You said you’re not an expert, in spiritual injuries and their effects.” He spoke, slowly. “Then…who is an expert?”

Warily, Utagawashi said “it is not exactly a well-studied thing. I would hardly say that there are any true ‘experts’.”

Undeterred, he demanded “But there are people who know more than you? People who you know?”

The priest stared. “You wish me to put you in contact with a…I’m not saying colleague’?” He asked.

Hikaru considered that, and nodded. “Yep.” After a pause, he added “You said you’re only mildly spiritually sensitive. You have to know people who are worse off, people who might have a better idea of how someone like me should be doing this.”

There was a pause as Utagawashi mulled that over, looking more thoughtful and less stressed. “…I suppose it’s possible he’d know more than what he told me.” The man mused. “If I didn’t need to know how the severely injured do things, he might not have bothered saying it.”

Interesting. “He’?” Hikaru questioned.

“Kaminaga-sensei.” The kannushi said, the name falling from his tongue with the sort of consideration that implied he’d not spoken it in a while. “He was the one who taught me….perhaps ten years ago, now? We’ve not been in contact in a while. I tend to tell him when I sense powerful spirits in the area, just in case, but aside from that…” He shrugged.

“And he’s more sensitive than you?” Hikaru questioned.
“He’s an **exorcist**,” Utagawashi said, dryly. “It’s not his full time job, but he can detect powerful spirits in almost every case, even if he can’t directly see them.”

“Exorcists are something that **exist**?” Hikaru asked, dumbly. But…of course they would, if spirits were real and could be defeated, like Utagawashi’s childhood experience would suggest. When something was there and problematic and capable of being dealt with, you could bet that there would be people who made a job out of dealing with said problematic thing. Which, really, was all kinds of weird and cool. It was like something from one of his manga. “Can you put me in contact with this guy?”

He received a considering look. “I had better contact him for you, so that he knows you’re genuine. Also to warn him about your horrific wounds. As sensitive as he is, he might try to exorcise you on the spot.”

“That would be bad.” Hikaru agreed cheerfully, his mood already considerably brighter. It seemed that all the priest needed was a bit of poking to get coughing up useful contacts. “Does he live in Tokyo?”

Utagawashi tilted his head, expression fairly puzzled. “No, but fairly close. He lives in Yokohama. He might not be able to visit for a while, so I’d advise you stop what you’re doing until you have the chance to speak to him.”

Hikaru frowned, squashing a rush of relief at the knowledge that he could legitimately not do the spirit stuff for probably at least a few days. It was sensible to stop what he was trying until he got another opinion on it, but it still felt cowardly to be so relieved about having what felt like an excuse. “Yeah, sure.” He agreed, rather conflicted on the issue. “Make sure to contact him as soon as you get home. I’ll be checking.”

“Pushy child.” The priest said disapprovingly, though he still looked puzzled. “…I have to say, you certainly cheered up quickly.” He mentioned, after a moment.

“I’m still pissed at you.” Hikaru assured, though the actual emotion certainly wasn’t at the forefront anymore. “But you’re being useful, so I’m being generous.”

“How **kind**.” Utagawashi drawled, tone sour. The vague confusion hadn’t left his expression, though, and he looked oddly pensive.

Hikaru observed this warily. “What are you not saying?” He demanded.

The kannushi didn’t say anything for several seconds, simply scrutinising. “When you were angry, it was projected spiritually.” He said, eventually. “Your force of will was…palpable, in the spiritual sense. I knew better than to try to change your mind once I felt that.” His eyes were suddenly very piercing.

Off-balance, Hikaru met his gaze and held it. “What does that mean?”

“It means that you are likely to be as unusual in the area of spiritual awareness as you are in the realm of spiritual wounds.” Utagawashi replied. “I wonder what you’ll be able to detect, that most of us are completely oblivious to? It will be interesting to see.”

Hikaru considered that. Cool, but… “You’re creepy.” He decided. “And sort of annoying.”

The priest shrugged. “Being near you makes me feel physically ill.” He said pleasantly.

“Okay, I can take a hint. I’ll leave you to be a dickhead in peace.” He huffed. “You’d better contact
that exorcist guy. If you don’t, I’ll use every spare moment I have to come back here and gross you out with my horrifying aura.” He noted with satisfaction that Utagawashi turned slightly green at the prospect; clearly, it would be an effective deterrent.

Without waiting for a response, he turned and left.

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Hikaru spent the rest of his Sunday procuring matches from everyone he could manage. He got in a couple of net matches with Waya and Yashiro, and upon discovering that Touya was at his father’s salon and in need of an opponent, immediately set out.

They played for pretty much the whole afternoon. The first was a fairly standard game for them, serious play interspersed with occasional bitching about each other’s moves, and Touya won by two and a half moku. The second game, Hikaru impulsively suggested playing a handicapped game, to simulate a game against the top level pros. After a bit of incredulous debate, Hikaru agreed to take the fall for the first attempt and Touya was the one to place a two-stone handicap. As one would expect, it was a humiliating defeat for Hikaru, but actually pretty interesting. It had been more like playing the top pros, and he interested Touya sufficiently with the concept during their discussion that his rival agreed to a reversal.

At the conclusion of the second handicapped game, this time in Hikaru’s favour, Touya had grown more enthusiastic about the whole thing and finished up the discussion with interest.

“I don’t know how often this sort of thing happens.” He commented, thoughtfully. “It’s standard for pros to allow handicaps for weaker players, and much weaker pros. Amateurs also use handicaps with other amateurs. But I’m not sure this – two relatively well matched players playing with handicap – is something that anyone does.”

“It seems like it’s good training, if you ask me.” Hikaru said, leaning back in his chair to stretch. “Sure, you can always get an actual top pro to helpfully thrash you, but they’re not always available. This could be a valuable way for equal players to practice for matches against much stronger opponents.”

“As with any handicap game, though, it doesn’t simulate the experience and tactical ability a genuine higher level player would have.” Touya pointed out.

He nodded. “True. But you do still need to play while at a major disadvantage, fighting for every bit of ground you can get. The top pros will always be a better choice, but this sort of game could still be useful.”

“I suppose.” The godan sounded half-dubious and half-interested. “It’s certainly something to keep in mind. If you have time, though, I’d prefer to play another even game.”

“Sure. Might have to speed it up, though. It’s getting sort of late.” Hikaru said, and they cleared the board in preparation to nigiri.

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That evening, after dinner, Hikaru replayed each and every one of the games to the kamidana, explaining the rationale behind the handicaps.

“It means whoever’s on the other side of the handicap gets completely creamed, since we’re usually pretty equal.” He said, after placing the last few hands. “It’s kind of cool, because normally you give handicaps to players much weaker than you, and the advantage means that they can sometimes play
on your level. When one of an equal pair do it…it’s kind of impressive, actually. Neither of our

games reached yose.” He paused, and admitted with a little effort “It sort of reminded me of playing

you, actually. You were always so, so much stronger than me, but I was a brat and refused to play

with a handicap. And you didn’t go all that easy on me, either.”

He stared at the goban. He’d been slaughtered on that thing more times than he cared to count…

although, if he put his mind to it, he probably could. All his memories of Sai were unwholesomely

sharp, which didn’t exactly help the whole grieving thing. He could even remember that first game

against Touya, though he tried not to. Remembering any of Sai’s games was…well, a pretty painful

kick in the gut.

Hikaru was roused from his thoughts by the buzzing of his phone. Startled, he pulled it from his

pocket, and looked at the screen. ‘Message sent,’ it read, under the name ‘Utagawashi’. ‘I will let you

know if I receive a reply.’

“Huh, that’s good.” He said, a little surprised. “I guess he really doesn’t want me to visit, so he’s

keeping me really up to date. I don’t think I mentioned this whole mess yet, did I?” The kamidana
did not respond, but he went on anyway. “Turns out whatever I’ve been doing is making my

problems worse, so I’m getting Utagawashi to contact this exorcist from Yokohama. Since he’s more

spiritually sensitive, and I guess he fights spirits, he might know more. So, for now, I don’t have to

do that nasty crap every night.” He sighed, looking down at the goban. “Have to admit, it’s going to

be nice to have a break from it.” Even if it did make him feel like a coward.

Hikaru shook his head, and cleared the board. “So, anyway, I clearly lost that match horribly.” He

said. “But the next one – that was my turn to place stones. It was quite a lot of fun, actually.” He

grinned, and started to replay it.

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The lack of spirit-diving did wonders for Hikaru’s mood and energy levels. He’d become somewhat

accustomed to the exhausted, wrung-out feeling that the sessions tended to impart on him, and going

without that was an absolute blessing. Cheerfully, and with much enjoyment, Hikaru absolutely

ploughed through everyone around and below his level that he played that week, earning a number

of odd looks and snide comments, especially as he couldn’t stop fidgeting for most of the games.

He’d received a notification from Utagawashi on Monday evening that the exorcist wouldn’t be able

to visit until the second weekend from then – so it would be nearly two weeks until Hikaru could

meet the guy. It was a wonderful prospect, to have so much time to recuperate from all the

exhaustion he hadn’t even realised he’d been battling through…but at the same time, the concept of

going so long without working towards an important goal made him feel antsy. It seemed almost

wasteful…but it wasn’t as though he could magically clear the exorcist guy’s schedule to get him to

come faster, so that was that.

It was good, anyway, to have a space of time he could dedicate fully to his career.

Tuesday began and proceeded as usual. He got up, did some school work to placate his mother,

studied a couple of this Chinese guy’s latest kifu, and then headed out to do his classes at the Go

salon. Later in the day, something far less typical occurred: Hikaru was wrapping up the teaching

matches at Heart of Stone when Touya called him. On his phone. It was not exactly a common

happenstance. Intrigued, and slightly alarmed, he answered the phone and said “Are you feeling

okay? Is your house on fire?”

“What?” Came the familiar voice on the other end, tone more than slightly perplexed. “I'm fine, and

so is my house. Why?”
“You never phone people.” Hikaru explained, and could almost hear the eye roll.

“Well, normally I don’t need to get hold of you on short notice.” Touya informed him airily.

Curiosity piqued, he blinked. “What is it?”

“You’re invited to my father’s study session this afternoon.” His rival said, without preamble. “I’d recommend you come.”

That…was a bit surprising. Hikaru knew that the study sessions had continued as though Touya Koyo had never retired, with the only difference being that they weren’t called ‘Meijin’ study sessions any more, but no one had tried to invite him there since Ogata’s attempt when he was an Insei. “Why now, all of a sudden?” He asked, genuinely interested.

“We’re re-discussing father’s match with sai.” Touya told him, and Hikaru had to swallow to calm the sudden emotional rush that was common when Sai was mentioned unexpectedly. “In light of the move you pointed out. Don’t tell me you forgot.”

He actually had forgotten, hadn’t he? Touya had said he was going to ask his dad if he’d seen the move. “I, um.” Hikaru coughed. “I maybe forgot. Possibly. But if I did, it wouldn’t be my fault since I had lots on my mind.”

There was an audible sigh. “As I thought, when you didn’t bother me about it the next time we played. At any rate, you should be here for this discussion. Are you coming?”

Hikaru paused while he thought. He rather agreed with the statement that he should be there for that. Not only was it Sai’s great game, but it had been Hikaru to find that move that they would be discussing. A move that, for obvious reasons, was of great personal significance to him. “…yeah, I’ll come.” He said, as though he’d have chosen anything else. “What time? And what’s the address? I forgot.”

In the end, Touya just asked him where he was and sent Ogata to collect him. It was the first time they’d seen each other since the party, so they exchanged snide comments about the likely severity of each other’s hangovers, quips about age and ability to play Go while inebriated, and a number of other topics during the course of the drive. Ogata also made his customary demand for information on sai.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake. We’re literally on our way to discuss a game by sai, and you’re asking now?” Hikaru said, exasperated.

The older pro shrugged, sensibly keeping his eyes to the road. “That’s all the more reason to ask now.” He claimed.

“You’re obsessed.” Hikaru complained, rolling his eyes. “How many times have you asked, and got the same answer?”

“And? Will you give me the same answer this time?” Ogata inquired neutrally.

“Yes.” Hikaru answered emphatically. “The facts aren’t going to change. You’re obsessed, I don’t know anything, the end.” He crossed his arms.

Ogata sighed, and they drove in silence for a few minutes. Hikaru watched the city fly past, feeling annoyed yet vaguely impressed at the Juudan’s near-fanatic persistence.

A thought occurred to him, and he grinned. “If sai were a kami, would you worship him?” He asked,
with interest.

“…I’m not Shinto.” Ogata pointed out, staring with irritation at the traffic light they’d run afoul of.

“That’s not what I asked.” Hikaru reminded.

There was silence for a while, and he began to think that there would be no answer, when the man shrugged. “Maybe, if he were a kami.” He said. “I doubt many kami know how to use a computer, though.”

“Probably not.” He agreed, amused at the idea and the answer both.

They sat in silence for the remainder of the journey.

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As it happened, Hikaru and Ogata were the last to arrive at the Touya household. He didn’t notice this at first, mostly interested in inspecting the house and how outrageously traditional it was. Even though it wasn’t his first visit, it was still somewhat impressive. Really, it was no wonder Touya was how he was, after growing up in a house with that sort of vibe – it was even worse than his grandpa’s place.

Touya Akiko, who he’d barely exchanged more than a few words with in the past, greeted them both at the door with impeccable politeness. “It’s nice to see you again, Touya-san.” He said, more politely than he might usually, and even bowed in response to her own.

“It is a pleasure, Shindou-san.” She said in response, an elegant grace in each of her motions. “I am glad you continue to be a good friend to Akira-san. He replays your games frequently.” Hikaru grinned a little at that, shaking off some of his awkwardness, and allowed himself and Ogata to be shown inside.

Seriously, though. He’d heard it before, but…what kind of person used ‘san’ with their own child? That was so outrageously formal.

The inside of the house was every bit as old and traditional as the outside would suggest. Shoji everywhere, tatami on every floor, with the screen doors of the study room opening out onto an exceptionally traditional garden. Really, the whole thing was so Japanese that it was almost cliché. It had been sort of like staying in a hotel, that time before the Hokuto cup – he bet Sai would have liked it. Ignoring the pang the thought provoked, Hikaru spotted the house-shrine on the way through, and was distracted by curiosity. He wondered, absently, which kami the shrine’s ofuda called to.

In the study room, the former Meijin was already there in front of the Goban, and so was the rest of the group. Touya looked up, eyes finding Hikaru with quick familiarity, and he even smiled a bit. That guy Ashiwara was there, as well as the brown-haired man…Sasaki? Yeah, Sasaki. And some greenish-haired pro whose name Hikaru couldn’t remember for the life of him, though he was sure they’d met before. All of them were looking at him, the newcomer.

Feeling rather out-of-place, Hikaru bowed and said “Thank you for inviting me.”

Koyo inclined his head. “I’m pleased to see you again, Shindou-kun.” He said, calmly. “And pleased to have you here, as it is your observation that we are here to discuss.” This appeared to be news to the non-Touya members of the group, Ogata included. “Please, Ogata-kun, Shindou-kun – have a seat.”
Obligingly, Hikaru situated himself beside Touya the younger due to him more or less being the most familiar thing in the room. Ogata put himself between Sasaki and the other guy, and once they were all settled, the former Meijin began to speak.

“You are all aware of the match I played with the NetGo player known as sai.” He began, directly. “We have discussed it in this study group more than once. It was undoubtedly one of the finest games I have ever played. Recently, however, my son came to me to point out a new element in this game, one that Shindou-kun here had discovered and shared with him.”

Hikaru squirmed slightly under the curious glances, and narrowed his eyes at the slight spark in Ogata’s eyes. The bastard was making conclusions about Sai again, wasn’t he?

Ashiwara looked perhaps most surprised. “Shindou-kun found something new? Something you hadn’t seen, Sensei?” Hikaru eyed him, pensively. He’d played the man on a couple of occasions—he was good, but didn’t seem to be improving much. He was probably one of those guys who got to a certain level and didn’t rise much from it once settled there.

Koyo looked almost amused. “I did see it.” He corrected, and both Hikaru and the younger Touya straightened with interest. So he had found the move, and apparently hadn’t told his son about it when asked, either. “It did, however, take me several weeks and dozens of times replaying the game. I was aware I was missing something, but could not see it.”

“Are we going to replay the game again, then?” Ogata inquired, more politely than Hikaru was used to hearing.

“We are, indeed.” The retired player nodded, and assembled the stone bowls. “Shindou-kun, if you will, would you place the stones for sai?” He didn’t even ask if Hikaru remembered the game, simply expected. It was a bit of a compliment, but at the same time…

He trembled slightly, and then moved forwards without breaking seiza to sit at the other end of the goban, accepting the goke silently.

It was crueler than Koyo could have known, to ask him to play for Sai. To ask him to replay this match with Sai’s hand, in particular.

Koyo placed the first stone, with that same firm surety that had once inspired him so much. Breathing carefully, Hikaru placed Sai’s response, as he had so long ago. It had been a click of a computer mouse then, with the artificial blip of the computer rather than the click of a stone on wood, but Hikaru still remembered the fan guiding his moves. The fan he had with him now, even—the same fan in spirit, given to him in his last glimpse of Sai.

The next black stone came resolutely to its place, and Hikaru followed it. He settled into the familiar game, heart thudding as he fell into a familiar role as Sai’s medium. Sai wasn’t here, he wasn’t here and hadn’t been for a long time, but this was familiar. This felt similar, with the echo of Sai’s will passing through his hand to place the stones, Hikaru himself an admiring and watchful observer.

It was such a beautiful game.

The other students all watched in silence. By the time the last hand was played, Hikaru felt overwhelmed and emotionally exhausted, focusing every scrap of will on keeping his expression neutral and his hands steady.

His hand withdrew from the goban and did not return. As a group, they all stared at its face, and at the phenomenal shape that the game had made there.
“Thank you, Shindou-kun.” Koyo said, after a moment. Hikaru glanced up, and took his cue, bowing slightly as he shuffled off to the side again. Touya looked at him curiously for a moment, but returned his attention to his father without commenting. “Now that everyone has been refreshed on the game, I will return us to the critical point.” He removed stones and rearranged them, adjusting it back to the move which had decided the game. Koyo indicated the stone in question, saying “This stone here was my downfall. It was a good move, yes, and an appropriate response to the threat I was faced with. However, there was another place I could have played that stone. I did not see it for a long time.”

Ogata peered at the board, frowning. Touya exchanged an oddly satisfied glance with Hikaru as the rest of them joined him in their puzzlement – it was quite interesting to be in on the secret, after all. “I don’t see it, sensei.” Sasaki admitted, after several moments.

“I am unsurprised. After all, out of the many people to replay this game, only Shindou-kun and I have apparently ever spotted it.” Koyo said. “Allow me to show you.” He removed the fatal stone, positioned it in his fingers, and then placed it, with all the passion it deserved. The former Meijin sat back with satisfaction. “I will allow you to consider the implications of this move yourselves, for a while.”

Predictably, Ogata was the first to noticeably react, raising his hand to his mouth as his eyes widened. He kept it there as he stared intently at the board, joined in shock and surprise by the remaining members of the study group as they all began to see for themselves.

“Kami-no-itte.” Ogata intoned, softly, after a few minutes had passed.

Koyo inclined his head as Ashiwara gasped. “Indeed. I was somewhat miffed when I discovered that I had missed my chance to play God’s move. But, in any case, the move is there for us to learn from; that is why I have called this study session.”

Ogata turned to the side. “You saw this, Shindou-kun?” He questioned, sharply. “When?”

Hikaru shuffled. “It…was a while ago.” He said, awkwardly. “Just after the game was played, really. I only knew that it was how Touya-sensei could have won, back then. I didn’t see what a perfect move it was until recently.”

As the surrounding faces shaded themselves with varying varieties of shock and incredulity, Touya Koyo nodded gravely. “An excellent example of insight, to be certain.” He said. “I believe I might have seen it sooner, if I had been more familiar with the style of sai. As it was, I have already said that it took me weeks.”

Feeling vaguely embarrassed, Hikaru waited for all the looks coming his way to cease. He did alright in the spotlight, but less so when in an unfamiliar place and situation such as this one.

The man who had played Sai on equal footing regarded them all for a few moments, and then spoke again. “We are here, in any case, to discuss the impact of the unplayed hand and what White may have responded to it with. From what I have observed of this player, he might have wanted to strengthen his position in this corner, to contain the potential of the divine move.” Touya-sensei placed a white stone, and Hikaru leaned forwards with interest. “Perhaps here, for example. This would lessen the ability of Black to cut him off from the rest of his territory.” The man looked up at them, almost expectantly.

Hikaru stared at the suggested move, thinking ‘what would Sai play?’ as he had done so frequently as an Insei, but trying to do so without the associated surge of memory and emotion. He didn’t quite succeed, but with the efficacy of long practice he breathed deeply and centred himself, considering
the move from his deep familiarity with Sai’s play. Yes, it looked like something he might play. Sai did not hesitate to attack, but he was perfectly aware of when his territory was threatened and needed to be reinforced – he would have wanted to do that, after seeing how that one move changed so much.

But what would he have done next? Connected again, or moved forwards in a challenge of that encroaching hand?

Hikaru almost didn’t notice as Touya-sensei answered an agreement by Ogata, as well as an estimation that White would be aiming to consolidate his territory at that point, provided Black did not go too much on the offence. The retired pro nodded, and placed what his own response might have been – an aggressive move, seeking to cut White’s territory while it was still vulnerable to the momentum offered by that perfect, transformative hand played before.

He stared. Sai wouldn’t have been able to ignore that attack. He couldn’t afford it. Unable to stop himself, he leaned forwards and pointed as hundreds of games consolidated in his mind. “Here,” he said, indicating a bold challenge to Black’s reaching hand. “He wouldn’t let that go unchallenged.”

Eyes fell on him once again, and he squirmed, but this time they went back to the board more swiftly. Thoughtfully, Touya-sensei placed the white stone, offering a slight nod of satisfaction a moment later. “That would be a solid response by White, in line with the skill and pattern of his play.” He agreed. “In that case, though, I might seek to meet the challenge from my stronger position…”

Eyes intent on the board and the Meijin’s words, Hikaru absorbed all of it. This was Sai’s great game, and it was important to him in so many ways. He might rouse a bit more suspicion by his insight into Sai’s style of playing, but it was worth it, to be here discussing this game.

When he got home, he’d relay it all to Sai…or the closest thing he could manage, anyway. Every word, every supposition, every little detail.

What, after all, might inspire the ghost more than the memory of an intense match? If anything would reach him, wherever he might be, it would be this.

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At the end of the study session, when the other students were bowing and standing up to leave, Touya-sensei stopped Hikaru at the door. Ogata, who was his ride home, also paused, watching.

“If you wish,” The probable best player in Japan said. “You may attend these study sessions regularly. I am aware that you also attend Morishita-san’s sessions, but as we do not hold them on the same day, this should not impede you.”

Startled, Hikaru met his eyes. “Um. I’d like that.” He replied, reflexively, and he was actually sincere. The foibles that had held him back as an Insei weren’t at all applicable any longer, after all, and the study session had been excellent. Morishita was good, to be sure, but he was no Touya Koyo. Belatedly, he added “Thank you. But, uh, I won’t always be able to attend. I don’t manage to get to Morishita-sensei’s study sessions every week, either.”

The man nodded, satisfied. “That is fine. Well then, I hope to see you again soon, Shindou-kun.”

That, apparently, was that. Hikaru and Ogata bowed and left the room, Touya standing to accompany them to the front door.

“I didn’t know you knew how to be polite, Shindou.” His rival remarked, with that edge to his voice
which signified that the boy was attempting to rib him. “Though your manners, unsurprisingly, leave much to be desired.”

Hikaru’s ride home watched them, amused, as Hikaru shrugged. “Eh,” He expressed. “I know how to show respect when it’s warranted.” He hid a grin as two sets of eyes narrowed.

“Brat.” Ogata muttered. “I’m surprised you agreed so easily. Last time I suggested it, you turned me down flat.”

Hikaru caught another glance at the house shrine on the way out, feeling himself bizarrely and consistently curious about it. He wondered to what extent the Touya family was religious, and he wondered what kami their shrine was dedicated to, and he also wondered if he’d ever manage to find out whether kami were real or not. It seemed likely, but you could never know. They might just be puffed-up spirits which gained a reputation, or something.

“Last time you suggested it,” He began, diverting his attention from his rival’s religion. “I was like thirteen, and also an Insei, and Touya was also at that time in his life when he was pretending not to be eagerly waiting for me to catch up with him.”

Ogata inclined his head slightly in acknowledgement, and smirked a little as Touya’s expression became decidedly grumpy. “Point.” He conceded.

In a clear attempt to divert the topic from his years of denial, Touya said “so, I suppose you’ll be attending the study sessions now, then?”

“When I have time.” Hikaru agreed. “It would be dumb not to. Your dad’s still the best player anyone’s likely to find around here.”

“Except sai, perhaps.” Ogata mused, voice carefully neutral. Unimpressed, Hikaru did not react beyond raising an eyebrow.

“Maybe. But I’d not know anything about that.” He answered, pointedly. His reticence on the subject of Sai was well-known amongst those obsessed with the NetGo legend, and he had no intention of doing that reputation an injustice now.

“And yet,” The blonde-haired pro pondered, just as they got to the front door. “You know the play style of sai so unusually well…It does make one wonder.” His voice was full of false curiosity.

“Does it?” Hikaru asked, mockingly. “Well, good for you.”

“I can’t believe you’re still asking him about this sort of thing, Ogata-san.” His rival sighed, as if he had room to talk. He might not ask, or bother him persistently like Ogata did, but the looks he gave Hikaru whenever sai was mentioned in any capacity…he had the very same unnervingly long-lived curiosity.

The blonde pro opened his mouth to reply, no doubt with something exceptionally snarky, but shut it as soon as he spotted Touya Akiko by the door. While she’d been nothing but courteous, Hikaru had no doubt she must be truly formidable to have raised someone like Touya Akira, not to mention living with someone as intense as Touya Koyo. As such, he and Hikaru were both very polite as they made their farewells, leaving Touya with his mother as they walked to the car.

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The relatively eventful Tuesday was followed by a moderately eventful Wednesday. Hikaru’s official match for the week was booked for then, so he followed his usual habit of studying his
opponent’s kifu the night before so as to go into the match with a reasonable feel for their style. This week, it was a yondan, a player in his mid-thirties who Hikaru was not acquainted with; this, in his experience, meant that he was likely to underestimate him. Touya’s meteoric rise in the world of Go pros meant that the rest of the ‘new wave’, as it was called, tended to be overlooked as merely gifted rather than exceptional, which had resulted in a great many curb-stomp matches of unprepared players.

Touya had been so highly anticipated that he tended to attract most of the attention and concern of the media, Go world, and amateurs alike. Very few people outside of his circle of acquaintances seemed to know that Hikaru was on the same level, and in fact was being watched very cautiously by a number of high level pros. Waya, Isumi, and Ochi had it even worse – a lot of players hardly seemed to know they existed until they got kicked across the goban by them.

His suspicions panned out. The man was prepared for a match with a fellow pro, but he sure as hell wasn’t prepared for Hikaru. The guy probably hadn’t even read his kifu – so, naturally, he never saw the sneaky and duplicitous play coming.

The week, in general, proceeded as usual. Hikaru made an extra effort to play better opponents – if he played amateurs on NetGo, he always insisted on them having handicaps. He managed to corner Kurata for a match, as one rapidly-strengthening pro to another, and while he did lose it was a thoroughly interesting game and a far better showing than he’d made in their last bout. Waya and Isumi, initially resistant to the idea of handicap stone between near-equals, eventually conceded to his stubbornness and in the aftermath of several very one-sided games concluded that it could be good training.

Unless he was studying kifu at home or playing NetGo, Hikaru left the house early and returned quite late. He made it to Morishita’s study group again, carefully did not mention that he was also attending Touya sessions now, and participated in a very interesting discussion of a Korean player’s tournament match. He did very little school work; there were more important things to prepare for.

Friday was the day that his mother finally discovered the shrine in his bedroom, which he discovered when he walked through the front door.

“Hikaru!” She greeted him, pleased to see him as always but also with that scolding note to her voice that said she had a bone to pick with him. “Why on earth didn’t you tell me that you’ve become interested in Shinto practices recently?”

For a moment, he just stared at her, the question not having been expected in the least. Somehow he hadn’t remembered that his mother didn’t know about the shrine. “I just...didn’t?” He answered, questioningly. “It’s not a big deal.”

“It’s a big deal that you wasted money on a kamidana when we have a perfectly good house shrine to pray at.” She said, sternly. “I know it’s very basic and its ofuda needs replacing, but there was no need to get another kamidana.”

Hikaru blinked. Hesitantly, he offered “I...like to worship in private? The house shrine is okay, but for one thing it’s in a hallway, and also it’s already taken by Inari. I wanted to pray to a less major kami.”

She looked at him dubiously. “Who would that be?”

“The kami of Go.” He answered, grinning, and watched as her expression swiftly became exasperated.
“Of course.” She sighed. “Everything is about Go for you, after all. I didn’t even know there was a kami for Go, though I suppose there would be.” She shook her head. “Somehow, I’m not surprised at all. But, in any case, you should still pray at the house shrine, even if you prefer yours. It’s rude to ignore Inari completely in favour of this Go god.”

Hikaru made a sort of ‘pff’ noise. “And when was the last time you prayed at the house shrine? You said yourself that the ofuda isn’t even up to date.” It might be a bit hypocritical of him at this point, though, considering his Sai shrine didn’t even have an ofuda. Maybe he could use some kifu? Sai would be far more likely to pay attention to the kifu than an ofuda anyway.

His mother remained unmoved. He had to have inherited his stubbornness from somewhere, after all. “How often I pray is not the point.” She said, with great dignity. “The point is that you are disregarding our household god for your kami, and that’s rude.” He opened his mouth to retort, but she cut him off with a warning finger. “Just do it, Hikaru. Light some incense and thank Inari for his protection. With how often you’ve been burning incense for your shrine, I’m sure you can manage it.” She told him, firmly.

He rolled his eyes. She was right, pretty much – it wasn’t as though it would cost him anything. And, who knew? If kami were totally a thing, a bit of divine favour wouldn’t hurt. Plus, considering what he’d soon be pulling on his mother, it would be wise to build some good will. “Fine.” He huffed, putting his shoes and bag away before heading up the stairs to retrieve his incense burner, as well as the previously unused kaya incense. Only Sai got the wisteria incense, full stop.

Hikaru hadn’t ever had much to do with his house shrine, really. He knew from memory that it was dedicated to Inari, but as one of the most widely-worshipped kami, this was hardly anything unusual. And, considering he’d got his kamidana and supplies for the purposes of remembering and maybe sort of communicating with Sai, the house shrine hadn’t really been relevant.

Thoughtfully, he arranged the burner and a stick of the incense at their house shrine. He wasn’t an exceptionally respectful person, most of the time. In a lot of cases, he was downright irreverent. But there were a number of people who Hikaru respected, and deeply. Many of them were top Go players, or his colleagues and friends, but in every case there was something there to respect. Touya Koyo, for example, had such intensity of will and purpose both on and off the Goban, and it was impossible not to respect that. He respected people like his rival for their own determination, and the steady evolution of their games. He respected Akari pretty much for being her; after a lifetime of interaction, Hikaru knew her well enough to say with confidence that she was a pretty amazing person.

…and, of course, he respected Sai. Not only for his beautiful games, but for the sheer force of will that had carried him through a thousand years, for his grace, for his kindness, for everything. Even for his over-emotional and occasionally childish weirdness.

The point was, Hikaru was more than capable of respecting people, sometimes. When there were qualities to be admired. The great god Inari, he supposed, almost certainly bore such qualities.

He lit the incense and sat down. “I don’t know how kami work.” He said quietly enough that his voice wouldn’t carry far. “I don’t know if you hear the people who pray at your shrines. I don’t know if you hear the people who pray at neglected shrines with outdated ofuda, either. I know that some kami are meant to have been human once, though people don’t really seem to say that about you. What I can say, though, is that if you’re real and a thing, you’ve been around for thousands of years.” He thought of Sai, and his own long unlife. With a breath, Hikaru admitted “I can respect the hell out of that.”

He wasn’t lying – he didn’t know how kami worked. But he could guess that, in the absence of any
offering but a stick of incense, sincerity of expression was probably significant. And, as he had said, he could certainly respect any being which had the willpower or power or both to stick around for so long. Hopefully that sincere respect meant something, to the maybe-existent Inari.

Hikaru observed the kamidana thoughtfully. “You’re meant to be a god of general success and prosperity, right?” He asked, more than used to addressing a shrine without expecting an answer. “I could use some of that. Success, especially. Prosperity is something that would happen on its own after a bit of success, but I could use some of that, too. Not for my job, though – I don’t want to get better at Go by divine intervention, that’s up to me. Just,” he waved his hand. “the other stuff. If you’re real, you know. One of your priests is all tied up in it. I could really use some success with that stuff, if you’ve got any success to spare.”

Amused at himself, Hikaru stopped talking and just sat silently, trying to feel as genuinely respectful to the concept of Inari as he could. He watched the incense steadily burn itself away, the woodsy scent indeed somewhat reminiscent of an especially old and high quality goban, and as it was nearly at its end, said “I’m meant to be meeting this guy, next week, to help with some stuff. I could especially use some help there.”

Bare seconds later, the last centimetre of incense ash went cold and fell to the burner. The ember, with nothing left to burn, went out with a last exhalation of fragrant smoke.

Hikaru watched the shrine with a curious eye for a minute longer. He hoped that the kami did turn out to be real; it would be so interesting.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was written on particularly low inspiration, amidst a number of distractions. As usual, it was submitted to tumblr first, and has been revised a bit. I think it's probably my most boring chapter so far, but in my opinion chapter 8 makes up for that. Chapter 8 itself is already on tumblr, but 9 hasn't even been started yet. My weekends are busy, so that will be a while.

General story stuff: my initial tumblr estimates of this story's length were proven very inaccurate. As it is, this will definitely break 100k.
Other stuff: Today, my housemate and I will likely be watching the dreaded episode 60 of Hikago. That will be fun.
Artistic license disclaimer: I feel I should mention that I'm fully aware that Koyo's way to victory against Sai was not the hand of god. It was just a very insightful route that neither he nor Sai saw during their game. But, yeah, artistic license.

01/06/18 – stylistic edits, some subtleties, etc.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Hikaru meets an exorcist.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The first weekend of October, now nearly upon him, loomed ominously in his thoughts in the same way that the pro exams once had. In other circumstances, Hikaru might have been anxious about the upcoming meeting with Utagawashi’s supposed exorcist, but he had more pressing concerns for the beginning of October.

He’d been able to ignore the apprehension and excitement during the week, throwing himself single-mindedly into all of the games he could manage. It was less possible to do so now, as he nervously double-checked the times for the Saturday trains and set a good three wakeup alarms on his phone to ensure he wouldn’t sleep through them all. Realistically, it wasn’t something he should be so anxious about – it wasn’t like he hadn’t done this sort of thing before, he had. It had just…been a while. And, well, he knew what he was preparing for, by doing this thing. The worry was very premature, but…it was there.

Once the reminders were all set, Hikaru tidied his room, tidied the study, cleaned the shrine, cleaned the house shrine, and washed his Go stones in a lengthy fit of somewhat frenetic energy. The last task was only half complete when his mother called him for dinner, so in a bit of a hurry he removed the white glass stones from the water and set them on a towel to dry while he ate. He was required to adamantly refuse a few of his mother’s claims that he was acting oddly, and had to reassure her about the state of his health before she’d let him leave the table, eventually managing to battle himself free and return to his stones.

He finished drying the white stones, then got to work washing the black ones. Once they were all clean and dry, Hikaru took them to his room and replayed a recent game with Touya to calm himself. He went to bed early, but did not succeed in falling asleep for some time.

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Hikaru woke up easily with the first alarm, all of his misplaced apprehension rushing in at the slightest hint of consciousness. He turned off both of the others in case they went off while he was in the shower, and then immediately got himself out of bed and into the bathroom, getting up quickly enough that he became extremely dizzy and had to catch himself on the wall on the way there.

His morning ablutions passed quickly, concluding with a bleary-eyed stare at himself in the mirror. Being wide awake did not necessarily equal being alert, and he slapped himself lightly on the cheek a few times in hopes of repelling the residual drowsiness. After taking a look at his jawline and concluding that he likely wouldn’t need to shave for a few more days yet, he headed back to his room and got dressed.

Having gotten himself up on the first alarm, Hikaru had a lot of time before he needed to leave. He consumed his breakfast somewhat mechanically, and then headed upstairs to sit with the shrine for a
bit, the scent of the incense more calming than basically anything else at this point, even if it did still come with an associated rush of scent-memories.

He didn’t replay any games, or even speak, until the incense was nearly burned out. Watching the ember reach its end, he said “Wish me luck, Sai.” He stood up, readied his things, and left the house despite how damned early he was.

He knew the trains to the Institute so well by now that he could probably navigate them in his sleep. Nerves singing with a familiar sort of terrified excitement, Hikaru watched the stations rush past until he’d reached his own destination, emerging out into the daylight with only a short walk separating him from the next stage of his career.

Hikaru entered the building early enough that few people were there. He approached reception, confirmed that all his paperwork was in order, and was directed to the relevant floor for his pool. He settled in to wait, glancing at the other people who were there. He recognised a yondan as the first opponent he’d faced as a sandan, and not one of those who had underestimated him – it had been a good match. Hikaru met the young woman’s eyes from across the room, and they both nodded slightly in acknowledgement. There were a couple more people in the room, someone that he remembered vaguely as one of this year’s crop of shodans, as well as a nidan that he’d thrashed soundly in the past. The nidan in question did not seem happy to see him there.

Having assessed the other three early birds, Hikaru closed his eyes and ran over what he remembered of their games. The yondan likely wouldn’t have changed much since their match, since it had only been a few weeks previous. The nidan, though…it had been a while. He could have improved considerably since then. He replayed the match in his mind, considering how that still-rough style might have sharpened over time.

People steadily filed into the room, most of whom Hikaru had played before. He exchanged nods and brief words with several, as well as a brief conversation with a fellow sandan who had gate-crashed his party last month, and continued to run over his memories of games with the growing number of residents of the room. He’d studied the kifu of most of them, in the past, so there were those to think of as well. He didn’t know who he would be matched with, and it was good to be prepared.

Eventually, two very familiar faces appeared at the door. A grin formed on his face almost the second he saw them, his distinctive hairstyle drawing their eyes at once. Hikaru watched Isumi’s eyes widen with surprise, and Waya’s shock swiftly transform to outrage as he took in the sight of him. “Shindou, you lying lout!” He exclaimed, striding over to get up in Hikaru’s face. “You never said you were entering the Kisei league!”

“Not mentioning it isn’t lying.” Hikaru claimed, grinning shamelessly. Isumi, having wandered over at a more sedate pace, sat down on his other side as he shoved Waya out of his space and down into a more respectable seiza. “It’s your fault you didn’t ask, you just assumed I wasn’t entering.”

“You haven’t entered a single title league since you got kicked out of your first.” Waya sniped. “I was starting to think you didn’t want a title, so excuse me for not asking!”

“I’m glad you’re finally entering another league, personally.” Isumi said supportively. “I could have gone without the extra opposition, though. Unless there’s some unexpected talent…you’ll almost certainly be one of the ones going to the next round.”

“That’s what I’m hoping for.” He agreed. Considering he regularly played on par with his notorious fifth-dan rival, Hikaru was no stranger to the fact that he was easily one of the strongest contestants in the first to fourth dan pool. He had no intention of letting his guard down, but…well, he’d be lying
if he said he wasn’t relatively confident of getting to the second, final preliminary.

Waya was still fuming, glaring at him from behind his skinny shoulder. “This is a huge pain in the backside. Why couldn’t you have left it another year?”

Hikaru tilted your head. “This is your second time in the Kisei preliminaries, right?”

“Yeah, and Isumi’s first.” He nodded. “I didn’t make it to the second round last year, but it will be different this time!”

“Well, if you don’t manage it, there’s always third time lucky.” Hikaru said diplomatically. “That seems to be your thing, after all.”

The Kisei league had two preliminaries. This, the first, separated its contenders into four pools. The three of them were in the lowest, which every entrant from shodan to yondan competed in. It was a fairly good system, usually ensuring the best of every grade group got through to the final preliminary, which itself had four pools. If Hikaru was going to be eliminated, it might be in that round, which was when the toughest players started to fight each other for the places in the Kisei league.

The three of them chatted about Waya’s experience with the preliminaries until they were all called to silence, the first matches about to be commenced.

Hikaru ended up against that early-bird shodan he’d noticed before, who did not look very confident about it. Being unfamiliar with his game, he kept his guard up for the opening hands, gauging his opponent’s style and skill…and, yeah, this kid wasn’t going to beat him. Quite carefully, he did not relax his insight, his own duplicitousness on the goban making him ever-wary that other opponents might have similar tricks, but there wasn’t anything. The boy, maybe a little younger than Hikaru had been when he passed, was a strong shodan…but certainly not on the level Hikaru had grown to.

His opponent resigned shortly before the game would have entered yose, looking frustrated and very slightly tearful. Not the best of openings to the Kisei league for him…but, really, no one expected the shodans to get far in title leagues. Kind of like Insei in the Young Lions tournament – it was unusual if they got past more than a few matches. No one really expected nidans, sandans, or even yondans to get very far, for that matter. Even a godan like Touya, who would place in the next pool up, would be very unlikely to even reach the main league. Hikaru hoped that his skill, which was clearly beyond his grade, would carry him beyond that trend, but…well. He would have to wait and see.

Bowing to his opponent, Hikaru cleared away his stones and went to record his first win. An easy start, but next week’s match likely wouldn’t be against a fresh shodan, so it would be best not to get cocky.

Waya had already finished his game, a win, and was watching Isumi. Hikaru joined him, quickly noting the clear advantage of their friend’s game, which was in the concluding hands of the endgame. Isumi’s opponent should have resigned at least ten moves ago, but…well, it was easy to get stubborn when you were determined, he supposed.

Very shortly, Isumi won by a somewhat huge margin of ten and a half moku, the fellow nidan who had faced him looking nearly as upset as Hikaru’s opponent had. He and Waya went to wait by the door as Isumi recorded his win, and then left together.

“All of us won our first match, then.” Isumi sighed, after hearing from the other two. “This isn’t like the pro exam, though. No round robin here. Have you checked the match schedules?”
Hikaru and Waya nodded, sharing troubled glances. “We’re unlucky – all of us are in the same branch. Your fourth match, if you win the next two, is against Waya.” He said, sympathetically. “If I win all of my matches to that point, I’ll be facing whichever of you wins in November.”

Isumi winced. “That’s early.” He sighed. “I hadn’t thought of entering the Ouza league…but if I lose to Waya or you, Shindou, I may as well. I’ll have enough time to get the paperwork in.”

“This is far too early to be giving up.” Waya told his friend sternly, earning a smile in response, and a surprisingly ominous chuckle.

“Oh, I’m not giving up.” Isumi corrected, with a hint of menace lurking in his polite smile. “If you don’t both play your best against me, I promise I will slaughter you.” He said it so pleasantly that, quite honestly, Hikaru had to run over his words twice. They both stared at him with raised eyebrows, half-concerned and half-impressed.

“Isumi-san is being scary.” Hikaru said to Waya, with interest. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but I’m pretty sure Isumi-san wasn’t scary a few years ago.”

“Neither were you, Shindou. You were terrible.” Waya pointed out. “But…true. It must be because of the Chinese. They’re infecting our Isumi-san with their devious ways.”

“Must be.” Hikaru agreed, and they both nodded sagely. Beside them, Isumi sighed and shook his head at them as though displeased – but if he were actually displeased every time he did that, they wouldn’t be friends, because he did it a lot. It was fairly obvious that Isumi secretly enjoyed being annoyed, otherwise why would he hang around them so much?

“Can we perhaps discuss our games rather than how the Chinese are corrupting me?” Isumi asked, plaintively.

Waya pointed at him victoriously. “He admits it!” He crowed, earning a very beleaguered look from his older friend.

Hikaru took pity on Isumi, saying “Heart of Stone? I’ve got some teaching to do there, anyway.”

Isumi sighed for the second time. “That works.” He agreed, and they all set off.

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The next day, Sunday 5th, Hikaru gathered the assorted papers and paraphernalia he’d been gathering for a particular purpose and looked them over with an analytic eye. His father wasn’t here, and likely wouldn’t be by for a good while, which would make things easier. Deciding he had everything that he needed, he went downstairs and solicited his mother for a conversation.

Somewhat taken aback, she allowed herself to be led to the table and seated in front of a small stack of papers. There Hikaru gave her a talk he probably should have years ago; namely, the talk about how playing Go was going to be a lifelong profession for him. This progressed into a talk about title leagues and how he was going to need more time than he did before to study Go, and how the easiest thing in his schedule to be replaced was schoolwork.

Shindou Mitsuko’s response was pretty much reflexive at that point: “Hikaru, your schooling is important.” She’d said it a hundred times before, probably enough so that it had become an ingrained reaction. There would likely always be a part of her inured to her son’s attempts to get out of doing schoolwork, and it tended to come to the forefront with instinctive menace whenever it felt its presence was warranted.
“It kind of isn’t,” Hikaru disagreed, and spent the next half hour arguing with his mother over prospects, the validity of playing Go as a profession, and his own potential in that field. He rang up Touya at one point, and got him to stammer through a summary of his income as a godan. He rang Ogata, as well, and asked him whether he thought Hikaru could get to title-claiming level someday. The ninth-dan player, who still held the Judan title, simply replied “yes” over the phone and hung up, leaving him to grin triumphantly at his mother.

He thought, and said as much, that a direct answer from a current top-level player about his potential was more than enough endorsement. With more than a hint of sarcasm, he asked whether he should get references from other high level players too, like Kuwabara and Touya Koyo and a number of high dan players who were watching his and Touya’s advance suspiciously.

It took a while, since parents were by their nature heavily resistant to the belligerence of their children, but Hikaru eventually managed to get his mother’s agreement that he could tone down his studying, with the aim to be done in four years rather than two. She warned him that she would be speaking to his father, and might need to have the talk again later, but that was victory enough for Hikaru.

He left the papers with his mother to distract her, and then promptly left the house, ringing Touya again to see if he were free for a game.

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His rival reacted to the news of him finally entering another title league with interest. The boy was himself currently in the first preliminary round of the Meijin league, and doing very well at it, but was admittedly struggling in the second preliminaries of the Judan league, which he’d entered at the beginning of the year. They were neither of them his first league attempts by any means, but then again it was rare for mid-level players to get far in title leagues.

“What’s annoying,” Touya told him, while placing a stone in a very casual game. “Is that despite all of my matches and the experience I’ve gained while trying the title leagues, you are still keeping up with me.”

Hikaru grinned, placing his rather aggressive response with a flourish. “Maybe now that I’m doing title leagues too, I’ll overtake you.” He suggested, to a very dark look from his rival.

“Never.” Touya vowed, and then proceeded to play a brutal enough match that Hikaru lost by over five moku. The godan looked very smug once the territory had been counted, saying “Looks like you won’t be overtaking me any time soon.”

“Maybe not.” Hikaru shrugged. “But you sure as hell aren’t going to leave me behind, either.”

They met gazes over the goban, expressions caught somewhere between determination and full-on glaring. It was a familiar sort of eye contact – the same look Touya had given him, when chasing Sai, and the same look Hikaru had given Touya, while chasing him. The prospect of one of them leaving the other behind never failed to inspire the will behind these eyes, even after so long.

Hikaru was ahead of Waya and Isumi, and the disparity became clearer and clearer every day. Players who had once been immovable now no longer seemed so, and the peaks of mountains which had once seemed unreachable could now be glimpsed over the path ahead. Hikaru had left many people behind on his road to the Hand of God, and he would leave many more behind before he was done, but Touya…

If he ever went beyond Touya, the other boy would claw his way through all obstacles to reach him.
If Touya ever went beyond him, there was nothing in the world that could keep Hikaru from doing the same in turn. When they were both old and grey, they would probably be sitting in Go salons like this one, still bickering over games, maybe bitching over a title one of them had stolen from the other with fervent promises that it would not remain stolen for long.

That was what it meant to have a true rival, he supposed. It was a pity so few people ever experienced it.

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The following week passed in much the same manner as the previous. Hikaru stuffed as many games as he could into every day, soliciting friends and acquaintances everywhere he could. He attended his first normal study session at the Touya house, where they discussed the first match of that year’s Ouzza title challenge. It was actually Ogata’s match, as the man had taken his second title the year after he claimed Judan, and was now defending it against Kuwabara. He had won the first match, but there were four yet to play.

If Ogata felt any stress over having a very important match of his discussed and pulled mercilessly apart by his old teacher, he certainly didn’t show it. If anything, he seemed far more intent than usual, drinking in everything said about the game with one of the most absorbed expressions Hikaru had ever seen on him. Kuwabara was an opponent that Touya-sensei knew well, and had contended with many times – it made sense that Ogata would value the input into his games.

After that study session, rather than being driven straight home, Hikaru was commandeered by Ogata for an unexpectedly ruthless game at his apartment, allegedly in order to relieve stress. It seemed to serve its purpose, with the blonde pro looking very pleased as his opponent resigned.

“I’m guessing it worked, then?” Hikaru asked him sourly. “Beating up poor, innocent sandans is how you let off steam, now?”

The older pro smirked at that, sitting back to exhale a puff of cigarette smoke. Hikaru made a face and waved it out of his air-space with his hand, before realising he had a fan with him which was far better suited for the task. Immediately, he extracted it and fanned the smoke back into Ogata’s face.

“You play an interesting game, Shindou.” The man said, puffing out more smoke as if in retaliation. “You’re still easy to defeat, but with all your tricks…you’re at least not boring.”

Hikaru scowled. “I demand a rematch.” He said, shaking his fist at the current Judan and Ouzza. “I’ll show you ‘easy to defeat’!”

Ogata sighed at him. “I’m sure you will.” He said, patronisingly. “After all, you did such a good job last time.”

“Rematch.” Hikaru uttered, vehemently, brandishing his fan like a weapon.

“Since you asked so nicely…” Ogata smirked, and took the white goke.

Hikaru made a far better showing this time, partially as Ogata was no longer playing with quite as much pent up frustration, and partially because Hikaru was playing with a lot more pent up frustration. He fought and clawed his way into various territories, viciously prying every moku out of his opponent that he could manage, and playing like a cornered animal when his own clusters were threatened. Nonetheless, he lost, but it was far less of a crushing defeat than the first game had been.

By the time this had finished, it was rather late. Ogata was agreeable enough when asked for a lift home, though, so that wasn’t an issue.
Later in the week, Hikaru ended up discussing the same title match in Morishita-sensei’s study group as he had at Touya-sensei’s, which sort of sucked. It did mean he had a lot of insights to offer, but it also meant that basically nothing new was brought up except one or two small details by Morishita himself. Half way through, his thoughts veered off into contemplating the game in terms of how he’d have played it – in Ogata’s place or in Kuwabara’s. He would be facing them both in an official game at some point, after all – and provided Kuwabara clung onto his title for a few years…well, there was a reason Hikaru had been studying his games, though he’d never personally played the man.

Throughout the week, Hikaru played two games with Waya, three games with Yashiro, and two with Isumi. Yashiro was closer to his level than Isumi, and Isumi closer than Waya, but…unless they pulled something unusual and played a really great game, none of them seemed to win much anymore. It wasn’t as though they weren’t improving, because they were – Hikaru was simply improving faster. It was honestly a bit sad, and reminded him uncomfortably of leaving the Haze Go club behind. Maybe when he was higher level, and his progression started to slow down, they’d catch back up…but they might be on a different level to him, for a while.

When at home, Hikaru did his best to prepare for his Kisei league matches, searching for recent kifu on his next opponent and studying them carefully. He didn’t think he’d have any trouble with this one, either, but it was better to be sure.

He was thankful for the fact that the Kisei matches had started the first weekend of October – if it had started this weekend, the same one that he was meant to be meeting this exorcist at, he was sure he’d be too nervous to play properly. As it was, he was more apprehensive about the meeting on Sunday than the match on Saturday.

Friday evening, Akari dropped by to bother him, strong-arming her way into his room as usual. She inspected the shrine, now out of the wardrobe and in the open, with satisfaction but no surprise – either she’d bugged his room, or she’d been talking with his mother. Or both.

“I heard that you had taken this out.” She told him, after appraising the kamidana for a few moments. “What made you move it? Weren’t you being all dumb and secretive about converting?”

Hikaru rolled his eyes at her. “I am very protective of my faith.” He said, seriously. “So, naturally, I wanted to keep it quiet for a while. That stopped being possible when Waya went through my wardrobe for spare clothes when we were all hung over.”

She stopped short at that. “Ah, so your friends all know, now?” She asked, curious. “What did they think?”

“Waya didn’t believe it.” Hikaru said, grinning. “I’m not sure Touya did, either. Who knows what Isumi thinks. Yashiro offered to convert, some day.”

“Yashiro-kun did? That’s surprising. Are you sure he wasn’t just messing with you?”

He shrugged. “He was almost certainly messing with me.”

Akari rolled her eyes back at him. “Some of your friends are far too much like you, Hikaru.” She said. “I’m surprised about Touya-san, though. Didn’t you say his family is Shinto?”

“Maybe. They have a house shrine that looks well maintained, but I don’t know how serious they are. Most people have a house shrine, after all.” Hikaru informed her. “Touya might think I’m just doing this to mess with them, like Waya does.”
“While I can believe you’d spend a large amount of money on a joke,” His lifelong friend said. “I am less willing to believe that you would have tried to keep that joke hidden in your wardrobe like you did at first.”

Hikaru shrugged at her again, walking over to fall onto his bed with a satisfying squeak of bedsprings. The mattress bounced slightly as he settled. “The kamidana was the expensive part.” He sighed. “Mum can’t understand why I didn’t just use the house shrine.”

“It’s because you’re cagey with stuff you don’t want the world to know yet.” Akari explained, as if she were more acquainted with his thought processes than him. She sat down on the floor near the bed, looking up at the kamidana on its perch. It was bereft of a shintai, for the moment – the fan was in his pocket still, a weight and presence he was constantly aware of.

He removed it and inspected it, gently unfolding it to look at the folds and the spokes. It was starting to get tattered, which was pretty much unavoidable with fans like this, no matter how well made. He might have to have it repaired again soon – he’d done that once before, around ten months ago. He could probably still find the contact details for the place that had done it…

Hikaru looked up, aware that Akari had been quiet for an unusually long time. When his eyes fell on her face, he immediately noticed that her expression was highly reminiscent of someone trying desperately not to laugh.

“What is it?” He asked her, deeply suspicious.

An unladylike snort escaped her despite her best efforts, followed by a small stream of giggles that she quickly suppressed. “Hikaru,” She said, with a mirthful anticipation. “If you were keeping the kamidana in your wardrobe because you were worried what other people would think, and you weren’t ready to show them, but now you’ve put it on display and everyone knows…does that mean you’re ‘out of the closet’?”

Hikaru took a moment to parse the indirect translation of that English euphemism, and then stared flatly at his best friend, making a face. “You are the worst.” He told her.

“Maybe.” She conceded. “But are you?”

He threw his arms up in exasperation. “I guess I am out of the closet with my…faith thing.” He admitted grumpily. “Happy?”

Akari beamed at him. “Very.”

Hikaru decided he didn’t like the look on her face, and promptly threw a pillow at her. The indignant squawk she produced was very satisfying indeed.

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The next day, Hikaru headed to the Institute bright and early for his second Kisei league preliminary match. He didn’t get there as early this time, lacking much of the apprehension which had dogged his footsteps the week before. He greeted Isumi and Waya briefly before heading to his goban to wait.

His opponent appeared five minutes before the match was due to start; a nidan who Hikaru had beaten around eight months ago. Judging by the kifu, he’d certainly improved since then, but only in a sort of steady trickle. He wasn’t about to let his guard down…but, as with the first match, Hikaru fully expected to walk all over the guy.

He was not surprised. Admittedly feeling concerned over the meeting with Utagawashi’s teacher the
following day, Hikaru took out his apprehension on his opponent, playing a fairly brutal game that ended in an early resignation for his opponent, who stormed out of the hall after his thickly-muttered ‘makemashita’. It was, honestly, a bit cruel of Hikaru – he sort of regretted not going easier on the guy, but…well, it was a title league, if only the preliminaries. In these sorts of contests, one couldn’t afford to coddle one’s opponents.

Hikaru looked in on his friends’ games, both of which seemed to be proceeding in their favour, and toured the games of a few people of interest that he might be facing later on. He noted the ones who had more solid games to look up later, staying to observe one of the yondans he would undoubtedly be facing somewhere down the line. She was better than Isumi, certainly. He thought he might have issues with her, and resolved to spend some time studying her kifu.

For the next fifteen minutes, he switched between the board whose winner would be his next opponent, Waya’s board, and Isumi’s. Waya seemed to be having some trouble with his opponent, who was among the stronger nidans and was putting up a very impressive fight despite his earlier disadvantage. Hikaru wasn’t certain which of them would win, though he was still leaning towards Waya. Isumi’s was far more likely to be a win – Hikaru could see the courses he was going to take in the game, and thought it likely that his opponent wouldn’t see them coming.

In the end, Waya won, though narrowly. Isumi won by a more decisive four and a half moku, and Hikaru’s next opponent was decided by who lost the final match he’d been observing.

As they had the previous week, the three of them headed to Heart of Stone. Waya replayed his match of the day, as it had been a closely fought one, and they all discussed it. Soon after they replayed some of their most interesting games of the week, and then finally played a couple of speed matches against each other.

It was mid-afternoon that they left the salon, heading their separate ways for the weekend. Hikaru sighed, resolving to take his mind off of the meeting with the exorcist by running over some kifu once he was home, and headed to the train station.

Something felt…different, that afternoon. He couldn’t quite place his finger on it, but he didn’t feel how he usually did, when he was on his way home after a match. Hikaru’s brows furrowed as he tried to identify what it was, but failed entirely. He didn’t feel ill, or nervous…just, well, off. Different. A little on-edge, maybe.

He was in the middle of discreetly comparing the temperature of his forehead to the temperature of his arm, wondering if he was maybe coming down with a cold, when he noticed movement in the corner of his eye; some old guy staggering onto the train from one of the bigger stations, wearing a large backpack. Hikaru blinked at him a moment, noting that he was being looked at in turn, and wondered if the guy was drunk. It would explain the staggering and the sort of green tint to his skin.

The train set off from the platform, and the old guy clung to one of the bars, looking increasingly ill. He…was sort of staring at Hikaru, wasn’t he?

Shortly after they arrived at and departed the next station, the old man swung his backpack around, removing some sort of paper thing from one of its side packets. He unfolded it carefully, forming a paper bag, and then turned politely to the side and vomited into it.

Hikaru flinched away at that, because…really, what the hell? It was fair enough if he was sick, but most people didn’t have time to meticulously unfold their vomit bag before barfing into it, it tended to be much more of a hurried process.

He made a face as the acidic smell began to pervade the carriage. Several other passengers inched
away from the man, leaving a noticeable empty space around him.

The old guy neatly tied up the presumably liquid-proof puke bag and put it into one of the carriage bins. Ew. He then proceeded to turn back to Hikaru and stare. And… wait, what the hell? Was he wearing a sword?

Hikaru did a double-take, looking more closely. Yeah, there was certainly what looked like a katana hanging at the dude’s side, a really traditional sort with a fancy guard and scabbard, too. Why hadn’t anyone else noticed? It was all sorts of illegal to be carrying swords around in this day and age, and more than slightly alarming. Was he some kind of mad kendo practitioner? Was he delusional and pretending to be a samurai?

Abruptly cutting off his wild imaginings, the guy approached him.

Hikaru watched as the short distance between them closed, suspicious and slightly alarmed by the presence of the weapon. The guy mostly looked interested rather than aggressive, but you never could tell with old people, especially armed old people. They could be unpredictable.

“You’ll be Shindou Hikaru, then.” Said the complete stranger, in a matter-of-fact voice that somehow matched the appearance of his age perfectly. Slightly gnarly-sounding, but oddly even and precise despite that; smooth like the boughs of an old tree.

Shindou Hikaru stared, not having expected that in the least. “Um?” he offered, wide-eyed. His gaze slid to the weapon, and then back again.

The old guy nodded. “Well, I’ll see you tomorrow.” He said, and headed for the train doors as they arrived at the next station from his.

Hikaru watched the old man leave onto the platform, feeling uncommonly thick as his brain pieced the clues together. Amidst the mild smell of vomit leaking from the nearby bin, he thought of the staring, the nausea and puking, the fact that the guy had known his name, the mention of seeing him tomorrow, and the fucking sword.

Well, he’d met the exorcist, then?

…He honestly wasn’t sure what to think about that.

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Hikaru spent an evening fretting about everything under the sun. He worried that the exorcist wouldn’t have any more information than Utagawashi, and would tell him to stop trying for spiritual stuff completely. He worried that the exorcist would tell him that his spiritual wounds were actually just getting worse on their own and would continue to spiritually haemorrhage until he became a soulless husk. He worried that the exorcist would decide he was a demon after all and run him through with the katana. He even worried, in his more fanciful moments, that he would turn out to be some sort of chosen one who would be promptly abducted into a life of fighting against a demonic cataclysm that would otherwise end the world.

That last one might have sounded like fun times when he was younger, but now? Now, he kind of liked his life. There was a pretty large part of his life that he didn’t like, but he was working on that. That’s what this whole thing was about, after all.

Eventually, though, Hikaru managed to get himself to sleep and more or less stay that way until the morning. He woke up to a text on his phone that read ‘Kaminaga-sensei is coming with me to the shrine. He says to come by early, if you can.’
Hikaru more or less started vibrating with tension at that and didn’t stop until he was under the comforting deluge of the shower. “Shiiit.” He expressed into the water, wondering how on earth he got himself into this sort of nonsense. It was probably Sai’s fault. Most of everything he did these days could be traced back to the various effects Sai had had on his life.

He eventually managed to drag himself out of the shower, dress himself, and get some food into his stomach. Eating wasn’t usually something Hikaru had any trouble doing, and only tended to fall to the wayside when he was extremely focused, extremely anxious, or both. This situation mostly qualified on the anxious side, and his stomach felt unsettled as a result.

It had become almost a habit to spend some time in front of Sai’s kamidana whenever he was worried about something, the incense and illusion of Sai’s presence simultaneously upsetting and calming. He found himself wanting to sit there now – but the exorcist wanted him to arrive early. It was best not to delay in an unknown situation like this. Giving his staircase a last, longing glance, Hikaru put a jacket on and left the house, clinging to his fan like it was his own special good-luck charm.

The walk to the shrine was quite a familiar one, now. At mid-October, the days were getting noticeably shorter and chillier. Hikaru had started wearing hoodies and jackets more often than not when he went out, and it would only get colder. Leaves were beginning to shift to autumnal colours, but were still predominantly green, and the sky behind them had itself in a very complementary shade of blue. The closer to the shrine Hikaru got, the more trees there were, the area itself a pretty rural one as far as Tokyo went.

Red peeked out from behind the trees as the torii came into view. Something about the shrine seemed different as he approached – it was off, somehow. As if some detail of the reality he saw before him had been tweaked out of place, ever so slightly. As far as he could tell, there was no difference, but…he couldn’t shake the feeling, and it just got worse the closer he got. Nerves, maybe?

Hikaru stilled as the honden of the shrine came into view. Utagawashi was there, in his distinctive kariginu, and so was another man; the man from the train. They were looking his way.

He paused for a moment, motionless. His hand quivered around the fan, feeling afraid and breathless in a way he couldn’t quite quantify. He was nervous about the meeting, yes, but…

Hikaru took a deep breath, and forced himself forwards.

The old man was far less unkempt today. If he’d been travelling yesterday, it would make sense for him not to wear good clothes. Now, he wore a traditional outfit which…actually, looked very similar to what Touya-sensei wore, though minus the decorative tassel, and in a dark unsaturated blue. The man himself was pretty old – maybe not as old as Hikaru’s grandfather, but somewhere in that region. In his sixties, maybe. That sword was still there, hilt tied to his belt and resting lightly at his hip. Its presence immediately drew his eye, innocuous, yet also vaguely menacing.

The sight of him and the sword put Hikaru quickly on edge. He steeled himself to continue walking regardless, and eventually came to a stop before the two of them. Utagawashi looked between them with an unreadable expression, and said “Good morning, Shindou-san. This is my teacher, Kaminaga Keiji.”

“Well, we’ve already met, you daft fool.” Kaminaga Keiji said, and his alleged student turned a bit pink in the face, sleeves fluttering anxiously. The old man shook his head minutely, and turned to focus his gaze on Hikaru. The weight of it was…considerable. As the man turned, the sword at his hip swung gently, arresting his attention again. “Though I didn’t introduce myself then, did I?”
Hikaru swallowed, and mentally slapped himself out of his bizarre tension. “No. You just threw up, said hi, and left.” He answered.

The old guy grinned at that, displaying the absence of one tooth as well as a subtle sort of menace. “Well, I knew you’d be something else to the senses, but I wasn’t quite prepared for it.” He said. “After yesterday, I spent some time meditating on your presence at this fool’s home;” he indicated Utagawashi, eliciting a small flutter of indignation. “As a result, I believe I am more ready to deal with you today. But honestly…what a mess.”

He regarded the supposed exorcist and the supposed exorcist’s former student cautiously. “You don’t seem to like your student much.” He commented, watching for a response.

There was a pause, and Kaminaga’s gaze slid back to Utagawashi. “I liked him just fine, before he fucked up with you.” The man said bluntly, without a hint of remorse at his student’s flinch. “He should have contacted me the moment he found out about you, and he didn’t. Worse, he gave you information I’d given him based on his case, which couldn’t be more different from yours. After a failure of this proportion, I’m not sure I should even call him my student.”

Hikaru wasn’t exactly Utagawashi’s biggest fan, but even so…he didn’t like to watch the man shrink like that, withering further with every word. “That’s a bit harsh, isn’t it? If he didn’t know that what you taught him was only for his case, then you obviously didn’t teach him well enough.” He challenged, finding himself both befuddlingly defensive of the priest and confusingly antagonistic towards the exorcist. He just…did not like this guy, he was unnerving. The sword especially so – he couldn’t help but keep looking at it. Why was it even there? Why was this old bastard carrying it around?

He bristled further as the old dickhead threw his head back and laughed. What was his problem? “You have your own will. Good!” Kaminaga nodded, crossing his arms. “That’s more than this one could ever claim.” The figure in the kariginu shrank even more, and started to edge away.

He scowled. “It’s true, though. If he didn’t know he was supposed to contact you, it’s your own damn fault.”

Kaminaga smirked at him, wrinkles compiling in bizarre folds along his cheeks. “Well, you see, I’d been under the impression that he was smart enough to realise when he was out of his depth.” He explained, gaze suddenly piercing. “I know better now.”

Hikaru blinked. “Well, I was under the impression that you might not be a complete dickhead. So I guess we’re all learning something today.” His voice was unexpectedly tight, and as he spoke, he saw Utagawashi slip off to the side with widening eyes, watching them from beside the honden.

“I suppose we are.” Kaminaga replied softly, shrewd gaze fixed on Hikaru. “You, in particular, have a lot to learn…such as how to control yourself.”

Hackles raised, he snapped “what’s that supposed to mean?!?”

“Look at yourself.” The old man said. “There you stand – detesting the very sight of me, my very presence setting your teeth on edge. I unsettle you, I make you angry, and you want to fight me even though you can see that I am armed, and when all I have done is belittle someone who you hardly know. And you’ve not even noticed that this is unusual.”

The guy was right about the anger; Hikaru really wanted to punch him. His blood was pounding in his ears – he felt disturbed and pissed off and unaccountably afraid of the sword and…well, wasn’t it a bit much? He frowned, one fist clenched around his fan and the other pressing nails into his palm.
“I…I don’t…”

Kaminaga smiled at him. It was not a nice smile. “You’ve barely scraped the surface of your wounds, and there you are: projecting such willpower and aggression that Utagawashi-kun can’t stand to be near you.” He said, sounding pleased. “And you can already see my katana! And it alarms you, doesn’t it? Tell me, what do you think of it?”

Hikaru’s shoulders hunched as he looked back at the sword, eyes lingering longer. “I don’t like it. You shouldn’t have it. You shouldn’t be carrying it around.”

The exorcist’s bizarre enthusiasm increased, and his hand went to the katana. Hikaru tensed as he did so, ready to run the fuck away if…if what? If he drew the sword? If he…what? “Is it the sword you dislike, or the fact that I’m armed?”

He stared at the thing, pissed off and worried at the sight of it in a way which didn’t feel quite rational. Why was he so on edge? Why was that sword so worrying? Why was he so pissed off at Kaminaga? “I…is there something different, about that katana?” He asked, eventually.

Kaminaga grinned at him. “You tell me.” He said, fingers closing around the hilt.

Hikaru looked up at him, and then back at the sword again. His fist clenched as, slowly, the old man drew the katana, its lethal blade glinting in the sunlight, something about the edge of it far more menacing than mere steel. “Put it away.” He said, instinctively repulsed. “There’s something…it’s not right. Put it away.” With a knowing look, the exorcist did precisely that, returning the shimmering blade to its sheath. Hikaru found himself near-automatically beginning a breathing exercise, finding that his heart was beating far more quickly than he’d realised. His fingers were trembling, and he was afraid. Kaminaga waited, patiently, while he breathed to calm himself, eventually straightening to say “It’s spiritual sensitivity, isn’t it? I’m…detecting you. And something about that sword.” It was the only thing that made sense.

“You got there eventually.” Kaminaga said, approvingly. “Good boy.”

Hikaru stared at him, eyes sliding to the katana every few seconds no matter how he tried to stop. It…felt dangerous. Like he had to make sure he kept an eye on it. “What is it?” he asked, suppressing a shiver of tension as the old man’s hand failed to leave the sword. “And how can I be sensing it…and you…when I’ve been failing at the stuff I’ve tried?”

“You’re a bit of a unique case.” The old man said, a glint of fascination in his eye. “From what I can tell, you’re already more spiritually sensitive than Utagawashi-kun there. It’s only that you must not have encountered any strong spirits or people with severe spiritual scarring before now, or if you did, you simply attributed your feelings to illness or some other excuse.”

Hikaru glanced at the man, briefly meeting his eyes, before returning his focus to the sword. He was already a little spiritually sensitive, then? More than Utagawashi, even? In that case… “The katana. It’s a spirit?”

“It is.” Kaminaga nodded, giving the sword at his side a look full of dark satisfaction. Hikaru felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise at the sight of it – there was something there, something palpable, between this man and the sword, and he didn’t like it. He didn’t like it at all.

“Why is it there, then?” He demanded, running a thumb almost frenetically over the spine of his fan. “You’re an exorcist – so, exorcise it!”

“Hmm…” In a sick parody of Hikaru’s own motions, the old man ran a thumb over the hilt of the
blade, slow and soft. “…No, I think not. This creature is my great enemy; the one who tried and
failed to destroy me, the one who gave me my scars. And now…it is my prisoner. It has been so for
a long time. Why should I exorcise it, when its edge serves me so well? It says it will kill me one
day, but…well. We’ll see about that.” He smiled, shadows stretching across his face.

That was…Hikaru took a step backwards, swallowing. He felt like he had a lump in his throat. He
felt sick. He felt more and more uneasy with every passing second, watching something pass
between the man and the blade, feeling the same slick menace on them both, a resonance building
more and more with each moment that passed-

“Stop it.” He said, unable to just stand there and watch. “You’re sick. There’s something wrong with
you, you old geezer – can’t you see that?! It might not be possessing you, but it’s sure as hell not far
off, and you’re letting it!” Off to the side, Utagawashi looked horrified. Did he know about this? Did
he know that the sword was a spirit, and a really fucking nasty one, too? Did he know that his
teacher was keeping a demon that damned close to his soul?

He could feel it, he could suddenly feel it and it was awful – how could Kaminaga stand it? How
could he stand there, a thumb stroking over that monster’s hilt as though it were something precious?

Sai, he thought, reaching out thoughtlessly for the reassurance of something that wasn’t there, but for
the first time there was something, just a tiny shred of familiarity at the edge of a void-

“It’s nothing like that, boy. Don’t overreact so.” Kaminaga chided, voice a little firmer and a little
less shadow-soft. “I’ve had this demon as my prisoner for over thirty years, and for over thirty years I
have slain countless other demons with its blade. Do you think you know better than me, on your
first time seeing a malefic spirit? Don’t be absurd.”

The words were confident, with surety of a sort that came only from wealth in experience and
knowledge. He sounded absolutely certain of himself, and under that ironclad certainty, Hikaru saw
Utagawashi’s expression waver in the distance. He breathed, trying to look past the impulsive
revulsion, to see without the shroud of horror that his spirit-sense had pulled over his eyes…

Hikaru looked at the sword, and felt the sword, and felt the pulse of its bloody desire, the thirst for
murder reaching out and whispering and thrumming in time with Kaminaga’s heart-

He looked up at this person who was supposed to teach him, hands trembling uncontrollably. “It’s
not lying.” He said, voice steady despite the state of his body. “It will kill you, some day. And you’ll
be so busy gloating about how you imprisoned it, you won’t even see it coming, you idiot.”

Incapable of standing another second, Hikaru whirled around and ran the fuck away, sprinting out
through the torii and away from that demon and its exorcist as fast as his legs could carry him. Only
once the trees were receding, and the mad aura of the demon had faded, did he dare to stop. He
collapsed against the wall of someone’s garden, covering his face with one hand as he tried
desperately to calm down.

That…had been seriously not nice.

Chapter End Notes

This was first posted on tumblr, and edited fairly extensively in parts for submission here
to correct a canon mistake that Unestel kindly pointed out for me. On that note, if people
notice flaws or mistakes in my writing, please do tell me. For example, I recently had a comment which criticised my handling of Shinto practices in the Japanese populace, and while it was apparently deleted, I did find it very helpful. Also, can I just say thanks for all the people commenting? It's seriously fantastic. Thanks to everyone who kudosed and bookmarked, too. I've been watching my rankings in the Hikago fandom keenly, and I'm on the first page for comments, bookmarks, and word count. I'm near the top of the second page on kudos, too, and it's frankly fantastic. So, lots of gratitude for everyone.

I very much enjoyed writing Kaminaga. As I went into his scene, I wasn't sure who he was. I was starting with a vague frame of Old Master, and decided to see how he'd turn out. He promptly became extremely creepy, his sword became a demon, and a few plots lengthened, fattened, and edited themselves in his wake. It was awesome. That sort of thing is one of my favourite things about writing - sometimes your characters surprise you, either by becoming something you didn't plan or by behaving in a way which you didn't plan, and usually the best option is to roll with it and see what they want to do. I've found it has led to some of the most genuine and interesting sections of my writing. I have a plan, with significant events and 'signpost scenes' to write towards...but in the less defined between-sections, unexpected things can happen which shift everything around, and I find that pretty awesome.

Go note: There's a fair amount of information available on the title leagues and their schedules, but not very much. So, for example, the match configurations and qualifying conditions are hard to find detail about, as well as how often matches occur and on what days, etc. So I'm very much waffling on that, assuming one match a week. I know how many pools there are in each preliminary, and how many people get through to each stage, but not how the knockout tournaments are structured in order for that to happen. So, if anyone knows more than me, give me your data. I would find it helpful.

03/06/18 – minor stylistic edits
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Hikaru skips town.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Hikaru hurried along the road, feeling more unsafe than he ever had before in his life. The encounter at the shrine had, frankly, terrified the hell out of him. He might be far away enough now that he couldn’t sense the exorcist or the sword-spirit, but he was starkly aware of the fact that they could still sense him. In all likelihood, someone as spiritually sensitive as Kaminaga might be able to track him down from miles away, given how much he apparently stood out. And that…that was a horrifying thought.

He couldn’t stop thinking about it. His skin crawled with the memory of the demon and its foul emanations – even now, as he hurried further and further away, he couldn’t help but remember it. How had he not noticed how terrible the thing was the moment he’d laid eyes on it? How had he not noticed, and willingly gone near it the next day? How could he have been so blind?

Hikaru’s heart pounded in his chest faster than his rapid pace could justify. His throat felt thick with fear and revulsion. Was this what Utagawashi had to put up with when he was near Hikaru? If so, well…if so, Hikaru forgave the man his awful behaviour and then some. Hikaru might not actually be a demon, where that monster of a sword certainly was, but even so – to put up with that repulsive aura, to willingly spend another second in its presence as it clawed at him? He couldn’t do it. He wouldn’t. He wouldn’t go anywhere near that shrine until he knew that Kaminaga and the demon were long gone.

Suddenly, Yokohama wasn’t nearly distant enough.

The walk home wasn’t the shortest, but it passed more quickly that day than it ever had before. Hikaru stopped and paused as he neared his house, paranoia itching insistently at his thoughts. His house had always been a safe haven before, but it might not be so today. What if Kaminaga followed him, and found out where he lived? Hikaru doubted the man would set a demon on him on purpose, but he certainly might bring it nearby…and Hikaru knew, with unshakeable certainty, that being anywhere near the demon in question was not good. Very not good. He absolutely could not go near that thing, or risk Kaminaga bringing it near him.

Kaminaga might think that Hikaru was an errant student, in dire need of being instructed. Maybe that was true. Even if the man was being slowly consumed, he had been doing the spirit thing for longer than Hikaru had been alive, and doubtlessly had very valuable lessons to give. But…if those lessons necessitated being near the sword, too…no. It was too dangerous.

Hikaru couldn’t see any signs of an old guy with a sword lurking nearby. He didn’t think he could sense him, either, but he didn’t trust his nascent spiritual sense nearly enough to trust it with this. After all, in this state, would he even be able to tell when he started feeling the approach of the sword-spirit? He was already afraid, already sick, already trembling with tension…would he even be
able to tell the difference?

He didn’t know, and that made it all the more frightening.

Clutching his fan like a lifeline, Hikaru looked back at his house. It…wasn’t like he could avoid going home, really. If Kaminaga was going to follow him, or try to find him…realistically, he’d probably succeed. Restraining a shudder at the thought, he stared at his doorway with wild eyes.

He knew so little. What would happen if the exorcist followed him here? Hikaru knew, in a visceral sense that couldn’t be put to words, that he was in danger from the man’s pet demon. But, well, was he the only one? Was his mother at risk, too? Was Akari? If he ran to stay with Waya, would Waya be in danger? If he stayed with Touya, would he and his parents potentially run the risk of spiritual harm? Hikaru could guess that spiritual attacks were rare, because otherwise he’d have likely caused far more spontaneous vomittings, especially in a city as populated as Tokyo. However, he had no way of knowing how demons selected their victims. Did they go for the pre-tenderised, like Hikaru? Did they prefer hapless and unaware people who had no idea what was stalking them?

Hikaru stood motionless in front of his home for a while longer, unsure of what to do. Increasingly, this seemed like a very risky situation, and one that necessitated a swift response. He faced a threat of unknown severity, which might or might not attempt to hunt him down, and for that matter might or might not harm his loved ones in the process. This threat, in all likelihood, was not very far away from his current location.

He didn’t know enough. Maybe later, depending on what the man believed and didn’t believe, he could get more information from Utagawashi. But, for now…he couldn’t risk putting his friends and family in the path of that demon, and he couldn’t afford to be close to it. It would likely be effortless for Kaminaga to track him down at this distance, and then where would he be?

He pulled out his phone, noting that there was already a message from Utagawashi, as well as a missed call. He ignored both soundly, and sent off a message to someone altogether less problematic. With an apprehensive sort of resolve forming itself amongst the chaos of his thoughts, Hikaru entered his house with the traditional call.

With barely a further word, he ran upstairs and packed a bag as quickly as he could manage, throwing in a couple changes of clothes as well as his necessary toiletries. After a moment of hesitation, he stopped in front of his bedroom shrine, his urgency warring with the desperate desire to sit down with the kamidana. He didn’t know where he’d end up at the day’s conclusion, but…

He took the fan, which had barely left his hand, and stared at it. Somehow, he always felt safer when he had it in front of him, which was invaluable at a time like this. Still, he wished fiercely that Sai himself was here – even if the ghost might not be able to protect him from that demon, Hikaru would at least not be alone with his fear.

Gathering his resolve, Hikaru packed the incense burner and remaining wisteria incense into his bag, leaving his room with a last glance at the kamidana.

“Mum.” He said, as he ran downstairs. “I’m going away for a couple of days. Maybe more. I might be back by Wednesday, but might not.”

She straightened with surprise, turning to him from her place by the television. “Hikaru-“

“I’ll text you every day, so you know I’m okay.” He said, and left the door before she could ask him where he was going.
With a pace that was just short of running, Hikaru made his way in the direction of the bus station.

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Hikaru was aware that Kaminaga had arrived in Tokyo by train. He was also aware that the man had been on a similar route to him, and had presumably been staying somewhere very close to the station that Hikaru tended to use. Whether the man was trying to find him or whether he was just going home, there was no way he’d run the risk of encountering that demon.

It was with this in mind that he took the bus on a wide and circuitous route to a large but fairly limited train station that most inter-city travellers tended to bypass. Here, Hikaru got his first train, plotting out a course through and out of Tokyo which entirely avoided the trains heading to or through Yokohama, as well as trains leaving from the largest stations.

He wasted a good hour and a half like that before he managed to so much as leave the city, at which point his phone vibrated with a text notification. Hikaru glanced warily at the screen, confirming with a sigh of relief that it was Yashiro, and opened up the message.

‘You want to visit?’

‘Isn’t it a bit late notice?’

Hikaru winced a little, and tapped back rapidly.

‘If it’s too much trouble, I’ll get a hotel room in Osaka.’

‘Don’t be an idiot, of course you can stay.’ The response came almost instantly. Hikaru wondered if he’d even asked his parents. ‘It’s just a bit weird, out of nowhere like this. When will you be arriving?’

Well, wasn’t that a question. Hikaru considered his planned route with a furrowed brow, and answered hesitantly ‘Six, maybe?’ It would be twice as long a journey, at least, not that Yashiro would know that. He’d probably just assume he was leaving at two or three. ‘Maybe later’ he followed up after a thought. It wasn’t like he was an expert in how long these trains could take, after all. It was sort of an improvised thing.

‘Sure. Let me know when you’re half an hour away.’ The other boy responded, and that was pretty much that.

For the next hour or so, Hikaru switched trains fairly regularly, his longest stint on any of them half an hour. At one point, he had to switch to a bus to get to a different train station, but once he got on that one he got onto the train from Tokyo to Kyoto – not even the bullet train, the train, which was more expensive and took way longer – and could stay in one place for a while. He set an alarm on his phone and tried to sleep through it, with little success. A couple of times, he achieved a light doze, but he was far too unsettled by the morning’s events to manage any sort of meaningful sleep. Eventually, with a sigh, Hikaru accessed the pitiful and limited internet on his crappy phone and started burning through web money to play NetGo against a load of amateurs.

Twenty minutes in, the NetGo match wasn’t occupying nearly enough of his attention, so he spent five minutes finishing with his hapless opponent and rang up Touya instead.

“Shindou?” The voice asked, questioningly. “What is it?”

“I’m black.” He said, without preamble. “4-4.”

There was a startled pause, as the other boy registered his intent. Then a sigh, and his response. “16-16.”

Hikaru breathed, feeling himself relax a little despite himself. He spoke his hands, and listened to
Touya’s, plotting the stones out one by one in his mind. It was…surprisingly calming, to focus on that mental image, rather than dwelling on the fear which had been following him for hours now.

More grateful for his rival’s unquestioning presence than he could say, Hikaru played a focused and determined game, losing connection from time to time as the train passed through tunnels, but calling back the moment he could to continue it. A game like this was precisely what he needed. Not merely a game against a skilled opponent, but Blind Go, which tended to require more attention even at their level…and not only that, but his opponent was Touya, with whom he could create his best games of all.

Their game took an hour and a half, and Hikaru had to change trains in the middle of it. He heard noticeable pauses in his rival’s hands there, and could guess that the station sounds were pretty distinctive, but Touya didn’t interrupt the game. He continued playing. They reached yose, and battled for every bit of territory they could, grappling with ko until there was nowhere left to play. After a bit of thought, they concluded that Hikaru had lost by three and a half moku. He relaxed into his uncomfortable train seat with a satisfied sigh, holding the image of the game carefully in his mind as he said “Thanks for the game, Touya. Let’s discuss it.”

Though it was a few seconds before he did, the other boy agreed, and they engaged themselves into one of the most civil post game discussions they’d ever managed. Maybe the lack of physical proximity made a difference? At any rate, it was honestly a bit strange to be calmly discussing the stronger moves and the weaker moves and the times they’d left openings without a single fight breaking out about how idiotic those openings were. Helpful, maybe, but it was strange and unfamiliar.

The discussion concluded, Hikaru prepared to wrap up the call and hang up, but was pre-empted. “Are you alright, Shindou?” His rival asked, voice all serious even over the phone. He could almost hear that solemn-serious face, the one he got when he thought Hikaru was actually troubled by something.

Caught somewhat flat-footed, he stumbled over his words “Uh – what? Yeah, sure. Why?”

“You’re travelling.” Touya said, calmly. “I think you’re on a train, and also you called me for a very expensive game of Blind Go, and furthermore your play was oddly tame today. Good, but tame. And you didn’t insult my choices in the post-game discussion a single time, not even that little slip-up I had in the top right in the mid-game.”

“Oh.” He replied intelligently. “Well, it’s not like you were your usual self in the post-game discussion, either. Normally you’d have been shouting at me over how conservative I was being.”

“Believe me, I was tempted.” The boy said. “More importantly, though…Where are you going, Shindou? It’s Sunday, and not even that early either. Don’t you have tutoring matches on Mondays?”

Hikaru winced. Yeah, he should probably do something about that. “Yeah, I’ll probably cancel them.” He said. “I’m not sure when I’ll be back, so I don’t know if I’ll be getting to your dad’s study session either.”

There was another, lengthier pause. “And Wednesday?”

He shrugged, even though his rival couldn’t exactly see it. “I don’t know. We’ll see.”

“…You’re not skipping matches again, are you?” The voice on the other end was a little flat, but a little worried too.
The memory of those horrible two months overwhelmed Hikaru briefly, as it always did when he thought of it without preparation, and he shuddered a little. “No. Nothing like that.” He answered, vehemently. “I swear. I just…need to get away from Tokyo, for a little while.”

Several seconds passed by, voiceless. Then Touya spoke again, a little more quietly. “Is everything okay, Shindou? This is…a bit out of the blue.”

“I’ll be fine, don’t worry.” Hikaru said, avoiding a direct answer because at the moment things were kind of *not* okay. He hoped the crazy exorcist didn’t find his house somehow – if anything happened to his mother, or Akari…abruptly, the fear and tension that the match had held at bay was back again. Shoulders hunched, Hikaru added “I’ll let you know if I’ll be away for longer than expected.”

“Let the association know, too.” Touya instructed him, the concern unfortunately still present. “There’s no need to throw your game on Wednesday, after all. And you don’t want to forfeit out of the Kisei preliminaries, so make sure to be back by then.”

Hikaru grinned. “Yeah, it would be kind of pathetic to drop out on my third week, wouldn’t it?” He asked, rhetorically. “Anyway, thanks for humouring me. My phone bill isn’t going to appreciate the game, but I did. Talk later?”

“…Certainly.” His rival said, and hung up for him.

He removed the phone from his ear for a few seconds, staring at the screen. The missed call from Utagawashi was still there, as well as three text messages. He wanted no business with any of them at the moment, and locked the phone.

Turning to stare out of the window, Hikaru watched the scenery pass him by with a faraway eye. He wasn’t sure, right now, if or when it would be safe to return to Tokyo. Maybe once he knew a little more…well, to do that, he’d need to talk to Utagawashi. But not now, not for a while. Not when it could be Kaminaga’s responses he read, rather than the priest’s.

He sighed, and allowed his head to fall back against the seat’s headrest. It was going to be a long trip.

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It was a very long trip.

With his phone turned off to conserve battery, there was very little to do except sit and worry, and after enough of that Hikaru got so antsy and tense that he started pacing up and down the train in an attempt to clear some of his anxious energy. At one of the changeover stations, he paid an extortionate amount of money for a notebook and pen, and spent the duration of his next train journey recording makeshift kifu of every game with Touya that he could remember.

As it happened, that was a lot of kifu, and a few hours in it began to look like the notebook would run out of space before he even got to the games of the last few months. He tried to write them down in chronological order, but sometimes he didn’t remember a certain game until he’d come to games which had been affected by that previous one, so it ended up as a bit of a mess. And, considering it was only a notebook, not actual kifu paper…well, it was really a mess. It was at least something to do which didn’t involve extensive fretting, though, so he kept on with it.

Eventually, a couple of the stations he passed started to look a bit familiar. Hikaru checked the timetables, and confirmed that he was getting close to Osaka. He turned his phone on, promptly receiving like a hundred messages, and sent one to Yashiro informing him that he was about twenty
minutes away. That task completed, Hikaru inspected the other messages. There was one from Akari, demanding to know where he was going all of a sudden, a reminder from Touya to let his students know that their lessons were cancelled, and to contact the Go Association if he’d be missing his match on Wednesday…and, finally, the count of Utagawashi messages had risen to four.

Stubbornly ignoring the priest’s messages, Hikaru sent an affirmative to Touya and a mocking response to Akari along the lines of ‘wouldn’t you like to know?’, which he’d likely pay for later, but it was totally worth it to imagine her indignation. He also sent texts and emails to his students to inform them of the cancellation, and with that done, settled in to stare out of the window for the remainder of the journey.

Yashiro was waiting on the platform when he arrived, sometime approaching seven in the evening. He stepped forwards and pulled Hikaru off to the side, ignoring his protests until they were out of the other passengers’ way. The taller boy released him, and then proceeded to inspect him critically, eventually concluding “You look like you should be sleeping off the flu, not traipsing across the country. What the hell are you doing here, Shindou?”

“You look like you should be sleeping off the flu, not traipsing across the country. What the hell are you doing here, Shindou?”

“‘The kami are spiritually fumigating Tokyo at the moment.” Hikaru said after a moment, feeling almost too tired to be properly sarcastic about it. Almost. “It’s not a very healthy place for someone like me to be, so I decided to skip town for a bit.”

Yashiro raised an eyebrow. “What do the kami fumigate for? Spirit termites?”

He nodded sagely. “Something like that. If they didn’t do it from time to time, the shrines would all collapse, and then where would they be?”

“Wherever shrineless kami go, I suppose.” The Kansai pro shrugged. “Well, whatever. It’s sort of late, so we’d best get going. Have you eaten?” He grabbed Hikaru by the sleeve of his hoody again, dragging him towards the exit.

“You don’t need to pull.” Hikaru muttered, lacking the energy to do more than swat half-heartedly at his pushy friend. “And no, I haven’t. I’m seriously hungry.”

“We’ll get some ramen on the way, then.” Yashiro nodded decisively.

He considered the likelihood of his colleague being a divine messenger of some sort, and ultimately decided that it was very improbable. Nonetheless, though… “I knew there was a reason why I picked Osaka to escape to.” He mused.

“I live here?” Yashiro suggested, directing him and his backpack to a crossing.

“…pretty much, actually.” Hikaru agreed, and allowed himself to be led along with a sigh.

He felt exhausted, worried, and emotionally wrung-out. He was tense as hell and had no idea what he was doing, but at least he was far away from Kaminaga’s demon. So far, Osaka seemed blissfully free of obvious malicious spirits, and he had with him a friend who might not be endangered by his mere presence. A friend who was bringing him to ramen.

Far more quietly than he usually would, Hikaru accompanied Yashiro through the streets, feeling very grateful for the people he had in his life.

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They stopped to eat at a small ramen stand along a road that Yashiro assured him was the way to where he lived, though Hikaru could swear he’d not gone that way before. He obtained a small
bowl, not feeling up to much more, and enjoyed the feeling of life returning to his body as he ate. It was a shame that he still felt so nauseous, because he probably could have eaten much more, but it was at least something.

Yashiro paid after extracting promises from Hikaru to pay him back, and they set out on their way again. After another five minutes of walking, he became certain that this was not where they’d gone before. “Okay, seriously.” He said, glancing around the unfamiliar area. “I know I’m not just imagining this shit. Where are we going?”

His pale-haired friend grinned, and said only “home!”

“Like hell.” Hikaru refuted. “This is not where we went last time, my sense of direction isn’t that bad.” He crossed his arms and glared sidelong at Yashiro, briefly entertaining fanciful thoughts of the boy being some sort of impostor spirit. If it were that, though, he’d probably feel it – spirits strong enough to be seen and touched were meant to be powerful, right? So Yashiro probably wasn’t an impostor. Probably.

“You’re right, we are going a different way this time.” The probably-not-possessed boy agreed cheerfully.

Eyes narrowed, Hikaru asked “So, what, you moved house?”

Looking far too pleased with himself, Yashiro nodded. “Something like that!”

They walked for a few minutes with Hikaru staring suspiciously at his friend and the friend in question acting…well, acting pretty much like he did when he had an amusing secret. He glanced around the area for clues, noting that it was a semi-residential area with a number of apartment buildings, as well as a fair few small food outlets and corner stores.

It was only when Yashiro directed him over to one of the apartment buildings, brandishing a fob for the door, that he came to the logical conclusion. “You moved out!” He accused, following the taller pro into the building and towards the stairs. “I can’t believe you moved out and didn’t tell me! How long has it been?”

Expression profoundly smug, Yashiro strode up the staircase ahead of him. “Just a couple of weeks.” He informed, directing Hikaru to the door for the third floor apartments. “It’s still a bit messy and bare, so keep that in mind. But, yeah, here we are.” He indicated the second apartment on the floor, slotting in his key and unlocking the door.

Hikaru followed him in, looking about with interest. He’d visited Waya’s increasingly self-sufficient place many times, and Isumi had moved into the same apartment block not long after he became a pro. This apartment was similar to theirs, being quite basic and small, but it was a distinct step up in floor space by comparison. Maybe because of better prices – Tokyo was an insanely expensive place to live, after all.

There were still boxes laying around, presumably full of things Yashiro hadn’t been bothered to unpack yet, or otherwise had nowhere to go. A free-standing clothes rail was in the corner with a basic wardrobe hanging from it, as well as a small three-drawer canvas thing to its left. Near the wall was a laptop, charging cable connected to a nearby plug. Hikaru glanced around for and located the goban in another corner, and it was the same cheap thing that he’d been using before.

“Do you have a kitchen?” Hikaru inquired, looking around and locating one door on the left-hand wall, as well as a second on the right-hand wall. Above the left-hand door was a weird open loft of some kind, with steep ladder-stairs leading up on the side. He couldn’t see what was in it, since there
was a curtain drawn over the balcony-bit.

“Of course I have a kitchen, Shindou.” The boy responded, walking over to open the leftmost door. “Here’s the bathroom. That one over there goes to the kitchen, but it’s tiny. And the loft has my bed in it. It’s all pretty basic, but it’s what I can afford, so.” He shrugged.

Not bothering to be hesitant about it, Hikaru walked through to poke his face into the kitchen. It was pretty tiny, with an electric stove, a microwave, a diminutive fridge-freezer, and a small metal sink. There was barely enough floor space to turn around. There didn’t seem to be a washing machine, but there was a rice cooker and a kettle in one corner. He rooted through the cupboards and drawers with interest, locating a few basic pots and pans, plates and bowls, and generally the sort of meagre subsistence stuff that you’d expect of a young person’s apartment. “You’re doing better than Waya did, to start.” He assessed, after he’d invaded most of the kitchen. “Though you don’t have a washing machine, either.”

Yashiro, who had been watching his exploration with tolerant amusement, explained “There’s a laundry room on the ground floor which is pretty cheap, so I just use that.”

“Huh.” Hikaru stood back. “I’m actually pretty surprised your parents let you move out so soon. Weren’t they really clingy?”

“Kind of, yeah.” He nodded, and walked back out into the main room. “They wouldn’t let me do it until I proved I had enough for all my utility bills and could cook for myself, but I managed eventually. Anyway…I have a spare futon you can use. There’s enough space to put it in here, or I can roll it out in my loft. I think there’s enough room.” He looked up to frown at the loft-curtain. “Whichever you like.”

Hikaru did not really want to share a space that small with someone if it wasn’t necessary. “In here, I think.” He decided. Yashiro made an affirmative sound and disappeared into the canvas wardrobe, and Hikaru took the opportunity to make himself at home. He extracted his toiletries and took them to the yet-unexplored bathroom, which was apparently a wet room even tinier than the kitchen. After a quick inspection of the rather cramped space, Hikaru put his things in a corner of the floor, rummaging through his bag. He removed his phone’s charging cable, and after brief hesitation the incense burner, too. He didn’t know if he’d have the opportunity to use it here, and there was no house shrine anyway, but…well, honestly, it was sort of bothering him that he’d not had the chance to ‘talk’ with Sai that day, particularly with all that had happened.

Hikaru looked up at the sound of Yashiro zipping the wardrobe up, arms laden with futon. He stood and went to help him, setting it out along the wall and occupying maybe a quarter of the available floor space. “If you’re sleeping late, you’ll have to deal with me coming in and out of the loft.” His host said, standing up to look over the arrangement critically. “It’s a bit of an old futon, isn’t it?” He added, after a moment.

It was indeed a bit yellow stained, with a few holes here and there, but that hardly mattered. “Eh, it does the job.”

The other boy nodded absently, eyes intent on Hikaru’s face. “How long is it you’re staying?” He asked, slowly. “You didn’t say.”

Hikaru sighed, slumping a little as he sat on the futon. “A couple of days, maybe? It depends.”

“Don’t you have a match this week?” Yashiro, after a moment of consideration, sat down cross-legged on the floor to face him. “And didn’t you say you entered the Kisei league, as well? When are the matches for that?”
“I have a game Wednesday.” He replied evasively. “Kisei matches are on Saturdays.”

Yashiro leaned forwards, and perhaps unintentionally, his height meant that he loomed a bit. “So you’re going back around Tuesday?”

“…Maybe.” Hikaru looked away. “It depends.”

The taller boy studied his expression with uncomfortable seriousness, brows furrowed. “…A couple of the others have messaged me to ask if I know where you’ve gone.” He said, pensively. “If you’re not back in time for your match on Wednesday, I’ll tell them that you’re here.”

Hikaru straightened, displeased. He *hoped* he’d be back by then, but… “Saturday.” He insisted. “If I’m not back by then, feel free.”

Yashiro stared at him. Hikaru stared back. Eventually, his host nodded. “If you’re not back for your Kisei match, I’ll tell them all that you’re here.”

He slumped again, letting out a sigh. So, he had time to sort himself out. That was good. “Thanks.” He expressed, after a moment. The other boy was still frowning, in a rather more pensive manner than usual. Hikaru regarded this with a sort of wary anticipation, aware that questions might be forthcoming but not feeling quite up to the task of deflecting them.

Yashiro, however, proved himself to be an unusually excellent friend by exhaling, standing up, and saying “I won’t ask you any uncomfortable questions tonight. But I make no promises for later, okay?”

Hikaru looked up at him with wonder. “Yeah, sure.” He agreed, somewhat surprised.

“I’m *not* letting you off the hook with explaining why you’re fleeing Tokyo like a man possessed.” Yashiro stressed, eliciting a flinch at the unfortunate word choice. “It’s just you look kind of pathetic at the moment, and if I interrogated you now it would basically be like kicking a puppy.”

“Yeah, sure.” Hikaru said again, and eyed the goban-occupied section of the room. “Now, did you want to get thrashed mercilessly across a goban immediately, or later?”

“Who would thrash who?” His host asked dubiously. “You look like you’re about to pass out.”

“I look *fabulous.*” He refuted. “Just bring the damn goban over, I can’t be bothered to move.”

The game went a long way towards making Hikaru feel better. The spiritually-induced nausea didn’t seem to be fading at all, nor did the anxiety, but it was at least a comfortable and familiar distraction. As with his earlier game, Hikaru’s play was somewhat tame and uninspired, with a lot less intricacy than he usually managed, but he was too tired for that. Instead, he went with a sort of aggressive defence, claiming his territory very solidly before using it as a forward base to cut Yashiro’s lesser defended clusters to pieces.

That took them through to about nine in the evening, by which point Hikaru was honestly feeling very tired. Yashiro took one look at him after resigning and said “Yeah, let’s hold off on the discussion. You need to get some fucking sleep.”

“Yes, mother.” He drawled back, leaning forwards to clear away his stones. That completed, Yashiro ferried the board and its goke across the room again, put them down, and then headed to his little bathroom. Hikaru fished out the sleep-clothes from his bag while he waited, removing his fan from his pocket and putting it beside the futon. He looked at it pensively, a little too exhausted to really process the complexity of emotion that it evoked.
Yashiro emerged from the bathroom in short order, bade him good night, and disappeared into his loft with the laptop under-arm, curtain pulling fully shut behind him. It was a good enough time to get himself ready for sleep, so Hikaru went to brush his teeth, changed into his pyjamas, and then scouted the perimeter of the main room for a few minutes in search of the light switch. Locating it, he plunged the room into darkness, located the futon by a combination of its pale colour and light through the window, and got into bed with a sigh.

He really was so done with today. In the morning, he’d have to deal with the messages from Utagawashi, and actually think about all of this, but…

Now, he just wanted to sleep.

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Despite being profoundly exhausted, by both the frightening day and the long journey, Hikaru did not have a lot of luck in staying asleep that night. He woke frequently, sitting up to stare into the darkened room with vestiges of fear clinging to his half-formed thoughts, heartbeat thudding hard and eyes conjuring the shapes of monsters in the shadows. Sluggish terror accompanied him out of each nightmare, with every one bearing the uncomfortably vivid memory of that cursed length of steel. It took a long time to calm himself when he woke, the unfamiliar streets of Osaka through the window both unsettling and comforting at once.

He’d have felt more at ease in a familiar setting, like at home with the kamidana. Even now, he ached to light some incense and allow the familiar scent to overwhelm him. The grief and sorrow were painful and terrible in their own ways…but they were honest, and made sense. Grieving for someone like Sai was only right, after all. But…the sick fear that the thought of that demon-sword provoked? It was horrible, like a blight on his mind and body, and he couldn’t seem to get past it, no matter how far away from the demon itself he was. He would take the pure, clean pain of grief over that any day.

Still, it was reassuring to know that he was far away from where he’d encountered that awful thing. No one except Yashiro knew where he was, after all, and he doubted Kaminaga was spiritually sensitive enough to detect him all the way over in Osaka. It felt much safer to be here, rather than back in Tokyo.

Hikaru stood by the windowsill, noting the lightening sky and the slow onset of morning birdsong. He felt exhausted, perhaps more so in some ways than he had before he’d slept. He didn’t feel quite as…well, distant, as he had the night before. But in a way, that was worse. With a clearer head, he could appreciate the nausea and the trepidation all the more. It was almost humiliating. His first meeting with a less-than-pleasant spirit, and he fled all the way to Osaka? Here he was, hundreds of kilometres from the spirit, and that fear and disgust hadn’t faded.

He wondered, fingers clenching on the windowsill, if he’d really left to protect his family, or if he was just a coward.

With a sigh, he left the window and sat cross-legged on the dishevelled futon. Gently, he picked up the fan from the floor beside it and held it in front of him, fully spread. It was worn, more so every week, but so very precious. He wondered if Sai would have had any answers for this situation. Would the sword-spirit have been dangerous to him, too? Was inter-spirit violence something that happened? If so, he couldn’t imagine Sai being very good at it – the ghost might have been a devil on the goban, but he’d seemed far too peaceful to be hiding a militant side. Maybe Hikaru would have had to drag them both away from the scary spirit.

He remembered how horrified Sai had been at the sight of anything remotely resembling frogs and
toads. It had been sort of hilarious and endearing, really, to see this thousand year old ghost absolutely freak out at the sight of an innocuous amphibian in their path. Would he have reacted similarly to something like that demon? Would he even have noticed the demon? Sai had never shown any indication of noticing other ghosts or spirits, which…well, surely spirits should be able to detect each other perfectly? But maybe they couldn’t.

It kept coming back to him not knowing enough.

Hikaru checked the time wearily, noting that it wasn’t even six in the morning yet. Maybe later, after Yashiro had left for the Kansai branch, he could see what Utagawashi had sent him. He’d have some time alone then, after all, which was best if he ran the risk of freaking out.

He huffed, putting the fan back down at the bedside, and climbed back into the futon.

Maybe he’d be able to sleep for more than an hour, this time.

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Hikaru did not sleep for more than an hour, that time.

However, in a slight improvement on the other awakenings he’d experienced that night, it was Yashiro that woke him, staggering through the room at about seven in the morning, nearly tripping over Hikaru’s arm, and half-stepping on his shoulder in the process.

“Fuck, Shindou. Forgot you were there.” He cursed with a notable slur, quite clearly not really awake yet.

Hikaru, who had woken somewhat violently at the sudden contact and had promptly leapt half-way out of bed, stared at Yashiro with wild eyes and probably wilder hair. “Holy shit,” He spluttered, after a moment. “Please don’t trip over your guests as they sleep. It’s seriously fucking startling.”

“Sorry.” His host apologised, rubbing at his face and eyes. “In my defence, I don’t think I’m actually awake yet.”

“Why even are you awake? Is your game that early?”

“Yep.” Yashiro sighed forlornly. “They know I live close now, so I get the most bullshit times.” He shook his head. “Well, whatever. I’m going to make some breakfast rice. Want some?”

“No.” Hikaru denied, grumpy. “I’m going back to sleep.”

The tall boy shrugged. “Suit yourself, then.” He said. “I’ll leave my spare key and fob on the windowsill for you. If you want to go out in the day, you can. Just don’t get lost.”

“As if.” He sniffed, crouching down to immerse himself in bedding again. “Now shut up, I’m trying to sleep.”

“Whatsoever you say.” Yashiro agreed, staggering through to the kitchen.

Hikaru didn’t have a lot of luck in falling asleep, as his host was moving around and doing stuff and generally making enough noise to distract him from slumber – he did at least manage a sort of light doze, but it definitely wasn’t restful sleep. Eventually, however, Yashiro left the apartment, and Hikaru managed to fall asleep properly.

Somewhat predictably, the next time he woke it was to a sense of dread and fear and urgency, with
the sensation of the demon’s menace uncomfortably vivid. As he sat up and gripped the fan, it faded slightly, but stayed on as ambient low-level horror.

Sighing, he checked the time. He’d actually slept a fair amount that time, and it was now nine in the morning. Deciding that it would have to do, Hikaru roused himself and went to take advantage of Yashiro’s shower. The water turned out to be lukewarm to start, gradually shifting to horribly cold, so he kept it short and appropriated a towel to dry himself with, inspecting himself critically in the barely-steamed mirror. He looked like absolute crap, all pale and tired, with massive bags under his eyes.

Making a face at his reflection, Hikaru dressed and threw his pyjamas over at the futon, then went to see if Yashiro had anything edible. There was some cold rice from earlier, so he unenthusiastically consumed it before heading through to clear up his stuff and make the futon.

Once that was done…well, there wasn’t any use putting it off further.

He sat down on the futon, fan at his side, and opened the messages from Utagawashi.

The first one, sent in the morning probably not long after Hikaru had run away, read ‘What were you thinking, running off like that? Kaminaga-san has to go home in a few hours, you need to come back.’

That was promising. Had the exorcist gone home so quickly? He pressed for the next text. This one said ‘He’s decided to go home early, since you don’t seem to be coming back. I hope you’re pleased.’

Hikaru was, in fact, quite pleased by that. He clicked through. ‘Shindou, this isn’t good.’ The third message began, its time signature a few hours after the second. ‘I was talking to Kaminaga-san yesterday, and he says you’re at a very risky point in your learning. Please contact me, we can rearrange a visit.’

That one was a bit concerning. Even if Kaminaga was under demonic influence, he probably knew what he was talking about. Risky how? Did this relate to why his wounds had become worse? Frowning, Hikaru went to the fourth message of five. This one veered back into a chiding tone, saying ‘I’m not sure why you ran away like you did. Kaminaga-san doesn’t feel pleasant, certainly, but that bad? Surely it’s just the shock of sensing something like this for the first time?’

He scowled at the message, and rather violently went through to the fifth and final one. It was a single sentence, a question, asking ‘Why did you think that the sword-spirit was dangerous?’ Without any follow-up…maybe the priest had doubts himself.

Hikaru looked over the messages, considering what to reply. Eventually, he composed his message. ‘That sword is a fucking demon. I don’t care what you say, it’s dangerous. I’m not going near that thing. Now, what’s this about me being at a ‘risky’ stage?’ After looking over the words, he frowned and sent it. As a basic response, it would do well enough.

How soon he got a reply would depend on Utagawashi, he supposed. Depending on how the priest felt about this whole thing, he might or might not have his phone with him. He glanced over at the goban at the side of the room, wondering if he should replay a game to pass the time, and nearly dropped his phone when it started ringing in his hand.

Cursing, he inspected the name on the screen and stared for a moment, incredulous. It was, of course, Utagawashi. Was he feeling that urgent about this?
Squashing down his nerves, he pressed the answer button and held the phone to his ear. “Hello?”

“Shindou.” The voice on the other end was relieved, annoyed, and serious all at once. It was actually somewhat impressive, fitting that much expression into a single name. “Thank Inari-sama. I was worried you were going to completely ignore me.”

“Well, I’m not.” He replied uselessly.

“This is quite serious, Shindou. Before that whole mess yesterday, Kaminaga-san spoke to me and…well, I made some serious mistakes when advising you. People like you need to be much more careful about their wounds.” The words were frustrated and surprisingly emotional. “I’m sorry. I should have contacted him before.”

Hikaru was silent for several moments. Utagawashi…he sounded pretty worried. And quite messed up about the whole thing. “Hey.” He said. “I wasn’t lying, yesterday. He should have made sure that you knew that stuff. It’s not your fault he didn’t.”

“Maybe so. But it should have been obvious how different your case was.” The priest fretted. “And now you’re saying you won’t go near Kaminaga-san? How else are you going to learn?”

“Well, didn’t he tell you anything about how I was doing stuff wrong?” He inquired, shuffling to sit back against the wall, legs on the futon.

“…Well, a little, perhaps.” Utagawashi answered, after a moment. “Apparently…to access one’s spiritual abilities, you need to access the traces that the spirit left on you. Whether on a wound, or from ambient interaction. With a small wound like mine, it was fine to poke at it to find that residue, but for you…” The man trailed off, awkwardly.

That last part might have worried Hikaru more if it weren’t for what he’d said before. “…’Traces’?” He repeated, quietly. “You…what do you mean by that?”

There was a pause. “When a spirit spends time around a regular human, they leave traces of themselves on them. Residue of their own personal energy, if you will.” The priest said. “When there are wounds, there are always traces. Occasionally several. In a possession…apparently, very many indeed.”

Hikaru sat silently for a good while, trying to run that through his head.

Traces. Traces of a spirit.

“…Shindou? Are you still there?” Utagawashi asked worriedly once several seconds had passed.

“They…leave traces of themselves.” He parroted again, his free hand going to the fan almost unconsciously, fingers trembling. “You’re saying…” He couldn’t finish. He watched his hand shake around the fan.

There was something of Sai left in him? Something more than a ghost of a ghost in his Go? Something more than just memories and an aching void? And…there had been, all along?

He…didn’t know what to think about that. Grief and desperation rolled over him, a bitter and painful sort of hope joining them.

Warily, the priest spoke again. “As it turns out, it isn’t the wounds at all which determine the magnitude of our spiritual capabilities.” He explained. “It’s the spiritual traces left by the spirit. Violent encounters almost always leave far more residue, and worse wounds as well. Possession
leaves the most, because the spirit actually occupies the human spirit. My wound, and my residue, are insignificant enough that one is more or less the other…but it’s wholly different for you.”

“If there are traces of him there, and so many of them,” Hikaru began, the words heavy and painful. “Then why haven’t I found anything before?” If there were traces of Sai left behind in him…he wanted them, damn it. It might not be the real thing, but…

“It’s possible that you have, and it was very subtle. A small enough trace, like mine, only tends to provoke the emotional echoes, rather than the sense of the spirit itself. If you didn’t have at least that…well, as I understand it, you would not have been able to detect anything strange about Kaminaga-san at all.” Utagawashi elaborated, apparently avoiding the issue of the sword for now.

That was even worse. He hadn’t even noticed a little piece of Sai in his head? Palms clammy, Hikaru breathed deeply. “What have I been doing wrong, then?” He asked, gathering his will against all the damned emotion.

“You…” Utagawashi began hesitantly. “He described it like…well, like you had a gaping chest wound with a vital organ or two missing, and you’d decided to start pulling at the remaining organs and edges of the wound. So, it naturally got worse.”

“That’s gross.” Hikaru muttered, more or less on reflex. “And not good. What should I be doing instead?”

“I’m…not completely sure. He didn’t say anything about that, just told me off for what I had done wrong.” The priest sighed. “I think you’re supposed to be searching around the edges of the wound for traces, or something like that. I really don’t know. Shindou…you should really speak to Kaminaga-san about this.”

Well, the response to that was pretty obvious.

“Well no.” He declared immediately, and very firmly at that. “And that’s all there is to say on the matter.”

A few seconds passed silently. “Aren’t you simply overreacting? That sword has been contained for decades, and while it and Kaminaga-san hardly feel pleasant, I doubt they warranted the sort of response you gave.”

“I’m not overreacting.” Hikaru denied vehemently. “That sword is a demon, and it sure as hell isn’t contained. Or if it is, the containment isn’t doing a good enough job.”

There was another, lengthy pause. “Why do you say that?” Utagawashi asked, eventually. Maybe he was actually listening?

“I felt it.” He said, instantly. “And not just in the sword. It…it was reaching out, all around, but it was…it was sort of in Kaminaga. Like there were little chunks of it in him, and it was connected to them. They were…pulsing, kind of, at the same time.” With a shudder, he remembered the grotesque feeling of the demon’s malevolence resonating with the exact same murderous energy in the exorcist himself. It had felt…almost parasitic. Diseased, even. “What even is it, anyway? Is it a tsukumogami?” He asked, trying and failing to shrug off the memory of that disgusting sensation.

“…Sword-spirits are a type of tsukumogami, in a way, given that they are spiritual objects.” The priest responded, sounding troubled. “Supposedly, not all are malevolent, but most are. Some are forged the way they are, rather than gaining power over time. The legendary Muramasa blades are allegedly among these. They…are said to be possessing spirits, taking control of a human host when
“Kaminaga said that the sword gave him his scars.” Hikaru reminded. “Was he possessed, then?”

“I don’t think so?” Utagawashi answered uncertainly. “He never felt that badly wounded. Anyway, if I know the stories correctly, the human who cuts himself on a powerful sword-spirit is instantly lost beyond redemption, so it couldn’t have been that. I never asked much about the history of the sword...Perhaps he fought its host, or perhaps the sword-spirit is capable of other forms of possession.”

“Could be?” Hikaru offered, not knowing nearly enough about that. “It must be – it really did feel like that thing was...diseaseing him, somehow.”

A small, repulsed sound came down the line. “I sincerely hope you are wrong. But possessing spirits can be very cunning, and very patient. It’s...possible, I suppose, that over the years the thing has begun to fool him, or he became lax with its containment.” There was a short pause, and a sigh. “If you’re right...well, you were sensible to run away from it. You said you could feel it reaching out?”

Hikaru nodded, belatedly realising that this was not audible, and saying “Yeah,” instead. He shivered, revulsion collecting as nausea in his throat as he thought about it, now-familiar anxiety surging in him. “It didn’t seem interested in you. It was...connected to Kaminaga. But.” He stopped, unsure of how to continue. “I...”

A few seconds passed. Voice suddenly very intent, Utagawashi asked “Shindou. How did you feel yesterday, after you ran away?”

Taken aback, he blinked. “Why?”

“Humour me.” The words were unusually authoritative.

“Um.” He began, eloquently. “Sick. Worried. Scared, I guess. I’m actually not in Tokyo right now, I grabbed some stuff and left.”

Incredulous, Utagawashi said “You were worried and scared enough even after leaving the demon’s presence to flee the city?” At the small affirmative response, he asked “Why?”

“I dunno.” Hikaru responded defensively. “I just...knew I had to get away from it, and I couldn’t risk it finding me. I don’t know how demons work, I was worried it would track me down, maybe hurt my family.”

“...You seem very certain that it would be a danger to you, specifically. That it would seek you out, and maybe the people around you.” The priest observed, neutrally.

Hikaru opened his mouth to answer ‘duh’, but stopped. He...why was he so sure that it was a concern? “It’s...dangerous. I had to get away from it. I don’t know why I knew that.”

“Shindou.” The man began, carefully. “You said it was reaching out. That it didn’t seem interested in me. You didn’t mention yourself. Was it interested in you?”

“It wasn’t interested in you, no. It was connected to Kaminaga.” He repeated himself, trying to follow the thought through to its conclusion. “It – I–“ He stumbled over words, finding himself unexpectedly dizzy. The sword-spirit hadn’t been interested in the priest, had been connected to the exorcist, and...and, what? “I...can’t. I can’t...it...” Why couldn’t he think? He couldn’t think and it was terrifying.
“Focus, Shindou. Don’t think, just answer. Did it reach out to you?”

Panic starting to shorten his breaths, Hikaru gathered all the willpower and focus he could manage and said “Yes. Yeah, it…it did.” He could…he could remember that now, couldn’t he? Not just the malevolent presence, the murderous will, but also a sickening reach and a pull-

“And how do you feel now?” The voice cut through his terror a little, its tone very firm and unexpectedly calm.

“Sick. Scared. Worried.” He answered, trying to restrain himself from freaking out in a very major way. “I kept having nightmares, all last night. I feel just like I did yesterday. That…that’s not normal, is it?”

There was a brief period of silence. “No. It isn’t.” A beat. “I think you should get back here, Shindou. As soon as you can.”

Chapter End Notes

Minor revisions made for publishing here. Also, chapter 10 has just reached tumblr.

Quite a lot of the main questline here, and comparatively little Go. Next chapter is similar in that regard, but I expect 11 to be a bit more balanced.

Thanks to everyone for the comments I’ve been getting. It’s really very lovely. I’m also pleased to declare that, when sorting by kudos, I’m now on the first page of Hikago fics here on ao3, which is frankly fabulous. First page when sorting by bookmarks and comments, too. I was not expecting Paper Cranes to become this popular.

Credits: The interpretation of sword spirits here is heavily inspired by Vathara’s ‘Blades of Blood’, a Rurouni Kenshin fanfiction. It’s an excellent read, if you’re in that fandom. Or even if you aren’t, to be honest - Blades of Blood is an AU, you could follow it without having seen the anime. So consider it recced.

Thanks for reading.

03/06/18 – edited some train stuff. Edited Yashiro’s starter apartment to be more realistic. Had to edit a lot of sentences in light of that.
Hikaru listened to the kannushi speak, attempting to wrangle his panic down to a somewhat acceptable level. He wasn’t particularly successful, given that the three words ‘get back here’ produced a swift and alarming horror.

“No.” he said, the word scrambling out from behind his lips pretty much of its own accord. “I’m not going back yet.” His fingers were numb around the phone.

“What?” Utagawashi’s voice was appalled, even slightly outraged. “Whyever not? This is…this could be very bad, Shindou. I need to get you here, see if a few ofuda will do you some good-“

“I…It’s too close. To that damned sword.” Hikaru answered, stumbling over his words. He could hardly justify the feeling at all, he just knew that every part of him screamed bad idea at the mere thought of heading any closer to where the demon was.

“Kaminaga is in Yokohama!” Came the incredulous protest over the phone.

He shook his head, trying to breathe more slowly. “You don’t know that. That sword…I’m sure it’s affecting him. He might be hanging around.” Even to himself, the words sounded outrageously paranoid, completely ridiculous, but…he couldn’t help feeling it. If he got near that demon again, bad things would happen. He was certain of it. Going in a direction that would bring him any closer to it was just…utterly unacceptable.

There was a pause. “That is utterly idiotic!” The priest said, voice a little high from stress. “I can’t do anything for you from here…well, I could pray, I suppose, but I have no idea if that would help you.”

“I know it’s stupid. I just…can’t go back, not now.” Hikaru swallowed, inhaling slowly through his nose. He tried to think past the fog of fear that obscured his every thought. “What…” He stopped to breathe again. “What do you think it did to me?”

A brief silence held. “It could be a number of things.” Utagawashi admitted, quiet and worried. “The fact that you’re still experiencing the fear and worry, even as far away as you are, might suggest it wounded you somehow, and you’re feeling new emotional echoes. But…that explanation doesn’t quite suffice when considering your urgency to escape, and your insistence on not returning.”

He shuddered at the thought of that thing having left a wound on him, some of its essence. That would have been bad enough, but apparently it wasn’t that…and, by the sounds of it, something even worse. “Please tell me it’s not possessing me.” He said, plaintively.

Alarimgly, Utagawashi hesitated before answering. “Probably not.” He said, after a moment.
“…‘probably’?!” He exclaimed, stumbling to his feet in a burst of tightly-controlled nervous energy, and beginning to pace a little. “What the hell do you mean by ‘probably’? That’s really not at all reassuring, you know!”

“You behaviour would be much stranger if it were actually possessing you.” He replied, which was at least a tiny little step in the reassuring direction. “You’re speaking to me and worrying about this, which is a good sign. However…you did have difficulty remembering a part of your encounter. Or speaking about it, or thinking, whichever. That is…well, if I’m to be honest, that’s an early sign of possession, or at the very least spiritual tampering.”

“Fuck.” Hikaru said, emphatically. A litany of ‘oh shit’ sprouted in his mind and began to grow, careening off in all directions like a particularly unruly weed.

“Quite. It’s…” Utagawashi paused, apparently to consider his words. “It’s not good.” He settled on. “I would really like to have you back here to see if I can find out more, but if you’re certain you shouldn’t return for now…”

He didn’t answer for a while, too busy controlling his frantic mind. “Okay.” He said, mostly to himself, before raising his voice. “So. You…think the demon got me. At least a little bit.” It felt…plausible. He’d been feeling that same urgent, fretful terror ever since he encountered the damned sword, and it wasn’t going away, just like the grief from his Sai-wounds didn’t ever go away. And the nightmares…

“Probably.” The priest’s voice was very anxious. “If even such a brief meeting could cause something like this…you were right to run away. I don’t know what might have happened, had you stayed.”

“It wouldn’t have been good.” Hikaru muttered darkly, remembering that terrified impulse to escape. “And it’s not a good idea for me to go near it again.”

“…You seem to have very good instincts, with this.” Utagawashi observed. “Is there anything else that you feel about this? Any feelings or impressions that you can’t quite explain?”

Hikaru paused, and thought. “I shouldn’t go anywhere near where it might be.” He said, though he’d more or less already said that. What else, though? He’d been anxious and fearful more-or-less constantly, he’d kept waking up with a sense of terror and urgency, and he still felt it now. He swallowed. “Um,” he said, leaning shakily against a wall. “I…I think I’m on a time limit, here.”

“Time limit?” The man repeated sharply.

“Yeah. It’s like – I need to do something. And…soon, I think.” He breathed out, focusing on the reassuring weight of the fan in his hand as he became increasingly certain that he shouldn’t have wasted time sleeping. “But I don’t know what.”

“…Try investigating your wounds, as you were before.” Utagawashi said, after a moment. “Don’t go reaching into them like you were before, that was harming you. If the spirit is doing something to you…you might be able to detect it there. There might be unfamiliar wounds, unfamiliar residue, something like that.”

He shivered, and sat back down on the futon. He’d rather not risk passing out while standing up – the last thing he needed now was to hit his head. “Yeah, sure.” He agreed, shifting. “I’ll…try that now. I’m going to put you on speakerphone, okay? I’ve passed out while doing this stuff before, so…” Pressing the button, he put the phone on the floor beside the futon.
“You’ve passed out?” Utagawashi’s strident tones emerged through the louder speakerphone setting. “Why did you never mention that before? I thought that time at the shrine was the only one!”

“Kind of not what’s important here.” Hikaru answered wryly. “Shut up for a minute and let me do the thing.” Obligingly, no further words came through his phone’s speaker, though he did hear some low-level disgruntled muttering.

A little shakily, Hikaru braced himself, closed his eyes, and reached.

It had been quite a while since he last did anything like this. He felt different, somehow, as he stretched out in that intangible way that he had such difficulty describing. If he’d been reaching out with a weak arm and weak body before, not-limbs trembling in the dark, now he reached with a strong hand into less-ubiquitous shadows, despite the fear that pulled at him.

It…felt different. The place itself, his soul or spirit or mind or whatever it was meant to be. The grief and pain were familiar foes here, surrounding him in a growing tide as he neared that awful void he’d apparently made even worse with his blind meddling, but there was also something…off. A vague wrongness, like a single discordant note in a symphony, or the scent of rot drifting on fresh air. Cautious, he reached further, and soon enough he was there at the familiar edge, a yawning pit of agonising loss waiting to grasp him as soon as he stepped too close-

Hikaru stopped, feeling carefully at the edges of his mangled spirit.

Here, at least, there was no difference. So close to the wounds, he felt himself become heavy with emotion, loss weighing on him and choking his throat with sorrow. Sai, he thought, despairingly, before pushing past the melancholy and feeling around.

Before, he’d always tried to go forwards, rather than around – straight into the bleak abyss of Sai’s intolerable absence. It was somewhat disorientating to bypass that, and altogether far easier. He walked the shredded cliff-edge of the chasm, feeling the emotional echoes shift and claw at him as he went. In places, they were thinner, and easier to bear; in others, where the wounds seemed especially bad, they were heavy and hopeless. Here and there, he came across what felt like bright specks of pain, tiny starbursts of bittersweet memory clinging to him – he remembered a flash of indigo hair, a smile hidden behind a fan, the broadening depression of a ghost dissatisfied with his existence-

And then…then, there was something else. Something that built on that sour note he’d felt.

Hikaru experienced it first as a sense of unease, radiating from afar. In the ‘dark’, it was almost like a dim and ominous glow, with a source too distant to discern. After a pause, he continued forwards at the edges of the void, trailing memory-specks like motes of light in his wake. The low-level unease broadened into a threatening thrum of warning, fear and anxiety blooming in bloody shades as he drew closer, closer – and –

It was there! A careful, abominable presence, trailing in from the void and clinging to the edges of his wounds, its dark tracery like bitter claws in the flesh of his soul – and it pulsed, it lived! A beating heart of madness, that with every second grew stronger, more entrenched, thirsty roots reaching further and further in-

White with horror, Hikaru half-recoiled from his mind, the physical world insinuating itself into his awareness, though that abhorrent, detestable thing remained bright and terrible and undeniably there— “It’s…fuck.” He said, voice trembling. “It – the demon – it’s there, just a little bit, and it’s growing—“

If there was a response from the phone, he didn’t hear it, only a growing ringing sound as he stared both at the wall and at the invading entity in his head.
It noticed him, noticed his attention on it, noticed how he’d been reaching towards it, and it reached back. The physical world and its senses vanished again in the face of overwhelming horror, his revulsion and panic flaring like a bright flame as it touched, singing satisfaction and murderous glee and the promise of power into his head. It was loud, loud enough that he had difficulty thinking, that the ever-present grief and sorrow of his wounds became, somehow, more and more difficult to discern…

We will be together, said a silence at the heart of the unbearable noise, hypnotic and soothing. We will be together, and there will be no more pain.

He…couldn’t feel the void, anymore. It was…almost pleasant, like the feeling of half-painful numbness you might get after putting ice on a wound. He couldn’t feel the void, and the aching absence of Sai was so distant. With every second, that unconquerable loss seemed more and more irrelevant…and that? That was not okay.

Hikaru snapped.

In a burst of panic and fury, he broke out of the sound and its silence. Awareness of the spiritual surroundings returned – there was the demon’s retreating tendril, there its hooking grasp on the edge of his wounds, there its swelling core of bloody will…

Pain and anguish had returned to him, trailing around metaphysical fingers like whispers of wind. Grief was there again, and the sprawling void, that calamitous bleeding wound that Sai had left behind, and they all belonged. They were horrible, sickening injuries, but they were his. This piece of demon hooking itself into his soul was not. It was wrong, it was sickening, it did not belong and it absolutely would never, never be allowed to make him forget Sai-

Terror and horror and incandescent rage lighting up his mind, Hikaru reached out and burned.

It hurt. It seriously fucking hurt. If he’d experienced this in a physical world, he’d have screamed and cried at it, but this was not a physical realm. Bracing himself grimly against the pain, he took vicious satisfaction from the way the demon-shard twisted and writhed and flickered as he tore into it. He filled it with light and seared it, pulling its claws from the edges of his spirit with ruthless and reckless determination, hunting out every abominable trace it had left and destroying that as well, no matter how agonising it was.

And then it was gone.

Slowly, the fear and fury that had fuelled him dissipated, with nowhere left to go. Where the demon had gained a foothold, on the edge of his existing wounds, there was now an immensely painful and bizarrely bright scar, but no trace of the demon at all. He acknowledged this with a sort of stunned triumph, aware that he’d somehow ousted the thing but in far too much pain to try to figure out how he’d managed it.

With lingering paranoia, Hikaru did a last check for vestiges of sword-spirit, confirming the absence of that ominous wrongness, and then withdrew from his spirit.

Immediately, he was choking.

Spluttering and coughing, Hikaru turned to the side, wheezing painfully to hack out the obstruction to his airways. Blinking, he found that his vision was swimming crazily, he was absolutely covered in vomit, and Utagawashi was going kind of mad over the phone.

“Shindou!” The priest shouted at him, the voice coming from his right. “What’s happening? Answer
me, for Inari’s sake!”

“Holy shit,” Hikaru gasped, still coughing. He tried to sit upright properly, but didn’t do very well at it. He was so dizzy that he found himself thudding back onto the futon with a damp slap, splatting his face onto some of the sick he’d apparently produced. It was absolutely disgusting and *everything hurt*. He spluttered and wheezed pitifully on his side.

Utagawashi was quiet for maybe three seconds, after which he started talking again. “What happened? Why are you coughing?” He demanded.

His throat in some serious pain by this point, Hikaru tried again to sit up, this time more slowly. Supporting himself on his hands, he managed it, looking around wildly. Everything was blurry, shapes and colours swimming crazily. “I can’t see straight.” He said, plaintively. His voice sounded odd, like he was hearing it from underwater.

“*Answer the questions,*” The priest implored. His voice sounded the same sort of distant and distorted.

He thought of the questions. “Oh, uh. I threw up. Also ripped the bit of demon out of my head.” He said. “It *really* hurt.”

“…That will have been why you screamed, then.” Came the response after a moment. “You *ripped it out*?”

“I screamed?” Hikaru asked, in the same incredulous tone. “Well, shit. I hope none of the neighbours will fuss.” He blinked rapidly, grateful to find that his eyesight had resolved itself somewhat, though his head was still absolutely swimming, and also aching like a complete bitch. His voice still sounded unnaturally distant. “Look, Utagawashi, I’ll call you back later.” Ignoring protests, he reached over and pressed the button to end the call, missing a couple of times before managing it.

Groaning, he looked around to survey the situation. He himself was very much covered in vomit, with lovely bits of half-digested rice all around, and the futon had sustained a bit of nasty too. He grimaced at it, grateful that it was only an old thing, and absently rejected the attempted call from Utagawashi. “Urghh.” He sighed, and got up to stagger wildly to the wet room.

This time the shower was freezing cold, which at least sort of helped to make him more alert. However, his head was killing him, he was so dizzy that he had to sit down on the floor several times, and quite honestly he still felt horribly nauseous. The anxiety and sensation of urgency were altogether gone, though, so that was something.

In his state, it took quite a while to get himself clean. He rinsed off his clothes as well, towelled off quickly, and then procured some tissue to clean up some of the nasty from the futon. He stripped what bedding he could, rinsing it in the shower, and consigned the rest to a distasteful heap in the corner. Half way through this, he had to run to the toilet to be sick for the second time, which mostly procured an acid that burned on its way out.

Once that was all done, Hikaru washed his mouth out, brushed his teeth, and then drank as much water as the persistent nausea would allow. Procuring a glass to sip from, he returned to the now very-bare futon and stared contemplatively at his phone.

On one hand, it would probably be wise to call Utagawashi and tell him what had happened. Also maybe ask about why he was suddenly so ill. On the other hand, he felt sicker than hell, his head hurt, he kept swaying in place from the dizziness and with every second he grew more horribly exhausted.
Utagawashi could wait.

Caring very little about the absence of bedding, Hikaru flopped down onto what remained of the futon and fell almost instantly into slumber.

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Hikaru slept deeply and dreamlessly, failing to rouse through a number of attempted calls. Later, he apparently remained asleep even when Yashiro returned, because the first thing he was aware of after his earlier collapse was being shaken vigorously and having his name shouted in his ear.

With the kind of instinctive flailing often experienced by the suddenly-woken, Hikaru woke up. He found Yashiro in his face, looking pretty concerned. “What the fuck?” He inquired, muzzily. His head still hurt, his eyes didn’t appreciate the light, and now that he was sort of awake he felt sick again. It was kind of like a hangover, actually – a very bad one. Or maybe the flu.

“Don’t do that, Shindou. I thought you’d caught some horrible disease and died.” Yashiro sighed, looking at him with a scowl. “Why didn’t you tell me you were sick? I mean, you looked like shit last night, but…”

“Came on kinda fast.” Hikaru mumbled, fumbling for his water glass. He managed to get some of it down, which sort of helped the nausea, but got more of it on his face and dear god he was tired. Making a disgruntled noise, he wiped his face off and buried it in the futon with a sigh. “Can I go back to sleep?”

“Get up a second.” Yashiro ordered, which was apparently his idea of saying ‘no’.

“Why?” He demanded, not at all pleased with this consciousness thing he was doing.

“So I can check you for plague. And maybe rabies. Why else?” The boy answered smartly, pulling him by the collar. The pressure on his neck was not helpful for the nausea, and he gagged, causing his assailant to quickly let go. “Shit, are you going to throw up?”

He groaned, attempting to scramble upright. “Did that already. Why do you think all the bed stuff is over there?” He waved a hand in the vague direction of the soiled bedding pile.

“…So that’s why it smells weird in here.” Yashiro mused, watching him as he sat up. The other pro swiftly planted a hand onto his forehead, apparently checking for temperature, but not looking especially certain about the result. “Maybe a bit warm?” He murmured, brows furrowed. “Hard to tell, though. This would be so much easier if I had a thermometer…”

“Mm.” Hikaru expressed, grabbing his phone to inspect it. Twenty-two missed calls and one text message. Heh, Utagawashi was apparently freaking out.

“Well, hm. What kind of sick are you?”

He considered it. “The sort where everything hurts and I want to go back to sleep?” He suggested.

Yashiro blinked at him, unimpressed. “Painkillers?” He offered.

“Yes.” Hikaru said at once, attitude towards the terminator of his sleep shifting dramatically. The tall boy huffed at him with amusement, and he stood up to walk away, presumably in search of medication. While he did that, Hikaru opened the message from Utagawashi. ‘Please call back to reassure me you’re not dying or possessed’ said the text.
He managed to type out a quick ‘Alive, really sick, and probably demon free. Talk later, sleep now’ before Yashiro returned, brandishing not only a couple of pills but also a spare pillow and blanket.

“Here.” He said, dropping the pills into Hikaru’s waiting hand and then dropping the bedding beside the futon. “Please don’t throw up on this lot, too.”

“Sure.” Hikaru agreed, tossing back the pills with his remaining water. Hopefully they’d do something for the headache and the rest-of-body ache, but if not, he fully intended to be too deeply asleep to notice. “Can I go to sleep yet?” He asked, arranging the blanket over himself.

There was a sigh. “Knock yourself out.”

He didn’t need any further encouragement. After making sure that the fan and phone were sufficiently far away from the futon that he’d be unlikely to vomit on them, he planted his face in the fresh pillow and embraced sleep as though it were his dearest friend.

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An unknown amount of time later, Yashiro woke him up again, apparently in an attempt to feed him. “Come on, Shindou. It’s just some rice. Eat a bit and drink some water, and then you can go back to sleep.” His friend-turned-nurse told him, pulling insistently at his ear to make sure he didn’t fall asleep again.

Still feeling profoundly exhausted, Hikaru moaned and groaned and eventually sulkily ate about half a bowl of rice and drank most of the water, ignoring the hand on his forehead as it checked for a heat increase. The hand left before he finished, and once that was all done he swatted Yashiro away and went back to sleep again.

At some point later, he was roused into a much brighter time of day that thoroughly disagreed with him. Hikaru viciously resisted attempts to feed him or get him to leave the bed, consenting only to drink some water before falling mercifully unconscious again.

In the end, it was late afternoon on the Tuesday before Hikaru woke up of his own accord, head pounding and body screaming at him about its neglected needs. With a pitiful whine, he sat up, noting that it seemed to be getting sort of dark outside and that also the curtain in Yashiro’s loft was illuminated, a little light inside silhouetting a human shape sitting against the wall. He waited for his head to stop swimming at the abrupt change in elevation, and thirstily gulped down the water at his bedside. It was around then that he succumbed to the complaints of his body and staggered to the bathroom to empty his bladder. Afterwards, he stared at himself in the mirror, noting that he was significantly less awesome a sight than usual.

He was pale, looked as exhausted as he felt, and his hair needed bleaching again. It also needed a proper wash and was practically begging for the visit of a brush. His mouth tasted kind of like vomit even though he’d brushed his teeth after the last time he’d puked, and he stank of stale sweat.

Half-heartedly, he gave himself a bit of a wash, towelling off his face before staggering back out of the bathroom. Yashiro was there now, apparently waiting for him.

“You finally woke up, then.” He observed, as though it weren’t obvious.

“Obviously.” Hikaru said, and then felt kind of bad about it. Yashiro had been taking care of him, after all. “What time is it?” He asked, trudging past the boy to sit down on the futon.

“It’s like, seven.” Yashiro answered, following him. “You’ve slept a damn long time. Are you
feeling any better?"

Hikaru sighed, considering it. He didn’t feel quite as exhausted anymore, though he had a frankly terrible headache and his muscles all felt sore. “Yeah, I think.” He said, after a moment. “I still feel sick and everything hurts, but…yeah, a bit better.”

He nodded. “I called the Association for you, by the way. I kind of figured you wouldn’t be back in time for your match, with how sick you are.”

“…Yeah, I completely forgot about that.” Hikaru mused, blinking. “Thanks. It would have sucked if I’d had to forfeit.”

“No problem. Do you want something to eat, now?” Yashiro inquired. “Also, even if you say no, I’m still going to make you eat, so.”

Throwing him a look, Hikaru laid back down. “Sure.” He agreed, amiably. “Can you get me some more painkillers while you’re at it?”

“Next to you.” Yashiro called, already half way to the kitchen, and Hikaru inspected the area beside his futon with interest. Sure enough, there was a box of pills accompanying the fan, phone, and glass of water. He shook his head a little in disbelief even as he retrieved the painkillers. Yashiro was a total mother hen, apparently. Who’d have guessed it?

Pills taken, Hikaru opened his phone again. There was a message from Utagawashi, reading ‘You’re surely not still asleep?’ as well as a message from a receptionist at the Go Institute, stating that Yashiro had called in sick for him and that he’d need to sign something when he returned to confirm it. There were also messages from his mother and Akari, both essentially requesting evidence that he still breathed, as well as a furtive inquiry about his health from Touya. Waya apparently hadn’t yet heard about his escape from Tokyo, because otherwise Hikaru would have had a borderline antagonistic message about it by now.

He replied to the priest’s message with ‘I was totally still asleep. Just woke up.’ He sent confirmation of his continued existence to his mother, and a longer text to Akari explaining that he was ill and staying with a friend. She’d almost certainly guess where he was, but he hardly cared at this point. To Touya, he wrote something similar, saying that he’d fallen ill the day before and might not be back for a couple of days.

Yashiro emerged from the kitchen shortly after he’d finished with the phone and had started inspecting his surroundings more closely. He’d apparently also failed to notice a neat pile of clothes at the side of the room, his bag beside it, with his miscellaneous belongings presumably inside it. “You did my laundry, too?” He asked, amused.

“I already had to wash the stuff you puked on, so it only made sense.” He shrugged, walking over. “I tidied your stuff up a little, too. Why do you have incense and a burner with you, anyway?”

“…Uh.” Hikaru said, a little thrown. “Well, obvious?”

“Burn incense?”

“Yep.” He nodded, eyeing his host. “I didn’t know if that was allowed in your lease though, so…”

“Doesn’t matter to me. Just make sure you close the kitchen door, that’s where the fire alarm is.” Yashiro decided after a moment. “And don’t set my stuff on fire.”

Hikaru stared at him, feeling unexpectedly touched. It wasn’t as though Yashiro had any way of
knowing the significance of the incense, but…still. He paused, remembering he’d not ‘spoken’ with ‘Sai’ in a fair while now, having missed the Sunday and then proceeded to be unconscious for the better part of two days. There was no kamidana, here, but…it would be good, to at least burn some incense. He sighed. “Thanks, Yashiro. You don’t have a house shrine, right?”

“Hah. No.” The other boy snorted. “Kamidana are expensive, you know.”

“I do know.” He agreed, ruefully, and changed the subject. “How long is it until dinner?”

Yashiro inspected his watch. “Not long. It’s just rice with fish.” He answered. “There’s about ten minutes left. Just…occupy yourself until then.” He waved his hand vaguely, then stood up and headed back to the kitchen.

Hikaru eyed the goban speculatively, but decided he probably didn’t have time to replay anything of interest. For lack of anything else to do, he retrieved his phone, replying to the text he’d received from Akari with confirmation that he was with Yashiro, and inspecting Utagawashi’s response. He’d tried to call, again, and had left another text. It asked only ‘How are you feeling?’

After a pause for thought, he responded ‘Tired, dizzy, nauseous and achy. Is that normal?’ Within minutes, Utagawashi tried to call, and he scowled as he rejected it. ‘I’m at a friend’s house, and he’s home. Stop trying to call.’ He wrote, and sent.

Soon, the reply came through. ‘Exhaustion, disorientation, and head pain are apparently normal after especially challenging spiritual fights. The nausea may be as well, or else could be an actual illness taking advantage of your weakness. When will you be able to call?’

Hikaru contemplated that information with interest. ‘Hopefully it goes away soon, then.’ He replied, quickly adding ‘Maybe tomorrow’ to answer the actual question.

‘You’re sure the spirit is dealt with?’ Came the next message, very swiftly.

‘The part it left in my head, yeah. I don’t think that was all of it.’ He responded, after thinking. The bit of demon in his spirit…well, objectively it had been pretty small. And if he hadn’t wasted time sleeping, it probably wouldn’t have been even half as big as it had been when he’d found it. And, while it had undeniably borne the same aura, it had been…lesser. Like it was only a tiny facet of the real thing.

‘Alright. We’ll talk tomorrow.’ Utagawashi responded, potentially for the last time that night.

That concluded, Hikaru withdrew his incense and the boxed burner from his bag and looked at them. He didn’t have time to do much more than that before Yashiro emerged from the kitchen with two bowls of food, a spoon, and a set of chopsticks. The bowl and chopsticks were presented to Hikaru, who eyed his host’s implement with confusion. “What’s with the spoon?” he asked.

“I only have the one set of chopsticks.” Yashiro shrugged, setting the bowl down. “Itadakimasu,” he said, Hikaru quickly following suit, and they dug in.

He didn’t manage to finish it all. He ate the fish, and most of the rice, but there was a fair bit left over once his stomach decided it had had more than enough, thank you very much. “Thanks for the food.” He said, putting the bowl down. The other boy, who was still eating, eyed it with interest.

“I’d finish that, but I don’t want to catch whatever you’ve got.” He stated, looking slightly forlorn. “Oh well.”

“If it’s contagious, you probably have it already and it’s just incubating.” Hikaru informed him,
though he knew that most of his symptoms could probably be attributed to spiritual stuff.

“A fine guest you are,” Yashiro mused. “Coming to my house and vomiting everywhere, and then infecting me with your disease.” He shovelled his last spoonful of rice into his mouth, chewing briefly.

“I didn’t exactly plan to get all sick.” He scowled, gulping down some water. He might have actually eaten too much – he felt nauseous again.

Setting his bowl aside, Yashiro eyed him. “Maybe not, but I still had to clean your vomit out of my stuff.” He said, critically. “If you’re up to it, you can make it up to me with a game.”

Hikaru looked over at the goban, pensive. “…I can give it a go?”

“Come on, then.” His host said, walking over to the goban. “Don’t you dare throw up on my goban,” he added, as Hikaru followed him over.

“I would never.” He sniffed, sitting down and offering a handful of stones. Ending up with white, he settled cross-legged and bowed to his opponent.

“Onegaishimasu.”

His play ended up being pretty pathetic. Hikaru was dizzy and tired, and despite the pills still had a very persistent headache. On top of that, he had to jump up and sprint to the bathroom about half an hour in, ejecting some of his dinner along with a garnishing of stomach acid into the toilet. He resigned not long after returning, unable to focus worth a damn.

“You really are sick.” Yashiro observed, sort of sympathetically. “It’s a good job you don’t have your match tomorrow – if you’d have played half this bad, you’d have lost to a shodan.”

“Yeah, well, your mum.” Hikaru muttered, rubbing his face. “At least I didn’t throw up on your goban.”

“You did keep your word, there.” The boy agreed, clearing the board for both of them. “It’s only about nine, though. Are you going to sleep already?”

He grimaced, getting to his feet. “I think so, yeah. I’m seriously tired.”

“Fair enough.” Yashiro nodded, and set the goke on top of the board. He walked past, saying “I’ll get you some water.”

“Thanks.” Hikaru said, heading to the bathroom to brush his teeth. When he emerged, a fresh glass of water was already by his futon, and Yashiro’s bedroom light was on. He headed through, turning off the light for his room and closing Yashiro’s door. “Good night!” He called through the door, hearing a muffled ‘night!’ in turn as he turned and headed for bed.

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Hikaru slept the kind of muddy, heavy sleep that only the ill could manage. It was no longer the deep sleep brought on by sheer exhaustion, but rather that unpleasant and sticky breed of slumber, which tended to leave a person feeling absolutely terrible whenever they woke up. What dreams he had were vague and senseless, and the sleep itself did not feel especially restful. When Hikaru woke, late on Wednesday morning, the sludgy residue of his crappy rest clung insistently to him, and he showered all the while feeling like he wasn’t at all awake.
He didn’t feel like he hadn’t slept, per se – more like he had slept, but the sleep itself had been of absolutely deplorable quality, enough so that it left him feeling even sicker than before.

Nonetheless, he actually got dressed that day, rather than spending the whole time in sleep-clothes. Yashiro had already left, leaving him a note that described the location of some onigiri he’d procured. Hikaru opened the fridge to inspect them, dubiously. While he lacked anything resembling an appetite, he was aware that his body probably did need food, so he took one of the four onigiri and ate it unenthusiastically. His sense of taste was somewhat dulled, which combined with the nausea to make eating a far less pleasant experience than it usually was for him.

Being ill sucked.

He washed his face with cold water until he felt slightly more alert, then retrieved his phone and sent a message to Utagawashi. ‘I can talk now.’ Sitting down on the futon, he waited.

It took only five minutes for the call to come, so it was a slightly amused Hikaru that answered with a teasing “Don’t you kannushi have anything to do?” His voice was rougher than he was accustomed to, with a hoarse rasp to it. It was a little surprising, since his throat wasn’t sore.

“What?” Asked Utagawashi, sounding somewhat taken aback.

“You called me like a million times the other day. And you didn’t even take ten minutes to call today.”

“Well, excuse me for being concerned.” The priest grumbled. “As you know, I very rarely have my phone with me at work…but, honestly, at a shrine this small there isn’t all that much to do.”

“I guess.” Hikaru said, laying back. “So, what did you want to talk about?”

“What you found, what it felt like, and what you did. Among other things.” Utagawashi answered succinctly.

“Well, hm.” He paused to consider his words. “Well, as soon as I started poking around, I could tell it didn’t feel right. I didn’t go too close to my…wounds, I guess, but sort of moved around the edges until I found the demon.”

“What was it like? What was it doing?” The priest pressed.

“It was kind of like a tiny bit of the bastard had latched on and started growing.” He answered, considering his description. “Yeah, that’s pretty much exactly it. It felt like it had grabbed on to the side of my spirit injury pit thing, and then started rooting itself.”

Utagawashi was quiet for a few seconds. “Early stages of a possession attempt, then. It was likely trying to possess you on Sunday, but when you ran away, the piece of itself it left on you had to extend on its own. Eventually, it might have been able to convince you to approach the true spirit again, at which point it would undoubtedly overwhelm you.”

Hikaru blinked, a little alarmed. Well, that explained why he’d been so inclined to get the hell away from the demon and stay away. “I didn’t know spirits could do that – split themselves off in little pieces.”

“It’s reserved for the most powerful.” The man sighed. “That sword-spirit must be very old.”

“If it can do that, though, then why hasn’t it happened before?” He questioned. “If Kaminaga has had it that long, how hasn’t it possessed him yet? Or hundreds of people around him?”
There was a pensive pause. “No matter what you may think of Kaminaga-san, he is exceptionally skilled, and has been containing the demon for decades. It’s likely that he is very alert to the possibility of possession, so the demon has to work very slowly and subtly with him. I doubt it would have been able to possess anyone else, either, under that sort of containment. You are...an exception.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Why’s that?”

“You’ve been possessed before, Shindou. And for a long time.” Utagawashi said, bluntly. “While most of us sensitives are actually harder to possess than normal humans, possession victims are different. We’re not certain why, but people like you have to be extremely vigilant for this sort of thing, as you seem to be exceptionally vulnerable to other possessing spirits.”

“That sucks some major balls.” Hikaru said, after a moment to consider that. “So, what, the sword-spirit got a whiff of my deliciously pre-possessed soul and decided to move in?”

“…More or less, I suppose.” Utagawashi sighed at him. “This is why I said you’re at a risky point in your learning. At this stage, you are vulnerable to possessing spirits but not quite aware enough to be properly vigilant. Although...you still haven’t said how you got rid of the incursion, except that you ‘ripped it out’.” He waited.

“Oh, right.” He remembered. “Well, when I found it, it noticed me, and...I guess tried to possess me properly? It was kind of nasty.” More than kind of, by a long way, but he didn’t feel any particular desire to describe that steady sensation of being subsumed. “It pissed me off, so I...burned it? Sort of. That’s what it felt like.”

There was a long and very loaded silence.

“...What?” Hikaru asked, defensively.

“You burned it.” The priest repeated, flatly. “So, what, you eradicated the spirit’s foothold on your own? Using only anger?”

“...Not only.” He admitted. “There was other stuff too.”

Utagawashi pondered for a few seconds. “You are going to make an absolutely terrifying exorcist, some day.” He concluded.

Hikaru removed the phone from his ear and stared at it, as though questioning its ability to accurately transmit the priest’s words. Slowly, he returned it to his ear, and said “Um. What? Why?” He was fairly sure that being an exorcist was not something that had been mentioned or suggested to him before. Him? An exorcist? The only frames of reference he had for that were Kaminaga and popular culture. Neither were particularly appealing examples.

“Shindou-kun,” Utagawashi said, pleasantly. “Possession, even a foothold attempt, is not something that people can usually fight off on their own. Usually, exorcists are involved. Multiple ofuda, too.” He paused and added “I think you must have found some traces of your first possessing spirit. I doubt you could have done something like that, otherwise.”

Hikaru stared wildly at the wall. “I didn’t notice anything like that!” He protested. And, how depressing was it that he now had to call Sai his first possessing spirit? How many more would there be?

“As I have said, it can be hard to notice smaller traces. And you were quite distracted at the time, so it’s unsurprising.” He answered. “Perhaps you’ll even be able to sense me, once you return.”
“…Maybe.” He muttered, thoughts running wildly. He’d found more traces of Sai, and still hadn’t noticed? Utagawashi was right that he’d been pretty distracted by demonic menace, but…

“Is the prospect of returning to Tokyo still worrying?” The man asked, cutting through his train of thought.

Hikaru paused to think about it, probing about the concept for any hint of the instinctive rejection he’d experienced before. “No, not at all.” He said, surprised and a little pleased. “I feel edgy about the idea of going near the sword-spirit again, but Tokyo is fine.”

Approvingly, Utagawashi said “You seem to have some very good instincts.”

“I guess.” He allowed, mind already considering the next issue. “…What are we going to do about Kaminaga, though?” He asked, finally. “It’s not like we can leave it alone. That demon’s going to get him eventually, and if it gets near me again…”

“…It will undoubtedly try to possess you, again.” He conceded, troubled. “Yes, it’s a bit of a problem. Depending on how successful the sword-spirit has been, it might be able to influence Kaminaga’s thoughts and actions. I would hope he wouldn’t come to Tokyo without warning me first, but…”

Hikaru shuddered. “I guess I need to get better at this spirit stuff, then.” It was a sobering thought. Before, his sole purpose with all this stuff was to commune with spirits in search of Sai-finding clues. That was still his ultimate goal, and it wouldn’t change, but now…well. Now, if he didn’t improve at the spirit stuff, he might be possessed by a demon. It was a hell of an incentive, really. “…hey, Utagawashi. The demon wouldn’t try to go after my family, right? Or my friends?”

“If it had both a fully-controlled host and a grudge against you, it might.” The priest responded. “I don’t know about the grudge, but it almost certainly can’t possess regular humans at the moment, and it hasn’t fully possessed Kaminaga-san, so you likely have nothing to worry about, there.”

“What about other spirits?” He persisted.

“Typically, a spirit will only go after your loved ones if they feel they are taking revenge for something. So do your best not to offend any spirits, and you’ll be fine.” Utagawashi said dryly.

Somewhat satisfied, Hikaru nodded. “Okay, then. I guess I’ll come back to Tokyo as soon as I feel up to the journey.”

“Well, let me know when you do.” He instructed. “I’d like to discuss this all with you in person.”

“If you can be around me without throwing up, then sure.”

There was a pause. “I didn’t think of that. Have you been wounded very badly by this sword-spirit’s attempt?” He sounded worried, suddenly.

“…I don’t think so.” Hikaru frowned, considering. “Hang on a minute.” He closed his eyes, and concentrated, slipping into the bizarre internal realm that was apparently his soul. Comfortingly, there remained no trace of that malignant presence, with not even the faintest of remnants. He reached out, searching for the location of the demon’s prior foothold, even as those familiar traceries of emotion and pain followed in his wake. Increasingly, this inner realm seemed like it was made of light, ebbing and flowing in strange ways, with what felt like the brightness of a thousand stars flowing with it.

It didn’t take long to find the site of his violent encounter, because it was bright. If his void was the gaping pit of an open wound, then this was undoubtedly a burn on the edge of it, and absolutely
saturated with…something. He inspected it, reluctantly fascinated. It was still very painful, but nowhere near what it had been before. Did that mean it was healing? Even though it was a spiritual wound? He probed at it, carefully, the sheer brightness almost mesmerising. There was some of the familiar wound-echo of grief to it, but mostly it just felt…good. Healthy.

Intrigued, Hikaru withdrew. Rather than the dizzying and disorientating slap to the face that it usually felt like, sensation and physicality returned to him smoothly. “Okay, so there’s basically a big burn there, where the demon thing was.” He said into the phone. “It’s not as painful as it was before. I’m pretty sure it’s getting better. And…it feels good? There’s no traces of the sword-spirit or whatever from it.”

Utagawashi was quiet for several seconds. “That’s really very interesting.” He said. “I wonder if that’s normal? After all, you would expect an exorcist to become more and more spiritually wounded as he fought more spirits, but Kaminaga-san has always felt much the same.”

“What, so when someone exorcises a spirit themselves, they don’t get wounded by it?” He asked doubtfully.

“Or maybe they do, but it recovers.” Utagawashi suggested. “I don’t know. Kaminaga-san never taught me much about exorcism; it was rather irrelevant for me.”

“So basically, Kaminaga probably knows, but since he’s half-possessed we can’t ask him.” Hikaru summarised with a sigh.

“More or less.” The man agreed. “Something we will have to discuss when you return, I suppose.”

“Yes.” He nodded, pointlessly.

“Let me know when you’re returning to Tokyo.” Utagawashi requested. “We can arrange a day for you to visit, then.”

“Will do. Was there anything else?”

“I don’t believe so. Nothing pressing.” A pause. “Well then. We will talk again soon.” With that, he hung up.

Hikaru removed the phone from the side of his head and put it on the floor, wondering what on Earth he was meant to do with his day. He could maybe steal Yashiro’s laptop and play some NetGo?

That would do, he supposed.

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Hikaru did indeed abduct Yashiro’s laptop and did indeed play NetGo on it, logging in with his own nick after signing out of Yashiro’s. As sick as he might be, the majority of amateurs on this site posed no challenge whatsoever, so for lack of anything better to do Hikaru laid in his futon for hours doing nothing more exciting than half-heartedly thrashing a load of weak players. He was feeling a bit too beleaguered to play proper shidou-go, but he did go easy on his opponents.

At least, up until Touya logged in, and quite promptly challenged him.

He stared at the challenge window, reading in it his inevitable defeat. With a sigh, he accepted, and got to work. Through relatively herculean effort, Hikaru managed to not be completely destroyed, and did in fact take the game to yose before he fell too far behind and resigned, a little depressed at his sub-standard play.
Very shortly afterwards, Touya rang him. It was fairly surprising, despite having a predictable purpose. Blinking, Hikaru answered, very aware of his croaky voice. “Hey, Touya.”

“That game was appalling, Shindou.” His rival informed him without preamble. “What were you thinking, going after my bottom right cluster like that? You fell into the most pathetically obvious trap I’ve ever used on you.”

“I’m sick, Touya, leave me alone.” Hikaru told him, in tones of profound suffering. “Be a dickhead to someone else.”

There was a pause. “Stop moping around and get serious. We’re going to play another game. I’ll even give you a handicap, if you’re that ill.” His voice held the sharp edge of a taunt.

“Fuck that.” Hikaru responded immediately, glaring at the laptop screen and its fresh challenge. Equal strength handicapping might be something he’d taken to lately, but he absolutely refused to accept a real handicap. It would probably do him some good, given how shitty he felt, but…hell no, fuck that. He accepted the challenge, declaring “I don’t need a handicap to kick your ass across a goban!”

“Prove it.” Touya challenged, and hung up. God, what a dickhead. Hikaru placed his first stone swiftly, feeling a reluctant sort of admiration for how easily Touya had plucked him from his misery. Rather than feeling all beleaguered and useless, now…now he was feeling the familiar incensed desire to mightily conquer his opponent.

It was, as he might have expected, a far better game than the first. He still lost, but only by a small margin, which was somewhat impressive given that he couldn’t focus well enough to play properly. He wasn’t reading as far, which meant that his usual traps and tricks were far less effective, but he’d managed nonetheless.

‘Better.’ Said the text message Touya sent him, after the game.

Meticulously, Hikaru used punctuation and miscellaneous characters to compose the image of a hand with its middle finger raised, and sent it in lieu of a verbal response.

There was a pause, and then a prompt third challenge on the NetGo screen. Hikaru stared at it for several moments, eyebrows raised, and then shrugged. It wasn’t as though he had anything better to do.

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Yashiro returned home to witness what had become a marathon session between Hikaru and Touya. They were on their fourth match, and having won the third, Hikaru was determined to do the same for its successor. Touya, for his part, seemed equally determined to make sure he lost, so they were rather evenly matched.

“I see you’re feeling less pathetic, now.” His host commented, kneeling down to observe the laptop screen. “Is this what you’ve been doing with your day?”

“Pretty much,” Hikaru agreed, clicking his move. “I was playing random amateurs, but then Touya showed up and decided to be a dickhead, so we’ve been playing basically all afternoon.”

“Hm. Replay the games for me, after you finish?”

“Yeah, sure.” Hikaru nodded absently, eyes intent on the screen. It wasn’t doing anything good for his headache, and he still felt more like a pile of interestingly shaped sludge than a human being, but
that was life.

Yashiro sat down next to the futon and watched the game as it progressed, still pretty even. Having retrieved his fan during the third match, Hikaru spent a fair amount of time tapping it against the side of the screen, eyes narrowed as he contemplated his moves.

In the end, though, he lost the damn fourth game, which was annoying enough that he wanted to challenge for a fifth, but Yashiro wouldn’t let him.

“But I need to annihilate him!” Hikaru protested as the laptop was reappropriated by its owner. “Bring it baaaack!”

“Nope.” Yashiro denied, far too cheerfully. “I’m going to look over your last three games and you’re going to eat those onigiri you left. And then maybe we can play a game.”

“But, Touya!” He complained, flailing his hand in the direction of the laptop screen.

“Nope.”

Hikaru scowled, rising reluctantly to his feet. “You’re the worst.” He announced.

The other boy nodded knowingly. “I know, I’m just awful, aren’t I?” He commiserated. “Making sure you get up and eat your food, how terrible of me.”

“You should be ashamed.” Hikaru agreed, and staggered gracelessly to the kitchen.

Chapter End Notes

So, chapter 11 took me a seriously long time. I’d thought it would be finished by Monday, but then a friend dropped by and stayed for a few days and I was thoroughly distracted. Also, inspiration has been low this week, so I had to absolutely force it. At any rate, it's on tumblr now, and here is chapter 10. Some fairly important stuff happens this chapter. Next chapter is somewhat slow, and the one after might be as well, but we're building up to some decidedly not-slow stuff, so.

As a note on story length...I doubt I'm even half way done yet. I should be clearing 100k shortly, too, which is kind of awesome.

What is also awesome is how much attention this story is getting. More and more people are commenting and it's absolutely fabulous. You people are the reason I'm making myself keep writing when inspiration is flagging.

03/06/18 – edited some sentences to follow up the changes to Yashiro’s room.
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Hikaru leaves Osaka.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Wednesday evening passed, for the most part, with absolutely no drama.

Hikaru, having managed some high standard games that day, was inevitably challenged by his host. With considerable effort, he muscled his way through his headache and growing tiredness to emerge victorious – and he was pretty damn smug about it, too. It wasn’t as though Yashiro was the greatest opponent he’d defeated, but any victory achieved while your brains were making an earnest attempt to break out of your skull was a victory worth being pleased about.

“Well, that was definitely a better showing than before.” Yashiro decided, once they’d discussed the game. Hikaru nodded amiably, agreeing wholly with the sentiment all the while he felt his energy reserves flag. Go, particularly Go against worthy opponents, was not the most restful of activities, and the extended playing was starting to be a bit much for him in his current state. “You’re feeling better, then?”

“A little?” He responded, yawning. “I don’t feel as sick, and I’ve not thrown up today. But the other stuff…” A vague gesture indicated his body as a whole, which was apparently still of the opinion that he needed to be experiencing tremendous soreness. He half suspected that he’d genuinely managed to catch the flu on top of the side effects of his first sort-of exorcism, as Utagawashi had suggested. The muscle aches would be a bit strange, otherwise, though he was hardly an expert on the physical manifestations of spiritual hardship.

“Hmm.” His host hummed, eyeing him oddly. For a second, there was a seriousness there, that sharp look he’d pinned Hikaru with after he arrived, but it disappeared as swiftly as it came. “Well, if you’re still sick, you should probably get to sleep early. You weren’t sleeping through today, right?”

Hikaru shook his head. “Too much Go.” He explained. “Touya was being too much of a smug bastard not to keep challenging.”

“He’s a strange one.” Yashiro mused, as if he was one to talk. “That time leading up to the Hokuto cup, I ended up thinking he was your average boring serious Go pro. But he was sort of alright at that party of yours.”

“Strange is right.” Hikaru agreed, as if he was one to talk either. “That party was a miraculous triumph – I’ve never managed to get him to loosen up like that before. Or since.” He paused to consider. “Maybe I should try to get him drunk again, and play some stupid games.” He pondered.

“Invite me. We can make another dog.” Yashiro suggested.

Hikaru raised his eyes and stared. “We will not make another dog.” He stated, hoping he sounded as severe and unimpressed as he felt. “I don’t know if the world could handle another one.”
“Spoilsport.” The other boy muttered. “It was a good party, though; I don’t go out all that much, since I lost contact with the guys from my junior high school, so it was a nice change.”

“I’ll see if I can make everyone hold parties for their promotions.” He decided. “I don’t know who will be next, though.”

Yashiro considered it. “Isumi-san seems like he could be a sandan. Not sure about Waya-san, though.”

“Isumi could definitely be sandan, but it’s a bit early for him to get that sort of promotion. He only just made nidan, pretty much. Waya….” Hikaru frowned. “He’s…about sandan, but not quite. I don’t think he’ll advance for a while, yet. Maybe next year.”

“And of course, you’re definitely better than sandan.”

“Yep.” Hikaru nodded, without an ounce of modesty. He knew it was true, after all. “Well, my early troubles aren’t helping me there – I’ll probably always advance more slowly, thanks to that.” He shrugged. “I guess I just need to get into a prestigious title league. Then I can get an instant nanadan, like Touya.” His rival had, after all, managed to get into the Honinbou league the same year Hikaru had lost Sai. It had been a good match-up for him – if he’d been facing someone like Kurata or Ogata to qualify, he’d likely have lost, but he hadn’t. Instead he’d had some guy who’d not managed to get into a league for years, despite being pretty skilled.

It was either awesome or embarrassing that a nanadan was playing on par with a sandan. Or ridiculous. He would probably go with ridiculous.

“Hm, well.” Yashiro thought. “That would be one way to do it, I suppose. What was the league he got into?”

“Honinbou.” Hikaru answered, a little darkly. That particular title hadn’t held much significance for him, until Sai disappeared, and even then not immediately. He’d even played in the Honinbou league for a while, though Morishita-sensei had kicked him out in the second preliminary round….but it was different, now. It was more or less inevitable that he’d become fanatical about any tangible reminder of Sai, and while the Honinbou title wasn’t precisely a memento of the ghost, it was close enough. He knew that, even now, Touya was in the Honinbou league – as one of the four bottom-ranking entrants to the previous year’s league, he was automatically relegated a place in the final preliminaries for the next year.

Hikaru knew that there were a number of very strong people between Touya and the right to challenge for Honinbou. But…even so…thinking about it made him feel rather aggressive and indignant.

He would be so pissed off if Touya got the Honinbou title. So, so very pissed off.

“That’s the one you’re gunning for, right?” Yashiro asked, looking a little amused. “What a scary look on your face – are you worried he’ll get there first?”

“No.” Hikaru lied petulantly, glaring at his socks. “It’s not gonna happen.”

Yashiro raised an eyebrow. “Is that so?”

“Absolutely.” He nodded, with finality.

“If you say so.” The taller boy allowed, amused, as he stood up to head to the kitchen. “Are you still hungry? I was going to heat up some leftovers.”
“…Nah.” Hikaru decided, after consulting his stomach. “I’ll just get ready for bed, I think.” He stood up and went to make good on his words, walking quite carefully, as he was still rather unsteady on his wobbly legs.

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The next day, after a lengthy and high quality sleep, Hikaru felt rather improved. Still sore, and still with a headache, but with considerably less of the ambient misery. He was less shaky, too, and thought that most of his remaining weakness could probably be attributed to how little he’d been eating.

As a natural consequence of this observation, Hikaru set to work raiding Yashiro’s fridge. His search swiftly located the remains of some egg fried rice, so he retrieved that and heated it, discovering as he ate that his appetite was much improved, though perhaps not back to its usual heights. It was, nonetheless, a noteworthy improvement. Along with the other stuff, he thought he might be well enough to travel, soon. Today might be a bit hasty, but tomorrow…With consideration, Hikaru retrieved his phone to text Yashiro, who’d left a couple of hours before he woke. ‘I’ll probably go home tomorrow.’ He informed, succinctly, and left it at that. He sent a near identical message to Utagawashi, too, along with a mention of his improved health. Touya, Akari, and his mother were all also informed of his probable Friday return, to unanimous approval.

Hikaru washed up and dressed himself, wondering what he should be doing with his day. He might still feel quite under the weather, but he was feeling far more alert than he had the day before…he could play more Go? Yashiro wouldn’t be out for the entire day, so it wasn’t like he had to occupy himself for long…

He glanced across the room, eyes drawn to two particular items. The tube of incense, and the burner. He stilled for a moment, inhaling slowly, and then walked towards them.

Yashiro had said he could burn some incense, after all…and it had been over a week.

Removing the burner from its box, Hikaru made certain the kitchen door was closed before setting it down in the box’s lid. He positioned it carefully on the floor by the bare section of wall beside the goban, then got up to retrieve a stick of incense and his lighter.

Placing the stick, Hikaru stared at the set-up for several moments before carefully positioning the fan against the wall, moving the burner further back so as not to risk getting it smoky. It was…pretty substandard. No kamidana, no candles, and only the bare laminate floor as a surface. The goban, to his left, was just a thin table-top folding board, and was sitting atop a cheap low table to make up for its lack of legs. It felt a bit bizarre to reach out and light the incense here, and even stranger once that familiar smell hit him.

For a moment, he felt profoundly disorientated. He wasn’t at all used to smelling that incense, so similar to Sai’s robes, anywhere except his room, now. And here he was, hundreds of kilometres from home, paying respect to Sai in the residence of someone who only knew him as a famous NetGo player; someone who had never even played him.

Hikaru shook his head slightly to dispel the strangeness of the situation, and then sat back into seiza with a quiet exhalation. He looked at the fan, with its thick white paper that wasn’t holding up all that well, the edges a little tattered and the white becoming discoloured. The tassel in particular was looking weird – sort of scruffy and unkempt and not nearly as purple as it should be. Sai’s fan hadn’t had a tassel, but…the colouring of the white fan with the purple tassel had just been too perfect. Sai’s fan hadn’t been white, either – it had looked as though the paper had aged and yellowed, though the overall condition had been pristine. Maybe robes were kinder to paper fans than pockets? Either
way, he’d have to get his fan repaired again, soon…

“…Hey, Sai.” He said, the words sounding strange in this unfamiliar room. “I’m sorry it’s been so long, and that there’s no kamidana, but…well, things have been a bit crazy.” He sighed, wondering where he should even begin. “You know that exorcist that was going to visit, and maybe show me where I was going wrong? Well, turns out he has this pet demon, a sword, and things got seriously messed up from there…”

Haltingly, in stops and starts, he narrated the whole thing, from the initial encounter all the way through to his sort-of-exorcism of the demon’s foothold, which itself was somewhat concerning. “Utagawashi says that there must be traces of your energy all over, considering you possessed me.” Hikaru informed, with a frown. “And I must be using them, otherwise I wouldn’t be spiritually sensitive at all. But…I haven’t really noticed anything. You’d think I’d be able to tell, since it’s you.” He rubbed at his face. “Well, I’ll talk with Utagawashi at the weekend, see what he thinks. And we’ll need to figure out what to do about Kaminaga, too.”

Sighing, he looked to the side, eyes on the cheap goban. “Enough of this doom and gloom. I’ve not played all that much this week, what with being sick, but there’s been a couple good games. Some last week, too. I’ll replay them for you.”

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As it happened, replaying all of the noteworthy games of two weeks took rather a long time, particularly when he stopped to ruminate on various potential outcomes of different moves, which was often. This, combined with the fact that his story had taken a fair while, meant that the afternoon seriously snuck up on him, eventually announcing itself with the sudden and startling opening of the apartment door.

Hikaru, completely shocked by this perfectly reasonable turn of events, jumped half way out of his skin, falling out of seiza and glancing wide-eyed at the somehow unexpected shape of Yashiro entering the room.

The same disorientation he’d experienced earlier returned to slap him cheerfully in the face. During the hours of talking and replaying games in front of his fan, with the smell of incense clinging to the air, he’d more or less forgotten that he was sitting in Yashiro’s apartment, and that Yashiro was going to be returning at some point. So, here he was, sitting at a goban in front of an incense burner in front of a fan, half-way through the second game he’d played with Touya the day before, staring up at his host with a rather confounded expression spread across his features.

Yashiro, for his part, looked just as perplexed. “Um. I’m home?” He said, hesitantly. “What’s with the…” He waved his hand at the arrangement.

Hikaru looked from the arrangement in question to his friend. “You said I could burn incense.” He reminded, feeling bizarrely exposed. He didn’t think he’d ever been interrupted during Sai-time before, and…honestly, it was unexpectedly disturbing. He hadn’t quite realised just how personal these times had become for him until now, encountering the feeling that Yashiro was intruding on something private.

“Well, yeah, but…” The nidan nodded, kicking off his shoes and putting his bag down. He walked over to loom over Hikaru, looking first at the goban and then at the fan, and then back at the goban again. “…That’s one of yesterday’s games, with Touya-san?”

“Well, duh.” Hikaru responded, feeling thoroughly thrown-off and even sort of shocked, as though Yashiro had done something unexpectedly rude. It was sort of the feeling he’d had when that creepy
middle-aged guy had got all up in his face during the pro exams – weirded out and bothered, with a distinct feeling that his personal space had been violated. When it came to his friends, Hikaru didn’t have all that much of a concept of personal space, and Yashiro was no exception, but he suddenly found himself wanting to edge away from the boy.

“So, what, you like to burn incense while replaying games?” Yashiro inquired, staring between the goban and the makeshift shrine with furrowed brows.

Hikaru tilted his head, attempting to rally his wits. “Well, yeah.” He said, truthfully, craning his head to look upwards. Considerately, Yashiro knelt down to make it easier on him, inspecting the fan closely.

“And you need to put your fan up for that?”

“…Precisely.” He agreed, giving in to his urge to inch away from the boy and shifting sideways a little.

Yashiro turned and stared at him, looking both confused and suspicious. It was an interesting combination. “…I smell bullshit, but I’m not sure what kind.” He said, eventually.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Hikaru asserted, glancing uncomfortably at the fan. If Sai was aware of what happened during these sessions, he’d probably be giggling madly right about now. He loosened up a little at the idea, noticing suddenly how tense he’d gone. It was a bit embarrassing, really, getting so worked up over this.

Yashiro stared, for an uncomfortably long time. It was getting sort of unnerving, actually. “Is this some sort of Shinto thing?” He asked, squinting. “You did say some stuff before about a god of Go, but I can never tell when you’re being serious.”

“Um.” He answered, eloquently. “This…might be very slightly sort of a Shinto thing?”

“…Right, okay. So what, replaying games in front of a fan with incense burning is a Shinto thing?” Yashiro asked, dubiously, leaning forwards to peer at the box of incense at the side.

“Well, usually I have a kamidana. This is just sort of making do.” Hikaru sighed, deciding he might as well roll with it.

His host sat back, looking rather confused. “Replaying games, though? Isn’t that a bit weird? Everyone’s burned incense at a house shrine before, but replaying games? What’s it even for?”

Hikaru frowned at him. “Well, if you were a presumably Go-obsessed kami or ancestor spirit of some sort, what would you prefer?” He asked, archly. “Endless incense or some interesting games?”

“…I guess.” Yashiro said, dubiously, still staring at the fan. “And the fan?”

“Why not a fan?” He shrugged, his gaze on the other boy growing thoughtful. All this time, he’d been replaying his games for Sai, partially because if Sai was aware of it, then that way he would have some Go to watch. The ghost would undoubtedly prefer to be playing himself, but watching games had to be better than nothing. It also simply made him feel better, to behave as he believed – to act as though he truly thought that Sai still existed, in some greater form than memory or residue, and might be listening.

There was, however, undeniably an element of offering to it; as if Sai actually were a kami, to be offered games like you might offer rice to Inari or his foxes. He replayed interesting games from tournaments and leagues every so often as well, but showing his own games felt far more significant.
More personal, certainly. And…in that regard…wouldn’t a live game be even better?

He eyed Yashiro speculatively, and the boy’s expression grew wary. “What is it?” He asked, suspiciously.

“Yashiro,” Hikaru said, determinedly. “Let’s play a game.” He shuffled around, shifting the goban so that he was sitting at its side, the fan and incense burner on his left.

His host, raising an eyebrow, looked back at the fan. “What, like how you replay games? You want me to do your Shinto-thing?”

“An offering.” He affirmed, eyes gleaming. “Come on, Yashiro. Weren’t you the one who said you wanted to learn how to worship the God of Go?” There was a certain hint of goading to his tone; the edge of a dare.

His hapless opponent-to-be made a face. “…Somehow, I knew that would bite me in the backside someday.” He mused. “I can’t believe you remembered that.”

“It was only like a month ago, of course I remembered.” Hikaru stated, rolling his eyes as he cleared up the half-replayed game. “Now get over here and play me.” He leaned to the side, removing the nearly-depleted incense stick and lighting a new one.

Hesitantly, Yashiro took his place at the other side of the goban, looking far more baffled than he usually did at the beginning of a game. “So, what, do we just play? Or do we need to do some random crap like clapping to wake the kami?”

Hikaru considered the idea of adding some such pointless intricacy to this mess, but decided against it with a brief grin. “Nah. Just play the best game you can.” He said, and placed some black stones on the board. Yashiro placed one white stone, in a successful guess that landed him black. They exchanged stone bowls, Hikaru glancing at his makeshift shrine thing at the wall as he settled into his game mindset. This was a bit spontaneous and unexpected, but if he was going to do it, he’d do it properly.

This is for you, Sai, he thought, turning back to bow to Yashiro. “Onegaishimasu.” He said, with all the seriousness and solemnity he would in an official match.

Somewhat taken aback by this, Yashiro gave a slight nod before he bowed, echoing “Onegaishimashu.” After a pause, he placed his first stone.

They exchanged the opening hands with increasing fervour. Yashiro began more hesitantly than usual, mind clearly not all in the game yet, but he sank deeper with every stone. Soon, his face was the same serious scowl that Hikaru had seen when they fought for the place in the Hokuto cup, responding to the fierce will in Hikaru’s hands with his own.

Hikaru played Yashiro a lot. Rarely in person, given the distance between their homes, but very frequently over the net. Like his games with Waya and Isumi, and sometimes even Touya, they had a tendency to become casual and almost rote. Battles, yes, but ones lacking that tense clash of minds that official matches brought forth; more play-fighting than actual war. Here, though…Hikaru slammed his stones down with all the energy the game warranted, vigour building with every move.

It was a bit spontaneous, and a bit strange, but…as he poured the intensity of his feeling into the game, it was inevitably reciprocated. It was hard not to respond to something like that from your opponent; fervour called to fervour, the battle of wills as much a part of Go as the strategy. He remembered, with flawless clarity, the first time he’d felt it, placing stones for Sai against Touya.
Koyo. That force of will, the sheer power in the man’s hands, had summoned Hikaru’s own inspiration from its slumber – when he’d placed that stone, feeling coursing out of his fingers, he’d been unable to believe it was him. He’d been convinced that Sai was controlling him, because surely, he could never feel something like that on his own. Hikaru smiled at the memory, watching the pattern of black and white bloom on the goban.

It was not a short match. They didn’t bother with clocks or timers, they simply played. Hand after hand, stone after stone, with long pauses while one of them or the other became caught in intense thought. The incense burned out fairly early in the game, but the scent lingered regardless. To sit there, playing a game with that scent in the air, felt desperately familiar – just like those many games where Sai leaned in behind him to peer at the board with interest, robes casting the wisteria perfume into the air.

Hikaru almost always beat Yashiro, these days. The other boy had to really struggle to keep up, and today, struggle he did. In an admirable mirror of Hikaru’s own bullheaded persistence, he hissed and spat and clawed his way through Hikaru’s territory, hoarding away every moku he could manage as he reached unhesitatingly forwards in challenge.

Then, eventually, they ran out of room. All the ko fights were done, and there was nowhere left to play. Without a word, they counted their territory, and Yashiro sat back with a sigh.

“I win.” Hikaru said, with quiet satisfaction. “Two and a half moku.”

“That was an intense game.” Yashiro said, appreciatively. “I played pretty well, I think, even if I lost.”

“You did, yeah. It was one of the best games I’ve seen from you in a while.” Hikaru leaned to the side to light another stick of incense. “Want to discuss it?”

“Of course.” His host nodded, sparing an odd glance at the mock-shrine before looking back. “…Did your Go-kami appreciate the game?” He asked, a little dryly.


It was a bit odd, to have shared something like this with someone who didn’t understand. Yashiro didn’t know who Sai had been – he didn’t even know it was Sai they were playing for – and he certainly didn’t know anything about Hikaru’s ongoing grief, or his tireless search to find the ghost. But, nonetheless…it had been a good game.

Discerning from his opponent’s expression that he was weirding him out a bit, Hikaru shook his head and got to business. “Right, so, the game.” He said, and steered them into the discussion.

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Later, as they finished a simple dinner, Yashiro inquired “So, you’re going back to Tokyo tomorrow? What time?”

“Whenever.” Hikaru replied dismissively, carrying his bowl to the kitchen sink to wash. Yashiro stood beside him as he did the washing up, having claimed the chef’s right to abstain from doing any himself. For a teenager who had only just started to live alone, the other boy was unusually neat – he’d picked up the slack for Hikaru’s dishes while he’d been sick, but now that he was recovering it
had been made abundantly clear to him that Yashiro expected cleanliness.

“Have you even looked up the train times?” The neat-freak in question inquired, his tone implying that he had already guessed the answer and was pre-emptively exasperated by it.

Hikaru lived up to these expectations in full by grinning and cheerfully declaring “nope!” He brandished the now-clean bowl with a flourish, allowing dishwater to slip out of its rim.

The tall boy shook his head, his unruly hair following the motion. “Typical. Well, the latest I can walk you to the station is eleven, so try to find a time before then.”

“It’s not all that far. I could probably find my way alone.” He pointed out, setting the bowls aside to dry and navigating the kitchen in search of the rice cooker. He located it, retrieving the bowl from inside it and scraping out residual gooey rice into the bin.

“I don’t think I believe you.” Yashiro claimed, with a critical squint at his cleaning of the rice bowl. “You weren’t exactly at your best when you came here.”

Well, fair point, actually. He’d not been the greatest example of alertness and health when he arrived on Sunday. “…Hmph.” He expressed, instead of actually agreeing. He could probably manage to find his way to the station without having to consult strangers for directions, but only probably. And he might end up going the wrong way. That said, stations did tend to be signposted quite consistently, so he was reasonably confident he’d manage.

Yashiro leaned backwards against the counter, pinning Hikaru with an odd and calculating look. “You still haven’t mentioned why you ran away from Tokyo, you know. Don’t think I forgot.”

Very slightly, Hikaru stiffened, rinsing the soap out of the rice cooker’s bowl. “I totally did. Spiritual fumigation, remember?”

“Uhuh.” The glance he received was by no means an impressed one. It was, in fact, highly dubious and sceptical and quite efficiently communicated ‘pull the other one’. “Spiritual fumigation, sure. Very horrifying, that spiritual fumigation, driving you all the way to Osaka.” His tone was very flat.

“Very much so.” Hikaru nodded, seriously. “When you hear the spirits are fumigating, you don’t mess around. You just grab your stuff and get the hell out of there.”

“But it will have cleared up by now, hm?” Yashiro asked idly, reaching to the side after a pause to grab a cloth. In hand, he made himself useful by drying off his crockery.

“Very probably.” Hikaru agreed, hoping he was speaking the truth. He considered it highly unlikely that Kaminaga would be lying in wait when he got home, but…some quiet part of him insisted that the sword-spirit would go to reasonably great lengths to get at him again. Pushing that unsettling thought to the side, he glanced around to see if there was anything else to wash. It didn’t seem like it, so he was probably done.

Yashiro sighed. “Right then. And this ‘spiritual fumigation’, is it going to happen again?” Left unspoken was ‘are you going to randomly traipse to my location on short notice again in the future?’

He paused to consider his response, eventually admitting “Maybe. I hope not, but you never know.” If Kaminaga did show up again, sword-spirit in tow, Hikaru would waste no time in getting the hell out of there.

With another sigh, his friend rolled his eyes, putting down his cloth before heading out of the
kitchen. “Well, whatever. If you ever need to escape this *spiritual fumigation* again, let me know. Just...see if you can give a bit more warning, maybe.”

Hikaru blinked at him, a heartfelt grin wrestling its way onto his face. “Thanks, man.” He said, pretty damn genuinely. Having a place he could escape to was actually very reassuring.

“No problem. Just don’t throw up on my stuff, next time.” Yashiro answered, from the next room.

Drying off his hands, Hikaru followed through the doorway. “I’ll try.”

“Don’t forget you owe me money.”

“I won’t.” He assured, rolling his eyes. Eying the goban speculatively, he asked “Are you up for another game?”

The grey-haired boy glanced back over his shoulder, eyes wary. “What, another *offering game*?”

Hikaru considered it, with a glance towards the incense burner. “…nah, don’t think so. It was a bit intense.” He decided, hand going to the fan in his pocket. “Just a normal game.”

After a bit of suspicious scrutinising, Yashiro nodded. “Well, that’s okay, then.” It was almost funny, how he now seemed to be on the lookout for Hikaru hooking him into his alleged religious practices, despite those ‘religious practices’ being *Go*, for the most part. Which, you know, the guy did for a living. How horrible of him, making Yashiro play an earnest and skilful game in front of a paper fan.

“Wuss,” Hikaru mock-coughed into his hand, receiving a light cuff around the head for his troubles.

Undaunted, he grinned at his assailant, and then went on to cheerfully disassemble him over the goban.

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The next morning, Hikaru was more or less satisfied with his health. He felt perhaps less stellar than usual, but felt quite confident that he’d perform well in his Kisei match the next day, given how well he’d been playing the day before. He was a bit tired and a bit woozy, but on the whole managed to walk straight all the way to the train station.

“You realise that this is going to take, like, an hour longer than it needs to, right?” Yashiro asked, demonstrating once again his extreme disapproval of Hikaru’s travel choices.

“Yokohama is the devil and I will avoid all trains going past it like the plague.” Hikaru insisted, firmly, collecting his tickets from the machine.

“Ohuh.” His host and nursemaid for the week uttered, unimpressed. “And why, exactly, is Yokohama so evil?”

Hikaru waved a hand vaguely, brandishing tickets in the process. “You know. Full of demons.” It might actually be, for all he knew. There was at least one demon there, to begin with, and that was more than enough for him to stay the hell away from it.

He wasn’t sure what Kaminaga’s range was, on detecting him. But if it were far enough...well, he’d probably sense Hikaru going past on the train, and he did *not* want that guy and his demon sword to be aware of his movements.

“Of course.” Yashiro sighed. “Would these ‘demons’ be anyone I know?”
Tilting his head, Hikaru blinked. There was an obvious wrong assumption being made there, but… he scrutinised the boy, nonetheless, trying to see if there was anything off about him. “…Nah.” He said, eventually. “I don’t think you’ve ever met a spirit in your life.” Or, if he had, it had been insignificant enough an encounter that he couldn’t sense it at all.

Yashiro scrutinised him right back. “…You’re a strange one, Shindou.” He informed.

“You’re one to talk, Mr Premature Grey Hair.” He replied immediately, not missing a beat, and then dodged out of the way of Yashiro’s swipe with a laugh.

“My hair is beautiful, you tasteless shit.” His friend declared with outrage. “It’s just an unusual colour, is all!”

Hikaru observed this with a glint in his eye. “Do I detect a sore spot?” He demanded gleefully, ignoring the strange looks they were attracting from other station-goers as he retreated to a safe distance from the larger boy he was teasing. “Are you worried about your old man hair? Maybe it will be premature balding next, hm?”

“Like hell!” Yashiro retorted, nostrils flaring. “It’s not old-man grey in the least, you hear me?! And I’m not going to go bald until at least my fifties!”

“Calm down, grandpa, you’re making a scene,” Hikaru half-sang, and failed to dodge the next lunge. His friend promptly commandeered him into a rowdy yet mostly amiable scuffle, disconcerting numerous bypassers and attracting the frowns of the station staff. They managed less than a minute of spirited horseplay before a station attendant came and ruined their fun.

“Come on, boys, that’s enough.” The woman told them sternly from nearby, having stridden over to interrupt. “Don’t make me kick you out of the station.”

Obediently, they both stilled and broke apart. Hikaru removed his elbow from the vicinity of Yashiro’s face, and Yashiro released the backpack he’d been using as leverage. “Sorry about that!” Hikaru apologised cheerily, not sounding especially sorry in the least. Yashiro rolled his eyes and muttered something presumably uncomplimentary at him beneath his breath.

“Yeah, sorry.” He echoed, giving Hikaru a light shove in the direction of the platforms. “Come on, you loser. Any more messing around and you might miss your train.”

“Who’s a loser?” Hikaru demanded, ducking out of the way but heading to the stairs regardless. “I remember beating you at least twice yesterday, or did I imagine that?”

The station attendant shook her head at them, looking a little amused as she went back to the ticket office.

“Being good at Go doesn’t mean you’re not a loser at other stuff.” Yashiro told him imperiously, reaching the stairs to the platform.

“Like what?” He challenged as he followed downwards.

“Like how you’re basically the last of us to move out.” The other boy stated, smugly. “You’re getting proper pay and everything and you’re still living with your parents?”

Hikaru blinked “I’m sixteen!” He protested, a little surprised. He…honestly hadn’t really thought about moving out. It was a bit of a befuddling concept. It…could be nice to have his own place? But then there was cooking, and laundry, and ugh.
Yashiro shrugged. “So am I.” He said. “And Waya was even younger when he moved out, if I heard right.”

Frowning slightly, Hikaru fixed a pensive glance to his shoes. “Well…it’s just convenient, where I live?” He explained, lamely. “It’s close to a station, for one thing.” For another, it was close to Utagawashi’s shrine, which he’d likely be visiting more frequently now. “…I don’t think it would make sense for me to move out, just yet.” He concluded, after some thought. “Maybe next year. I dunno.”

“Well, whatever. It doesn’t matter to me.” The other pro claimed. “Just get on your train already – it’s leaving in like five minutes.”

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Hikaru arrived in Tokyo without incident, and upon arriving home was pleased to pronounce the area apparently demon-free. So far as he could tell, anyway – he could detect no hint of that lingering bloodthirst or malicious will, but that didn’t mean that it wasn’t there. It was entirely possible that Kaminaga and his demon were in the city, but too far away for him to detect…but if they were, he was certain he’d find out eventually. For the moment, Hikaru concentrated on stifling his prickling paranoia and settling back into his home.

He greeted his mother, deflecting questions about his absence and health, before returning happily to his room. With all due haste, he replaced the incense burner at the kamidana and stared at it with satisfaction. He had no idea if his makeshift thing at Yashiro’s place had worked…or even if this worked in any appreciable way, for that matter…but in any case, it was good to be back again.

He sent a text to Utagawashi, notifying him that he’d returned home, and resolutely got to work catching up on his Go studies. He had a match the next day, after all, and he’d not prepared for it.

Hikaru chased up the kifu of the sandan he was facing in the Kisei preliminaries and studied it avidly, playing out one particularly interesting game on his slightly dusty goban. This guy was actually quite good – better than Waya, probably. Maybe about the same level as Yashiro? It wouldn’t be such a clear-cut game as some of the others had been, then. Hikaru was confident that he was stronger, but…well, people often got lucky against their superiors.

Apparently inspired by the league or something, his opponent-to-be had played particularly good games over the last couple of weeks. With a considering eye, he printed off those kifu as well to pick apart on his board, attempting to familiarise himself with the style.

It was about then that Utagawashi sent a text demanding he come to the shrine to check in. Hikaru blinked at it, aware that it was reasonably early in the afternoon and he probably could afford the time. Still, though… ‘Why?’ He texted back. ‘I have a tournament match tomorrow and I need to prepare for it.’

‘You can do that later.’ The priest responded, very swiftly. ‘Making certain you are safe is more important. I want to see how you feel, after what happened.’

Well. ‘How lovely of you to be concerned!’ Hikaru sent back, with a wry grin. Utagawashi might be a bit bitchy, but…he was kind of a marshmallow, wasn’t he? ‘If you insist…’

‘I do.’ Utagawashi insisted.

Hikaru considered the time, and responded ‘I’ll be there in half an hour-ish.’ He located a jacket and a small notepad, just in case he needed to write anything down, and headed down the stairs.
It wasn’t until he was quite close to the shrine that he noticed…something.

Hikaru paused, wary. The top of the torii was in sight beyond the weakening trees, its deep red a compliment to the autumnal colours in the surrounding forest, and something beyond it was setting off his senses. Not necessarily in a bad way either – it was nothing like the sword spirit. But it was pretty weird-feeling.

After taking a few minutes to probe at his impulses to see if there was anything worrying, like for example a deep and abiding need to run away, Hikaru took a deep breath and continued on towards the shrine, the feeling of something growing more evident as he approached. Utagawashi, in his pale and very noticeable kariginu, was visibly waiting for him, looking his way as he walked through the torii and closed the distance between them.

He might have expected a pinched, or pained, or disgusted expression from the priest. Instead there was surprise, though it was a fairly quiet sort. “What is it?” He asked, as he arrived within sensible speaking distance.

The kannushi regarded him with perplexed interest. “You actually feel better than you did the last time I saw you.” He said, voice keen with incipient fascination. “I didn’t expect that.”

Hikaru…wasn’t surprised. He frowned at that, wondering at the lack of reaction. He’d repelled a possession attempt, had burned a fairly substantial area of his soul in so doing…shouldn’t he feel worse to spiritual senses, now? Wasn’t that how it worked? Somehow, though, it made perfect sense that he wouldn’t feel worse. Perhaps it was some sort of spirit-thing? “What, so am I less injured somehow?” He asked, because that was the more surprising part.

“No, you’re just as mangled as ever.” Utagawashi claimed, with a touch of amusement. “It’s just… less offensive, somehow. Not by much, but it’s noticeable.” He tilted his head, the eboshi making the motion somewhat exaggerated-looking. “It’s a bit of a relief, I must admit. I was worried you’d feel even worse than before.”

“Hmm.” Hikaru mumbled, with a slight frown. He regarded Utagawashi, focusing as much as he could on that ephemeral sensation of weird. There was something he was detecting, but actually pinning it down seemed beyond him. It was like trying to catch smoke. “You know, I think I’m sensing you.” He said, after a pause that had been made somewhat awkward by his blatant staring. “It’s hard to say, but there’s definitely something weird about you.”

“…You’re definitely more spiritually sensitive, then.” The priest observed. “How do you feel? Have you noticed any difference?”

He snorted. “Well, I’m basically recovering from spirit flu, so I don’t feel great.” He replied dryly. “On that note, I’m gonna sit down, okay?” Without further ado, he turned around and headed for one of the rather old benches on the premises, planting himself upon it with a sigh. The vaguely rotten wood was cold and a bit damp, since it had apparently rained recently, but it was better than standing up.

Utagawashi, having followed him over, eyed the bench speculatively but didn’t join him. He’d probably get his pale robes dirty, so it was likely for the best. Instead, he stood near Hikaru a little uncomfortably, looking down. “My senses are fairly weak,” He said. “I can’t really tell what’s changed in you, only that something has. You said you have a sort of burn where the demon had hooked itself, correct?”
Hikaru paused for a few seconds, and nodded. “I’m guessing it’s to do with how I got rid of the thing.” He offered. “It hurt like a complete bitch to begin with, but by the last time we talked it was actually okay.”

“Have you checked on it since then?” The priest inquired, and Hikaru shook his head. “Well, hm. Would you mind having a quick ‘look’? It will be interesting if it has changed further.”

Hikaru regarded the bench he was on. It didn’t have a back. “If I fall off this bench, you have to buy me ramen.” He stated, and then obligingly closed his eyes to ‘have a look’.

It was becoming increasingly familiar, and increasingly easy, to slip out of the physical world and into something…else. It was becoming increasingly vivid an experience, too. It hadn’t been long that he’d been doing this stuff, so he was perfectly able to remember that, before, the only sensation he’d had relating to his spirit was of a painful and looming void at the edge of it. Now, though…

Increasingly, it seemed like this was an actual place, that he could move around in and explore and interact with. There hadn’t been any sensation analogous to sight, before, but now there sort of was. It wasn’t quite sight, as it tended to blend unpredictably into varieties of touch and feeling, but it was close enough. More and more, his spirit was coalescing into an endless dark expanse, lit by tides of soft light, with incandescent specks scattered here and there. He trailed light around him as he moved, and apparently some of the light was the emotional echoes because he felt it when he was in the flow of it, and it was all very cool and very weird.

The edges of his calamitous wounds were experienced in a sort of visceral manner, part sight but mostly feel. The injuries were messy, casting light in some areas but completely disrupting or even snuffing it out in others, and they hurt. Even the sensation of the pain was messy – part the physical sensation you’d expect from having a very bad injury, but grief and absence writhed through that pain in agonising swathes. It did not feel good.

That burn, though…Hikaru navigated to it, in a not-quite-movement way that was difficult to describe. The burn was on the edge of his wounds, where the demon had hooked in and where he’d evicted it, and it barely hurt at all. He poked at its bright mass with interest, scattered echoes of sorrow flailing at him as he did. It felt…well, like a scar. The void beyond it was as empty and terrible as ever, but this edge…

It was better.

Intrigued, and more than slightly hopeful, Hikaru withdrew from the not-place and slipped back into his actual senses.

He found himself slumped over slightly, but not in danger of falling off the bench. Apparently lacking the desire to buy him food, Utagawashi was hovering watchfully nearby, and perked up when he noticed Hikaru returning to awareness. “It basically doesn’t hurt at all, anymore.” Hikaru announced cheerfully. “It feels like a pretty well-healed scar. Kind of tender, maybe, but that section isn’t an open wound now.” Without waiting for a response, he stood up, excited. “Do you think I could do that to the rest?”

The priest blinked, looking honestly startled. “What, ‘cauterise’ the edges of your wounds?” He asked, surprise giving way to interest. “…Perhaps. It depends on how you managed it, this time. Do you think this could actually heal you?”

Hikaru pushed aside the perhaps premature cheer and thought about it. “…I’m pretty sure there’s nothing I can do about the main ‘wound’.” He said, with a slight grimace. “There’s a pretty large section of my soul that’s basically not there. The edges, though…”
Utagawashi winced at his description. “That…well, yes, I can see how most of it is beyond help. But if you can ‘scar’ the edges, there might be some improvement.” He opined. “Do you think this scarred area has helped with the emotional echoes?”

He frowned, doubtfully, and turned a little more attention to the constant tide of grief he was forever compensating for. “If it has, it’s not much.” He answered, dubious.

“Hmm.” The priest considered his words. “Well, if nothing else, you feel better to the senses. I’m sure that means it has a positive effect, even if you can’t detect it yet. It’s certainly worth looking into.”

“I’ll see if I can do it again on purpose, some time.” Hikaru agreed, considering that bright section of scarring, and the increasingly poignant sensations of its surroundings. “…Hey, Utagawashi?”

The man glanced at him. “Yes?”

“Can you feel the bits of your soul which aren’t the wound?” He asked. “Because I started out only being able to feel the nasty, but now there’s other stuff too.”

Utagawashi presented him with a fairly startled expression. “…I can’t, no.” He said, blinking. “I’ve never noticed anything other than the wound. You can feel your own soul?”

“…maybe?” Hikaru offered. “It’s kind of like its own place, and I can move around in it. At first it was just a weird feeling, but now I can almost see stuff too. Sort of.” Seeing the priest open his mouth to ask, he cut him off. “Light, mostly. It’s a bit weird.”

“…Perhaps it’s related to your spiritual sensitivity?” Utagawashi suggested, unknowingly echoing Hikaru’s earlier thought. “I can honestly say I’ve not heard of that before, but if it is a sensitivity thing…well, I’m not exactly stellar in that regard.” His expression became pinched. “It…well. It really is a shame that we can’t ask Kaminaga-san.”

Hikaru scowled at the reminder. “…Yeah, I guess.” He muttered, aware that the old exorcist likely had a wealth of useful information but not best pleased with the package it came in. “So, what are we going to do about him?”

Utagawashi sighed, a troubled frown coming over his face. “It’s a little difficult to say.” He answered, heavily. “I have no idea how much the demon is affecting his thought processes, but I’m not sure he’d listen to me if I tried to warn him that it’s slipping its leash. He is a fairly prideful man to begin with, and I don’t imagine the sword-spirit is helping with that.”

“Yeah, probably not.” Hikaru agreed darkly, one hand going to his fan on impulse. No way would that bastard consider listening to people he looked down on. “Is there anything we can do? Like, could we exorcise the thing?”

The priest shot him an alarmed look. “Let’s keep you away from exorcisms, please.” He said, a high note in his voice. “You’ve proven extremely vulnerable to possession by that sword and I don’t want to risk it succeeding.”

“Can’t you just slap some ofuda on it, or something?” He demanded.

“Shindou-kun,” Utagawashi said, patiently. “That demon already has an ofuda on it. For containment, perhaps, but despite the ofuda it’s still powerful enough to try to possess you and to be making progress on Kaminaga-san. Additional ofuda might be enough to exorcise it, but…I’m not willing to gamble my life on it. You may not have noticed, but the demon is a sword, and that sword is physical. Kaminaga-san is a master at swordwork. Do I need to continue?”
Hikaru wilted a little. He didn’t especially want to be assaulted with a demon sword, no. Not exactly his idea of fun. “Well, how else are we meant to exorcise it?”

The priest paused. “Prayers, purification chants, spirit traps.” He listed, dismissively. “Those can work on a lot of spirits, but…well, most of those would require Kaminaga-san to kindly hold still for us, and we can’t count on that. Besides, I’m no expert on exorcism. The one who should be our best resource is the one we are trying to help.” He sounded exceptionally frustrated.

“What about other exorcists?” Hikaru prompted. “When you thought I was a demon, you said there were onmyouji. Don’t you know any that could help?”

Utagawashi stared at him. “…Actually, that’s an excellent idea.” He said, his frustration steadily replacing itself with consideration. “There’s at least one man I could contact – we’re actually acquainted through Kaminaga-san, so he should be interested in this. And he’s certainly an experienced exorcist.”

“Well, you do that, then.” He nodded, a cautious sort of optimism unfurling in him. “Hopefully he can sort out that dickhead.”

“He’s a busy man, and doesn’t live nearby.” The priest cautioned. “He might not be able to go to Yokohama for a fair while. We will have to be careful about that demon in the meantime.”

“I can sense it coming.” Hikaru pointed out, becoming increasingly cheerful at the prospect of not having to deal with the demon again. “And I can work on my spiritual sensitivity to help with that. I’m sure we’ll manage.”

“Perhaps.” Utagawashi said, clearly attempting to be pessimistic about the whole thing, but not really succeeding. Instead, he looked rather encouraged. And, really, why shouldn’t he be? Reinforcements from an actual exorcist were exactly what they needed in this situation.

See? Hikaru thought to himself, flattening down his residual paranoia. It’s going to be fine. “So,” he said, in a swift change of subject. “You said you had something for me?”

Chapter End Notes

Hello all, I’m posting this in a hurry before I go to aikido. Sorry for the wait, but now that I’m back at uni chapters will take longer to write. Thanks to everyone for all of the comments and support, it’s been amazing.

03/06/18 – very small edits
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Hikaru takes several very sensible precautions.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In a somewhat bemusing moment of déjà vu, the priest presented Hikaru with a stack of ofuda. Granted, they were being politely offered rather than flung in terror, but there was a definite familiarity to the situation.

He stared at them in consternation. “Somehow, when you said you had something for me, this is not what I expected.” He said, mostly to get the thought out of his head and into the open. Hesitantly, he took the stack of charms, feeling an odd tingle pass up his arm as he did, and inspected them. They were almost identical to the ones that Utagawashi had tried throwing at him back when he’d been terrified of his demonic menace – the only difference was that these were apparently meant to ward an area rather than just generally repel evil spirits.

Looking very pleased with himself, Utagawashi stepped back and brought his hands together in front of him, the sleeves swiftly consuming any hint of skin. It was a painfully familiar gesture. “What did you expect, then?” He asked, amused.

Hikaru shrugged, turning the topmost ofuda over to read it. “Dunno. Not this, though.” He replied, tilting his head. “So, what am I meant to do with these?”

“Put them around your home.” The kannushi replied, serenely. “At least one in every room, and on the doors. These ones have been written specifically to ward demons from your home. There are three at the bottom which are more standard, that you can carry with you. While I doubt that the sword-spirit can be exorcised with ofuda, carrying some will undoubtedly offer you protection.”

He considered that, pulling out one of the bottom ones to compare it with the topmost. Insulation against murderous sword-spirits was definitely something he could get behind…though, honestly, if Utagawashi had told him months ago that he would one day be grateful for being given ofuda, he’d likely have egged the Honden in response. What on earth had his life come to? “And what, putting them up around the house protects the house? Stops demons from coming in?”

“Frankly, I have no idea.” Utagawashi admitted. “It might do, and I know exorcists who have done it who swear it helps, but as I can’t sense ofuda…. I can’t guarantee it. It can’t hurt, though.” He nodded to the stack in Hikaru’s hands. “I wrote what seemed like enough for one house, but I could be wrong. Let me know if you need more.”

Hikaru didn’t answer for a while, instead scrutinising his pile of charms intently. It was very faint, almost beyond his ability to notice, but there was something about the ofuda. Something he thought was probably spirit-y. He pondered the implications of that, his faith in the concept of protective charms rising a notch. “Is there anything else I can do, to be safer?” He asked, eventually. He wasn’t the most cautious of people, typically, but…he wasn’t going to mess around when it came to that sword. He clamped down on the reflexive fear that surged whenever he thought of the thing, and
looked up to Utagawashi. The man looked oddly approving.

“To begin with, you should try to pray to Inari-sama every so often.” Utagawashi said. “If you have a house shrine, that will do nicely. You can also pray here – it is an Inari shrine, after all.”

“Some shrine. I’ve never seen anyone else here.” Hikaru said archly, raising his eyebrows at the priest. He felt it was a valid thing to remark on – he wasn’t sure how many times he’d visited, now, but there had never been anyone else.

The priest of the shrine in question eyed him in a distinctly unfriendly manner. “I’ll have you know that there are a handful of regulars.” He claimed, severely. “It’s hardly my fault that you seem to forever be missing them.” After a pause, he added “In fact, there is a man called Shindou who visits every few weeks or so. I wondered if you might be related, but haven’t asked.” Hikaru blinked with surprise.

“Is he as old as dirt?” Hikaru inquired.

Utagawashi sighed at him. “He is of advanced age, if that’s what you mean.”

“I mean he’s old as dirt.” He corrected, mulling over the knowledge that his grandpa was probably a semi-regular visitor to the shrine. It made sense, given the proximity, but he had difficulty remembering that his family members actually did stuff besides ambienctly existing. He generally assumed that his grandpa lived in a constant state of grandpa-ness, milling about his old-fashioned house and complaining and generally being grumpy, and doing very little else. It hadn’t really occurred to him that his grandfather might actually leave the house from time to time and visit places. “So, what, does he come here to make offerings?”

“That is, generally, what one does at a shrine.” The man informed him. “Contrary to what you may believe, spiritual training and demonic encounters are not normal shrine-going activities.”

“Hm. Sounds boring.” Hikaru remarked, still caught on the idea of his grandfather. He lived like, five minutes away from the shrine, didn’t he? “…You know, my grandpa is superstitious as all hell. Could you make him up some ofuda for the next time he visits, claim there’s been bad spirits around or something? He would totally put them up.” He hadn’t considered it at all, before, but…the old guy lived close. If the sword-demon came back here, it was too close for his liking.

Utagawashi seemed somewhat taken aback. “And you can’t just give him the ofuda yourself?”

“Of course not. Then he’d think I believed in all of his superstitious bullcrap.” Hikaru explained sensibly, tone implying that the priest was a bit thick for needing it said.

The kannushi stared. “Shindou-kun. You are learning to detect and ward off spirits, and have been planning the exorcism of a demon with me. You very obviously believe in this sort of thing.”

“Well, yeah. But he doesn’t know that.” He nodded with satisfaction.

A deeply beleaguered sigh was his response, and Hikaru watched with amusement as Utagawashi rubbed wearily at his face. “You are a strange person. As you wish, I will make some ofuda for your grandfather.”

Hikaru grinned. “Cool, thanks. Can I also have a normal ofuda for the house shrine? I’m pretty sure ours is, like, at least two years old.”

Utagawashi glared at him half-heartedly. “I’m going to start charging you for this,” He warned, and went to the Honden, presumably in search of another ofuda. He returned in short order with a more
typical piece of paper, such as you might find in anyone’s house shrine. “Here. I suggest you pray to Inari-sama for protection at least once a week. If you can, come here to make food offerings, too. Inari’s foxes are meant to be guardian spirits, so making them offerings is only sensible.”

“Fox spirits, hm?” Hikaru mused, accepting the ofuda and adding it to his stack. “I thought they were meant to be tricksters.”

“Many certainly are.” The priest said, glancing to the side at one of the pair of fox statues the shrine had. “Inari-sama has his own foxes which are his servants and messengers. These are supposedly more benign than their troublesome cousins.”

Hikaru followed his gaze to the fox statue. It was a stylised thing which didn’t look all that much like a fox, and the red bib around its neck frankly looked rather silly, but that was how all the statues tended to look. He wondered if a fox-spirit might be something he could see, one day. “Maybe I’ll come with an offering on Sunday.” He said, eventually.

“Rice, fried tofu, and Inari-zushi are all good offerings.” Utagawashi told him.

He nodded agreeably. “If you say so.” Turning over the enlarged stack of paper in his hands, he said “So: ofuda, praying, offerings. Anything else I can do?”

Utagawashi raised an eyebrow at him. “Well…you could take up misogi.” He said, an amused tilt to his mouth suggesting that he was expecting a particular response. Hikaru stared suspiciously.

“…That’s the thing where you dunk yourself in a freezing cold waterfall, isn’t it?” He asked, flatly.

“Well, it’s not quite cold enough yet for the temperature to be freezing…” The man’s tone was subtly teasing.

“Yeah, no.” Hikaru concluded, decisively.

The priest smirked at him. “Well, if you change your mind, the traditional time of the month is the eleventh day.” He said. “So you have nearly an entire month to work yourself up to it.”

With a huff, he replied “My idea of a good time does not involve frostbite.”

“Well, we all have our flaws.” Utagawashi stated philosophically.

“I’ll stick with the ofuda, thanks.” Hikaru stated, very firmly. He glanced at the stack in his hands, and wondered what on earth his mother would think of it.

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His mother, as it happened, was rather exceptionally bemused.

“Hikaru, what in the world are you doing?” She asked, voice torn between exasperation and tolerant amusement as she watched him slap ofuda into strategic locations around the house. “Where did you get all of those ofuda? Aren’t they expensive?”

“Nah, I know this priest. I got them for free.” He said cheerfully, inspecting the one he’d put on the front door and concluding that he had placed it evenly after all. He headed to the kitchen door and gave it its own protective charm, placing it carefully.

“Since when do you know any priests?” Mitsuko inquired sceptically, wandering to the front door to inspect the ofuda. “…These are very strange ofuda.” She said, after a moment. “Protection against
malevolent spirits? What are you up to?"

“I,” Hikaru stated, strongly. “Am protecting our glorious household against demons. I know,” He nodded at her startled look, knowingly. “It’s very valorous of me. But there’s no need to thank me – I could hardly let our home remain vulnerable, could I?” With that, he entered the kitchen and inspected it for likely ofuda-bearing corners.

“…You are a strange child, Hikaru.” His mother said. “I think you may have been spending too much time with your grandfather.”

“Lies.” He claimed, selecting a spot near the window. “I’ve not talked to him in weeks.”

“Then why all the ofuda?” She asked, with a sigh.

“I already said – it’s protection against demons. Nasty things, demons, you should be glad I’m taking measures against them.” Hikaru said. “All you need to do is not touch the ofuda. Clean around them, leave them where they are. Maybe actually use the house shrine for once, since it would be kind of ungrateful to be asking for so much protection without giving anything back.” It was only fair, right?

His mother stared. “What on earth are you talking about?”

“Pray to Inari, or he’ll be sad.” He replied, severely. “You don’t want to make Inari sad, do you?” She seemed to have no idea what to say to that, so he moved on upstairs to continue his crusade. He put ofuda in every room, and having several left over, put a number more in his room and two more on the front door for good measure. Once he was finished, he nodded with satisfaction and offered a last glance to his very confused mother. “Remember, leave the ofuda where they are.” He told her, and then went upstairs to see to the house shrine.

The ofuda behind the kamidana’s doors was…old. He had no idea when it had last been replaced, but it had the kind of weird crinkly look of paper which had been left in one place for a long time. Hikaru shook his head with mock disappointment as he replaced it, closing the little doors and sitting back critically. The house shrine was clearly part of his mother’s cleaning routine, as it was only slightly dusty, which was something to be grateful for. There were all sorts of stories about the nastiness that neglected shrines could spawn.

After a pause, he shrugged and went to retrieve his lighter from his bag, returning to the house shrine to light the candles and a stick of incense. He knelt on the floor in front of its shelf, settling into seiza with the half-awkward feel he remembered from the last time he’d done this. Praying to Sai was strange enough, but to an actual god? He’d never been the sort of person who cared much about the Shinto traditions, and it was unspeakably weird that honouring them was now part of his life.

Well, sort of. It was kind of a selfish honouring of tradition, since he was mostly doing it for the spiritual protection he might get out of it. Hikaru glanced up at the shrine, wondering if Inari cared about that sort of thing. It probably happened all the time - a lot of humans only prayed when they wanted something, rather than from genuine respect and reverence. Hikaru certainly wasn’t an especially reverent person.

At any rate, though, some prayer was better than none. Hikaru closed his eyes and sighed, feeling a subtle spark of something on the ofuda he had with him, feeling the sparks of the ofuda he’d placed around the house. There was something about them that…resonated, from point to point. Like distant motes of light reaching out to each other from across a dark room. There was something about the ofuda in the kamidana, too, something that hadn’t been there before. As he focused on it, wondering, it flickered brighter. Brighter, and almost…watchful.
Feeling an inexplicable nervousness come across him at the feel of it, Hikaru breathed deeply. *Thank you,* he thought, in the clear and focused way he’d once used to communicate with Sai, reaching out to that spark in the kamidana. *Thank you, for the ofuda. For however they help, against that sword-spirit.* Carefully, he fed his honest gratitude, with a shadow of the fear that had spawned it, into the reaching thought. He had no idea what he was doing, here, but…

He projected *gratitude,* with slow concentration, and felt the watchful *something* in the shrine begin to unfurl.

*It knows I’m here,* Hikaru knew, with unwavering certainty. *It can hear me.* It was so faint, just a tracery of light at the edge of his awareness, but…it was there. It was *watching.* Shaken, and oddly breathless, Hikaru tried to relax, extending a tremulous thought…

*Inari-sama, are you listening? …Please, help us against this demon.*

*Awareness* whispered back, the tiniest hint of reciprocity, and he trembled. He felt *afraid,* but not at all in the same way as he had in the presence of the demon. It was like standing in front of an enormous waterfall with his eyes closed and his ears blocked, the cold spray of water on his skin the only hint of the huge power he was blind to. Something was *there* – something he couldn’t see, or hear, or even truly *feel* – but…it was there.

Abruptly, he found himself overwhelmed, and quickly withdrew. He could still feel that spark of presence in the shrine, but he didn’t try to reach out to it again. Instead, he sat quietly with his eyes still closed, breathing steadily to disperse a surge of nervous energy. The scent of the woody incense accompanied his dazed, and almost bemused thoughts. In the space of minutes, the world had shifted around on him. The introduction of spirits and demons to his reality had been, in comparison, slow and gentle. This, though…

Minutes had passed, and now the world was different. *I think I believe in Inari, now.* He thought to himself, almost incredulously.

The shrine-presence flickered like a candle-flame, and he shivered.

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The house felt different, after that, and Hikaru wasn’t sure what to think of it.

He sat on his bed, aware that he should probably be studying for his Kisei match, but too occupied with the weird developments to do so. The house was *different,* and it was really very bizarre. Every time he closed his eyes, he could feel the ofuda around the house, their unique spiritual stamp feeling more and more settled by the minute. It was like they were sinking into the walls, permeating the bricks and the doors with a subtle presence, and it was *strange.*

Nothing about it felt worrying, which was the only reason he wasn’t freaking out and calling Utagawashi. He’d tentatively reached out to the increasingly-rooted *something* in the walls, and touched it, and all it had done was sort-of acknowledge him and then move on. There was no malevolence to it, nothing that unnerved or unsettled him, but despite all that it was an unfamiliar feeling, and *distracting.*

He couldn’t *not* notice it – every time he sort-of acclimatised to the sensation of being surrounded by ofuda-traces, they shifted on him, and his attention was inescapably captured again. It was honestly a little maddening.

Grumbling a little to himself, he retrieved his phone and tapped out a message to Utagawashi, stating
‘I can feel the ofuda spreading through my house.’

What followed was a short text conversation wherein Hikaru learnt that being able to detect ofuda was usually the purview of very spiritually sensitive people, so apparently he was still picking up speed with that. Utagawashi said he’d never personally felt it, and wanted to know what it felt like.

After some thought, he concluded ‘Noisy’, because it was, even if in a spirit-y kind of way rather than in an auditory way. It was like a quiet sound that was too irregular to get used to or tune out, and was frankly very annoying. It kind of…itched. Or tickled. Neither sound nor touch really came close to really describing the feeling, but suffice to say, it was a slight and irritating sensation that showed no signs of stopping soon.

But, if it meant that his house was safer from demons…he supposed it was worth it.

Hikaru grimaced at the ceiling, wondering how he’d managed to get to this point. All he’d wanted was to develop his spiritual sensitivity so that he could track down some spirits and interrogate them about where Sai might have gone, and while his spiritual sensitivity was certainly increasing, the demon hadn’t been something he’d expected. It had been a sudden and very unwelcome development, and not one that he could ignore.

Sitting and hoping that the thing would go away on its own would be a mistake, and a seriously gargantuan one. Hikaru had no desire to find out what possession was usually like for its victim, but if he let his guard down, he might not have a choice in the matter. To his knowledge, Kaminaga and the sword were nowhere near him, but the instant his thoughts strayed their way it was like an alarm went off in his head, blaring ‘caution!’ at him in bright red lettering. He was, realistically, doing everything he could. Utagawashi was contacting an actual exorcist who could go help Kaminaga for them, he had warded his house with ofuda and was paying respect to Inari…but still, it didn’t feel like it was enough.

He had a bad feeling about this whole thing. A persistent, pessimistic train of thought which insisted that things could and probably would go badly, and he wasn’t doing enough.

The combined itching of his pessimism and the low-level distraction of the ofuda eventually joined forces to propel Hikaru from his bed. Acting on impulse, he withdrew his fan, placed it on the kamidana, and lit some wisteria incense.

He sat in front of the shrine for several minutes, a little perplexed at his own actions. He wasn’t offering a game, and while he could provide an ‘update’ on the situation, he mostly just wanted to sit with the shrine and the incense. Considering that the smell of the incense always magnified the ache of loss, it was a bit of a weird impulse. Almost masochistic, really. But…he just sort of wanted to do it.

God, I’m obsessed, he thought to himself, a little scornfully, but didn’t move.

Hikaru sat in front of the kamidana with no particular purpose in mind. He wasn’t stressed and in need of the melancholic calm it could provide. He wasn’t offering any games. He wasn’t speaking. He was just…sitting. Sitting, and allowing himself to bask in sorrow rather than be driven to annoyance by the background activity of the ofuda. Wasn’t that a bit disproportionate?

He stared at the shrine, a contemplative frown falling across his face. He’d felt something, in the house shrine. It had responded to his presence, to his thoughts and intentions. It had only been a hint, like seeing the barest tip of a dragon’s whisker twitching in the dark, but it had been there.

There was no such presence in Sai’s shrine.
It was a bit of a punch in the gut to experience that complete lack of presence, even though there were so many reasons why he shouldn’t feel anything from this kamidana. To begin with, Inari was one of the most celebrated kami in Japan, and if Hikaru could barely detect his presence, he surely wouldn’t be anywhere close to detecting Sai, who had only been a particularly powerful ghost. Shrines for true kami probably worked differently to memorial shrines, too. Even so…he wanted desperately for there to be something in the kamidana, some bare hint of Sai, and it was agonising to find nothing there.

He had so few things to hang onto. There was the fan, there was the incense which smelled so familiar, there was the hint of Sai’s immaculate play in his own games; there were Sai’s games, each and every one of which was burned with painful clarity into his memory, which he could rarely bear thinking about. And, of course, there was himself – the terrible wounds on his spirit testament to who had dwelt there. He had hoped that the kamidana might be something like that, too, but…

Was he accomplishing anything, with this kamidana? Were the games worth anything? Were the words, his emotions, getting through to anything at all?

Hikaru breathed through the bitter thoughts, gritting his teeth against familiar hopelessness as he shoved it down and suffocated it. It was pointless to entertain such questions. Most people had no idea if their loved ones heard anything, when they paid their respects. Most people couldn’t feel the echoes of a god’s presence listening to them as they prayed. They didn’t know, but they did it anyway. Whether or he was speaking to Sai or to empty air made no difference – in the end, Sai deserved the respect, and the words, and the offerings, and Hikaru would be damned if he failed to give them because he was too busy wallowing in self-pity.

Around him, ofuda itched in his spirit-sense. He twitched, eyes fixed on the trail of incense smoke, and wondered if he’d be able to get to sleep at all with that irritating sensation transpiring around him. He hoped he wouldn’t be too sleep-deprived for his game, tomorrow.

“I wonder how ghosts work, that you couldn’t feel all this stuff.” Hikaru mused, intentionally speaking aloud to clear his depressing thoughts a little. “You’d think, being a ghost, you’d have perfect ability to interact with the other spiritual things.” Sai had never shown any hint of it, though. Not the barest recognition of the presence of other spirits, or of kami at shrines, or anything. It was honestly a bit weird.

He hoped he’d be able to see spirits and even ghosts, eventually. He wanted to interrogate the hell out of them.

…it all came back to spiritual sensitivity in the end, didn’t it? He’d have to spend some time ‘meditating’, and see if he could find those energy traces he was apparently still picking up…but not tonight.

Hikaru watched the last ashes fall, and sighed. “I’d best try to get an early night, what with all those ofuda doing their thing.” He stood up, feeling a little emotionally worn-out, and went to get ready for bed.

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Sleep did not come easily to him that night. The ofuda twitched and wove and ribboned through the walls all night long, forming interlinked strands of presence. The sensation itched at him incessantly, and as a result Hikaru failed completely in his efforts to attain deep sleep. He woke up periodically, the unfamiliar sensation of the home protection eventually driving him out of his room and down the corridors of the house, running his hands over the walls. He obtained a glass of water, draining it slowly while he contemplated the ofuda, still half-asleep.
He wasn’t really awake enough to do more than feel. He wasn’t awake enough to care when, as he reached out to feel the presence in the walls, he slipped half-way into that bizarre spiritual realm of his soul, feeling motes of light dance around him. It was all light now, wasn’t it? Sparks in the ofuda, embers in the shrine, and light in his soul. There was a glow in the walls, like threads of incandescence, spooling thicker and thicker, a fibrous mesh of radiance that rooted itself more firmly into his home with every second.

Hikaru reached out to his front door and its bright mass, a nexus in the light-web, and sleepily pondered the dissonance between the bright walls and the dark shadows. It was strange, wasn’t it? On one hand, his eyes saw the darkness of a house in the dead of night, but on the other…

The threads in the walls spread and settled, firmer with every heartbeat, and he watched it bemusedly. He was too tired to devote much thought to it, but…it was kind of pretty. Even if it was keeping him awake. Half-dazed, he felt the light spool around him for what felt like hours.

Eventually, tiredness settled into his limbs like a physical weight, and Hikaru thought he might be able to get some sleep. He sighed, and returned upstairs to his bed, attempting to ignore the spiritual itch. He sort of succeeded.

By the time Hikaru’s alarm went off, signifying that it was officially time to concede defeat and awaken properly, the ofuda had managed to build a pretty comprehensive cocoon of spirit-presence.

He marvelled at it as he showered, making faces at the ceiling as he concentrated his senses on it. The feeling was almost tactile, now – like running his fingers over something soft but with a subtle rasp, like rough-spun silk. It felt strong, though. It felt firm and resolute, awash with guarding light, and it was still strengthening, threads filling in the dwindling gaps. He hoped that it would be finished by the evening; that way he might actually be able to sleep properly.

He wasn’t really all the way awake by the time he left, but it would have to do. Hikaru blinked, eyes bleary, and left for the Go institute, exhaling a frosty breath into the cool October air.

At the end of the game, Hikaru bowed and thanked his opponent with more enthusiasm than he typically managed. Every game was beautiful, as Sai had said, but…some games were more beautiful than others. This person, this fellow sandan, had put up one hell of a fight before resigning, and it had been a thoroughly enjoyable game. He supposed that was no consolation to the guy for his loss out of the Kisei league, but that was just sort of how leagues worked.

Hikaru had started out as the strongest shodan and now he was the strongest sandan, and it showed. The gap in skill between he and his usual opponents only grew larger with time, it had to, otherwise he’d have no hope of keeping up with Touya. His rival's progress was meteoric, and to match that...well, Hikaru had to be similarly meteoric. Considering his two-month streak of forfeits at the beginning of his career, he’d never have managed to make sandan this quickly if he weren’t exceptional. Other sandan players very rarely came close to matching him these days, but this guy...

He watched his disappointed opponent leave the room with a thoughtful eye, and went to record his win, stamping the name into his mind. He’d make an effort to remember this one.

Hikaru met up with Waya and Isumi shortly after leaving the room, to news that both had won their matches. This was of course good news, but also somewhat sobering. “You guys are playing each other next week, right?” He prodded, slipping on his shoes. It wouldn’t be the first time they’d had to contend in an official match, but...playing friends for something that counted always sort of sucked.
He observed as Waya and Isumi stared at each other, a familiar sort of tension building in their stances. They weren’t rivals, just competitive friends, so that tension would never reach the intensity that Hikaru had experienced against Touya – the kind of rivalry they shared wasn’t a common thing. Even so, the looks they were fielding at each other at that point were not particularly conciliatory. “...Yeah.” Waya voiced, after a lengthy pause. “We are.”

“Perhaps we should hold off on our games, this week.” Isumi suggested, looking away and breaking the impromptu stare-off. “I don’t know about you, but it feels strange to be playing casual games with someone I'll be playing officially.”

“That'll be kind of awkward, since we're basically neighbours.” Waya pointed out half-heartedly, casting an impatient glance to the side. “What are you doing, Shindou? Aren't you coming over?”

“I've got to talk with the receptionist first.” Hikaru informed them, indicating the front desk. “You know, because I was sick this week and missed a match.”

“You were?” His messy-haired friend inquired, suspiciously. “Why didn't I hear about this?”

“I was sick,” He repeated. “It's not like it's that big a deal. I just need to go sign something to confirm I was ill.”

“...Didn't you phone in?” Isumi inquired, after a moment. “I can't see why they'd need a signature for a single match if you called them to say you’d be missing it.”

Hikaru laughed sheepishly. “Well, no. Yashiro called in, since I was kind of too messed up to remember. So, signature.”

There was a brief and incredulous pause. Most of the incredulity came directly from Waya; Isumi only looked politely curious. “He lives in Osaka!”

“Yeah, I was visiting.” Hikaru confirmed cheerfully. “It was fun. I got sick and threw up on his stuff. Now stay here, will you? This shouldn't take long.” With that, he left the two of them to loiter by the doors, making his way to reception. “Hi, I was told I had to sign something for my absence this week...”

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As was becoming typical for their Saturday afternoons, Hikaru departed with his friends to a go-playing venue of their choice. This was often a salon, but lately they’d taken to visiting one of the older two’s apartments to hold their own protracted study sessions. As the two of them lived in the same building, they often defaulted to Isumi’s apartment, which was two floors lower and therefore necessitated a shorter climb.

One might expect from Isumi’s politeness and well-kept appearance that he would be a very neat person in his home, but that wasn’t really the case. He made an effort to keep his living and dining area relatively clear, considering he often entertained Waya and occasionally Hikaru there, but he did leave things laying around and seemed to take a fairly casual approach to cleaning. Hikaru had seen his room a couple of times, and it wasn’t exactly tidy. Isumi wasn’t necessarily a messy person, but his living space had a tendency towards being haphazard and disorganised.

“Yashiro just moved out, you know. Like, a couple of weeks ago.” Hikaru remarked, the somewhat untidy entryway reminding him of the Kansai pro’s fastidious neatness.

Waya followed him in with interest, closing the door. “I didn’t know that. Is that why you visited?”
Hikaru paused. “Yeah, something like that.” He lied cheerfully, following Isumi through to the most important fixture of the home: the goban.

Isumi glanced at him, amused. “A housewarming visit?”

“Sort of.” He hedged, seating himself on the floor. “It was kind of short notice, so I didn’t bring anything. I’ll get him something next time.”

Waya eyed him searchingly as he sat at the side of the goban, moving some kifu out of the way as he did. “…Were you actually ill, or was that just an excuse for being hung-over?”

Hikaru opened his mouth to retort, and then closed it, pensive. “We totally should have got ourselves shit-faced. Why didn’t I think of that?” He lamented, internally cursing the post-spirit-thing illness. If not for that, a housewarming party would have been an excellent excuse to procure alcohol and dick about. “Oh well. Next time.” He resolved, retrieving his phone to text Yashiro.

‘Next time I visit, we should get drunk and call it a housewarming party’ he wrote out.

“Is it Yashiro-kun you’re messaging?” Isumi inquired, removing the goke from the board and setting them beside him.

A response came quite promptly. ‘Only if you go halvesies on the booze.’ Hikaru grinned, and raised his head to nod at his host. “Yep. Next time I visit, there will probably be beer involved.” He declared, and watched with interest as Isumi removed the lids of the goke. “Are you going to replay a game?”

Waya looked over with similar interest as Isumi nodded. “I played some interesting online games with my Chinese friends this week.” He said, and Hikaru noted with amusement that he didn’t specify names. He and Waya could hardly ever remember them, after all. “I thought a couple of them were worth discussion.” He placed a black stone at the top left star.

“Yeah, sure.” Waya agreed, watching the first white stake out its own corner. “So long as I can do one afterwards.

“Who’s this game against?” Hikaru asked, as the first hands were played out. “Mini-Waya, Yang Hai, the one with the hair, or snooty guy?” Isumi accumulated more and more foreign Go-playing acquaintances every year, and it was somewhat difficult to keep track of them all. Those four, however, were the ones he seemed to play most frequently.

Isumi sighed at him, a small indulgent smile quirking at his lips. “The one with the hair.”

Waya squinted at the board. “Is he the one who’s better than Yang Hai? I can’t remember.”

“No, that’s snooty guy. I think this is the one that’s better than Isumi but worse than Yang Hai.” Hikaru corrected, with a clinical eye towards the board. The opening hands were absolutely critical to the game, but it was hard to discern personal styles from them unless it was someone like Yashiro, who liked quirky starts.

Isumi levelled an insincere glare at them. “Kindly shut up and discuss the game with me.”

Waya and Hikaru shared a glance. “I don’t think we can do both of those things at the same time.” Hikaru pointed out, after a moment.

“Then one of you can shut up and the other can discuss the game.” Their host said firmly.

“I volunteer Shindou for the shutting up.” Waya said quickly.
Isumi nodded cheerfully. “Shindou-kun, you are hereby forbidden from talking for the rest of the game. Any talking will result in you paying for our next lunch. Any questions?”

Hikaru had opened his mouth to protest indignantly, but shut it firmly upon hearing the meal clause. After a pause for consideration, he put his hands to the task of conveying his displeasure via a number of obscene gestures, and while it was difficult to communicate precise profanity via such methods, he was fairly sure that he’d made his point.

He received a sigh and an eye-roll for his troubles, and watched somewhat sulkily as the game and the discussion went on without him. He eyed the cluster being debated and considered how he was meant to contribute without a voice or any sort of sign language to his name. Charades? Interpretive dance? Rude noises?

He considered his options for a moment, and then went on to explain through a combination of wild gesticulation and facial expressions that Isumi’s response to his opponent’s attack had been a weak-ass attempt at recovery, and that he should be ashamed of it.

“I have no idea what you’re trying to say.” Isumi replied, eyebrows raised, and very pointedly did not restore his speaking privileges.

Hikaru pondered that, and presented a very apt response in the form of his middle fingers.

“Very mature.” Waya observed smugly, and returned to the discussion.

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Near the larger Inari shrines, there tended to be stalls selling fried tofu for the convenience of the tourists; a shrine-goer could simply buy some of the stuff and have an offering ready to present to Inari’s foxes. Utagawashi’s shrine was by no means a large shrine, entertaining a modest trickle of locals and very few sight-seers, and as such there were no such amenities outside the torii.

Thus forced to plan ahead, Hikaru went on a round of local corner stores, visiting three before he found one selling Inari-zushi. Thus armed, he resumed a more familiar path to his grandpa’s part of town, diverting to the shrine as he neared it.

He paused in front of the torii, considering. He frequently failed to observe etiquette, and though Utagawashi had never commented on it…he shrugged, and bowed slightly to the torii before entering. “Hey, Utagawashi!” he called as he approached the honden, when a white-robed figure failed to materialise. It felt like he was in the honden, though, and wasn’t it cool that he could remotely locate certain people now? “I brought an offering!”

There was a slight clatter from inside the honden, and a pause. Several seconds later, Utagawashi emerged at a sedate pace, bowing to the door as he left. That done, he ambled over to Hikaru. “You don’t have to shout,” he reprimanded. “It’s not like I can’t feel you coming.” His eyes slid to the shopping bag. “You bought something from a store?”

“Some Inari-zushi, yeah.” Hikaru nodded. “You don’t have a specific offering hall, right? There’s only the honden?”

“I have not, in fact, miraculously hidden an entire building from you.” The priest stated dryly.

“Then where do I do the thing?”

Utagawashi shook his head. “Look around. The answer will come to you.” The words were not particularly helpful. Hikaru stared, then obeyed and ran his eyes over the surroundings. Honden,
torii, bench, the purification fountain he rudely never used, fox statues…oh, right.

Hikaru approached the little platform in front of one of the foxes, observing that there was actually a white plate of rice already there. “How did I never notice that?”

“Probably because you’re approximately as observant as a brick wall.” The man remarked. “Do you have a plate?” At Hikaru’s baffled glance, he sighed. “Of course you don’t. Wait and I’ll fetch one for you.” He strode back to the honden and disappeared from sight for a while. Hikaru spent his brief wait focusing his more spiritual sense on the priest, noting that he was easier to detect now than he’d been on Friday. Was his sensitivity just climbing on its own, now? It seemed odd that such a thing would happen after two years of nothing…

Utagawashi returned with a ceramic plate for him after less than a minute, and Hikaru accepted it with a light frown. “Is there some sort of proper procedure to making offerings?” He asked. “Because if there is, I’ve sure as hell not followed it before.”

“That doesn’t surprise me in the least, given how you never even wash at the fountain when you visit.” Utagawashi said critically, eliciting a guilty grimace. “If you’d brought incense, you could burn that. Otherwise, just place the offering and make a quick prayer.”

Hikaru nodded and took the plate to the little platform thing in front of the fox, placing the Inari-zushi onto the ceramic saucer and then positioning it beside the rice. He stood in front of it somewhat awkwardly, not sure if he should be kneeling but not wanting to get his knees cold. After a moment of consideration, he bowed twice, clapped twice, and bowed again, since that was meant to be the traditional thing. Or so he remembered, anyway. He might not have done the correct number of bows, but hopefully it was the thought that counted.

After a moment, he offered a thought targeted at the statue. *Any protection against demons, specifically sword demons, would be great.* He projected, feeling a flicker of his own ‘light’ reach out. There was no answering flicker in the statue like there had been in his house shrine, but there was…something. It was really far too subtle for him to put words to it, but…there was something different about the statue, the torii, the whole shrine. Pensively, he straightened his back, lingering respectfully for several moments. Then he bowed a final time for good measure before making a beeline for the honden.

He observed its door intensely, as though strength of stare might enhance his spiritual perception. Reaching out to the house shrine, the fox statue, and the protective presence in his walls had been easy. All of those had been very close to him, after all. This, though…there was something in the honden that was different, but it was at least five metres from him, and…it almost felt like he was *stretching…*

…there.

Hikaru opened his eyes, unsure when he’d closed them in the first place, and blinked at the shrine’s main (and only) building.

Somewhere behind that door, there was a very familiar flicker of presence.

“Is there any particular reason you’re staring at the honden?” Utagawashi inquired from beside him, having approached slowly while he eyeballed the building.

“…I believe in Inari, now.” Hikaru announced, after a moment.

The priest frowned at him. “You didn’t before?” He asked, disapprovingly.
“Well, I was open to the idea, but not really.” He shook his head. “But the other day… I prayed at the house shrine and I sort of felt something there. And then there were the ofuda, and now I can feel that same sort of thing in this honden.” He waved his hand in the vague direction of the subtle presence.

Utagawashi blinked at him, looking a little startled. “You detected Inari-sama?”

“Well, maybe. It’s not like he introduced himself.” Hikaru answered, shrugging. “There was something there, though, and since I was praying to Inari at the time…” He observed the odd look on the priest’s face with raised eyebrows. “What, are you jealous?”

The man glanced at him quickly. “Of course not!” He said immediately. Hikaru stared at him for several seconds, and watched his demeanour become somewhat sheepish. “Well. Maybe a little. Not for your wounds, of course!” he hastened to add. “But…well, I have shaped my life around worship of Inari-sama. I can’t help but wish I could feel his influence as you do.”

Hikaru considered that. “Fair enough, I guess. It’s really subtle, though – I can barely detect it. The ofuda, however… whoof.”

Utagawashi tilted his head, visibly curious. “It’s noticeable?”

“Very.” He answered emphatically, the new feeling of his house a distinctive and wholly unfamiliar one. The ofuda had still been at work through Saturday, but when he’d woken up that morning…

He now pretty much lived in a cocoon of spirit-y presence. It was bizarre and more than slightly cool.

“Well, that’s useful to know.” The priest claimed. “Others have told me that it seems to have a discernible effect, but as I’ve never been able to detect it, I’ve just had to take their word for it. I don’t suppose you could check on my flat, at some point? I’ve put up ofuda as well, but I don’t have the senses to confirm that it did anything.”

“Yeah, sure, but not today. One of my… colleagues, I guess, is coming over for a game, so I can’t be out long.” Hikaru said. “I pretty much just came here for that offering.” He watched with a twinge of concern as, quite abruptly, the priest tensed, the robed lines of his shoulders hunching noticeably inwards.

“You’ll be leaving soon, then?” Utagawashi asked, after a moment.

He observed the kannushi, brow furrowing. “…Yeah. Is something wrong?”

Utagawashi shuffled. “Well, perhaps.” He looked away uncomfortably for a few seconds. “I called Arakawa-san – the onmyouji – and he’s very concerned to hear about the problem with the sword. Apparently he and Kaminaga-san are old friends.” He frowned slightly at his own words. “At any rate, he wants to help, but the soonest he can come is three weeks from now.”

“…I guess we’ll just have to be careful until he sorts everything out, then.” Hikaru ventured, uncertainly.

“Yes, but that’s not all.” The priest sighed, and looked up to meet Hikaru’s eyes. “…Kaminaga-san phoned me, yesterday.” He said, and Hikaru stiffened. “I told him that you were doing well and didn’t need any help, but…”

“He didn’t believe you?” Hikaru guessed darkly.
“I don’t believe so, no.” Utagawashi sighed. “You need to be careful, Shindou-kun. I think he might…well, he didn’t seem very pleased with what I was telling him. I don’t know if he’ll come here to try to talk to you, but…”

Hikaru swallowed, nervousness settling into his gut. “But he might.”

“He might.” The priest agreed.

Chapter End Notes

Hello, all. This here is the chapter which has been on tumblr for months, released now because I finally finished 13. I like this one, so hopefully those of you who’ve not read it will enjoy it. On a related note, 13 is now available on tumblr for perusal.

Inspiration flagged rather hugely during term time. Those of you who took the time to comment made a big difference - a particular shout out to Noip13, who presented me with a couple of highly appreciated essay comments. Seriously, those accounted for like 10% of my inclination to keep working at this thing. Other large chunks can be attributed to Esama displaying the slightest interest in this story, Vathara displaying interest in this story, and oddly enough Yuri on Ice. I think the feels are conducive to writing? At any rate, fic remains gen and is unlikely to involve ice skating, so never fear. A thank you to all who showed appreciation through kudos and bookmarks. Paper Cranes became the most bookmarked hikago fic on ao3 a while ago, which is bloody amazing. I'm also steadily surpassing or gaining on a number of my favourite stories, kudos-wise, which is...yeah, kind of mad.

Note on editing: because I am a fastidious perfectionist when it comes to this, I'm going to be undertaking a reasonably thorough edit of all of the previous chapters soon, to iron out inconsistencies and add in pertinent details. This should be finished before chapter 13 is posted here, so if I remember I'll include a brief 'changelog' in chapter 13 notes. You can see tumblr chapter 13’s notes for more details.

03/06/18 – very minor edits
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Hikaru has a brief reprieve.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It went more or less without saying that Hikaru wasn’t eager for a repeat performance of the previous week’s fiasco.

Most right-thinking people would feel apprehensive about the prospect of a demonic menace trying to track them down. Hikaru would hesitate to describe himself as a right-thinking person, but he was no more interested in having himself possessed than most people would be – or, at least, he wasn’t interested in any spirit except Sai possessing him. But…if Kaminaga came looking for him…

“Well, that’s just lovely, isn’t it?” He muttered, scowling at his shoes. “And the onmyouji guy definitely can’t come any sooner?”

Utagawashi shook his head minutely. “His wife is due to have their second child, very soon.” He said, almost apologetically. “And, to quote him, ‘family comes first’, within reason. If Kaminaga-san shows signs of becoming dangerous, we can always ask again, but as it is…he has had that sword for decades, and it’s unlikely that a few weeks would make much difference.” He hesitated. “To be honest, I’m not sure he believes that the situation is all that bad. He seems to have a lot of faith in Kaminaga-san.”

“What a tool.” Hikaru muttered, staring ahead. “Faith’s all well and good, but it’s a demon.” The man’s words itched at his mind. A few weeks wouldn’t make any difference, hm? Somehow…he wasn’t sure he believed that.

“Shindou-kun,” Utagawashi said, interrupting the unsettled thoughts he’d been brewing. He looked up questioningly, and the priest continued. “Please let me know if you sense anything unusual. And…be careful.”

He looked at the guy and his faceful of concern, and snorted. The kannushi was a bit annoying, a bit rude, and more than slightly awkward…but then he came out with all this honest worry, and Hikaru sort of couldn’t help but feel the tiniest bit fond of the guy. “You worry too much.” He said, straightening. “I’ll be fine, so relax.”

“You don’t worry enough.” Utagawashi claimed, with more than a hint of asperity. Hah, shows what he knew – Hikaru was basically fretting his pants off over this nonsense. He simply had a lot of practice in concealing various emotional states.

“Well, whatever.” He sighed. “Have you got those ofuda to my grandpa yet?”

“He hasn’t visited in the last couple of days, Shindou-kun.” The priest shook his head. “I did tell you that he only comes here sporadically.”

“Hmph. Well, if he takes too long, I might have to deliver them myself.” He scowled at the thought.
His grandpa would be absolutely insufferable about it, he was certain. It might be worth the fuss, though, since the thought of his family being so close to Kaminaga’s likely visiting area was not a comfortable one.

An even less comfortable thought occurred to him, very suddenly. Hikaru stood up straight, frowning. “Actually, Utagawashi…could I get some ofuda for another house?”

The man eyed him. “Yes, but you’ll have to give me money for the materials. You’ve had enough handouts.” He replied. “Did you think of someone else?”

“…Yeah. My neighbour.” He made a face, wondering how he could have forgotten about Akari. She literally lived next door, which was very much in the danger zone. “I’m not sure how I’ll convince her to put them up, but I’ll figure it out. How much will I owe you?”

Utagawashi made an uncertain noise. “…I’ll let you know later, when I’ve bought more paper.” He said eventually. “If you take the ones I was holding for your grandfather, I’ll write up this next set for him.”

“That works.” Hikaru nodded with slightly forced cheer, wondering how long he’d have to worry about stuff like this. Demons like that sword-spirit weren’t all that common, he assumed, but he’d managed to run into it after only a month or so of spiritual sensitivity. It didn’t really bode well.

Anything else?” The priest asked, with a hint of sarcasm. “Am I making ofuda for all of your friends, too?”

Hikaru ignored the obviously jocular nature of the question and thought about it seriously. “…Nah.” He decided, after some thought. “Doesn’t seem that important right now. If Kaminaga does come looking for me, he’s going to start here. There’s no reason he’d go half-way across Tokyo looking for my friends.” Maybe if he was fully possessed and the demon really wanted to mess with Hikaru, but…unlikely. He had the distinct impression that he was the target, here. And, of course, Yashiro lived all the way over in Osaka, so that would be fine.

Utagawashi regarded his shrine grounds warily. “I suppose I had better put up ofuda here, again.” He commented. “Kaminaga-san was able to enter the shrine grounds before, but perhaps an ofuda ward might help weaken the demon, at least.”

“Can’t hurt to try.” Hikaru agreed, peeking surreptitiously at his watch. “You do that, and I’ll check how it goes. I’ve got to go now – do you have those ofuda?”

“Just a moment.” The priest turned and headed for the honden. Hikaru watched him go, musing for what had to be the hundredth time that he was grateful for the man’s short hair. If it had been longer…well, the familiarity of the kariginu would be considerably more painful.

Utagawashi returned with another sheaf of papers, and Hikaru tucked them carefully into his coat. “Thanks.” He said, almost as an after-thought, and turned to the torii. “Let me know if you hear from that bastard again, okay?”

The man regarded him with a slightly pinched expression. “Go on then, you rude boy.” He sighed, making a shooing motion with his hand. The long sleeve of his robes swayed with the movement. “When you can, come back and we’ll see if we can work on your spiritual sensitivity.”

Hikaru nodded agreeably, feet edging towards the torii. “Maybe next week,” he suggested, turning away. “See you!”

Another glance at his watch reassured him that he was, indeed, running late. He winced, and hurried
through the torii, that ephemeral sense of otherworldliness falling away between one step and the
next. He paused, glancing at the torii he’d just passed, aware of the shrine’s boundaries in a way he
certainly hadn’t been before. He blinked, intrigued, and then went briskly on his way.

He’d have time to inspect the shrine later.

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The extra pair of shoes by the door informed him, quite pointedly, that he was not on time. Hikaru
sighed and glanced around, locating no hint of his guest but drawing the attention of his mother as he
kicked off his trainers. Traces of spirit-light clung to him as he turned to face her, as though the house
wards were welcoming him home in time with his mother.

“You shouldn’t keep people waiting, Hikaru.” She stated patiently, as soon as she’d dispensed with
the greetings. All genuine sternness present in Shindou Mitsuko had been thoroughly eroded through
the years, as was somewhat inevitable when one’s child was Hikaru. Heartfelt ire had become a
matter for special occasions only, and as such, she only sounded vaguely exasperated now, rather
than scolding.

“He’ll be fine.” Hikaru waved his hand dismissively, smiling reflexively at her sigh. “Bet you
anything he’s abducted my goban and is replaying something on it.”

His mother’s eyes crinkled with amusement. “Well, you do know him better than me, so I will take
your word for it.” She said lightly. “Now, shoo; go be a good host for your friend.”

He grinned at her, setting away his trainers, and headed for the stairs. He paused half-way up, feeling
an odd ripple in the ofuda’s energy in his room that was distinctly unfamiliar, and made a face as he
headed in. “Yo, Touya!” He greeted loudly, practically slamming open his door. The occupant of his
room jumped half-way out of his skin, the sound of a muffled curse erupting from the apparently
surprised boy, and Hikaru snickered.

“Shindou,” Touya said, not so much in greeting but more as an admonishment.

He studied the other pro, amusement giving way to analytic consideration at the vaguely tense, shifty
cast to the boy’s face. A glance around the room revealed his goban out and in use, as expected, but
his rival was surprisingly not sitting by it. Instead, he was standing by the dresser and its constituent
shrine. It was a good thing his mother hadn’t taken the bet, since for once Touya Akira had
considered something other than Go worth investigating.

“I thought better of you, Touya.” Hikaru declared, with mock sternness. “Snooping around in
someone’s room while they’re gone, for shame. Were you going through my underwear drawer?”
He shaped his features into an exaggerated guise of shock.

Touya reddened, the colour growing somewhat similar to the mauve patches on his sweater. “I wasn’t.
” He objected, indignantly, taking a hasty step away from the dresser.

“Just the regular drawers then?” He nodded with mock comprehension. “If you’re finally interested
in choosing your own clothing, I totally understand looking to me for inspiration; my fashion sense is
amazing.” Hikaru said. “But, you know, a store would be a better place. More stuff to choose from.”
He watched with satisfaction as his rival spluttered at him, apparently not certain which part of the
statement to decry first.

“I don’t – I wasn’t – there’s nothing wrong with my clothing and I wasn’t going through yours!” The
boy stammered over his words before finally settling on his sentence structure, accompanying it with
a firm nod and a half-hearted scowl.

“Of course there isn’t anything wrong with your clothes.” He replied soothingly. “…And on a completely unrelated note, if you ever want my input on buying yourself a new wardrobe, feel free to call.”

“Shindou.” His guest expressed again, the name uttered in a near-snarl.

Hikaru thought he made a reasonable point, really. The boring sweaters and uncomplimentary suits had sort of grown on him over time, and Touya had started to suit the haircut, but…really. Touya was basically begging to be introduced to jeans, and more interesting shirts, and basically anything that wasn’t the pinnacle of parent fashion. Maybe even a suit in a halfway respectable colour. Ogata could pull off white…but, really? Lavender? Could anyone pull off lavender?

One of these days he was just going to drag Touya shopping and be damned to his protests.

Still, though, Touya was looking sort of uncomfortable under his ire, so Hikaru committed the vague resolution to mind and obligingly let the matter drop. Kind of. “So, your interest in my fabulous fashion aside,” he said, ignoring the growl. “What’s so fascinating about my chest of drawers that was enough to pull you away from the goban?” He already pretty much knew, but..

Touya was still a bit red, though nowhere near the delightful shade he’d been sporting a minute before. “…I was looking at the kamidana.” He admitted, sounding somewhat as though the words were being extracted from his teeth with pliers.

Hikaru had suspected as much, but it still did weird things to his emotions to hear it. He quashed down the strange squirming of anxiety and grinned. “You want me to preach at you about the God of Go?” He asked, teasingly, and watched Touya’s eyes narrow at him. “I can totally do that. I’ve never preached before but I’m sure I can work it.” Maybe he could ask Utagawashi for pointers? He seemed the sort who could get preachy when prompted.

“…No, thank you.” Touya said, forcing the politeness out from behind his teeth. He glanced again at the shrine beside him, looking slightly unsettled.

“It’s like you’ve never seen a shrine before.” He remarked, wondering how he could rile Touya up to distract him from his scrutiny. “I know you have a house shrine – I’ve seen it.”

“Yes, I do.” Touya said, with some asperity. “And that – well, that’s…” He trailed off, frowning again at the Sai shrine. What was with the frowning? “My house shrine is normal.” He settled on, eventually. “This…isn’t.”

“How’d you figure?” He inquired, sitting down beside the goban and watching his houseguest keenly.

Apparently made uncomfortable by the sudden height difference, Touya sat down as well, though on the bed rather than the floor, as that was closest. “…Well, you already have a house shrine, to begin with.” He said, pensively. “It’s unusual for people to have a second shrine in their home for private prayer, unless, well…” His gaze slid from the kamidana, currently bereft of its shintai, and onto Hikaru. The flustered expression of a few minutes ago had, at some point, given way to a careful scrutiny.

Hikaru shuffled, ill at ease. “Unless what?” He demanded, fiddling with the tassel of his fan.

Touya looked away, frowning lightly. “Unless it’s for, well, a person.” He finished, a little awkwardly. There was a brief silence, where he was looking at the kamidana, and Hikaru was trying
to settle the line of his shoulders into something less defensive. Then he glanced back, and…well, Hikaru wasn’t completely sure what his face was doing, but it seemed to startle Touya a bit. The other boy blinked, hesitated, and then continued speaking. “A lot of people will make offerings for lost friends and family at their house shrine,” he said, carefully. “But some will make a separate shrine, for a particular person. Having an entire separate kamidana would be a bit extravagant, but…”

He was being watched for reactions, but, well. Touya hadn’t actually come out and asked anything, yet, so any response might just give the annoyingly observant bastard unnecessary ammunition. He couldn’t really help the tension, but…really, what could he say? ‘The shrine isn’t for a person’? He had flat-out lied about Sai on a number of occasions, and was certainly capable of it, but that didn’t mean he liked it.

And…the shrine. It was special. Calling Sai a kami of Go honestly wasn’t that far off, so he was fine with that ruse. Flat out denial, though?

“There’s no ofuda in there. I checked.” Touya followed up, looking slightly apologetic at the assertion. It was an invasion of privacy, after all. “And no shintai either. It’s…however you look at it, it’s not a normal shrine.”

“There is a shintai.” Hikaru muttered, a little sullenly.

“The fan, correct?” Touya stated plainly, and Hikaru’s gaze jerked upwards. “The same fan you carry everywhere? I saw it on there when it was in your wardrobe. And you use it as a shintai?”

His voice was just a hair’s width from confrontational. Hikaru bristled, reading the challenge on his rival’s face. “If you’ve got something to say, then say it, Touya.” He ground out, glaring up the boy.

The problem with this, with them knowing each other so well, with the nature of their relationship, was that sometimes they couldn’t help but piss each other off. It could be teasing, like Hikaru with the subject of Touya’s clothes, or amiably competitive, like the time last week when Touya had nagged him out of his convalescent misery, but sometimes….

“Who are you really praying to?” Touya demanded, with absolutely no tact or sensitivity, and Hikaru forced himself to go still, rather than go with his first reaction and retort loudly.

They were masters of each other’s ire. They’d made an art of it – egging each other on and motivating each other and occasionally bullying each other out of their respective rough patches – but this wasn’t something Hikaru wanted to have prodded in that way. Rather than rise to the bait and start bickering, as every impulse he had was urging him to, he breathed and clutched his fan and said “The God of Go, you dumbass. I wasn’t actually lying about that.” He stood up, stepping into Touya’s space to stare directly at him, priming his posture with all the animus that he knew rubbed his rival the wrong way. The looming probably didn’t hurt, either – Touya was still sitting on the bed.

Predictably, Touya bristled right back at him. “You don’t just make up a kami, you know.” He asserted, with annoyance, though he didn’t stand up.

“Says who?” Hikaru asked, pointedly. “All the widely-worshipped kami today started somewhere, you know. And maybe they started by actually talking to people but kami don’t exactly do that these days, do they?” Contrary to his increasingly argumentative tone, the knot of tension that had been building in his belly began to loosen. It seemed like he’d managed to distract Touya from his unwelcome line of questioning.
“Maybe so.” The other boy conceded, nostrils flaring in an excellent indication that he was becoming incensed. Quite abruptly, he rose to his feet and added “but that doesn’t mean that you can just decide a kami exists and make it so!”

Hikaru blew a raspberry at him. Given their physical proximity, this elicited some flinching, as well as a pretty disgruntled expression. “Come on, Touya, I’ve said this before.” He said impatiently. “You think there’s not a kami of Go when there’s kami for ponds? When there are so many people that have played Go and dedicated their lives to it? That’s dumb.”

That actually got through, a bit. Touya’s scowl wavered slightly, becoming a sort of suspicious consideration. “I would have thought that Go players would mostly venerate Inari,” he said, stiffly. “since Inari represents success and prosperity.”

“Among loads of other things, yeah.” Hikaru acknowledged, having become fairly well-versed in Inari lore. “That doesn’t mean there isn’t a smaller kami for Go. Again, pond kami. There are kami for everything.”

“…Maybe.” Touya said, dubiously, hackles settling down a little. His brows remained furrowed. Hikaru thought he might actually be convincing him, and for one disorientating moment wasn’t sure what he was trying to convince him of. He’d mostly been trying to deflect the idea of him mourning someone, right? But he did make a good point in that a kami of Go almost certainly existed, so… what?

“Considering how many Japanese play Go, you’d have thought this would have come up before.” Hikaru mused to himself, in full honesty. Why wasn’t there some sort of kami that Go players burned incense to for good luck? It seemed like the sort of thing that would have arisen organically, but then again maybe Touya was right. Maybe they all just prayed to Inari.

“…Look, Shindou, even if you’re right and there is a kami for Go,” Touya interrupted his musing. “I’m still not certain I believe you’re worshipping him. Or her.” He frowned. “Them.”

Hikaru paused, and narrowed his eyes. “And why’s that?” he challenged.

“Because you would have an ofuda.” He said, sounding almost exasperated. “It’s not so important for the kami like Inari, but with this? If you don’t even know the kami’s name, you could be praying to anything.”

He opened his mouth on reflex to respond, and stopped. Stared. “…I have a shintai, though.” He pointed out, in a smaller voice.

“And how do you know which kami of Go is occupying it when you pray?” Touya asked, flatly. “Like you said, there are kami for everything. There’s probably multiple kami for Go, and if you’re trying to pray to a specific one, you’re likely not succeeding; not without a name.”

Hikaru’s heart, which had started to beat a little wildly in distress, settled down a little at the last part. “So this is only a problem if I don’t know his name?” He asked, intently.

Touya frowned at him, with a bit more confusion than ire. “…I thought you didn’t know the name.” He said.

Hikaru flapped the fan at him impatiently. “Just answer the question.”

Looking profoundly perplexed, he replied “Potentially? If it is a known kami whose name you know, it’s probably fine.”
“What about an unknown kami whose name I know?” Hikaru pressed.

“I’m not a priest, Shindou.” Touya reminded him, with a touch of irritation. “The stories seem to say that the name is the important thing, but I’m hardly an expert in the veneration of minor kami.”

“Hm.” He hummed thoughtfully to himself. When Touya had started in on the ofuda, he’d experienced a brief moment of terror at the idea that he’d accidentally been pouring his heart out to some random Go spirit without knowing it, but, hm. Surely if he knew Sai’s name, and also knew arguably better than anyone the nature of the spirit he was trying to communicate with, it would be close enough for Shinto purposes?

Touya regarded him warily. “So…you do know the name of the Go kami?” He prodded.

Hikaru regarded him right back, considering. “…Yep.” He nodded, after a moment.

There was a brief silence. “Are you going to tell me what it is?”

“Hmm.” He mulled over his response, planting his hands into his pockets, the fan slipping up his sleeve. Was he in the mood to endure a million Sai-related questions? “Nope.” He decided, in response to both Touya’s question and his own thoughts.

Touya huffed at him, but didn’t seem to disbelieve his assertion on the topic of the name. He glanced back at the shrine for the first time since the beginning of their disagreement, and eyed it speculatively. “So…Shindou…you actually are praying to a kami?” He asked, finally.

“Pretty much.” Hikaru agreed, looking fondly at the kamidana.

“Honestly?” He asked, insistently.

The fight having left him, Hikaru plopped back down to the floor again, settling in seiza out of reflex. “Why does it matter to you?”

“Because if you’re lying about this, I will be very annoyed.” Touya explained, wavering a moment before sitting down as well. “With all the bizarre ofuda around your house, it seems like this—” he indicated the shrine “—can easily be the beginning of a tasteless practical joke.”

Hikaru inspected him curiously. The nanadan did look surprisingly invested in the situation – maybe he’d been right, when he spoke to Akari all that time ago? Could Touya be offended at the implication of him mocking honoured traditions? “Your family is really traditional, right?” He asked, shuffling to the goban and taking a goke on reflex.

Touya’s face brightened at the implication of imminent Go, and he situated himself opposite. “My mother in particular.” He agreed. “Respect for the kami is very important in my home.”

“Who do you pray to?” He asked, with interest.

“Inari.” Touya answered, looking at the board. “Nothing out of the ordinary.”

Hikaru snorted, remembering the spark in the house-shrine, with all its elusive presence. Ordinary. Right. “Our house shrine is for Inari.” He offered. “I mostly pray in here, but I’ve used the house shrine a couple of times.”

“Those ofuda are Inari-focused, too.” The boy observed. “But I won’t ask you about those now – getting you to seriously answer one question in a day is already ambitious enough. More would be an exercise in futility.” He eyed the goke hungrily. “Now, are we going to play, or not?”
“If you’re done invading my privacy and questioning my faith, sure.” Hikaru replied brightly, and pulled out a handful of black stones as his rival flushed. “Nigiri?”

After an embarrassed pause, Touya put a stone down, and while Hikaru counted his handful he shook his head a little. How weird was it that he and Touya now had something like prayer in common? He felt at the ofuda-wards in the walls with interest, wondering if Touya paying respect to Inari made them react to him any differently. They’d flexed around him a bit oddly to begin with, but now they were just ignoring him, like they did Hikaru.

“I get black.” He declared, after he finished counting, and put the stones back in the bowl, setting it to his right.

“Finally.” Touya sighed, as if he hadn’t been a significant contributor to the delay in their planned game day, and bowed with him to start the game.

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On Monday, things returned very nearly to business as usual.

After all the hubbub of the previous week, it felt strange and vaguely disorientating to return to his day-to-day life, apologising to his students for his absence, and just…moving on with things. As if he had not, in fact, recently fled Tokyo in fear for his soul. Monday, which aside from the teaching was one of the greatest opportunities he had to study or practice, was probably the greatest shock to the system any of his days could have been, in that sense. The teaching itself was so utterly familiar and safe – he just fell into his role picking apart students’ errors, occasionally haranguing them where he felt it necessary, and it…it was just Go. A collective of black and white stones, the amateurs’ errors standing out like beacons on the board…

It was routine. Ordinary, uncomplicated routine.

Hikaru felt increasingly bewildered by it as the day went on. The divide between the panic of the week before and the banality of this one was befuddlingly great; he couldn’t help but wonder if he’d dreamed up the whole thing. But, no: a quick glance inwards during his lunch break told him all he needed to know on that front.

“Life is weird.” Was how Hikaru greeted Waya when the boy dropped by, just as he was preparing to leave the salon.

“…Okay?” Waya returned, uncertainly.

He grinned at his friend and shook his head. “You want a game, right? You and Isumi are up this weekend.”

“Well, yeah.” The nidan squinted at him, pausing as if to wait for an explanation of that opening statement. When nothing happened, he rolled his shoulders and sat down at the goban Hikaru had been teaching at. “He wins most of our matches. I’ll need to be in top form to get a win on Saturday.”

“So, training.” Hikaru nodded, reaching for a bowl. “I have time for a couple of games, so long as we keep them at around an hour. Nigiri?” His opponent nodded his agreement, and withdrew a loose handful of stones.

The game progressed decidedly in Hikaru’s favour, with an odd twist. He’d been teaching at the same board for hours already, and the mindset lingered in unexpected ways; several times he had to bite back comments on Waya’s riskier shapes, a sensation he’d not experienced against a fellow
professional before. Each time, he blinked at himself with surprise, then went on to exploit the gaps in his opponent’s play mercilessly, holding each insight in reserve for the discussion. So, he was growing strong enough that he felt the urge to teach Waya, rather than merely discuss at the end. When had that happened? Where was time going?

Hikaru watched his friend’s face, furrowed with the weight of his focus, and wondered how much more the gap between them would widen.

*I’m getting stronger,* he thought to himself, and suppressed a twitch at memories of spirits and light. Stronger in Go, and stronger in spirit, too. He was a prodigy in Go and spiritual matters…and, by virtue of possessing him, Sai had introduced him to both. A strange, effervescent hysteria built in him at the thought of it, and his fingers shook as he placed his next stone. Spirits and Go…they had started off as more or less the same thing, for him, but now…

Now, they were so different.

Nearly fifty minutes in, Waya resigned much later than was wise, and Hikaru ran his eyes over the board. He’d come a long way from counting the lines to see where to place stones, hadn’t he? The world was so strange, and his life was even stranger. A quiet laugh bubbled out of him, entirely out of his control, and Waya scowled. “The hell are you laughing at?” He demanded, crossing his arms. “It was a perfectly good game! I might have lost, but I didn’t do badly!”

“I’m not laughing at you, Waya.” Hikaru rolled his eyes, looking from his irritated companion to their game and giggling again. He thought it rather ruined the trustworthiness of his words, but he couldn’t really help it. He might be playing well today, but…he was in a strange state of mind.

Now looking slightly insulted, the nidan glowered at him. “Oh, fuck you, man.” He said, darkly. “We’re going to play again and I’m going to crush you.”

Feeling oddly light-headed, Hikaru raised his eyebrows and said “what, don’t you even want to discuss this game?”

“You laughed at it!” Waya responded loudly, drawing the attention of a few nearby patrons, and made a motion to start clearing the stones away. Hikaru snatched at his wrist to stop him, and wrangled it away from the board.

“No, Waya.” He said, sternly, pushing aside his introspective mood as best he could. “We’re gonna discuss the game. If you want to beat Isumi on Saturday, you’d better not let any of your clusters get into this sort of sloppy shape.” He indicated a corner where he’d found an opening which had been very fruitful to pry at, and had heralded the end for Waya’s game. “Isumi is good at finding weaknesses like that. You play that against him, and he’ll do the same thing I did.”

Waya glowered at him sullenly, but didn’t say anything, which was as good as agreement. He didn’t try to reach for the board again. Hikaru nodded at the apparent acquiescence, and then set to retracting the game to a helpful point. “Right, so this is where it all started to go wrong for you. You played here, I guess to set up an attack on that corner, but you should have strengthened this cluster first. If you’d played here,” he pointed at the board, “I’d have had a way harder time attacking this later in the game than I did.”

“It’s easy for you to say that, when you’re not fighting you.” Waya muttered, frowning at the board. “Though, yeah, I get what you mean. I considered playing there, but I was concerned by your extension from the corner. I thought if I played there, I could cut off that stone and get some territory at the side.”
“Yeah, I know.” He nodded agreeably, the train of thought easy to follow. “If you’d kept sente, it might even have worked. But this move, here,” He pointed to the stone, a fairly conservative play to strengthen his assault against Hikaru’s reaching presence. “Without it, I might have threatened this stone, sure. But I was more interested in playing down here, to get into your corner. I could let you have a bit of the side in exchange for that.” It had been a good sacrifice, too – while Waya had skilfully strong-armed himself into a little territory at the edge of the board, capturing a couple of stones in the process, he’d apparently failed to notice Hikaru’s sly threats against the bottom right corner until it had been too late to adequately defend. It had been a momentous loss for Waya.

“I didn’t see that opening.” His friend admitted. “I knew it would strengthen my position if I played there, but I was thinking more about, hm, this sort of attack.” he reached over to take some of Hikaru’s stones, mapping out a quick hypothetical sequence. “I could have defended against that. But…you just saw deeper than me.” He looked very displeased by the admission.

“Eh, you’ll improve.” Hikaru shrugged, and abandoned the matter of the invaded corner. “After that, I think you could maybe have made a comeback, but I think you’d have needed to do something tricky with this shape at the top, and honestly, I think I’d have killed your stones if you’d tried.”

Waya stared at the cluster thoughtfully, and hummed. “I could have gone in here, though.” He said, pointing out a slight chink in Hikaru’s metaphorical armour. “If I could have cut you off from your other stones there…”

Hikaru tilted his head, thinking. “Nah. If you’d been clever about it, you might have scraped up a living group, but I think it’s more likely I’d stop you with this…” He mimed placing a stone, and Waya blinked.

“Oh.” He said, sounding vaguely embarrassed. “Didn’t think of that.”

He regarded the nidan, half pleased and half annoyed at the evidence of how much stronger he was. Insight had always been a talent of his, but here…Waya was completely outclassed. Hikaru didn’t always play this well, to be fair, but there was no denying the gap in skill.

He shook off the strangeness and returned to what remained of the discussion. “After that, pretty much everything you did was just you flailing around, waiting to die.” He said, only slightly apologetically. “You probably should have resigned earlier.”

“…yeah.” Waya sighed, frowning. “Well, whatever. Another game?”

“…Sure.” Hikaru agreed, and began to clear the stones in preparation to start again.

It was a little sad, how little challenge he’d had in that game. Now, when he was playing well, Waya really wasn’t that hard to deal with, and now he felt more like a student than a fellow combatant. That was what it meant to overtake people, and he wasn’t sure he’d ever get used to it.

Kind of bittersweet, he concluded. Quite suddenly, he longed to play Touya again, who he knew would never be left behind. It hadn’t even been a day ago that they’d last contended across a goban, but he wanted a game now.

Hikaru stared across the board at the wrong opponent, and once again felt disoriented by the passage of years. I am not right in the head today, he decided, grimacing at himself. All these thoughts, the jitters…He was looking forward to getting home tonight, maybe lighting some incense. He could probably do with some peace and quiet.

Feeling abruptly very tired, Hikaru bowed. “Onegaishimasu,” he said, and waited for the first stone
Touya was quite easy to come by on Mondays, seeing as most weeks they attended Serizawa-sensei’s study group together. Hikaru passed the study session with atypical passiveness, only making comments when he felt that the others were missing something overwhelmingly obvious. Considering Touya was in attendance, and he rivalled Hikaru in almost every respect, he ended up covering most of those points and thus Hikaru said very little.

Though the burning desire to play had faded since earlier in the day, Hikaru appropriated his rival at the end of the session anyway, perhaps out of a sense of obligation to his former self. “You, me, and a goban.” He said to the nanadan, solemnly. “Let’s make it happen.”

Touya’s expression seemed torn between amusement and scepticism as he peeled Hikaru’s hand from his sleeve. “Isn’t it a bit late?” He asked.

“Nah. It’s fine.” Hikaru claimed. “I have post study session games with Ogata later than this, sometimes.”

“If you say so.” The other boy said generously, offering no further objection to the idea of the game. This, in Touya-omission-speak, meant that he probably had a fierce hankering in him for a match. “Where would you like to go?”

“I’d kind of like to go home, honestly.” He answered. “Do you mind coming back with me?”

The other boy blinked dubiously, glancing at his watch. “It would be a bit late to make the journey home, for me.”

“Then stay over.” Hikaru suggested. “You don’t have anything important on tomorrow, right?”

“I don’t.” Touya agreed, humming pensively. “Well then, hm. I suppose that’s fine with me. I’ll message my mother to tell her.”

The train home was crowded for most of the way, so they spent it in silence, as per general public transport etiquette. This had the unfortunate side effect of allowing Hikaru’s mind to wander and get all preoccupied with pointless crap again – things like his odd depression at surpassing Waya, the strangeness of his dual life, and a dozen other details that shouldn’t be nearly as prominent as they were. He felt increasingly anxious to be home with every passing minute, itching for the familiarity of the sights and scents of his room. He shifted and fidgeted on his feet, holding onto the train supports to keep from falling into people, and watched the passage of each station keenly.

“Finally,” he breathed, stepping out onto his stop with Touya at his heels. “I swear that felt like it took longer than usual.”

“I’m not particularly fond of trains, myself, but they’re fine when they’re less crowded.” Touya commented, in an unusual attempt at small talk, as he followed Hikaru off the platform.

“I guess I’m used to them.” He sighed, setting a determined pace despite his tiredness. “I’m glad I live close to the station, at least. It would be a much bigger pain to get everywhere, otherwise.” He glanced side-long at his guest for the evening. “You ate already, right? I didn’t tell my mum you were coming, so she probably won’t have enough for you.”

“I did. It’s fine.” The other boy answered, a tad hesitanly. “…I prefer to eat before study sessions, generally.” He offered no other comment, falling into a sort of stilled quiet that was fairly typical of
Hikaru observed him and snorted, lightly, prompting a confused frown from the nanadan. “You don’t talk to people about non-Go stuff a lot, do you?” He remarked, slowing down a bit to keep a pace more comfortable for Touya.

“…Why would I?” Said one Go-obsessed maniac to another.

Hikaru laughed again, a short huffing thing that felt more sombre than he expected. “Why, indeed.” He murmured, mostly to himself, as he looked ahead. He wasn’t sure what was up with his mood today, but he didn’t like it. Touya seemed to agree, because he just sort of grimaced at him before falling silent, and they stayed that way for the rest of the short walk.

“I’m home!” He called into the house as he entered, pulling his key from the door. “Also, I brought Touya.”

“Welcome home! And, hello, Touya-kun.” Mitsuko said, from in front of the television. “Will you be needing dinner? I have leftovers in the fridge for Hikaru, but I’m not sure there’s enough for two.”

“I’ll be fine. I ate earlier.” Touya assured her, before bowing and making a respectable greeting.

“He’s gonna stay over tonight.” Hikaru asserted.

“If that’s alright with you,” The guest in question hastened to add.

Mitsuko laughed at them. “I’ve no problems with it, so long as you keep your game arguments quiet. It’s quite late, after all.” She said, displaying a well-learned knowledge for how rowdy their ‘discussions’ could become.

“Yeah, sure.” He agreed dismissively, inching towards the kitchen. “Touya, I’m going to eat now. You can stay down here or go to my room, whatever you like.”

“Well…” Touya glanced uneasily at the sitting room, where Hikaru’s mother was holding court in her favourite armchair, regarding a very boring soap with avid attention. “I…think I’ll go upstairs.” He decided, fleeing in the direction of the goban-bearing room in a remarkable demonstration of social awkwardness.

“He’s not much for conversation, that one, is he?” Mitsuko commented from her chair, though she only sounded affectionate.

“Not really, unless you’re talking about Go.” Hikaru nodded, inspecting the fridge for what wonders it might contain. It turned out to be a curry, which sort of surprised him. He’d have expected the smell of its cooking to linger, but maybe his mother had cleaned afterwards? At any rate, curry was good, and easy to reheat. He put it in the microwave and set it for a couple of minutes, wandering over to stand near his mother while he waited. “I have no idea why you watch that crap.” He told her, making a face at the overdramatic antics of the characters on screen. “It’s all so fake and contrived.”

“I hardly see how you can criticise my tastes in television when you don’t even watch anything anymore.” Mitsuko replied with aplomb, not removing her eyes from the screen.


“Televised Go news, sometimes.” His glorious mother retorted. “I can’t remember the last time I saw you watching a cartoon. And you sold your own television, so you’re certainly not watching
anything upstairs.”

“I could be, on the internet.” Hikaru pointed out, frowning. He….kind of hadn’t watched much TV in a long time, had he? And yeah, he’d sold his TV and DVD player, as well as the easier to find manga and anime stuff, while he’d been planning on buying a laptop computer, but…

“You only use the computer for Go. I’ve checked your internet history.”

He gaped at her. “Mum!” God, he’d not even thought of that. It was a good job she knew nothing about Sai’s NetGo legend, or the occasional logins to that could have told her a lot. He’d need to start deleting those records.

“You’re a sixteen-year-old boy, Hikaru. A parent has to be mindful of these things, in this age of technology.” Mitsuko told him cheerfully. “And, really, you’re remarkably well behaved compared to a lot of kids your age. Even some of the things Akari-chan apparently looks at on the Fujisaki computer…”

“Embarrassing?” Hikaru asked with interest, distracted for the moment from his own mother’s conniving ways.

“I’m hardly going to tell you that, am I?”

“You might?” He prompted hopefully.

She rolled her eyes, intent though they were on the trite crap she was watching. “No, Hikaru.”

He’d have protested further, since any blackmail on Akari was to be treasured, but a quick ring from the kitchen declared that his food was ready, and that he’d best attend to it promptly. Torn between the line of questioning and his stomach, Hikaru committed the matter to memory and went in search of sustenance, opening the microwave to retrieve his bowl.

He was in the middle of extracting some chopsticks from a drawer when the house-wards lurched, in a sort of sickening rippling way he’d never felt in their short existence. He nearly dropped his bowl, and did drop the chopsticks, glancing around in alarm as he fished the sticks of plastic from the drawer.

The hell was that? He thought, panic blooming at the thought of a demonic incursion. He had no idea what it would feel like if Kaminaga tried to get past the wards, but surely he’d have felt the demon coming? He couldn’t feel anything like that. Just the wards, coruscating like the surface of a disturbed pond, and…

He narrowed his eyes. The ofuda.

He grabbed his bowl and the chopsticks and stomped upstairs, storming into his room to bark “Don’t touch that!”

His traitor of a houseguest, who had peeled one half of an ofuda from the wall to peek at its underside, jumped in surprise and flinched back from the piece of paper in question, which flopped back down to reconnect unevenly with the wall. “Um.” Touya said, looking both guilty and profoundly confused as Hikaru set his things on the floor, moving over to inspect the ofuda.

Cautiously, he peeled the thing back and flattened it back down again, with all the care he could. The wards settled somewhat, but they were alarmingly shaken by so small a thing. They felt so strong to his senses, but he supposed that tampering with the anchors could easily thwart them. What a worrying thought. Could a possessed Kaminaga remove ofuda? All of his were on the inside of his
He poked at the light in the walls, a bit concerned with it. It didn’t feel quite as solid as before, and it was twitching in the way it had in the beginning.

“...I was only looking.” Touya said, tentatively, from where he’d retreated to. “I wanted to see what it said on the other side.”

“Should have asked, then.” Hikaru grumbled at him, rather displeased with the state of affairs. “Who’d have thought you’d be so nosy, Touya?”

The boy reddened, contrite, and just as well. Hikaru was not amused. “I apologise. It was very rude of me.” He admitted, slowly.

Feeling at the wards with consternation, he wondered if they’d settle back down again on their own. Maybe he should pray again? Would that help? He scowled at the walls as he retrieved his food, sitting on the floor to begin eating, all the while he kept a metaphysical eye on the state of his protections. If they were settling, they were doing it very slowly.

“...Shindou?”

He held up his hand in a ‘wait’ gesture while he chewed, which he did rapidly. He shovelled down his bowl of curry as fast as was practical before setting it aside decisively. He got to his feet and strode over to Touya, pointing at the boy who was looking up at him from seiza, uncomfortable and a bit bewildered. “Rule one of Hikaru’s house!” He proclaimed, as though presenting an Imperial edict. “No touching the ofuda. Okay?”

“Okay.” Touya responded automatically, looking no less confused.

Hikaru poked the wall and made a face at it, not liking the feeling at all. “You can make it up to me by praying at the house shrine with me.” He decided, after a moment. “I’ll go see if we have any sake in, stay here.” He left his room and went downstairs, poking about in the various cupboards he considered most likely to house alcohol. He found a promising bottle and took it through to his mother, waving it in her face. “Can I have a saucer of this for the house shrine?” He asked, cutting straight to the point.

Mitsuko, now distracted from her soap, blinked at him with surprise. “That was not what I expected you to ask.” She said, with a hint of amusement.

“What, you thought me and Touya wanted to get drunk?” He asked, lips quirking.

“It wouldn’t surprise me, what with how you young people are today.” She paused, and added “Don’t think I didn’t notice, at that party of yours. Your laundry stank of booze afterwards.”

“...Ehehe.” Hikaru laughed nervously, his suspicions about his mother’s shrewdness confirmed. In an attempt at distraction, or at least avoiding the issue, he waved the bottle of sake. Liquid sloshed within, the sound muted by the cap. “So, can I have some or not?”

“Only a saucer for the house shrine. I’ll be checking.” She told him sternly, waving her hand at him. “Now away with you. I want to watch this.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He said brightly, darting off to retrieve an appropriate receptacle. They did actually have sake cups, though there were only a couple, so he used one of those, pouring in the rice wine before putting the bottle away again. He took this carefully upstairs, stretching to position it carefully on the god-shelf, before he returned to his room. Touya was sitting where he’d left him, looking
rather out of his element. The contrast between this baffled, awkward specimen of the human race and the monster he became across the goban was pretty startling, really.

He retrieved some kaya incense and a lighter from his drawers before gesturing at the other pro. “Come on, Touya.” He insisted, leaving his room just as the other boy began to stand up. He was half way through positioning the incense when Touya came through, eyeing him warily.

“You’re acting very oddly.” He said, pensively, as Hikaru set to work lighting the candles and incense.

“Maybe so, but this shouldn’t be anything new for you, you pray to Inari at home.” Hikaru said, sitting down in front of the kamidana. “See if you can apologise for messing with the ofuda. Maybe ask for protection while you’re at it.”

“…Protection from what?”

“Just stuff.” Hikaru replied vaguely, waving at his friend to settle down. He had to wave again, more insistently, before he was obliged, an accompanying presence beside him that he’d never had when praying before. It was odd, but sort of nice.

Satisfied that Touya would at least make a token effort, Hikaru closed his eyes and breathed. Allowed the spirit-lights around him to come to the fore; both the wavering presence in the walls, and that sharp spark in the kamidana. Tentatively, Hikaru reached out to it, though not very far. He was nervous of the shadow of presence he’d felt the other day.

He didn’t mean any disrespect, Hikaru thought, carefully. He was just curious.

The presence flickered, once. Like the light of a distant star.

If you can, please put the wards back to rights. I don’t want myself or my family to be in danger. He hesitated, and added maybe protect him, too. I don’t know how much he needs it, since the sword mostly seems to be after me, but…his family prays to you, right? He surely deserves your protection.

The flicker of light didn’t tell him much. With slight trepidation, Hikaru reached in, felt-

Acknowledgement

-and snapped back away with surprise, suddenly short of breath. He didn’t open his eyes, and hoped that Touya wouldn’t either, because he was certain he’d jolted at the shock.

Had that been Inari? Actually the kami? Communicating?

But…surely not. If it were that easy, wouldn’t people as sensitive as he was currently, like Kaminaga, be able to communicate with kami? Then again, maybe he could, and just hadn’t told Utagawashi about it. What a dick move that would be, not telling a priest about communion with his gods…

With effort, Hikaru reined in his thoughts, keeping his breathing steady to help calm himself. He mostly succeeded.

Whatever that had been, he didn’t have any desire to do it again. It was…far too intimidating. And he wasn’t especially easy to intimidate, under most circumstances.

Still…it seemed to be working. Something was changing in the ofuda, the irregular twitches and ripples smoothing out in the area surrounding the house shrine, and steadily, slowly working
He sat in silence while the incense burned, feeling the wavering uncertainty become something steely again, though he thought it might take an hour or two to go back to how it had been. He’d never imagined that such a slight disruption of a single ofuda could cause that much damage. Maybe he should have a talk with his mother about it, to be certain she wouldn’t disturb any.

After a while had passed, perhaps ten or fifteen minutes, Hikaru opened an eye to peek upwards. There was still smoke, but he thought it looked more like the candle wisps than the steady stream of incense. After a momentary struggle, he stood upright, huffing a little as he was reminded of his tiredness. The incense had burned out; he removed the spent stick and snuffed out the candles. Within the shrine, a mote of light dimmed, subtly. He shook his head at it, marvelling, and took hold of his lighter.

He glanced down at Touya, who had opened his eyes and was regarding him in turn. He looked calmer and more settled after that brief sitting, much like the wards he’d disturbed. Hikaru wondered what he was thinking. “That should do.” He said, eventually, and motioned down the hallway. “Want to play now?”

“Certainly.” Touya said, eyeing him speculatively. He got to his feet a moment later, walking the few steps down the hall required to get to Hikaru’s room again.

“It is kind of late, so let’s not make it too long.” Hikaru suggested, though he knew very well that it was difficult to time their games. Unless there was a game clock involved, they tended to get carried away, and too occupied with the board to notice the passage of time.

“You had black yesterday, so I’ll take it today.” His rival informed him, selecting his goke accordingly as Hikaru positioned the goban.

“Was that only yesterday? Geez.” Hikaru muttered, sitting down. “Feels like a week ago. Days, at least.”

Touya blinked at him with interest, but didn’t comment. Instead, he waited to bow, and then played his first stone with a sharp click. Not wasting any time. Hikaru approved, and promptly followed his example to stake out the opposing corner. The next black stone came down just a second later, and Hikaru raised his eyebrow. Opening hands didn’t tend to require much though, but even so…Touya was clearly eager to get into the game, today.

Well, he could get behind that. He slapped down the fourth stone on the board with equal speed, and the game progressed.

It became, somewhat unsurprisingly, a bit of a speed session. While he’d been sort of jittery and irritable and annoyingly emotional throughout the day, it wasn’t affecting his clarity of thought, so Hikaru sank easily into the game to match Touya stone-by-stone. The quick pace got his blood up, passion and fervour inexorably pulled out of him, and in short order he was consumed in precisely the sort of battle of wills that he loved the game for.

So intricate, he thought to himself, admiring Touya’s strategy even as he laid it low. Who else in our age group can play like that? No one, not in Japan at least…maybe Ko Yeong Ha, if he’s progressing at the same rate as us, but otherwise…

They were the two brightest stars among the young professionals. There were others, but none as brilliant, and none rising so quickly. It wouldn’t be long before they were dethroning the top players – a couple of years, if that, depending on how they grew.
He was reminded, with every hand, of how much he loved this game. Even games like the ones earlier, the ones against amateurs and the ones against Waya, were beautiful in their own way. But the games he played with Touya…

Thank god Sai got me into this. He breathed through the lance of pain that the thought inspired, and simply enjoyed the game. It felt like it was precisely what he needed, at the moment.

In the end, he won by a mere half point. He sat back, sighing with satisfaction, and regarded the board. “That was exhausting.” He said, with feeling. “Damn good game, though.”

Touya murmured his agreement, eyes on the board. “You played oddly, today.” He observed. “Well, but…odd.”

“Hm, I guess that fits. I’ve been in an odd kind of mood.” Hikaru responded, rubbing at his eyes as the endgame focus left him, leaving an exhausted mess in its wake.

“…You were quiet, in the study group today.” The boy commented, observing him critically. “Do you want to leave the discussion for the morning?”

“I look that tired, huh?” He snorted, and Touya didn’t deny it. “Yeah, probably for the best.” He eyed the board with weary pleasure, laying back on the floor. He sighed.

His guest eyed him, half amused and half concerned. “Are you alright?” He questioned, leaning over the goban.

“Mm. Just worn out. Been a tiring week.” He yawned, contemplating the fragility of his own mood. He’d been unreasonably thrown by the familiarity of his regular routine, unusually upset by how far he’d outclassed Waya, and far more prone to small anxious outbursts than he usually was. He always had the wound-echoes assailing him, sure, but otherwise he didn’t tend to have this sort of emotional touchiness. It was bizarre, and quite unwelcome.

…it was probably stress, wasn’t it? Considering what had been going on, it wouldn’t be surprising in the least if stress was getting to him. He wasn’t the sort of guy who got stressed over much, especially since Sai’s disappearance had set the bar so high, but a demonic sword after his soul probably qualified as a stress-making thing. Maybe he needed to figure out some good ways to relax? Go with Touya seemed pretty good for that, though ‘relaxed’ wasn’t precisely the best way to describe him mid-game…

“I’ll get the futon, shall I?” Touya asked after several moments of quiet, interrupting his musings.

Hikaru raised his arms to offer two upturned thumbs. “That’d be good.”

The pro sighed at him, and left the room, presumably in search of bedding. Hikaru laid idly on the floor for several moments, before conceding to the inevitable and hauling himself up again, moving the goban carefully to the side of the room, where its stones wouldn’t be disturbed. Despite his care, they all wobbled at the movement, clicking against each other in a delicate pattering of sound. He admired it in a sort of distant, exhausted way, and rose fully to his feet before he lost the willpower to move. While he still had momentum, he left for the bathroom, brushing his teeth probably too quickly in his haste to lay down again.

Touya was laying out the futon when he returned, evening out the corners with fastidious neatness. Hikaru walked past him and flopped onto the bed, exhaling loudly into his pillow. “I will marry this bed.” He declared, the words muffled by fabric. Kami, but he loved his bed. Why did he ever leave it?
His rival snorted at him. “I’m sure.” He said, dryly, finishing with the futon. Hikaru observed this through one bleary eye, turning his face slightly to see.

“There’s, like, a spare toothbrush you can use, if you like.” He stated, helpfully. “And I’m pretty sure most of my pyjamas should fit you.”

“Hm.” The pro considered it. “That would be better, yes. Where are they?”

“ Toothbrush is in the little mirror cupboard thing. There’s a pack of them.” Hikaru explained, burying his face in pillow again. “And the pyjamas are the second from the bottom drawer in the dresser.”

There were sounds that matched a search for clothing, shortly. “You, meanwhile, look like you’re going to fall asleep in your clothes.” Touya remarked, closing the drawer.

“’s fine.” He dismissed, kicking at his covers until he managed to get underneath them. He sighed with deep satisfaction and buried himself under the duvet, the most pleasant sort of darkness enveloping him.

He sort of drifted off, then, sometimes between Touya leaving for the bathroom and returning. It was his name that woke him, even though ‘awake’ was certainly not the best way to describe his state of mind. He made a wordless, complaining murmur at the sound, twisting in his sheets.

“Shindou.” Touya said, more loudly this time.

“Whatissit?” Hikaru mumbled, emerging slightly from the covers to open a squinting eye at the nanadan. He observed, through a haze of sleep, that the boy had availed himself of a basic black t-shirt and a pair of grey tracksuit bottoms, probably the most loose and covering nightwear type things he owned. Still, it was unusual enough to see Touya in anything short-sleeved, let alone baggy.

“Hm.” He grunted to himself, remembering his thought from some other time to take Touya shopping. That could be fun…

“Shindou.”

“whatissit?” he repeated, plaintively, wondering if he’d missed a question.

“How did you know I’d disturbed the ofuda?”

What? Hikaru blinked, trying to wring some focus out of his half-asleep brain. Ofuda…oh, right. “Dunno what you mean.” He prevaricated, indistinctly, going under the covers again. Heh, undercover. “I’m undercover.” He said to his pillow, and snickered to himself. Damn, he was tired.

“…You were downstairs, but somehow you knew. You said ‘don’t touch that’ before you even saw me.”

“I’m psychic. Obviously.” He claimed, considering the merits of throwing a pillow at Touya to shut him up. It probably wouldn’t work.

“Indeed.” His rival said, dubiously.

“I have mystical powers.” Hikaru told him. “Very mysterious. Can I go to sleep now?”

There was a long-suffering sigh. “If you must.”

With that as his cue, Hikaru happily dived face-first into blissful slumber.
Hello all. Thanks for waiting. I've had some lovely comments over the last few months - thank you for keeping Paper Cranes beloved and precious in my mind. On a related note, we passed 1k in kudos quite a while ago and aren't far off second place in the fandom. /Thank you/. Also, despite this being a 1st April post, there's no tricks in it and it is a legitimate chapter. Just to confirm that.

Chapter notes:
Touya, on the subject of minor kami, is speaking from a background of Shinto tradition with a heavy helping of folklore. Names are Important in both. As an example, some Shinto funerary rites involve giving the deceased a new name to use in the afterlife, so their living name can’t be used to disturb them. However, Touya is no priest and may get stuff wrong. Bear that in mind.

Go-related notes:
I learned some stuff. Oteai, as a ranking thing, was eliminated in the real world in 2003, the year this story begins in. Prestige promotions for advancing to the leagues of prestigious titles, like Honinbou, were also implemented. I made changes to my fic without understanding that this happened in 2003, and have been writing Touya as a nanadan despite him having entered the Honinbou league a year or so too early for that. Since I like it better this way, I’m going to say that in my version of the Hikago universe, they backtracked the decision to all recent league entrants, so Touya will remain a 7-dan. Lucky him.
On a further note, Hikaru’s early forfeiting streak shouldn’t be holding him back as much now, since apparently advancement is now based on percentage of wins. More details are hard to come by, but this suits my thing of writing weekly matches fairly well, so I won’t change the implementation unless I find new information.

Final note: I was meant to edit the story but never got around to it, so earlier chapters remain rife with errors, most evidently, Touya is referred to as a godan a few times. There's some other stuff too. I'll edit it all eventually.

Anyway, I have stayed up very late finishing chapter 14 (it is on tumblr) and I have work in too few hours, so I'm off to bed. I hope you all enjoy the chapter, and thanks for sticking with me.

03/06/18 – minor edits
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Hikaru is more of a dickhead than usual.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Hikaru woke to a room without air.

One moment he was deep in slumber, and the next he was gasping for breath, dread clawing sharply at his throat. Too recently awoken for rational thought and too terrified to get himself together, Hikaru desperately tried to scramble up, away – but only succeeded in tangling himself in his sheets. Fabric cocooned his legs like a death sentence, and he couldn’t breathe - he kicked and struggled and writhed free, falling out of his bed with a shock of pain as he hit the floor-

“Shindou?” The voice was familiar and unthreatening, despite its alarm, and the sound of it was almost like a physical sensation, like a cold wind, like fresh air. Hikaru gasped, breath coming in short bursts as he hunched up against the side of his bed, quivering with the urge to run away.

“Shindou, what on Earth-”

A hand settled onto his shoulder, and he looked up to stare at it uncomprehendingly. He followed the line of the arm up to a face he recognised very well, and felt his pulse slow a little. “…Touya?” He managed. “What are you doing here?”

“I stayed over last night.” The other boy reminded him, brows furrowed. He looked rather worried. “Are you alright? You…”

Hikaru stared back at his houseguest, thoughts struggling their way through panic. “I’m…at home.” He said, mostly to himself. “And you’re staying over, and – what time is it?” He whirled around, looking for his clock. “Six in the morning. Huh.” It was still completely dark, but it was the darker time of year, so…

Run run run his impulses continued to urge him, and he shuddered. Resisting them and sitting still made his skin crawl, but he’d do himself no favours by running out into the night in his pyjamas.

What the hell was that? He thought, with an unpleasant feeling that he already knew the answer. The dread and anxiety scraping at his nerves were far too familiar.

“Shindou?”

Hikaru blinked, and frowned uneasily at his friend. He was too keyed-up to be especially embarrassed or self-conscious at essentially waking Touya up with a panic attack, but that would probably come later. “…Nightmare, I think.” He lied easily, injecting just enough reluctance into the words that it should go down nicely. “Give me a minute.”

He closed his eyes and, carefully, pored over his ragged soul for signs of incursions. He couldn’t find anything – it wasn’t coming from within, then. That could only mean that a demon, almost certainly Kaminaga’s, was in range of his developing senses. They were so new to him; it was difficult to
interpret the unease and fear that twisted viciously in his mind, and the sensation of extending his reach remained tenuous and uncertain. He tried it anyway, awareness stretching in wobbly stops and starts outside of the house’s protective shell.

The sense of dread grew more and more as he extended in a particular direction, but for the life of him he couldn’t figure out what that direction might be. Concentrating, Hikaru shuffled to orient himself where he felt the danger, and opened his eyes. The first second of vision threatened to snap that awareness back to his body, but he took a deep breath, and persisted.

Hikaru stared at a blank bit of wall between his windows, having ascertained that Kaminaga was in the direction of the train station and probably not all that far away. Was he getting closer, though? He trembled at the thought.

“…Shindou.” Touya said, distracting him just enough that his reach snapped back at once, and then there was only the feel of the house around him and of doom approaching.

Hikaru looked over at his friend, and the rush of fear was like freezing water down his spine. Touya is here, when someone maybe possessed by a demon might be after me. He acknowledged, fingers curling into fists. Why the hell did I let him come here? Stupid! What the fuck do I do?

“…Yeah?” He responded, instead of voicing any of the panicked thoughts that were swelling in his head. He rubbed at his face with both hands, feeling shaky and off-balance, considering the picture he must make. Nightmare, he thought, firmly, as he looked up at his guest. That’s the story I have to stick to. But what if Kaminaga came? What if he broke into the house? Would the ofuda stop him?

Oh, right. Ofuda. “A nightmare?” Touya prompted, following on from his improvised excuse.

“Kind of a nasty one.” Hikaru admitted, rising slowly to his feet to investigate the packet he’d brought back from Utagawashi’s shrine. He fished past the packet meant for Akari’s house and pulled out the personal charms in their crinkly plastic. There were three of them, it seemed, and thankfully they came with their own cheap cord. He tied one around his neck, slipping it under his shirt, and felt its spark flash against his skin. Then he offered one of the remaining two to Touya, stubbornly not thinking about how weird it must all seem. “Put this on, will you?”

Touya took it from his fingers and read it, turning it dubiously in his hand. “A protective ofuda?” He asked, brow very lightly furrowed.

“Just do it.” Hikaru sighed, climbing back onto his bed. “You can take it off tonight if you like, just put the damn thing on.”

“Why?” His rival demanded, never one to easily do as he was told.

“Because I said so, and I’m your host.” He scowled back, furtively peeling back one of his curtains to peer in the direction of the train station. “Don’t be a bad guest.” You should really escape now, his instincts suggested again, undaunted by his resistance.

“I hardly think wearing protective charms is part of good guest etiquette.” Touya said, an eyebrow raised. Hikaru glanced at him and then back to the road, unable to see very far in the low light. If someone was approaching, he’d not be able to tell until they were close enough for the nearest lamps. He sat back and let the curtain settle.

“It is now.” Hikaru inspected the nanadan’s face, quickly interpreting his obstinacy. The boy didn’t actually care about the ofuda, he just wanted to be belligerent and maybe get some answers out of him. Dickhead.
“Tell me why.” Touya said, proving Hikaru’s observations in three stubborn words.

“Because.” Hikaru insisted, brushing aside another frothing rush of panic that demanded his immediate escape from the area. It felt somewhat stronger than before, an impulse that nearly bypassed his thoughts entirely to seize control of his body. He paused, breathed, and added “Just do it, and then maybe we can get back to sleep for a couple of hours.” He didn’t mention how spectacularly unlikely that was on his part. In fact, he’d probably be fleeing right now if it weren’t for Touya, and for the fact that Kaminaga was currently in the direction of his escape route. Very inconvenient.

Touya studied him, eyes intent. Go-intent. Like he was searching for a trap hidden in stones. Usually, that look was directed at a goban; it was somewhat disconcerting to have it aimed at his face. Then, slowly, deliberately, he opened his mouth and said “Why?”

Hikaru let out an undignified and somewhat frustrated sound. “Touya!” He complained, biting the syllables off like an insult, and gallantly resisted shouting ‘to protect your non-existent soul from demons, you idiot’. It was a considerable effort. Sai would tut at the rudeness of his current thoughts, no doubt. He exhaled, and distracted himself by closing his eyes and reaching out again, awareness wobbling the further he extended it. Terror encroached like a tide of red, pulling more ardently at his breath the closer he reached to the distant threat, which he thought didn’t feel quite as distant anymore. It was getting closer.

Shit. Hikaru cursed inwardly, wondering what he’d do if something actually happened. What could he do? He had the ofuda barrier, but…Touya was here, and he didn’t know anything. All he knew was that Hikaru had abruptly become religious and also very weird about ofuda.

…I’m an idiot. He opened his eyes and immediately went to grab his phone from the bedside, opening a new text message to Utagawashi.

Kaminaga is in town. He’s coming from the train station. He sent, quickly. Then, a second later, he typed out might be coming here, or shrine. What do I do?

It was quite early. He knew Utagawashi tended to be up in mornings, but he wasn’t sure how early those mornings might be. Still, it was worth a shot. Shrine staff started at ridiculous hours, right?

Touya was still watching him, eyes ever-so-slightly narrowed, and Hikaru knew him well enough to understand that there was a lot of thinking going on there. He still hadn’t put on the charm. Hikaru twitched, and held himself still against the aggressive urge to just go over there and force the damn thing around his neck. “Put the ofuda on, Touya.” He said, almost plaintively.

“Will you tell me why?” He shot back immediately, voice calm except for the edge of challenge, damn him.

Hikaru scowled at him, and wondered if there was a way to pack emergency supplies for fleeing Tokyo without his dickhead of a guest noticing and getting in his face about it. Which, actually, was another good point…

He opened a text to Yashiro, stating Just a heads up, might be dropping by soon. Don’t count on it though. Then he closed the phone, turning to regard Touya.

He paused. He mulled over his options. Then, in a tone of deep and biting sarcasm, he said “I had a scary dream, and if you put that on, it might make me feel better.”

Touya tilted his head, ever-so-slightly, considering. He held the eye contact for several seconds as he
pondered the partially-untrue statement. Then, calm and collected as anything, he reached up and tied the charm around his neck. Finally.

“Thank you.” Hikaru sighed, his annoyance at the requisite effort somewhat counteracting his relief at success. Still…when he reached out, he could feel that guarding spark there, and it did help.

“…Are you going to go back to sleep, now?” His guest inquired, settling into stately seiza on the futon. The sheer solid calm of his posture and demeanour was startlingly reminiscent of his father, though the nightclothes sort of ruined the effect.

“I’m not sure I can.” Hikaru admitted, honestly, after a moment. “You can, though. We don’t need to be anywhere for hours yet.”

“Hm…I don’t think so. It’s not that early, after all.” Touya decided, and glanced deliberately at the goban they’d played on the previous night. “We could discuss that game, if you’re not going to sleep?”

Hikaru stared at the board, anchoring himself in the black-and-white. Was he in a state of mind where he could sit down, unmoving, and discuss a game? When a soul-threatening menace was drawing near outside? “…In a bit, maybe. I don’t think I’m awake enough for that yet.” It was patently a lie: with the amount of adrenaline pumping into his system, he could hardly remember a time he’d felt more awake. He was jittery with it, resplendent with agitation, every new second crawling under his skin like an unwelcome insect.

“Maybe take a shower, then. I’m happy to wait.” The other boy looked impossibly serene for the situation, but then again, he had no idea what was near. Hikaru envied him his ignorance.

Still, it wasn’t a bad idea to get somewhere away from his uninformed guest. He’d prefer to conduct any oncoming freak-outs in private, thank you very much. “I think I’ll do that.” He sighed, clutching at the wall for support as he stood up. He reached for the fan, unwilling to leave it here for a trip to the bathroom under these circumstances, even though it earned him an odd look. He left his room, closing the door quietly, and walked rigidly down the hallway. Running would do no good, he reminded himself, pushing back the maddening urge to get away. He had nowhere better to escape to, and his house was warded. Running wouldn’t help.

But, ugh, what if it would? Hikaru turned the lock on the bathroom door, leaning forwards to hit his forehead against the wood, groaning quietly. Utagawashi was of the opinion that a shrine’s honden couldn’t be ventured into by anything less than a demon king, so maybe the shrine would be a safer place, after all? But…no. Even if that were the case, and the honden would offer sanctuary…

Hikaru went still against the door, breathing very quietly, as though he were hiding. As though any movement would give him away.

There wasn’t enough time to run, now.

Dread crept up on him like a black wave, a tide of shadow come to pull him under. What he’d felt as a distant terror, abruptly, passed into awareness; a nameless horror reaching out from the dark, steeped in blood and madness. It was looking for him, its gleeful anticipation gushing out as though from a lanced boil, the pus and rot of it choking up his lungs – it was too late to run. It was already here.

Barbed desperation seized him by the throat. When Hikaru shoved his arm up between his teeth, stopping up his voice, it was from the atavistic certainty that if he screamed it might find him. In the space of seconds, fear swallowed him whole, promising that the slightest sound, the slightest
movement, the slightest twitch of his senses would be ruin-

The demon unfurled, terribly close, searching, reaching out for him, its crooning shadows slipping profanely between the layers of reality, and-

For several seconds, Hikaru – wasn’t there. He was separated, distant, held apart from everything by stark panic. His senses were lost to him, thoughts well beyond his grasp. For those moments, he remained suspended from everything without even the lights in his soul to hold on to-

But then, with a shock like a lightning-strike in the dark, Hikaru felt his enemy’s reach break upon light.

It was the ofuda – but they’d never been so bright before. They gathered as blinding as sunlight in the walls, so furiously incandescent that Hikaru felt that his eyes should be hurting, that there should be white spots on his vision, but there was only the ward. The ward, poised between him and a demon.

When Hikaru returned to something resembling awareness, he was curled on the cold tiles, teeth clamped painfully into his arm as he shook. His heartbeat was horribly, dizzyingly fast, and he was alive. His eyes were watering in some reflex reaction to light that wasn’t actually there, salt stinging in trails down both cheeks as he blinked rapidly to clear it.

Minutes had passed and the demon was still held at bay, curling like a snarl beyond the house-wards. The first thing he thought, hysterically, was thank fuck we fixed the wards last night and then he was laughing. Sick, choked sounds into his arm, reminding him that he was still biting himself like a total idiot. He pulled his arm away, clamping his teeth closed, as the walls frothed with power.

The second thought he had, dazed, was I owe Inari a really nice offering.

Once another minute had passed, Hikaru recovered enough of his wits to, tentatively, try to feel for what was still going on. All around him the wards crested, mantling with radiance, the motion almost angry. It was actually quite hard to tell what was going on beyond them, now – the horrifying blight of the demon’s presence was certainly far less immediate. He could just about feel it, coiling out in the dark street like an angry snake, thwarted and hateful and hungry.

With the overbearing terror of it distant, kept at bay by his wards, a hint of embarrassment occurred to him. He’d completely lost it, panicked so thoroughly that all capacity for higher thought had fled him, which was decidedly not a good thing to have done under the circumstances. Just…it had been so overwhelming. Without a doubt, he was a lot more sensitive than he’d been the last time he faced the demon, and apparently that wasn’t necessarily a good thing.

Hikaru exhaled, his breathing returning to something approaching normal. He sat quietly, feeling for the monster outside in the dark. He remained uncomfortably aware of the wards’ fragility, and the fact that Kaminaga might peel away his protection with a single piece of paper.

Minutes slipped away, and slowly, the presence receded. The wards settled down from their bristling rage, though their shape still prickled with alert.

Carefully, he felt after the retreating menace. It was heading vaguely shrine-wards, but…not quite.

For appearances’ sake, Hikaru staggered to the sink and ran a cloth over his face, and then left the bathroom. He’d not brought his phone, and he needed to warn Utagawashi. He pushed into his bedroom and paused. “Why are you on my phone?”

“He’s here now.” Touya spoke into the phone, voice professional and polite. “I’ll hand you over.”
Hikaru eyed the proffered phone with suspicion, but accepted it and held it to his ear. “Hello?”

“Shindou-kun.” Of course. It was Utagawashi. “You didn’t mention a friend was staying with you.”

“Didn’t think to, sorry.” He said, making a ‘wait’ gesture at Touya and leaving his room again. “Hang on, need to get downstairs so I can talk…”

“…You seem quite calm. Did Kaminaga-san not approach after all?”

Hikaru went into the kitchen, which was possibly the furthest he could get from his bedroom and still be in the house. “No, he definitely did. Came and stood outside the house for a bit like a total creep. Listen – I think he’s heading for you. The demon couldn’t get through the ofuda.”

“It tried?” The priest’s voice was sharp.

“It definitely fucking tried. It was looking for me.” He shook a little at the mere memory, dread still looming in the distance as the demon receded. Quietly, he added “…I think it might be stronger.”

Quiet held over the line for a few seconds. “Why do you say that?”

“I could be wrong. I’m more sensitive now, so it felt a lot worse. It could just be that.” Hikaru said hastily, before getting to the meat of his observation. “But…uh. I couldn’t feel Kaminaga. Even though he must have been right outside my house.”

Utagawashi cursed, softly. “Not at all?”

“Could be the demon was so noisy I just didn’t feel him.” He pointed out, uneasy. “I was pretty freaked out – I could totally have missed it.”

The priest was silent, and Hikaru could understand why. After all, he’d been able to sense Kaminaga at the shrine, and that was before the circumstances had forced his sensitivity to skyrocket. Not being able to detect him now did not bode well.

“…I’ll make preparations under the assumption that he’s fully possessed. Just in case.”

“What does that mean?”

There was the sound of movement on the other end. “Mostly, I try to sanctify the area any way I can. I’ll burn incense, sit down to pray – I’ll have ofuda and a purification chant ready. I won’t let him into my building.” There was a pause. “Can you feel him from where you are?”

“…Hang on.” Hikaru closed his eyes, and focused. Concentration was difficult to hold, after the fright he’d had, but he just about managed to chase the looming menace in the distance. “…Yeah, I can. I can’t really judge distances yet though, so it’s not that helpful. I think he’s definitely heading for you and not the shrine, though.”

“Unfortunately, he knows where I live.” Utagawashi’s voice was grim. “I’d best make preparations, Shindou-kun.” He hesitated. “I’ll keep you updated as the situation progresses.”

Hikaru felt his throat tighten with fear for the priest. It occurred to him that Utagawashi’s life might well be in danger, and this danger was something he’d brought on, by asking for Kaminaga to be called in. “I’ll pray for you.” He said, abruptly, and his face burned once his own words registered with him. It was possibly the corniest thing he could have said in any situation, but…

“…Thank you.” Quiet gratitude filtered over the phone. There was a moment of uncertain pause, and
then he hung up.

The phone beeped in his ear until he lowered it, exiting the disconnected call screen with a press of the button. His heart didn’t necessarily beat quickly, but it thudded, almost painfully.

Hikaru stared at the phone screen, a confused tangle of guilt and worry twisting in his gut. He considered, for a moment, phoning the police anyway, despite the potential problems. They’d surely stand a better chance than Utagawashi of fighting off someone with a sword, right? Especially if they were warned.

…They’d fare a whole lot worse against possession, though. Especially if the sword-spirit had become stronger, or at least less restrained.

He put the phone in his pocket to avoid gripping it too hard, and went for the liquor cupboard to get a fresh saucer of sake. As quietly as he could manage, he climbed the stairs, replacing the saucer at the kamidana before heading to his room for incense.

Touya, thankfully, had not allowed his nosiness to progress to eavesdropping. He had exchanged god knows how many words with Utagawashi, though, so Hikaru might potentially have some explaining to do. “You’re done on the phone, then?” His rival inquired, apparently curious enough about everything that he’d not messed with the goban at all.

“Uhuh.” He mumbled in reply, fishing out a stick of incense and extracting his lighter from the corner of the drawer.

“…You’re going to pray? Now?”

“Yep.” Hikaru said, with something as close to cheer as he could approximate given the circumstances. “Feel free to join me.” He headed for the door without waiting for a response, making a beeline for the house’s kamidana. To his surprise, Touya did actually come, arriving just as he was lighting the candles. When Hikaru blinked at him, he shrugged.

“You did offer.” He explained, a little condescendingly, in answer to the unspoken question. “Is there anything in particular we’re praying for now?”

“…The safety of friends and family, I guess.” He lit the incense. “Also, thank him for protecting us.” Hikaru sat down in front of the shrine, bowing his head and closing his eyes. He barely noticed Touya following his example. This time, he didn’t wait. He pushed aside his vague fright of the god’s too-vast shadow, and reached straight in.

Awareness washed over him, again, and he let out a shaky breath.

Thank you, thank you, thank you. He pushed gratitude out in a desperate, tremulous, heartfelt torrent. If it wasn’t for those ofuda I’d be dead by now, or – or worse, I’ll be giving offerings for weeks before I can even start to make up for that-

The heart of the kamidana flickered, almost like acknowledgement. Shifted, to welcome the open flow of feeling.

-but, please. Utagawashi is – it’s heading for him. Protect him, too. He’s only in danger because of me in the first place. Hikaru swallowed, eyes stinging beneath his eyelids. Don’t let that bastard get him.

In the shrine, the hint of consciousness said Peace, so firmly that it might as well have been written in stone. Faith chased the uttering, with the ironclad assurance of keeping one’s own from harm.
...And that, apparently, was that. The flicker of awareness retreated, settling back to the spark in the ofuda. The weight of that vast, ephemeral attention shifted away – hopefully to Utagawashi’s benefit.

Even though he wasn’t sure he had an audience any more, Hikaru spent the rest of the incense’s lifespan pouring in his thanks.

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Once he was done with the prayer, Hikaru wasn’t completely sure what he should be doing. Common sense indicated that he shouldn’t remain in the path of the demon, since Kaminaga would need to pass by his house again if he wanted to catch a train. On the other hand, the idea of leaving the wards with a demon so comparatively close seemed a frankly terrifying idea. The more he thought about it, though, the more it seemed a good idea to put some distance between the demon and himself.

Leaving for Osaka, however...somehow, that felt a little too close to abandonment. At least if he was still in Tokyo, Hikaru might be able to respond to hypothetical distress calls. Which, actually, was a reason why it might be better to stay home. But in that case, Touya would have questions...and he already had enough of those.

“That man called himself your spiritual advisor.” Touya informed him, as he went about making some rice for lack of a concrete decision.

Hikaru snorted, despite his tension. “Pfff. Really? Spiritual advisor? Is that what he said?”

“Is it not true, then? He did sound like he was scrambling for an answer when I asked.”

“No, actually, that’s pretty much exactly right.” He admitted freely, staring vengefully at the rice cooker. “Never actually thought of it that way, though. He’s a priest,” He added, seeing Touya’s brows draw into a befuddled frown. “Works at the local Inari shrine.”

Touya said nothing for a few moments. His eyes flickered briefly to one of the ofuda on the kitchen walls. “…Is he who wrote you the ofuda?” He asked, because he was unwholesomely sharp like that.

“...Yeah.” Hikaru sighed, wondering how much he was going to regret Touya’s visit once everything calmed down. What with the ofuda thing last night, the morning’s performance, and now this...he might have some difficulty bullshitting his way out of an explanation. Stubborn stonewalling might even be necessary – it seemed likely that Touya would get pushy about this sort of thing.

“Why did he give you dozens of custom-made ofuda asking for spiritual protection, of all things?” It was the sensible follow-up question, but damn him for asking it anyway.

“He’s superstitious, obviously. Claimed there’s a demon problem in the area and told me to put them up for a while,” Hikaru sort-of-lied cheerfully, removing the rice bowl as it signalled the end of cooking. “Can’t really argue with free ofuda, right? I even got replacements for the house shrine.”

Touya eyed him with deep scepticism. “Shindou, I’ve heard you complain about your grandfather’s superstition at least ten times in the last year.” He said, in a particularly flagrant example of exaggeration. “You will not convince me that you decided to fill your house with ofuda on a random priest’s say-so.”

“Why else would I do it?” Hikaru demanded, filling two bowls and an offering bowl with the rice before unceremoniously planting the cooker’s tub into the sink.
Deciding to pretend that the question was not rhetorical, his inconvenient guest promptly started listing off possibilities. “You could have been promised something else in return for putting the ofuda up.” Touya began, primly. “You could be putting the ofuda up to freak people out or win a bet. You could actually believe the priest and be putting the ofuda up because of that – which would incidentally explain why you became so defensive when I tampered with one yesterday – or you could be-“

Hikaru passed him a bowl of rice to shut him up, absconding with the little bowl for the shrine. He carried it upstairs and rested it carefully on the shrine shelf, and then returned for his own bowl. “We’re leaving in no later than twenty minutes, so get that down your throat.” He informed, completely ignoring all of the guesses he’d been battered with, and began shovelling sustenance forcefully into his own body.

“Why the hurry?” Touya demanded, abandoning his prior line of questioning. He seemed disinclined to use his hands like a savage as Hikaru was doing, and investigated likely drawers until he located some chopsticks.

Again, Hikaru cheerfully ignored him. Once he’d finished, quickly enough that his oesophagus had become very displeased with him, he put that bowl in the sink as well, and hurried upstairs to pack some essentials into his day bag before Touya could follow and get all suspicious about it. He made another, very brief, trip to the bathroom, and got dressed as swiftly as he could manage. As it happened, he managed all of this in the time it took Touya to finish his breakfast, because he was making abortive attempts at washing up when Hikaru went to check on him.

He shooed his slightly harried-looking guest away from the sink, claiming “You don’t have time for that, go get ready. I’m leaving without you if you take too long!”

“You are a terrible host.” Touya informed him as he was bullied upstairs, and then Hikaru was alone.

After he heard the bathroom door close, Hikaru closed his eyes and tried to feel for the demon again. It must have been far away enough, by then, to be approaching Utagawashi’s flat. He couldn’t quite reach it – the focus was too difficult to hold – but there was a hint of distant menace at his furthest stretch. Hikaru checked his phone, and found nothing. He wished, suddenly, that he’d thought to get the onmyouji’s contact details from Utagawashi. Then, maybe, he could get another opinion more informed than his own.

Hikaru kept his focus on the faraway demon as best he could while he waited, feeling it grow steadily more and more distant. He opened his eyes at the sound of footsteps on the staircase, blinking a little blearily at Touya. “You ready to go?”

“More or less, though it’s hours too early for me to need to be anywhere.” The boy said pointedly.

“Finally.” Hikaru said, as though twenty minutes was a reasonable amount of time to ask someone to eat breakfast and get ready in. “Let’s go.” He swiftly went about the business of getting his shoes on by the door.

Touya followed. “Go where? You don’t have anywhere to be for hours, either.”

He considered the question as he opened the door, stepping out into the early-morning cold with a slight shiver. “Eh, somewhere. You can go home or to a salon or something.” He waited for Touya to step through the door before he closed it, swiftly setting off down the path. Around two metres from his front door, Hikaru felt himself leave the wards, the protective light passing behind him. Abruptly, he felt far less safe, even though the sword demon was distant enough now that he could barely sense it.
“…You’re not suddenly leaving the city again, are you?” The nanadan’s tone was deeply suspicious, and Hikaru reflexively grimaced at him.

“Probably not.”

“’Probably’?” He repeated, a little too loudly for the quiet of the street. Some people were up at this time, going about preparing their cars, but for the most part no one was around.

“Shut up, Touya, it’s too early for your pestering.” Hikaru informed him, setting an uncomfortably brisk pace for the train station. His earlier anxiousness to escape still lingered, and he was putting it to good use.

“Why are you walking so fast?” Touya demanded, lengthening his own stride to keep up. “Do you have an appointment I don’t know about?”

“Nope.” He replied, cheerfully. “Walk faster.” He followed his own advice, now solidly into soldier-walk territory. He doubted he could convince Touya to run so this was sort of the best he could manage.

“Shindou…!”

“Stop bitching and walk.”

By the time they got to the station, Touya was really quite annoyed with him, and undoubtedly full to bursting with intrusive questions.

“You’ve been behaving strangely lately.” The boy accused, belatedly fumbling with the ticket machine as Hikaru threatened to walk off without him. “You’re not making any sense.”

“I think you’ll find it’s your face that doesn’t make sense.” Hikaru answered, checking his phone for the fifth time in as many minutes. Still no update, and the demon was beyond his range. He sighed, and settled deeply into the most obstinate kind of stonewalling-mindset he was capable of.

“Why did you make us leave so early?” His persistent rival demanded.

“Why were you born with green hair?” Hikaru returned, slipping his phone back into his pocket as Touya took his ticket.

That prompted a confused, vaguely enraged grimace. “Why was I – how is that relevant?”

“See, most Japanese people don’t have green hair. And your parents don’t. Are you sure you’re not adopted?”


Hikaru pretended to mull over his words. “Yeah,” He said, thoughtfully. “I guess you have to be related to your dad, at least. That sort of Go obsession has to be at least sort of genetic, right?”

“…That hardly explains you, Shindou.” The other boy said, eyes steadily narrowing. “And don’t think I’m going to be distracted so easily – you’re hiding something, and trying to irritate me so I’ll stop asking questions.”

“Is it working?” Hikaru inquired, as though genuinely interested in the answer.

The narrowed eyes shifted into full-out glaring. “No!”
“I don’t know, you’re looking quite annoyed. See, your face is going kind of pink and blotchy.” He pointed helpfully at the face in question, as if Touya needed help locating it. It turned even pinker in response.

“I have too many questions for you to distract me.” His rival informed him through clenched teeth.

“You have one of those faces that changes colour when you’re worked up about things, has anyone ever told you that?” Hikaru inquired. “Kind of like one of those shitty mood rings, but with less colour variety. Occasionally you manage purple but not usually anything more interesting than that.”

Touya very clearly wanted to hit him. Instead, he asked “Why did that man call you at half six in the morning?”

“He wants me to take up misogi.” Hikaru said. “I told him to fuck off about it, but he’s persistent. Keeps bugging me early in the morning when the water is iciest.”

He was rewarded with a beautifully frustrated scowl. “That’s not even close to being believable.” He claimed, with heat.

“Really? Funny, because that one was sort of true.” He remarked, pushing his way onto the train with grim victory. It was already crowded with early commuters, and given train etiquette, Touya now wouldn’t be able to interrogate him without the carriage as a whole reacting as though he’d dribbled on their shoes.

Touya opened his mouth as he followed into the train, then grimaced and closed it again. The glare he shot Hikaru was nothing short of vengeful. “I will get answers out of you. Later.” He promised.

Hikaru stuck his tongue out and left it at that. After all, later, many things might have happened. And he was frankly far more concerned about those things than a nosy and persistent rival.

Eventually, he identified the stop Touya would have to get off at to go to his father’s salon, and shoved him towards the train doors. The nanadan shot him a venomous look as he left the train.

Hikaru stared as the doors closed, the sight of that annoyance making him feel oddly contemplative. It really was a good thing that they were rivals, more than friends. Most friends, after all, wouldn’t take that sort of antagonism lightly. Hikaru almost felt bad about it; it wasn’t Touya’s fault that he was embroiled in spiritual conflict, after all.

Still, he was literally fearing for someone’s life at the moment, as well as his own. He thought he could be excused for being more of a dick than usual. Also, Touya thrived on challenge and irritation. Their next game was probably going to be gorgeous.

Assuming he, you know, hadn’t been eaten by a demon by then.

Hikaru really hadn’t had a destination in mind, but after some considering of the timetables, he switched trains and headed for Chuo. The Namiyoke Inari shrine was there, after all, and a shrine seemed as good a place as any to wait for news that may or may not come.

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After frequenting Utagawashi’s shrine, which was just about big enough to warrant having a kannushi but only just, it was a little weird to see one of the well-known shrines again. At this time on a weekday, not many people were there, but it was still odd to see. He might be mostly alone in all the spirit stuff, but he certainly wasn’t on the Shinto side of things.
Hikaru behaved like a proper respectful shrine-goer, washing his left and right hand and his mouth as well, and bowing properly to the torii. He even bought an ema, one of those wooden prayer boards, writing ‘please let no one I know die today’ on it before hanging it with all the others. He’d have bought some tofu or mochi for offering, if there had been a place nearby selling it, but there wasn’t.

He received a curious glance from one of the miko as he proceeded to the prayer hall, probably on account of his hair, or maybe the early hour. He removed his shoes in the space provided and went in, sitting quietly where he could. It was good that few people were visiting – it meant he wasn’t going to get shooed out so that other people could take their turns.

Hikaru closed his eyes, settling into familiar seiza. This shrine felt…different. He’d started to feel a sort of presence about Utagawashi’s shrine, an odd otherworldliness, and while that sensation was quite distinct here…there was something else, too.

It felt like something was watching him.

Uneasy, he gave his soul a thorough looking-at, but found nothing of note.

Something further away, then? Hikaru cast out his awareness, trying briefly to do it in all directions at once and failing miserably. Instead, he reached forwards, where he knew the honden was, beyond walls and stairs. The heart of the shrine was strong and distinct – a proud flame, where the ofuda were mere sparks. It flickered briefly at him in acknowledgement. Then there was a pause, something moving in the energy like the curl of a thought.

The shrine’s heart reached back to him, very smoothly, and echoes of mischief eddied over him like rain on a window-pane. Searching-leftwards, it whispered, and then retreated.

Hikaru opened his eyes to stare in the direction of the honden, not certain what to think. The hint was fairly obvious, but…

To hell with it. Hikaru closed his eyes and swept his awareness left, reaching out as though feeling around for something in the dark-

A hint of fur.

Hikaru grabbed at the presence, blindly, and felt it slip through his insubstantial fingers like a startled fish. Surprised!, Hikaru felt, very briefly, before it retreated entirely beyond his awareness. He felt around but found no hint of it again. He looked around himself, surreptitiously, finding only the prayer hall.

A spirit, then? And, evidently, one that Inari was okay with.

Despite everything, Hikaru felt himself growing interested. The demon sword hadn’t been the best first spirit to meet, so it was kind of cool that he’d felt another one, now, even if it did seem to be hiding from him. And maybe watching him.

His phone buzzed. It came as such a surprise, after his distraction, that he jumped half-way out of his skin. Restraining a curse, he bowed respectfully to the kamidana and then left the prayer hall, slipping his shoes on as he removed his phone from his pocket.

He groaned when he saw the name on the message: Yashiro. He liked the guy, and all, but he was kind of in major suspense waiting for Utagawashi. Well, no matter. He opened the message.

‘Anything I should know about?’ Yashiro had inquired, in response to his notification of a maybe-visit.
Hikaru tapped the keys indecisively for a few seconds, then sent ‘Nah. Thanks, though.’

The reply was quick, maybe less than a minute later. ‘Let me know if your plans firm up.’

He pondered that, a little grimly. After all, he hadn’t decided how long he was going to wait for Utagawashi to respond. Sure, he had stuff to do today – the Meijin study session in the afternoon, as just one example – but if he didn’t get an update within a reasonable time-frame, it would not bode well. And Hikaru would rather miss out on some responsibilities than die.

Kaminaga had to have arrived at Utagawashi’s place a fair while ago, by now. If more than maybe two hours passed without any updates, he should probably head for Osaka. ‘I might know for sure in a few hours.’ He wrote back. Yashiro didn’t respond to that one, but it didn’t really need a response, so.

Hikaru sighed, and went to sit by a fox statue to wait.

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The being-watched sensation persisted.

After a while, waiting tensely for Utagawashi to get in contact got tiring, and Hikaru allowed the watching-spirit to distract him. He was quite sure that it was intentionally hiding from him – otherwise, he felt sure his spiritual flailing should have touched on it at least once. But…the thing was sneaky. Without Inari’s tip-off, he might have never caught the hint of it earlier at all.

He tried to focus on the feeling of being watched itself, because the fact that he was feeling that meant that he was sensing something. After half an hour of what felt like trying to catch smoke, he thought he was starting to get a better feel for it, but nothing concrete enough to find the thing-

His eyes narrowed, feeling watching settling on him from behind, up – he thrust an arm out, in reflexive accompaniment to the reach-

Can’t-catch-me danced tauntingly at the edge of his senses, the feeling of it slipping away between one second and the next. His eyebrow twitched as his hand closed on thin air.

He pulled his arm back in, closing his eyes to grope for the sensation of something-watching again. He’d almost found it when, unexpectedly, his phone vibrated. He jolted, and it vibrated again, in a sequence, which meant he was being called-

Hikaru pulled out his phone, saw Utagawashi, and felt his heart thud as though hit by a particularly large hammer. He pressed the accept button urgently, shoving the phone to his ear as he retreated in search of a quiet corner of the shrine. “Are you alive?” He demanded, before the person on the other end had a chance to say anything. He waited with bated breath for the voice, pessimistic fear pointing out that Kaminaga could conceivably either have the phone or be forcing the phone call.

“I’m fine.” Utagawashi’s voice said, sounding shaken, but largely normal. Hikaru’s breath left him all at once in a gusty sort of heave, and he collapsed by an out-of-the-way stone lantern with relief.

He bit back his first three comments, which would have been thank fuck, I was worried he’d got you, and shit. “What happened?” He asked, instead, jittery with the release of tension.

“He came to the door and buzzed my apartment. He wanted me to let him in.” Utagawashi said, his own voice tremulous. “When I refused, he phoned me to demand why.”

Hikaru swallowed “Do you think he’s still in there? Alive, I mean?” All he’d felt was demonic
malice, reaching for him.

“He is, I’m certain of it.” The priest sounded exceptionally relieved, and no wonder. “Good news, to be sure.”

“He’s definitely being sort of controlled, though.” He said, with conviction.

“I’ve no doubt of that, either.” Utagawashi confirmed, the relief turning sour. “When I asked him why he was calling unexpectedly, before polite hours, and why he’d been loitering outside a teenager’s home, he couldn’t seem to answer. Every time he tried to reply, it was like his mind jumped. He’d forget what we were talking about and demand to be let in, instead.”

Hikaru grimaced, remembering how his memory had stuttered over the demon’s intrusion, keeping it quiet almost past the point of recovery. “What did you say?”

“I told him he’d have to make an appointment in advance if he wanted to meet with me, and that it would only be at the shrine.” The kannushi claimed, voice vaguely terrified at the recollection. “…I also told him that he should be more diligent about his demon containment because clearly he wasn’t as good at it as he thought.”

“…Hah.” He managed, eyes wide. “You said that? When he was right there?”

“I did.” Utagawashi moaned, sounding perfectly horrified at himself. Hikaru was impressed. “I’m impressed,” he said, because it bore saying. “How badly did he take it?”

“He went off on a rant about how a student as misguided as me had no right to criticise his betters. It was quite vitriolic, actually. Quite unlike him.”

“I dunno, he came across as a big enough dickhead when I met him.”

Utagawashi made a negative noise. “He’s certainly blunt and scathing enough, I wasn’t denying that.” He said. “It’s just…I’d expect him to spend several minutes insulting me over every mistake I’d made, rather than just plain insulting me.”

“Did you tell him to fuck off?” Hikaru inquired. “I would have.” Contingent on his coherency in the presence of the demon, of course.

“I’m sure.” The man’s tone shifted, becoming quite dry. “I didn’t tell him so in as many words, but I did say that he should leave and that if he wanted to meet, he should request ahead of time like a polite adult should.” A pause. “Then I hung up on him.” He added.

“You totally told him to fuck off.” Hikaru concluded, satisfied. “Is he gone now, then?”

“I assume so. I don’t have your senses, but I looked outside and no-one was there.” Utagawashi swiftly slipped back into anxiousness. “You’ll have left the area, I assume?”

“Yeah, I did. Still in the city though.”

“I’ll stay home today, I think. I’ll not risk Kaminaga-san waiting between here and the shrine.” The man sounded half-annnoyed behind the resignation. “If you return later, please let me know if the area is safe.”

“Will do.” Hikaru nodded. “I’m going to try to go about my day normally now, but I’ll let you know if I sense demons and have to run.”
Utagawashi sighed. “What a mess.” He bemoaned. “I suppose I had better call Arakawa-san, now. I would hope this constitutes a reason to come sooner.”

“It had better.” He muttered, frowning as he recalled his earlier thought. “Give me his number, will you? I want to be able to contact him if Kaminaga kills you.”

There was a startled cough over the line at that. “Uh. Alright, then. That does sound reasonable.” He agreed, hesitantly. “…I do hope it doesn’t come to that, though.”

“Yeah.” Hikaru affirmed, standing up and stretching forward. He felt his back click satisfyingly in several places. “Anything else I should know about?”

“No, that I can think of. I’ll contact Arakawa-san and tell you what he says.” The priest paused. “Be careful today. It’s possible he’s looking for you.”

“I’ll keep a feel out.” He promised, finger hovering over the disconnect button. “Later, Utagawashi.”

“Shindou-kun.” The man acknowledged, and Hikaru hung up.

He looked out at the shrine, sighed, and headed for the torii. It was early, but he might as well get to a salon and see if he could scrounge up some students. Extra money never hurt, after all.

Hikaru stepped through the torii, awareness twinging at him as he did so. He paused, tilting his head.

Something-watching, said his hindbrain.

“You’d better not be another demon.” Hikaru told the thin air, and kept walking.

Watching nagged at him, persistently, as the spirit followed.

Chapter End Notes

Happy Hikago Day, everyone! As always, next chapter is on tumblr, this one has been revised a bit, etc etc. Chapter 15 came at the expense of revision time, solely to get it out in time for the fifth of May, so I hope those who read it enjoy it. I also hope that those who were waiting for chapter 14 to arrive here before reading it also enjoy it.

Reader response keeps getting more lovely, so thank you all for that. I’d like everyone to know that I preen over my story stats almost daily. We've broken second place in fandom for kudos, too. We're ages off of first place, but who knows? There's a lot of Paper Cranes yet to come.

Cheers!

03/06/18 – minor edits
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Hikaru is followed.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hikaru took a long and circuitous route back to the train station, if only to confirm that he was in fact being followed.

All the way there, the profoundly distracting sensation of *something-watching* chased his footsteps, dancing just out of reach every time he tried to grasp it, and at no point did it become more distant-feeling. When the feeling persisted even once he’d boarded a train, Hikaru felt he could well and truly conclude that he was being tailed, though he had very little idea of why.

Hikaru took a moment, clutching tightly onto the train’s rail, to check his soulscape again to make sure nothing untoward was going on. Given the shrine’s reaction to the spirit, he doubted there was, but he was becoming understandably paranoid what with all the goings-on.

As expected, he found nothing. He sighed, and stretched out his awareness, less to search for the spirit and more to just make a perimeter-check for the demon. Nothing stood out in that regard either, so he just stood and contemplated where to go to. He had a fair amount of time before he had to be anywhere, after all.

Really, Hikaru was tempted to go to the Touya salon and investigate the asperity of his rival. After the events of the morning, he might still be in a spectacularly pissy mood, and that could only mean good things for their prospective game…but, on the other hand, he might be in a pissy enough mood to deny him the game and just pester him for answers, instead. Hikaru mulled it over, distracted, and by the time the appropriate stop came around he still hadn’t decided. The train pulled away from the station, making his decision for him.

Well then, he wouldn’t be going to the Touya salon after all.

The train, cheerfully apathetic to his troubled mind, continued on past familiar scenery, and familiar stops, on a route he’d taken probably hundreds of times. It occurred to Hikaru, watching its progression, that moving towards the part of Tokyo he lived in might not be the most intelligent of ideas when a demon had recently been present there. He reached out again, wary, in the direction of his travel….and, yeah, there actually was something, that time.

He tensed, stretching his awareness to the point where it almost hurt, though in a weird not-physical way that was hard to put to words. It was, in a vague metaphorical sense, a bit like balancing, with every extension making it harder to hold position. He could, just about, feel *something*, vague and shadowy and indistinct, but the twinge of warning that ran down his spine was more than enough to worry him. Hikaru left the train at the next stop, promptly jumping onto another which was going in basically the opposite direction, though not quite where he’d just come from. He kept alert until the shadow of the demon’s presence was well beyond his senses, and stayed on the train a while longer for good measure.
Then, somewhat reassured in his distance from the demon, he took a cautiously indirect route towards Heart of Stone.

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Hikaru spent several hours at the familiar salon, allowing himself to enjoy the comfortingly simple routine of trouncing amateurs and getting money for it. He allowed himself to ignore the persistent being-watched that gnawed on his awareness, and relaxed somewhat from the morning’s ordeal.

Except, he relaxed perhaps a little too much.

In the middle of poking at his opponent’s shoddy endgame defences, Hikaru stiffened abruptly, feeling white. White as a texture rather than as a colour, white-

Sharp! Hikaru bit back a yelp at the oddest feeling, faintly painful, like a needle-toothed nip at his heels. He glared around, sweeping out awareness in increasingly wide arcs, searching for the spirit that had decided to make a nuisance of itself for no apparent reason. Before he could locate it, though, it came to him, an odd pressure in his chest like he’d been hit across the sternum with something very solid, and it felt like warning.

Warning, the stalker spirit repeated at him, and retreated. Hikaru blinked, tension settling back into the line of his shoulders as the spirit’s message registered with him. Carefully, he gathered his fledgling sense of spiritual presence, ready to extend outwards.

“Shindou-sensei?” The clueless student in front of him prompted, confused. Hikaru waved him away, pretending to check his phone as an excuse for his inattention.

“Hang on, I think I’m forgetting something.” He lied, distractedly, flicking aimlessly through his messages as he reached out, further, further…and, there.

A trace of encroaching dark.

Fuck it. Kaminaga was actively searching him out. Probably by train – the approach felt uncomfortably fast. “Yeah, sorry, I lost track of time. I’ve really got to go.” He apologised to his student, getting to his feet. “Since I’m bailing on you, don’t worry about payment, alright?” He grabbed his bag, ignoring the man’s protests, and hightailed it out of there.

---

Hikaru spent fifteen tense minutes in a taxi, which he’d hailed haphazardly from the street. He wasn’t quite sure where to go, and had stalled by telling the cab driver to take him to one of the larger stations which, naturally, was not a direct ride from where Kaminaga would have been. His first instinct was to get out of the city – if Kaminaga was actively searching him out, it wasn’t safe. There was every chance that he’d be followed to Touya-sensei’s house, where there weren’t any protective wards, and where an early departure would be heavily questioned. And also where there were lots of people he’d prefer not to be skewered on a demon sword.

But, on the other hand, his house wards had been very effective. If he kept his wits about him, he could flee to the shrine for a hypothetical future encounter, too…

He wasn’t sure what to do.

Disgruntled-watching flickered at the edge of his awareness, and Hikaru glanced to the side. He supposed, in a taxi this size, it wouldn’t be easy for a spirit to keep its distance and keep up with him. It was probably quite close. He reached out, tentatively, and found it on the roof of the vehicle. For a
moment, the impression of it was *alive* in his mind – white flashing on the tips of pointed teeth, pointed claws – but then it skittered away, just out of range. A capricious sort of edginess followed in its wake, bristling like a full coat of fur.

As he’d suspected, there wasn’t quite enough room for it to fully escape his notice, here. On a whim, he reached out to it with intent. *What do you think?* He prodded, extending the thought through the dark space between his soul and the spirit’s. It occurred to him, a second later, how heartbreakingly familiar a sensation it was, to offer out his thoughts like that. He breathed through the clenching sensation in his gut and waited.

The spirit hung back, skittering just at the edge of the limits imposed by the taxi. Eventually, it reached back, ever so slightly. It touched very, very lightly at the edge of his soul, and his eyes widened at the feeling of it – not a demon, not aggressive, but something *other*, not-him. He felt, suddenly, very vulnerable.

*Strategic retreat*, it offered, briefly, and then it withdrew. Hikaru didn’t try to follow it.

So, the spirit thought he should…retreat. That was pretty much in line with what his impulses suggested, then. Hikaru sighed, and took out his phone. He composed three messages.

One, to Yashiro: ‘*I’m coming to Osaka after all*’.

One, to Utagawashi: ‘*Kaminaga’s following me, so I’m leaving the city. Should be back tomorrow.*’

And, finally, one to Touya: ‘*I’m not gonna make the study session tonight*’.

A while later, once he’d paid the taxi driver and been deposited outside one of Tokyo’s large intercity train hubs, he remembered the existence of his mother and sent her a message too, explaining he was leaving the city – why borrow trouble where it wasn’t needed, after all?

Hikaru went about purchasing his ticket to Osaka as quickly as was practical. His range was growing, but he was also quite certain that Kaminaga’s was larger. If the bastard *was* actively following him, as it seemed, then he needed to get out of that range as quickly as possible.

He sighed a little as he keyed his bank card for the ticket. As one might expect, buying a ticket to Osaka on the day of travel was not exactly cheap. He’d used up all of the money he’d made teaching on the taxi, too…but, well, he was still living with his mother for now, so it wasn’t as though he needed his money for much else. Escape from demons probably counted as a justified use of funds.

The tickets printed out, and he headed to wait for the train. It wasn’t due to arrive for another twelve minutes – and, seven minutes in, his nervous checks detected Kaminaga incoming from probably a different station. He didn’t *think* the approach was fast enough for him to be caught out before his train came, but even so…

Hikaru checked again and again, dread building as the demon grew closer and closer – close enough to set his instincts to screaming and flailing again. He was uncomfortably aware that the only protection he had to speak of, at present, was a charm hung around his neck.

By the time the train finally arrived, fear was building like a crescendo in his ears, his blood pounding like a drum-beat. He practically scrambled for his seat, aware that the train wouldn’t actually leave for another five minutes, god-

Closer, closer, closer – far, far too close. If Kaminaga wasn’t at the station already, he would be soon, for the love of Inari *let the train leave, now, please*—
Finally, mercifully, the train doors closed, and the train began to pull away from the station. He released his breath all at once, slumping into the seat with terrible relief. Still, though, he didn’t dare look out of the window until five minutes had passed and the demon was starting to recede from his senses – he had the odd, irrational fear that if he looked out, if he saw Kaminaga, everything would be a lot worse. Then again, maybe it wasn’t irrational, who knew? He had no idea how these things worked. Maybe seeing the demon was riskier than merely feeling it.

His train was to change in Kyoto. Even if, by some stretch of imagination, Kaminaga chose to follow him across the country, the next train heading this way wouldn’t be for another half-hour, by which time Hikaru would be sufficiently ahead that Kaminaga couldn’t reasonably guess where he’d gone. Hopefully. It seemed sensible to assume so, anyway.

Sighing, Hikaru withdrew his phone, finding several messages and two missed calls already present. He replied to Yashiro with his predicted arrival time, and ignored the rest. He was far too tired to deal with much more shit today.

Hikaru reached around, absently, to confirm the skittering edge-of-awareness feeling of white. It was still following him, then. Even on a cross-country train.

He sighed again, and put his phone away, closing his eyes. His sleep had been interrupted early, after all, and things had been thoroughly exhausting since. With the demon’s looming presence finally behind him, he allowed himself to fall asleep, and didn’t wake until he arrived.

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It felt like it had been months since his last visit, at the very least, but Hikaru stepped off of the train with the odd knowledge that it hadn’t even been a week. Just as then, his number of missed calls was climbing steadily, and he also had a number of messages he was neglecting to answer, all except for Yashiro’s. He had a brief look at the texts Utagawashi had left, which all seemed to be along the lines of ‘I want to talk to you soon’, rather than ‘I am being assailed by a demon’, so he felt safe to leave those alone for a while.

He’d been informed that, due to the inconvenience of his arrival time, he’d have to wait to be let into his host’s home. As such, Hikaru went in search of food, having eaten a very brief breakfast and absolutely nothing since. He spent the following forty minutes feeding both himself and his bill at a sushi bar, all the while honing his awareness on the spirit following him around.

It was still pretty hard to get a read on, especially now that it wasn’t in a confined space. Still, Hikaru thought it had relaxed since earlier. It was behaving more like it had in the shrine– almost taunting him as it flitted in and out of his focus.

Perhaps it was just as pleased to be out of the demon’s reach.

Finally, Hikaru received word from Yashiro, and he went to pay his tab. He remembered the area well enough to start towards Yashiro’s flat, as instructed, and was intercepted just short of arrival by a tall and gangly mass of teenager. Hikaru must have come to associate the other boy with safe havens or something, because the sight of him was bizarrely reassuring.

“Shindou, you dickhead,” His host greeted him. “It hasn’t even been a week and you’re already back, what the hell?” The words on their own might have seemed harsh, but he was unusually amiable with their delivery. He also took the opportunity to accost Hikaru by the shoulders, marching him towards the flat at a pace a bit too fast for his shorter legs.

“I missed you too much, Yashiro.” Hikaru told him, solemnly, as he pinched his way free of
captivity. The arms fell away with muffled ‘ow’. “I couldn’t stay away. I had to see your face again!” He punctuated the statement with a fist, shaken at the sky for dramatic effect.

“Uhuh.” Yashiro nodded knowingly, rubbing at his pinched bicep. “I thought it might be something like that.” He paused, and added “It’s a very fine face, after all.”

“The stresses of life in the capital city were simply too much.” Hikaru sighed, and pretended to swoon. “What could I do, except escape to the comfort of your embrace?”

Yashiro patted him on the back as he presented the fob to enter his building. “You’re here now,” He said comfortably, voice matching Hikaru’s perfectly for feigned emotion. “Everything is going to be okay.”

Ridiculously enough, the hammy over-dramatic words did actually make him feel a bit better. “My hero.” Hikaru sighed, following Yashiro indoors, and then up the stairs to his flat.

The last time he’d been here, he had spent the vast majority of his time being very ill. Evidently, a great deal of cleaning had been conducted since his departure, because there wasn’t the least smell of vomit lingering, and the futon folded in the corner seemed clean.

“Don’t throw up on my stuff this time.” Yashiro instructed, closing the door behind him.

“I don’t feel even a little bit ill.” Hikaru promised, and set his bag down by the door. Yashiro promptly commandeered it and put it down in the corner of the room bearing the coat hooks, which was apparently a far more acceptable site for a bag to live in. Hikaru blinked after him, surveying his surroundings with the building suspicion that Yashiro was even more fastidious than he’d thought.

“How long are you staying this time, then?” The other pro inquired, setting his own bag down and removing his coat.

Hikaru did the same, hanging it on one of the free hooks. “Just overnight. I’ve got a game tomorrow.” He said. “And yeah, actually, related to that – can I use your laptop? I’ve not had a chance to look up my opponent’s games.”

“Leaving it a bit late to study, aren’t you?” Yashiro sounded amused. “You’ll have to be up pretty early to get to Tokyo in good time for – when’s the game?”

“Two in the afternoon.” He answered, thankful that it wasn’t earlier. “So it’s not too bad. I’ll have to get up pretty early, but not crack-of-dawn early.”

“That’s alright, then. Yeah, feel free to use my laptop – it’s in my bag, hang on–” The taller boy knelt, messy grey hair poofing in all directions as he unzipped the backpack, withdrawing the laptop in its protective sleeve. “If you damage it, you’re paying for it.” He warned, handing it over.

“Duh.” Hikaru acknowledged. Having no desire to have to buy Yashiro a new laptop, he handled it very carefully. He looked around, and observed “You have no chairs.”

“You didn’t notice that last time?” Yashiro raised an eyebrow.

“Well, there were still boxes last week.” He defended. “And I was ill.”

“Just sit on the floor.” His host advised.

Hikaru sighed, and obeyed. Nearby, he felt the stalker spirit settle in, apparently predicting that he’d be in one place for a while. He wondered at the ethics of literally leading unknown, though probably
benign, spirits to someone’s home. Shrugging to himself, Hikaru de-sleeved the laptop and opened it up, waiting for it to load as Yashiro headed for his tiny kitchen. He paused. “What’s the password?” He asked, loudly.

Apparently, Yashiro didn’t want to give his password out, because he promptly reappeared to yank the laptop away and enter it in himself. “Here.” He passed it back.

“I’m not feeling much trust in our relationship, here.” Hikaru mused, opening the internet and finding that Yashiro, helpfully, had the Association’s webpage bookmarked. The other boy rolled his eyes at him, and returned to the kitchen.

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The next hour passed in a sort of amiable coexistence, with Yashiro eventually joining Hikaru in his inspection of tomorrow’s opponent.

“This is his best game on record, I think.” Hikaru said, scrutinising the kifu as he rummaged for a black stone. “He lost it, but his opponent was two grades higher, so…”

Yashiro nodded with interest, watching as the stones took form. “That’s nice.” He said, appreciatively, at a rather bold attack in the top right corner. It seemed risky at first glance, but it had been executed and defended very effectively. “A really well-rounded assault. But he lost?”

“Mm.” Hikaru nodded, planting the next stones down. “He got a bit sloppy about his defence in the endgame, and white got too far in. It wasn’t a big loss, but it was a loss.” He shrugged, casting an analytic eye at the other kifu. “Still, this was four months ago, and his games since then…well…”

“Not as good?”

“I’m not sure whether this one game was just, like, a shining moment of truth for him, or if he’s suddenly got something on in his life making his games crappy.” He explained, gesturing in the air with a stone in-hand. “If he plays like this tomorrow, I might be in trouble, but given his standard of play lately….”

Yashiro took the laptop from him to scan quickly through the kifu. “…I reckon you’re still better than him, even when he’s on his game.” He concluded, after some thought. “You play best against Touya, of course – your games against other people are good, but not…as good. But, that game you played against Ogata, a while ago? If you play like that, he won’t stand a chance.”

“It’s harder to play like that when the people aren’t as good.” Hikaru complained, sitting back.

“Why?” The other pro demanded. “If they’re not as good, it should be easier to thrash them.”

He considered his response for a moment. “Only worthy opponents awaken the fire in my heart.” He declared.

“You have stupidly high standards of worthiness.” Yashiro told him, dryly. “I don’t suppose I’m on the list?”

“Sometimes, you make the list.” Hikaru responded graciously, and really it wasn’t any surprise at all that his words got him immediately strong-armed into a game.

What was surprising was how, not long into the opening hands, a sensation like curiosity brushed against his awareness, the feeling of it unfolding like a wary animal peeking out from behind cover. The presence edged ever-so-slightly closer.
The spirit was interested in their game, huh? Well, it would hardly be the first time he played for an invisible audience. Hikaru ignored the pang of memory and settled into the game, attempting not to let the spirit’s attention distract him.

It was kind of difficult, though. He was sensitive enough by this point that merely being watched was enough to set off his senses, but here the spirit was actively observing, the weight of focus and occasional quicksilver flashes of interest spearing their way into his mind. Nonetheless, he did his best to ignore it, even when at one point a flicker of earnest delight sent him profoundly off-guard, the feeling of the second-hand enjoyment quite reminiscent of Sai.

He wondered if this spirit wanted to play Go, too. The thought was a painful one.

In any case, Hikaru’s distraction made the game a bit closer than he’d prefer, but he did win in the end, scraping by on a three-and-a-half point victory. The spirit’s interest continued throughout the discussion, finally dissipating when Yashiro hauled Hikaru to the kitchen to start on dinner.

“Cut these.” Yashiro ordered, setting a cutting board, a knife, and three spring onions in front of him. “And then these.” A small heap of other vegetables joined the onions on the counter.

 “…Yeah, sure.” Hikaru said, agreeably, and set to work. “What are we making?” He wasn’t especially hungry, having eaten fairly recently, but…well. Under most circumstances, Hikaru was not a person who turned down food.

“Vegetable stir-fry.” Yashiro shrugged, getting to work on what looked like fresh ginger, for god’s sake. That was almost absurdly luxurious for a casual dinner made by sixteen-year-olds. “It’s cheap and easy.”

“You are weirdly self-sufficient. You know, for someone who’s been living alone for a grand total of three weeks.” He pointed out, putting the onion-ends aside. “Waya lives on a diet of parent-leftovers and cup ramen.” Isumi was a bit better, but he was also an adult, and therefore didn’t count.

“It’s more like four weeks.” His host corrected, looking very cheerful at the assertion.

“And Waya has been living alone for over a year and still doesn’t know how to cook.”

“Well, my parents raised me differently.” Yashiro claimed, very serenely, as he prepared the rice cooker for its sworn duty.

Hikaru rolled his eyes, but obligingly went along with the instructions of the one person present who knew how to cook, and watched as a distinctly palatable-looking dinner took form. Yashiro used a store-bought teriyaki sauce rather than making his own, which sort of relieved him. If he’d been making his own sauces at the age of sixteen, not even a month after leaving home, Hikaru might be concerned about losing the fellow pro to the cooking industry.

Dinner was served in plastic bowls, and eaten with what looked like reused single-use chopsticks. It was, however, very tasty. “This, Yashiro.” Hikaru declared, plunging the chopsticks into the rice, “more than makes up for the lack of chairs. Well done.”

“I’m so glad I have your approval.” The tall boy deadpanned, shovelling his food down like a ravenous beast.

Hikaru noticed, throughout the meal, that the mystery spirit seemed unusually focused on them, though it was keeping carefully distant, so he couldn’t pick up any particular emotion from it. Still…he observed his rice, and wondered.
It was half-way through doing the washing up that the evening went awry.

Hikaru’s phone, which had remained unexpectedly quiescent for most of the day, set itself to buzzing in his pocket. He fumbled with the bowl he was drying, hastily wiping it off and putting it down so that he could check the screen.

Utagawashi, the screen read. He sighed.

“Phone call?” Yashiro inquired, dunking the wok into the water.

“…Yeah.” Hikaru considered the vibrating phone in his hand. He could ignore this call, too, but… “I’m gonna answer it.” He decided, heading out of the kitchen.

“Don’t think this gets you out of doing the drying!” The boy called after him. Hikaru shut the kitchen door behind him and went to the opposite side of the room in search of somewhere discreet to answer the call. After a second of thought, he simply settled where he was. He didn’t feel comfortable invading Yashiro’s loft for the purpose, and, well, the tap was still going in the kitchen, so it should be alright.

Hikaru leaned against the wall in the corner, and accepted the call, holding the phone to his ear. “Hey, Utagawashi.” He greeted. “Is everything alright?”

“I think that’s my question.” The priest sounded profoundly exasperated. “Shindou-kun, you didn’t even mention whether or not you’d managed to leave the city successfully.”

“Oh, right.” That was true, wasn’t it. “Yeah, well, I did. Obviously. It was a close one – he followed me to the station and everything, my train just about left in time – but I’m at my friend’s place now, so it’s fine.”

“…I think we have very different definitions of ‘fine’.”

“I’m alive and not bleeding.” Hikaru stated, reasonably. “That’s a decent start.”

“I suppose so.” Utagawashi sighed. “At any rate, I’m glad to hear you’re alright, but that wasn’t the primary reason I called.”

“Yeah?”

“I have good news and bad news.” The kannushi claimed, somewhat ominously.

He exhaled. “Go on.”

“The good news is that Kaminaga hasn’t been back to bother me today. Also, I spoke to Arakawa-san, and he agreed to come sooner.”

Hikaru straightened, the flash of relief waking him up from post-meal drowsiness. “Thank fuck. When is he coming?” Soon, finally, all of this shit would be over. Holy shit was he looking forward to it all being done.

Except, then, there was an uncomfortably long pause. “...And that’s the bad news.” Utagawashi admitted, eventually. He spaced out his words, edgily, in a way that did not bode well in the least. “He…only moved the timetable up by a week.”

A…week. Out of three. For a moment, he could hardly believe what he was hearing. Then:
“What?!” His voice sounded too-loud, but that didn’t seem important in the face of – of this.

He could practically hear the wince over the line. “November the second, he said.” The priest’s tone was meekly apologetic. “So…twelve days.” Hikaru couldn’t quite find words for the following seconds. Utagawashi took the opportunity to add “Eleven days, by tomorrow.” as if that made things any better.

He found his voice. “That’s bullshit!” Hikaru exclaimed, bristling with indignation.

“Shindou-kun-“

“Didn’t you tell him what happened?” He demanded, leaving the wall to pace angrily across the room.

“I did, but-“

“Then he knows how bad things are.” Hikaru snarled, his free hand instinctively locating the fan in his pocket for comfort. It soothed him a little, but not nearly enough. “I was stalked around an entire city today, for fuck’s sake! And he’s…twelve days?!?”

Utagawashi made an uncertain, nervous noise before trying to say “Shindou-kun, if you think about it from his point of view-“

Hikaru interrupted, fingers trembling around his fan. “I don’t want to think about it from his point of view!” He bit out, angry and worried and afraid. “He’s obviously an idiot!”

“…Shindou-kun-“ The voice was a little firmer this time, but he didn’t care to listen.

“I could have died!” Hikaru reminded the priest, at volume. “You could have died! We could literally have been murdered this morning! And he wants to wait? What if we don’t have that long?”

“There’s not a great deal we can do about it, Shindou-kun.” Utagawashi snapped back, having apparently located his spine sometime within the last few seconds. “I agree, it’s foolhardy in the extreme to have such confidence in one man, even an old friend…but if he doesn’t believe me about the urgency of this, what do you expect me to do?”

Hikaru opened his mouth to retort, but….stopped. Closed it. He exhaled, indignation leaking out of him like air from a popped balloon, and slumped against the nearest wall. “I don’t know.” He said, miserably. “Isn’t there someone else we could call?”

“There aren’t that many active exorcists in Japan, Shindou-kun.” The man informed him, his own ire leeching away. He just sounded weary, now. “And I’m not in contact with most of them, even so.”

Hikaru stared at the fan in his hand. “That’s shit.”

“That’s life.” Utagawashi responded, with finality.

“What can we do, then? Is he going to keep coming back?” He questioned, fiddling with his fan distractedly. “Like, do I need to take a leave of absence to hide away for twelve days, or what?”

There was a thoughtful pause. “If something like today happens again, yes, I think that would be a good idea.” Utagawashi decided, after he’d considered it. “Twelve days isn’t too long to be in hiding. Otherwise, we can stall.”
Hikaru blinked. “How do we do that?” He was understandably dubious about their prospects of stalling a sword-wielding madman.

“...Best I can think of is to inundate him with messages. Mention things the demon might be making him overlook, like his actions today, and proper shrine maintenance.”

“...And that will help?”

“He’s not fully possessed yet. The demon’s mind tricks will become less effective the more they’re repeated.” The priest explained. “All we need to do is buy time. If we can prompt even a single moment of clarity where, for example, Kaminaga might put on another ofuda....” He trailed off leadingly.

“Well, you’d know better than me.” Hikaru conceded, feeling suddenly very tired again. “If you think spamming him with messages is the way to go, fine.”

“Well, it's the best thing I can think of which doesn’t just involve taking a two-week holiday.” Utagawashi admitted. “At any rate, we can talk more about this later, provided you get back without issues.” ‘Get back without issues’ seemed to be his politic way of saying ‘if you don’t get ambushed on the way back’.

“I don’t have much on tomorrow, so I could come by in sort of late afternoon.” He offered. “That should do nicely.” The man acknowledged. “Please let me know if anything happens.”

Hikaru nodded, slightly. “You too.”

“Of course. I’ll see you tomorrow.” Never one to draw out a call without need, Utagawashi hung up.

Hikaru sighed, lowering the phone from his ear. He allowed his head to fall back against the wall, taking several moments to just feel weary. Tired, and thoroughly fed-up.

The sound of a throat clearing broke quite neatly through his moment of rest.

A slow sort of dread settling in his stomach, Hikaru straightened up, noticing three things as he did: First, the kitchen tap was still running.

Second, that meant very little, because the kitchen door was open.

Third, Yashiro had been shamelessly eavesdropping from said door for who-knows how long.

“...Um.” Hikaru said, eloquently.

“For the record,” Yashiro spoke, conversationally. “My willingness to respect your privacy ended around when you said ‘we could have been murdered this morning’.”

“Um,” He replied, more insistently, in a failed attempt to make his words work.

“However, no amount of awkward conversation gets you out of doing the dishes.” The other boy went on. “So you go do that, and you can also use the time to think about how exactly you’re going to explain this one.”

“...Very generous of you.” Hikaru said, weakly, and ducked past him to do precisely that.
Unfortunately, a few short minutes weren’t quite enough time to compose bullshit of that proportion, especially when he wasn’t sure how much Yashiro had heard. As such, when he was sat down in the middle of the floor with an unasked-for cup of tea in hand, he didn’t have a single good explanation which wasn’t also uncomfortably close to the truth.

To stall for time, he inspected the tea. Yashiro sat down opposite him with his own shitty little cup. “…Why green tea?” He asked, helplessly.

“Thought it might help your delicate nerves.” The boy explained, settling cross-legged on the floor. “Now, talk.”

Hikaru stared at the cup in his hands, and the swirling steam rising from it. “…I joined a local live action roleplaying group.” He tried, because he had to make at least one attempt at denying everything, no matter how pathetic. “Some of us are getting a bit too into the characters.”

Yashiro didn’t even do him the favour of considering it. “Nope.” He denied, and waited.

“…The priest at my local shrine is a bit crazy, and I’ve been humouring his delusions.” Hikaru moved on, injecting just a little bit of truth in. “He thinks there’s a bloodthirsty samurai stalking him and I’m trying to get him some psychiatric help. Through lies and deception.”

His host’s head tilted slightly to the side, a mop of grey hair following the movement. “Bit closer, but nope.” He decreed. And…

Hikaru gave up, slumping. What he said next was actually almost the truth. “…It’s the priest’s friend who’s delusional.” He sighed, removing a hand from the teacup to rub at his face. “He’s having a psychotic break and won’t listen to us about it. We’ve called in one of his old friends to try to sort him out, but in the meantime he’s sort of been stalking us threateningly.” He chose not to mention that he was the primary focus of the stalking.

Yashiro stared at him for several long moments as he digested the words. “That…sounds truer.” He mused, leaning forwards. “So, if that’s the case, why not call the police on him?”

Ugh, how to answer that one? “He’s not actually a bad guy, he just needs his meds. Getting him arrested is kind of a bit much.” He claimed, and that was certainly true. “He’s kind of an asshole, but he doesn’t deserve that.” Also true. Being consumed by a demonic menace did not seem like a pleasant fate.

“You thought you could have died today.” Yashiro reminded him, very sensibly.

Hikaru scowled. “If he goes to jail, he’ll just go crazier.” He claimed, and that was certainly true. “He’s kind of an asshole, but he doesn’t deserve that.” Also true. Being consumed by a demonic menace did not seem like a pleasant fate.

The other pro sat back. “…What’s the guy’s name?” He asked unexpectedly.

He eyed him, wary. “Why?”

“I’m trying to catch you out on details.” Yashiro explained.

Of course he was. Yashiro was an oddly forthright interrogator. “I’ll tell you if you promise not to call the cops on him.” Hikaru bartered, taking a sip of his tea for the hell of it.
There was another thoughtful pause. “Conditional on you telling me every day how it’s all going.” He countered. “If you don’t keep in touch I tell the police what you’ve told me. And that friend of yours, Akari.” …Ack. If Akari heard about any of this, he’d never hear the end of it.

Hikaru glared, shoulders hunching. “…Only for the next twelve days, until his friend arrives.” He argued. “It won’t matter after that.”

“Done.” Yashiro nodded. “The name?”

“…Kaminaga, uh, Keiji, I think?” He thought it was Keiji, but he wasn’t exactly using the guy’s given name, so.

His interrogator hummed. “The priest’s name?”

“Utagawashi.” Hikaru sighed. “Kichirou. Is this important?”

“Might be.” Yashiro responded airily. “Is ‘Kaminaga’ the reason you came here last week?”

“….Yeah.”

“And you’re genuinely worried he’ll murder you.”

“Yes.” Hikaru said, biting off the word like a curse. He considered, briefly, the merits of leaving to find a hotel and escape the questioning, but concluded that Yashiro could just contact Akari, so that was no good.

Yashiro sat back, and for a wonder, it looked like he’d decided on something. “Right,” He said, tone of voice lending credence to that observation. “You’re still not telling me the truth.”

Hikaru stared at him, outraged at the perfectly true statement, and opened his mouth to retort, probably in a very uncomplimentary fashion-

“Not the whole truth, anyway.” Yashiro followed up, cutting off the exclamation before it began. “I think you’ve told enough, though. So if you give me that priest guy’s number, and check in every day, I won’t tell anyone about all this.”

He was quiet for a few seconds as he thought. “Not even the police?” He prompted, eventually.

“Not even the police.” Yashiro promised. “Also, weren’t you talking with that guy about hiding until it’s over? Why not just do that to begin with?”

“Kaminaga doesn’t live in Tokyo.” Hikaru sighed, extremely annoyed with the world at large. “Utagawashi thinks it might be safe to stall. And I don’t want to have to drop out of the Kisei league.”

It probably wasn’t a surprise that Yashiro looked very understanding at that. Their obsession with Go could at times make them do crazy things. “If you get stalked again, just come here and hide for a while.” He advised. “Ouza preliminaries start December, so you could always enter those. Kisei isn’t worth dying for.”

“I don’t actually want to die, Yashiro.” Hikaru informed him, tiredly. “If he shows up again, I’ll come back here.”

“Good.” Yashiro nodded.

And that, apparently, was that.
Hikaru, as agreed, handed over Utagawashi’s number, and then proceeded to spend the rest of the evening sulking. He commandeered Yashiro’s laptop and avoided all but the bare minimum of social interaction, feeling residually offended at having been pinned down and made to agree to things. There was also the fact that he had, more or less, sort of told the truth on a significant matter he’d been trying to hide. This displeased him.

Also, once he’d calmed down enough to notice, it swiftly became apparent that the spirit had been watching the interrogation and quite evidently found it hilarious. Every now and then, bursts of amusement erupted like barely-suppressed giggles from an empty corner of the flat, and it was all really very humiliating and he was not at all happy with the situation.

So he sulked, all the while Yashiro and Utagawashi apparently conferred by text. He remained in his corner, content to nurse his bruised ego while pretending to study Go.

Later, Yashiro came by and asked “Did you want to play another game, or are you still ignoring me?”

Hikaru glared at him half-heartedly. “…I’m not sure.” He said in the direction of the keyboard, begrudgingly. He wanted to hold onto his irrational irritation at the circumstances, but he was also aware that a game would probably cheer him up. But on the other hand, irritation.

The author of his sorrows nodded at him understandingly. “Well, until you decide, I’ll be at the Goban.” He said, innocently. “Just…you know. Replaying a game. From the Honinbou League.”

Hikaru twitched. He focused fiercely on the laptop screen to hide it.

There came the sound of shitty glass stones moving in their boxes. Then, worse, there was the sound of a stone on a board. “I’m glad I managed to get this kifu from the institute today,” Yashiro said loudly. “I do always like to replay Ogata-sensei’s games.”

Hikaru did not react. He didn’t.

“Especially when he plays against Touya.” The boy finished, with immense satisfaction, and for a moment Hikaru thought he was talking about the former Meijin, except obviously not because he was retired and Yashiro would have called him Touya-sensei anyway, except that meant that Touya had had his Honinbou league game against Ogata and hadn’t told him about it-

“Give me that kifu,” Hikaru demanded, tumbling across the room as though propelled by a tremendous wave. “Oh my god that bastard I can’t believe he didn’t tell me about this.” He added, as an afterthought, while groping madly for the piece of paper in Yashiro’s hand. He couldn’t even bring himself to feel annoyed at how easily he’d been played, because…because Touya, that complete dickface.

Yashiro looked tremendously pleased with himself, but Hikaru really didn’t care. Only the kifu mattered. He snatched it up and let his eyes run over it, quickly finding the most important part-

He sat back, a sort of gleeful and vindictive relief washing over him. “He lost.” Hikaru announced, finding that knowledge to be of immense comfort to him. “That’s the second time he’s been kicked out of the Honinbou league by Ogata, isn’t it?” That detail practically sang to him, dancing in his mind in a litany of ha he lost he lost he’s not getting Honinbou before me!

“Seems that way.” His host agreed, and offered him a stone bowl. “Let’s replay it.”
Hikaru nodded, already fiercely intent on the kifu paper, and cleared away the existing stones to begin it again. At the same time, in an anonymous corner of the room, a passive sense of amusement gave way to intrigue. Interest, expressed the spirit, and Hikaru felt it slinking closer.

So, it was at least sort of interested in Go, if this was the second time it had decided to observe a game. Hikaru eyed the space where it should be, vision straining, and thought he could see the outline of something very, very white.

“So, the Honinbou League, incidentally the one I want to win like absolute burning,” Hikaru announced to the room at large, much to Yashiro’s confusion, “Has its main league matches running from October to April. Whoever wins the league tournament challenges the title holder. A guy I know recently kicked my rival out of that tournament and I’m pretty happy about it.”

Yashiro eyed him much as he’d just been eyeing the spirit-occupied space. “…That’s nice.” He said, warily.

It was worth the weird looks though, because the spirit was paying attention. Interest-in-this prodded at him insistently, and he grinned. His bad mood had evaporated marvellously.

“So, Touya had black.” Hikaru confirmed aloud, and switched stone pots with Yashiro. “You play the stones for him, alright?”

The other pro scrutinised him for a moment. “You just want to replay the game from the winner’s side.” He deduced, a second later.

“Pretty much.” Hikaru agreed shamelessly, and waited for the first stone to be placed. Once it was in place, he followed it up with white’s answer, clicking it decisively to the board. “Right then, so what next…”

He peered at the kifu paper, and steadily, the game took shape. If he narrated the meaning and reasoning behind certain moves more than he usually would have, or went into more detail in their discussion than typical…well, Yashiro was hardly going to figure out why.

The spirit, at least, seemed to appreciate it. So that was nice.

Chapter End Notes

Preliminary note: Paper Cranes has been published on ffnet. If you’ve enjoyed this story, I would appreciate it if you could head there to bestow whatever attention on it you feel like. With luck, I should pick up some new readers who don’t leave that website in search of reads. Here is the link: https://www.fanfiction.net/s/12562525/1/Paper-Cranes

Chapter notes: I really enjoyed writing sulky Hikaru at the end there. Some of the most fun I’ve had writing this since maybe the Utagawashi introduction chapters, or the sandan celebration party.

Reader attention continues to astound me. You know that by this point Paper Cranes has 50+% more bookmarks than the nearest competitor? It’s mad. And it’s a rare day when I don’t get at least one kudos on the story. Thanks, all!

03/06/18 – minor edits
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Hikaru makes an important discovery.

Chapter Notes

Today, 10th August 2017, is the one-year anniversary of Paper Cranes being introduced to the internet. A year ago, its first chapter was published to tumblr as part of Esama's random hikago event. To commemorate it, chapter 17 (posted on tumblr) is of extended length, coming in at just over 11k.

Thanks to everyone who has supported the story over this past year. You've made it a wonderful writing experience and I couldn't be more grateful. Have a good day, all.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

What with having both a journey and a game the following day, Hikaru’s second visit to Yashiro’s residence provided no more opportunity for a party than the first. Technically, they could get drunk and stay up most of the night, but that would be a bad idea for all sorts of reasons.

“Next time.” Yashiro told him, consolingly, after Hikaru had complained about the situation a little. Just a little. “Once your mad samurai troubles are over you can come and celebrate. We can make it a joint thing – housewarming and safety from murder.”

Hikaru produced a rude noise while he checked his phone. “That’s assuming that ‘next time’ won’t be me fleeing Tokyo in terror again.” He pointed out, eyeing the messages on the screen. Touya had become quite salty with him, if the texts were any indication, and seemed likely to be belligerent and demanding the next time they met. That was to be expected, given his behaviour that morning, on top of how he’d suddenly ditched the study session. Again.

“Well, if you have to come hide here, we can just have the housewarming. It’ll be a good distraction.”

“I could use distraction now.” Hikaru said, plaintively, which neatly summed up his disappointment in the lack of imminent partying opportunities.

“Pray to the kami or something. That seems to be a thing you do now.” Yashiro suggested, closing the laptop they’d been examining the other Honinbou games on.

Hikaru seriously considered it. He thought of how long it had been since he’d had a Sai-session, and his shoulders hunched a little. “I don’t have any of my things with me.” He admitted, a little depressed about it. He could have used a proper talking-stuff-out, but… “Tomorrow, I guess, if I have time.” He had his fan, but no incense, which would be a bit...lacking. And besides, he still needed to talk to Utagawashi about the importance of ofuda. He could maybe do that when they met up. He felt a brief, heady rush of need for a quiet room steeped in the scent of wisteria.
“Well, whatever you like.” His host allowed, feet turning away as he stood up. “I’m going to get ready for bed now. Do you need any help with your futon?”

“I know how to put out a damn futon, Yashiro.” Hikaru contemplated his phone, wondering if he should taunt Touya for his loss over text or wait for the next time they were in person. It would be more effective in person, wouldn’t it? Better to wait.

Yashiro rolled his shoulders before stretching a little, shaking out the various cricks he’d apparently developed from sitting still for too long. “I’ll leave you to it, then.” He said, plugging the laptop into the charger at the wall before heading for the bathroom.

Hikaru waited until the door was closed to eye the empty space where he thought the spirit was sitting. It had become somewhat less flighty throughout the impromptu Go lecture, but it still seemed to prefer going undetected, ducking out of the way at any hint of a reach on his part. Still…he closed his eyes briefly, and attuned himself to the not-quite-itch of presence, the whisper of its direction becoming easier to discern every time. He oriented himself towards it and said “I guess you’re sticking around overnight, then?”

There was no response except a sort of flick of acknowledgement, like the twitch of ears or tip of a tail. Even so, the imprint it left on his senses…settled, somewhat. As though it were getting comfortable, with no intention of leaving.

“It’s not going to be all that interesting, you know. I’ll be sleeping the whole night.” He elaborated, but there was no response to that either. He waited a few seconds before shrugging. “Well, however you want to spend your time, I guess.”

With that, Hikaru turned and set to work setting out the futon.

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The next morning, Hikaru was obligated to spend five minutes at the train platform being blackmailed into compliance by his friend before he was allowed to leave. This was especially galling given that it was raining and the rain was freezing. Hikaru glared at the sky while Yashiro harangued him, and took an icy drop of sky water in his eye for his troubles. He cringed and wiped at the eye, blinking rapidly.

“Remember that I have your neighbour’s number.” Yashiro said intently, looking half aloof and half worried as he dispensed threats. The rain was dripping onto his face off of his hair spikes, but this didn’t appear to bother him, and he hadn’t laughed at Hikaru getting weather in his eye either. “I have no problem with telling her everything you’ve told me if you don’t keep me updated. And I’m sure she can tell all sorts of inconvenient people, too. She seems like the sort of person who knows how to deal with your bullshit.”

This was, sure enough, quite accurate. Hikaru grimaced at him. “A text a day.” He acknowledged, begrudgingly, and shoved the other boy out of his way. “If you’re done threatening me, I’ve got a train to catch.”

“Don’t get messily slaughtered!” Yashiro called after him as he headed for the train doors, drawing some alarmed glances from nearby commuters. “Death is terrible for your Go!”

Hikaru considered that as he hauled himself on board, and eventually shook his head a little. Ah, Yashiro, he thought to himself as he shook water from his coat, taking it off and hooking it on an armrest. How wrong you are. Sai, after all, had developed his Go considerably after death. But…then again, Hikaru was not at all certain he’d even be capable of leaving a ghost. What if you needed
an intact soul for that? He wasn’t precisely keen to test it, that was for certain.

He spent the first leg of the journey napping. As he was not a particularly skilled train-sleeper when not completely exhausted, this didn’t last nearly long enough, and after he’d woken from fitful slumber enough times he rubbed grit from his eyes and practiced spirit-finding to pass the time.

Unsurprisingly, the mystery spirit had accompanied him onto the train, and for the most part kept still unless he was reaching too tangibly in its direction. Hikaru thought he had gained considerable skill in detecting it in the past day, with the reaching itself feeling far more steady and his overall sensitivity greatly ameliorated. For possibly the hundredth time, Hikaru wished he had a trustworthy spiritual person to consult about his rate of growth. He thought that he was probably progressing faster than typical, but he had no way to confirm that guess.

Once he started drawing in closer to Tokyo, Hikaru abandoned his efforts at sensing the apparently non-hostile spirit and started straining himself to feel for the traces of demonic menace. Five minutes from arrival, he was quite sure that he didn’t have a nasty surprise waiting for him at the station, and ten minutes after that he was relatively secure in the lack of demons in the surrounding area. He’d arrived with an hour and a bit to spare before his match, so he headed for the Institute and waited out some of the time having lunch in a nearby coffee shop.

The match was…tricky. It was evident that this opponent, at least, had studied Hikaru’s kifu and knew not to take apparent mistakes at face value. He didn’t fall for the obvious traps or the subtle traps, manifesting exactly the finesse that his one most impressive game on record had hinted at. Despite that, Yashiro had been right – skilled as the man was, he hadn’t improved enough since that game, and Hikaru…well, Hikaru never stopped improving. Still, it had been a very absorbing game, and when Hikaru went to record his win he turned the kanji of his opponent’s name over thoughtfully in his mind. Sakada Haru, hm? He’d have to remember that one.

He sent a text Utagawashi’s way as he left the Institute, declaring his intention to stop home before heading shrinewards. The spirit trailed behind him as he headed back into the intricate network of trains that he knew so well, and Hikaru wondered what it had thought of his game. It had kept its attention somewhat quieter for its duration, but he wasn’t sure if that was a sign of lesser interest or simply of courtesy. The flashes of interest could be quite intrusive, after all, and maybe the spirit had recognised the potential inconvenience of that?

Well, at any rate, it hardly mattered.

Hikaru kept his senses up for any sign of Kaminaga in the vicinity of his home, but it seemed entirely clear. What was interesting though was that he could feel his house at a fairly significant distance today, something he’d not noticed the day before. Were the wards stronger, somehow? He groped at them with interest as he passed under their threshold, just beyond the front door, and thought that there didn’t seem to be much change. Was he just that much more sensitive now, then?

Even more interesting, the house-wards welcomed the spirit in like an old friend. He couldn’t see it, but its location was obvious enough as the light-cocoon rippled around it, and Hikaru paused to hold the door open, even though it could probably pass through the thing without issue. It only seemed polite, after all.

Apparently making its own effort at politeness, the spirit offered a sort of thankful movement in front of him, its presence suddenly…noticeable. Just for a second. But very noticeable. It proceeded past him soon after, and Hikaru felt it slip by with the sudden knowledge that it was quite a bit bigger than he’d thought. Like, very-big-dog sort of size, maybe. And strong. He supposed he should be thankful that it seemed friendly.
Hikaru put his overnight things away, giving his kamidana a longing glance, and vaguely considered the idea of offering his invisible houseguest some rice. It had been at an Inari shrine, right? It should like rice. He was debating it when his phone buzzed and reminded him that he was expected at the shrine, which rather deflated those plans. If the spirit was still around later, he decided, he would offer it rice.

He sent off confirmation of his visit to Utagawashi and then left the house again, feeling oddly bereft as he left the home’s protective light.

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The sky in Tokyo was a sullen grey that cast a rather depressing gloom on the surroundings. However, it wasn’t pouring frigid water down his neck, so Hikaru was alright with that. The comparable dimness of the daylight only made the spirit-lights more distinct, though, and it was strange to experience.

Behind him, his house was like a beacon, and there were two more ahead. It took only minimal reaching to confirm their locations as Utagawashi’s residence and Utagawashi’s shrine, both of which were yet at least fifteen minutes distant. It was a little bemusing to think that, only yesterday, he had not possessed that sort of range.

He reached out to inspect the two sites as he walked, which turned out to be distracting enough that on two occasions he nearly collided with a lamppost and on another he tripped over a drink can that someone had left on the floor. *Amusement* flickered at him from a different direction each time, the spirit apparently enjoying his clumsiness, but he was getting better at ignoring that.

As he drew nearer to the shrine, Hikaru became quite sure that the ofuda wards on both locations were brighter and stronger-feeling than those on his own house, which was interesting. It made sense that they would take better on a shrine, but what about Utagawashi’s apartment? Was it because he was a priest? Or maybe because he prayed more piously? Or both, even?

Once the torii was in sight, the shrine’s wards had become bright enough that it was actually somewhat uncomfortable. Hikaru squinted in reflex, but that didn’t help at all because he wasn’t actually seeing it with his eyes, and the incandescence bloomed around him like an incipient headache as he passed beneath the red archway.

Something strange washed over him, then; something that wasn’t the wards, something that was probably the same weirdness he’d felt about the shrine before. He stood still for a few seconds, trying to pinpoint where the feeling was coming from, but it sort of seemed to be everywhere, and yet too subtle to actually put words to. He grimaced at the false-brightness of the wards around him, and noticed with interest that they greeted his stalker spirit as amiably as his own had. They also made it much easier to ‘spot’ the spirit, what with how they spun around it as it moved.

Quite pointedly, the spirit moved ahead of him and sat beside the cleaning station. Hikaru abruptly remembered that shrine etiquette was a thing, and also that it was a thing that he was trying to do now.

“Oh, right.” He mumbled, and shuffled over to cleanse his hands properly.

He felt Utagawashi approaching, easily, without even having to look in the right direction. It was weird. “How miraculous.” The priest said instead of a greeting, coming to stand a short distance from him. The robes were uncomfortably familiar in his periphery, even if the feeling of the presence was
all wrong. “You’ve somehow managed to learn how to behave at a shrine.”

Hikaru shook droplets of water from his fingers and straightened, rolling his eyes. “You thought I wouldn’t, considering everything?” He asked, eyes running over the priest, narrowing slightly. He was much easier to detect than he had been, yes, but there was also…something about it.

“You managed to frequent shrines for months without learning it.” He was reminded. “I think I can be forgiven for a lack of optimism.”

Hikaru didn’t comment, trying to focus on the weird thing on Utagawashi. It felt nothing like the demon, which was a small mercy, and it was very slight, but there was something there that…didn’t belong, maybe?

The priest shifted uncomfortably as the silence stretched. “What are you looking at, Shindou-kun?” He asked, voice acquiring an edge of wariness. Hikaru shushed him, distracted.

“There’s a thing.” He muttered, fingers twitching with the desire to reach out and investigate properly. It was so subtle, like a thread of fabric just slightly the wrong colour for the material around it. What the hell was he sensing? The wound, maybe? “I can feel a thing on you. Something not-you. Not the demon,” he added, when the man started to look very alarmed. “It’s…old? And really small. I think it might be your scar.”

Utagawashi eyed him, the wariness giving way to a reluctant interest. “Does that mean you can feel the difference between it and me?” He asked, after a moment. “Being able to detect normal human souls is meant to be a lot harder than detecting wounds.”

“Maybe?” Hikaru hummed thoughtfully. “I was starting to be able to sense you before, but I think that was sort of you and the scar squashed in together. But now…” He paused, had a thought, and then reached out and poked. Except, spiritually.

Utagawashi squeaked, and flinched away. “What was that?!?” He fluttered a little as he said it, voice gone high-pitched. Hikaru snickered at him, and then did it again, getting him right on the weird-thing. Utagawashi squirmed, his face contorting into a profoundly baffled grimace. “Don’t do that.” He complained, edging away from Hikaru as though tiny amounts of physical distance would ward him off.

Hikaru did back off, though. “I poked you.” He explained, with interest. “In the soul. I didn’t know I could do that.” But, then again, it hadn’t felt that different from reaching out to Sai, when Sai had still been sharing soul-space with him. Or even reaching out to the recent stalker spirit. And, on that note…

He shifted awareness to where the wards were behaving weirdly, and surely enough, found the spirit. It radiated amusement, briefly, before it moved away. As before, its presence within the wards made it exceptionally easy to track, so its capacity for stealth was rather ruined.

“I wasn’t aware that was possible, either.” Utagawashi stated, eyeing him. “You’ve grown. Again.”

“That’s mostly because I’ve had this spirit following me around since yesterday.” Hikaru claimed, watching the ripples in the wards. He blinked. He looked closely at the space behind Utagawashi, and then reached out, swiftly. He found something there that was white and fluffy and quite disgruntled at his sudden investigation of it – it sort of yelped at him, and twisted away with an impression of bristled fur. He watched it go with considerable interest, noting that it was both weaker than his one and also not nearly as good at hiding. “I think you’ve got one, too.” He added, after a moment to follow its presence. It moved around to hide behind his stalker, which did actually make it
“….And this didn’t seem like something worth mentioning, yesterday?” The priest seemed somewhat disturbed by the knowledge, and Hikaru waved a hand at him dismissively. He didn’t think they were worth worrying about.

“I’m pretty sure they’re fine.” He said, watching how the wards interacted with the spirits and how the spirits interacted with each other. He reached out again, but his stalker reached back and sort of lightly slapped him away. It wasn’t at all a violent gesture, more of a chiding stop that kind of thing. “The wards like them. And so do the shrines.” He paused, and added “I think they’re foxes.”

Utagawashi visibly brightened at the words, following Hikaru’s gaze to empty space with eager fascination. “Really,” He said, delighted, and actually clapped his hands together. “Foxes? That’s wonderful. Have you spoken with them?”

“Mine’s a sneaky bastard.” Hikaru explained cheerfully, ignoring the outraged sound that Utagawashi produced at the disrespect. The spirit didn’t seem to mind, though – amusement flickered from its direction like the heat-shimmer around a flame. Amusement seemed to be its most common emotion. “So not really. It warned me when Kaminaga was getting close, yesterday, and I’ve felt some stuff from it, but it likes hiding.”

“They must have been sent by Inari-sama.” The man decided happily, which seemed like sort of a premature conclusion to Hikaru, but also fairly likely. “Perhaps they’re here to protect us?” He seemed so pleased, so genuinely delighted, that Hikaru decided not to be a pessimist about things and just nodded agreeably.

“That would be nice.” He mused, feeling quite pleased about the idea himself. It was, along with the wards, a fairly concrete sign that Inari was looking out for them, which was…comforting. Who’d have thought he’d ever experience divine intervention in his lifetime, indirect or not? What a weird world he’d found himself in.

And then: “We must make them offerings.” Utagawashi declared, and the probably-foxes definitely seemed interested in that. Their presences perked up, causing ripples in the ward-light around them. Hikaru thought he could almost ‘see’ the head of the less-sneaky one, poking out from behind the first with perked ears. It was more of a shape of spiritual presence than something he could actually see, but it was still a lot closer to seeing a spirit than he’d managed since Sai.

Hikaru observed their reaction with amusement. “Yeah, why not.” He agreed, looking at the statue where he’d left an offering before. “Do you have anything, or do I need to go get some stuff?”

Utagawashi beamed. It made him look significantly younger. Like…not much older than Isumi. That level of ‘younger’. “I have my lunch.” He explained, and Hikaru had never heard someone sound so excited about sacrificing their food before. “It’ll do until I can get something better later.” He turned very quickly, his robes following the motion with a brisk swish, and Hikaru watched in bemusement as the priest practically flounced into the shrine building.

“I think you have a fan.” Hikaru said to the two spirits. Utagawashi’s one didn’t make any sort of communicative gesture, still lurking in the other’s shadow, but Hikaru’s…preened, a little. It was hard to describe. The amusement shifted to a flickering smug-pleased sort of feeling that was expressed like a puffing-out of fur.

The priest returned shortly with a plastic bento box, of all things. Hikaru looked at it with bemusement as Utagawashi transferred rice and chunks of fried tofu onto offering plates. It was a segmented bento box, with all different things in it, lovingly laid out and arranged. It was like
something your mother would pack for you to try to out-do all of the other kids’ parents, right down to the meticulous placement of decorative vegetables. Honestly, this guy. He clearly had far too little to do in his spare time. And it was like, late afternoon. Why hadn’t he eaten it yet?

The upside of the quaint and excessive lunch was that Utagawashi would probably have some left for himself afterwards, since he was only dishing out a portion of it. The foxes seemed very pleased with what he was providing, though, so apparently the stereotypes about their preferred foods were accurate. They hovered back as the two offering plates were set out and the bento put aside.

“Come and thank the foxes and Inari-sama for their protection, Shindou-kun.” Utagawashi told him, firmly, and stared him down until he obligingly moved over.

“It’s your food, though.” Hikaru protested, even as he took his place beside the priest. “I can’t make an offering using your food.”

“Make one of your own later, and it will suffice.”

Well, alright then. Hikaru settled in front of the statue and fell into silence with Utagawashi, feeling the spirits inch closer to the stone fox. It felt vaguely awkward to make a prayer-type thing to a spirit that was properly there, rather than a piece of god in a shrine, but he did it anyway. He reached out to the spirits, more slowly and politely than before, and they actually sort of stayed in one place that time.

*If you’re here to protect us from the sword demon, thanks.* He told them both, before focusing on what certainly seemed to be the larger and more powerful fox. It rustled slightly under his attention, but didn’t move. *Thanks for warning me about Kaminaga, yesterday.* He shifted to the smaller one, which seemed less comfortable about it, so he was brief. *Thanks for helping Utagawashi.* He expressed, and then drew back. He reached out in a different direction, to the honden, and found the usual sort of shrine-spark, though it didn’t feel…active, for lack of better words. It was there, but there was none of the weight he’d come to associate with divine attention.

To the spark, he said *thank you for sending the foxes, if you did send them.* It did feel better, to have some variety of guardian there, that would presumably stand between him and spiritual harm. Even better that the one following him seemed quite powerful.

There was a brief, absent sort of acknowledgement from the spark in the shrine, but as he’d thought, no greater response. Maybe Inari was busy?

Quite uncomfortable with making offerings to spirits that he could actually sort of feel and interact with, Hikaru left it at that, and opened his eyes. He kept quiet for the few more minutes that Utagawashi spent, and then straightened up, observing the distance of the spirits. They didn’t move towards the offering, even when he stepped back and gave some space. “Do you think the foxes can actually physically eat that?” He asked the priest, frowning a little. “Or is there some sort of spirit thing connected to food or offerings that they get instead?”

“…I’m not certain.” Utagawashi admitted, stepping back as well. “Powerful spirits are meant to be able to interact with the physical world, but most offerings never vanish, so it’s hard to say.”

“Maybe it’s both.” Hikaru suggested, watching as the spirits shifted. “Maybe they get some sort of spirit thing out of it, and the stronger ones can actually physically eat.”

“Let’s not talk about the spirits in their presence.” Utagawashi decided, after a moment. “It seems rude.”
Hikaru considered the spirits in question, the distortions they left in the wardlight showing two vague shapes that certainly seemed quadrupedal and tail-bearing. “Yeah, sure.” He agreed, and followed Utagawashi over to the honden when prompted. The priest slipped inside briefly and then emerged with his phone, the piece of technology looking decidedly odd in the hands of a man wearing kariginu.

“I sent a message to Kaminaga-san last night.” He said, apparently deciding to finally get down to business. He opened the message log to demonstrate, tipping the screen towards Hikaru’s face. “He responded this morning, I sent another, and he replied to that one too.”

“That’s fast.” Hikaru observed, scanning the messages over quickly. Utagawashi had started off sort of polite, saying ‘Hello, Kaminaga-san. I would be obliged if you arrange your visits in advance in the future, and refrain from approaching Shindou-kun without his prior agreement.’ The language was courteous, but…it was a fairly bold message.

Kaminaga had not been courteous in his reply, to say the least. There had been several lines of dark, snarling reprimand, wrapped up with a demand to meet Hikaru. Aspersions had been cast on Utagawashi’s intelligence, reasoning, parenthood, and spiritual competence. Hikaru had not been referred to in the kindest of terms, either.

“Yeesh.” He winced at Utagawashi’s response, a clipped ‘I can’t arrange a meeting at this time’, which had not garnered a favourable response either. “He’s not happy.”

“He isn’t.” Utagawashi agreed. “But more to the point, he isn’t himself, either. See his second reply?” The response to Utagawashi’s refusal, sure enough, had contained eerily similar phrasing to the first, and a demand for a meeting phrased almost exactly the same as the first. “It seems like he doesn’t even remember the first message.”

“Have you replied yet?” Hikaru inquired, making to grab for the phone. It was retracted from his reach before he could commandeer it, and the message log scrolled down. This one was longer: ‘Again, Kaminaga-san, my reply won’t change. If you please, could you add an extra ofuda to your demon’s body, and perhaps make an offering to Hachiman-sama? I understand you feel that your containment is adequate, but it would make my charge feel better, and there is no harm in it.’ He made a face at it. “You’re making me sound like a damsel in distress.” He protested. “Or maybe a toddler. Your ‘charge’?”

If Utagawashi had been Yashiro, or Akari, or even Waya, he’d have likely pointed out that Hikaru’s life was starting to bear an alarming resemblance to a magical princess’, complete with spirit animal companions and menacing stalker demons, so he may as well be a damsel in distress. However, Utagawashi was none of those people and simply sighed instead. “Better to remind him that you’re under my protection, Shindou-kun.” He said, in a semi-resigned tone.

He blinked. “If anything, you’re under my protection.” Hikaru objected. “You can’t poke people in the soul. Or feel wards. Or rip bits of demon out of your head.”

“That might be true. However, you are a minor, so I’m responsible for you in this situation.” Utagawashi said, abruptly reminding Hikaru that he was in fact an established adult who occasionally tried to be responsible about things. It was somewhat surprising. Since their first proper conversation the man had seemed so fixated on the spirit-weirdness that he hardly seemed to notice that the weirdness-bearer was also a teenager. Hikaru didn’t respond, torn between uncomfortable and oddly flattered at the attempt to claim responsibility for his safety, and the priest took the opportunity to continue. “Besides, we are both under Inari-sama’s protection, which ought to be more than enough.”
Hikaru glanced, reflexively, back at the foxes. He thought of the sword-spirit’s aura. “…Yeah.” He agreed, somewhat unconvincingly, and reoriented the subject. “So, has Kaminaga replied to that one yet?”

“He hasn’t, no.” Utagawashi said, brows furrowing. “It has only been a few hours, so we’ll see. If there’s no response by lunch tomorrow I’ll send a similar message.”

“And you really think that will help?” He pressed.

“If the demon is forcing his mind to skip over what I’m sending, it ought to get less effective when repeated.” The man said, though Hikaru noticed that he didn’t seem especially confident in his words.

He eyed that poorly hidden uncertainty and said “ Couldn’t it just wear Kaminaga out more and make it harder for him to resist?”

“…I think it’s more likely that it will help.” He said, optimistically. “It offers more chances for him to realise something is wrong, at the very least.” His shoulders had drawn inwards, ever so slightly.

Hikaru peered at him. “But you don’t actually know for sure if it will help or not.”

“And I’m sure you have many better suggestions.” Utagawashi returned, with a sting of defensiveness in the sarcasm. And, well, he had him there.

“No, not really.” He admitted.

“Well then.” The priest cleared his throat, and visibly attempted to straighten up his posture and shed some of the tension. “Well, there’s hardly anything else to be done, is there? If it doesn’t work and he comes back again, we leave the city and wait out Arakawa-san’s arrival, and that’s that.”

Hikaru thought uncomfortably of how many questions he’d have to bullshit his way through if that happened. Still, it would be better than a hypothetical bloody and horrifying death. “I guess.” He sighed.

“In the meantime, you should continue working on your spiritual sensitivity.” Utagawashi added, after a moment. “What you did earlier was interesting. Perhaps you could do something similar to fight the demon, if necessary?”

“What, like punch it in the soul?” Hikaru asked, amused at the thought. He wondered, idly, if the fox spirit following him was likely to offer any combat tips.

“Something like that.” The man’s lips quirked with a little humour. “It’s odd to think of fighting a spirit in such a way. I’ve not heard of such a thing before. All the exorcists I’ve heard of use tools – ofuda, swords, staffs and the like.”

Hikaru hummed. “I don’t think a sword would be much good against Kaminaga.” Even if he could find one…something told him that it would not end well.

“He runs his own iaido dojo, so no. I do not think it would be.”

“Huh.” He wondered if Kaminaga was as much of a dickhead to his sword pupils as he was to Utagawashi. If so, it was a wonder he had any.

Also, wasn’t iaido that super lethal school of sword-fighting? Yikes.
A short and fairly awkward silence stretched for a while as both he and Utagawashi realised that they weren’t sure what they were meant to be talking about, now. The priest was the one who broke it, coughing politely. “That’s all I wanted to discuss, really.” He said. “I’ll keep you updated on the messages. Was there anything else?”

“Well, there was the ofuda thing, but he thought there was also something else. Something Yashiro had said? “Oh, right. My nosy friend, the one I gave your number to, don’t tell him about any of the spirit stuff. He just thinks that Kaminaga is someone who needs to go on his medication.”

“I wasn’t planning to.” The man raised his eyebrows at him. “Though, honestly, he seems a trustworthy friend. Don’t you want to have someone your own age to tell about these things?”

“Maybe, but then they’d never shut up about it.” Hikaru sighed, frowning at the thought, because, well, Akari and Waya and Touya probably wouldn’t stop bugging him about it for ages. But Yashiro…he was kind of more chilled out about things, it seemed. Isumi, too, though Hikaru didn’t feel quite as close to him as he used to.

Still, he felt too residually resentful about being cornered and interrogated to willingly tell Yashiro anything more, now. Maybe that would change eventually, but he was fine for now. “I’m fine for now.” Hikaru voiced the thought aloud, decisively, and it was mostly true. Sure, it was a little stressful having to make excuses for running for his life, and the situation with Touya the previous morning had been a nightmare, but he was operating on the assumption that things would calm down once Kaminaga was dealt with. There wouldn’t be as many excuses to make then, right? So it wouldn’t be a problem.

“If you say so.” Utagawashi said, sounding quite dubious about it. “Was there anything else?”

“Yeah, actually.” Hikaru nodded, inhaled, and gathered himself. “You know the ghost that possessed me for a couple of years?”

The priest blinked. “You mean the one you intend to have possess you again?” He sounded critical. He was definitely judging. Meanwhile, twin needles of surprise stabbed over from the foxes. Hikaru wondered if they knew anything about his situation or if they hadn’t known where he got his wounds from. For that matter, were spiritual injuries as repulsive to spirits as they were to sensitive humans? The fox didn’t seem bothered, but who knew?

“Yeah, that one.” He agreed, ignoring how his sanity was very obviously being found lacking. “So, like, I’ve been sort of praying to him.” He paused, and clarified “At his own kamidana, I mean. Not at my house shrine.”

Utagawashi stared at him. The very clear expression of you-are-mad didn’t really go away, but it did gain a side helping of befuddlement. Hikaru’s fox, on the other hand, found that piece of information very interesting, and sent wardlight streaming as it slunk closer. “…I’m not sure I understand.” He said, eventually. “Are you praying as you might for a departed friend, or as you would for a kami?”

Hikaru heard ‘departed friend’ and was immediately caught by clinging, aching loss. He breathed through the swell of feeling and shrugged. “Sort of both.” When the priest didn’t seem to know what to say, he added “He was over a thousand years old, you know. It’s not that weird to think he could have ended up as a kami.”

Interest, expressed the fox. Hikaru glanced in its direction, finding its stealthy disturbance circling considerably closer.

“Maybe so.” Utagawashi mused, looking vaguely troubled by the reminder. “But if you’ve been
using a dedicated shrine for him, what have you been using as a shintai? I can’t imagine you have an ofuda.”

Hikaru hesitated, and then carefully withdrew his fan from his pocket. It felt familiar and comforting in his hand as he opened it. “This is the shintai.” Interest came, yet again, from the fox’s direction, and he frowned at it. Yes, I get it, you’re interested, he almost projected at it, but refrained. He probably shouldn’t be rude to what might be his guardian fox.

Utagawashi peered at it, stepping a little closer. He extended a hand. “May I?” He asked. Hikaru dithered for several seconds, then reluctantly held it out. He watched warily as the priest took the fan, holding it delicately as he turned it over in his hands. He closed his eyes. “It certainly feels like a shintai,” he murmured, thoughtfully. “Though it’s interesting, that it feels that way constantly.”

Hikaru shuffled awkwardly, fingers twitching. “It doesn’t feel like anything, to me.” He said, uneasy, and held his hand out. “Can I have it back?” It felt not right to have someone else handling it.

“Of course.” Utagawashi passed it back, and Hikaru was slightly mollified by the care he handled it with.

He accepted it with relief, and slipped it into his palm. “So. You can feel shintai?” He asked, running a thumb over the fan’s spine.

“Usually only when the kami is inhabiting it.” Utagawashi admitted. “I’m not that sensitive. I can usually only detect a shintai during the rituals to offer the shintai to the kami.” He nodded in the direction of Hikaru’s hand, where he was folding and unfolding the fan in reflexive motion. “That feels similar, though.”

“I can’t feel it at all.” Hikaru muttered, setting his senses about the fan. It felt good, and familiar, but there was nothing unusual about it. “I’ve never felt anything from the Inari shintai either. Just the ofuda.”

“I’ve heard that sometimes you can detect the presence of shintai during prayer, if you focus.” Utagawashi shrugged apologetically. “I’m not that sensitive, though. Perhaps try it next time.” He tilted his head, curiosity making its way onto his features. “It’s interesting that you can’t feel it, though.”

Exasperation wavered from the direction of Hikaru’s fox. He shot it an expectant glance, but it didn’t do anything. “It just feels...familiar. Normal.” He offered. Exasperation came again, and he scowled. “Anyway, it’s not the fan I wanted to talk about. It’s the ofuda.”

“…You have an ofuda for the ghost?” Utagawashi ventured, perplexed.

“No, that’s the problem.” Hikaru shook his head. “A friend of mine said that if you don’t have an ofuda, you could be praying to anything. Is that true?”

“Well, that depends.” The priest pursed his lips, considering. “It depends on what you have in your shintai, there. If it’s just your own spiritual energy – which would explain why you can’t feel it as anything odd – then yes, I don’t think there’s any guarantee your prayers are reaching the right spirit.” Hikaru wasn’t sure what his face did then, but it apparently made Utagawashi scramble to add “But if it’s the spirit’s energy in the shintai, you ought to be fine!”

Hikaru ruthlessly suppressed the near-panic at the thought. I knew I might just be praying to nothing, this shouldn’t be so surprising. He told himself viciously, and moved on. “Can you make me an ofuda for him?” he demanded. “Or teach me to make one?”
Utagawashi shot him a withering look. “You’re not a priest, Shindou-kun. No, I can’t teach you to make an ofuda.”

“Why not?” He persisted, not to be deterred.

“Train to be a priest, and find out.” He suggested.

Hikaru was not going to do that. “Tch.” He scowled. “Then can’t you make me one? Or are you not allowed to do things for kami that aren’t Inari?” Amusement, expressed the fox, again. It was getting irritating.

“Shinto priests aren’t dedicated to single kami, Shindou-kun.” Utagawashi explained patiently. “I could request to be reassigned to a different kami’s shrine, but I follow Inari first, so I won’t. The problem with writing an ofuda for your spirit is that…he?” Hikaru nodded. “He is unknown. The rituals to imbue the ofuda with his essence aren’t known, and he doesn’t have existing shrines to draw from.” He sighed. “I wouldn’t know how to imbue an ofuda for an absent spirit. The rituals generally assume that the kami or spirit is there.”

Ugh, this conversation was doing awful things to him. Hikaru shuddered through the ache of loss, pushing it away from his thoughts. “I know his name, and I know him.” He said, plaintively. “Isn’t that enough?”

“There would be no spark in it, Shindou-kun.” The priest said, quietly. Apologetically. He rather hated the tone. “It would just be paper and ink.”

Hikaru grimaced, and would have stubbornly tried to get him to write one anyway, but then exasperation radiated again from the nearby fox, far more insistently this time. He turned and snapped at it: “if you have something to say, just say it!” He flicked his fan open, focusing on the sound of its paper rather than how unhelpful the fox was being.

“…Shindou-kun?”

“Not you; the fox.” He explained, still staring in the direction of the larger ward distortions. “Well?”

The spirit’s presence shimmered, drew near. It made considerably less effort to conceal itself, and Hikaru adamantly resisted the urge to step back as, for a moment, the view of it nearly resolved – stark white and big – but not quite. The shade of its presence coruscated, briefly, and then reached.

Hikaru yelped at the sudden, extremely disconcerting sensation of his soul being yanked on. He flinched back, but…it was holding him? Just a bit of him, and not physically, but his soul didn’t move with him when he tried to move, and so he couldn’t. It was the weirdest thing. “What the hell is that for?” He demanded, gathering his own reaching presence, ready to make his first attempt at punching a spirit in the soul if it didn’t have a good explanation.

It sighed impatience, and tugged a little more delicately, pressing look-here into his mind. The bit of his soul it was gripping, firmly but gently, wasn’t anything interesting. It wasn’t near the shredded, violated edge, and didn’t have any obvious wounds on it, either. He closed his eyes to focus on it better and confirmed it – there didn’t seem to be anything of note there. It was just the softly luminescent expanse he’d grown used to.

“I don’t get it.” He admitted, waving off an increasingly concerned looking priest. “What am I meant to be seeing?”

The spirit wavered, consideringly. Apology, it said, finally, and then-
Hikaru lashed out before he even registered the pain. He slapped his hand out towards the offending spirit, incidentally also the hand carrying the open fan, and watched with shock as the fox – *fully visible* – was propelled most of the way across the shrine ground.

It was only visible for a few seconds, a white shape sized more like a wolf than a fox, and then it shimmered back into pale anonymity as it hit the ground. *Ow!* It offered, lingering on the ground for several seconds, and for a moment Hikaru nearly found his face full of fangs as the other fox – also suddenly visible, but much smaller and with fewer tails – took offence.

Hikaru’s pulse was sounding so loudly in his ears that he couldn’t even hear what Utagawashi said, he only brandished the fan in the face of an angry spirit and hoped for the best-

*Stop,* the first fox projected, sharp and clipped like an order, and the smaller one stopped mid-lunge. It paced in front of him, white fur bristling, as the larger fox brought itself back over and nudged the smaller one away. It acquiesced, reluctantly, and slid back into shaky invisibility. Hikaru held the fan out, shakily, as it approached again, not knowing what the hell had just happened but fully aware that he’d just used his most prized possession to slap a spirit a good twenty metres across a clearing.

*Apology,* it offered again, finally, settling placidly in front of him. It was back to the pale, misty appearance of before, and made no attempt to get closer.

He stared at it, distantly registering that Utagawashi had been trying to get his attention for minutes now. “What the hell was that for?” He asked, eventually. Whatever it had done had *hurt,* like having a strip of skin suddenly torn off, and had considerably soured his trust in the fox’s good intentions. He tried to inspect the bit of soul it had apparently assaulted, and found that…actually, skin peeling was a fairly accurate analogy. It looked somewhat like an uneven layer of light had been pulled back.

*Look-there.* The fox instructed, reaching out very slowly to touch the sore area where it had done whatever. *Look.*

“Shindou-kun?” Utagawashi repeated, sounding now very worried, because he hadn’t responded beyond battle-ready terror since the fox did the thing. “What’s happening?”

“The fox did something to me.” Hikaru explained, distantly, as he closed his eyes to inspect the peeled-back bit warily. “It hurt, but I think it’s trying to show me something. Shut up for a minute.” He ignored the indignant noises this prompted, and focused wholly on the damaged area.

The area of his soul it had chosen wasn’t close to the cavernous pit of nothingness, or the badly torn parts at its edge. It was, rather, a bit further in, where the surface of the light seemed mostly undamaged and even. Hikaru had never attempted to investigate the healthy ‘flesh’ of his soul so this…this was new. The light was…layered. Sort of?

“It’s like there’s two different bits.” He murmured, confused, and prodded at the bit the fox had exposed. The coating of light it had peeled back was fairly thin, and what was underneath it was just *more* light, but….actually, it wasn’t the same, was it?

Realisation was building, slowly, like the crest of a wave. The light on top and the light underneath *were* different. ‘Colour’ wasn’t really the right term, but it came close enough, and there was that sort of difference between the two layers. It was *not* a huge difference, when you looked at it superficially – in colour terms, it was like blue and vaguely more purple blue, almost unnoticeable. But when he actually *felt* one, and then the other, it became *overwhelmingly* obvious. “Holy shit.” He breathed, caught somewhere between stunned and elated and worried.

“What? What is it?” Utagawashi demanded, hovering distractingly close.
“Spirit traces,” Hikaru said, utterly astounded. He hovered around the peeled-back bit, poking the top layer and feeling familiar eddies of grief run over him. “Traces’, you said. ‘There’s probably lots’, you said.” Holy shit it all made sense now.

“An explanation would be nice?” The priest suggested.

In retrospect, it made no sense that he hadn’t been able to find Sai’s spirit traces, given how he’d been possessed, and that meant they should have been basically everywhere. It also didn’t make sense how quickly he’d been improving lately, given he should need to use those spirit traces to actually do any improving at all. “I don’t have traces of Sai on me,” He said, numbly. “I have a whole fucking layer.” He poked at the surface of his soul in a few places, and depression promptly leaked out like some sort of spiritual ooze. Now that he was looking, really looking, it was just slightly the wrong ‘colour’ to be his own spirit-light, and it was everywhere. What the hell?

“…’a layer’.” Utagawashi repeated, slowly.

“My whole soul is coated.” Hikaru confirmed, after he’d looked around a bit. He….wasn’t sure what to think about that. On one hand, he had a hell of a lot of essence-of-Sai left with him. On the other hand, it was clearly completely lifeless, with no trace of consciousness in it at all. It didn’t feel like Sai. It just felt like…energy. Depressing, painful, grief-inducing energy. He glanced back at the fox, finally, whose pale presence was feeling quite satisfied. Smug, even. “Is that was you were trying to show me?”

Affirmation. The fox nudged him in the hand with a tendril of thought. He looked down, and found the fan there. Tentatively, he reached out to the energy which hadn’t felt like much of anything, before, and now that he was looking…

Yeah, that was Sai’s energy, in there. Some of his, but mostly Sai’s. A lot of it. It had felt so similar to his own that he hadn’t even noticed.

Was it there because of the dream he’d had, where Sai gave him the fan? Or had he just…imbued it, somehow, with some of the huge amount he was carrying around with him?

“Oh,” Hikaru realised, finally getting what the fox had brought this up for in the first place. “That’s it, isn’t it? You think I can move some of what’s on me into an ofuda?”

Satisfaction radiated from the fox in waves.

He looked up at the taller man, who was lingering quite close by. “Do you think we can do that?” He asked, unable to kill the thread of hope now. “If I’ve got the missing part, will it work? Can you make me an ofuda for him?”

Utagawashi stared, wordless, for several seconds. His brows furrowed, he thought, and he slowly nodded. “I think I can.” His gaze wandered to the honden. “Understand, though, Shindou-kun: I’ll need you with me for this. Knowledge of how to make true ofuda is not meant to pass outside of ordained priests – I’ll allow this, because it’s so important to you, but you must take it seriously.”

“I will.” Hikaru swore, clutching the fan – suddenly even more precious – in his hand. “And I won’t tell anyone. Not that you broke the rules or how you do ofuda.”

“Well then.” Utagawashi considered him, and looked at the honden. “Well then. Come with me, and we’ll discuss how this is to be done.”

Without any further words, the priest stepped towards the sacred heart of the shrine.
Hikaru followed.

Chapter End Notes

Additional anniversary notes: Reminder that the extended anniversary chapter is available on tumblr. A link to it is here: https://tenspontaneite.tumblr.com/post/164016597041/paper-cranes-17

Furthermore, on the fic:paper cranes tag on my tumblr, there is now a bit of art I did for the story. It features a recently-introduced OC with a number of tails. It will not be the last art I do for the story, either.

Chapter notes: It's a fairly uneventful chapter, but an important one. We're at the turning point, all.

Shinto notes: I’ve taken a fair bit of artistic license here, because finer details of how ofuda work and indeed the process by which they’re imbued with the kami’s essence aren’t known beyond the priesthood. What is true: Shinto priests are not ordained to specific kami; they can do their priestly thing for any number of them. Also true: ofuda are said to be imbued with a kami’s essence, though the specific process isn’t known. To this end, I won’t be describing it. I’ve tried to do what I can with the information available to me.

In this universe: to imbue an ofuda with a god’s essence, a ritual is performed at the god’s shrine to call their attention. The kami then reaches out to place some of its essence into the ofuda, and link it to itself. Details on the invocation and rituals will not be forthcoming.

Metaphysics notes: Stuff revealed this chapter: there is a lot of Sai essence remaining with Hikaru. It is also behaving in an unheard-of way for lingering spirit essence (for humans, at least). More about its behaviour, what it’s doing, and why are in the next chapter, which is on tumblr.

Other stuff revealed this chapter: Hikaru can slap a fairly powerful spirit across a clearing with his fan.

Also, yes, foxes. I wasn’t especially subtle about it so it’s unsurprising everyone called it :P

04/06/18 – minor edits
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

This is the Paper Cranes one-year anniversary chapter. Enjoy!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hikaru wandered home in a half-daze, all of his attention irrevocably commanded by the precious piece of paper he was carrying.

There were so many other things he could be focusing on – like the subtle strangeness of the shrine, or the wardlights in three different places, or even the fox spirit who’d somewhat violently aided his breakthrough, who was trailing behind at a modest distance. But…they all seemed so irrelevant, in comparison.

It was just a spark. The merest of lights, considerably weaker than what he carried on his soul or in his fan. But…

A spark.

His fingers were numb and trembling with strange tension by the time he came home, the wards of his home washing over him. He felt almost deaf and blind to his surroundings, and didn’t notice his mother greeting him until she was right beside him.

“How was it?” She said, presumably when he’d failed to respond to an initial greeting. “Aren’t you going to close the door? It’s cold outside.”

“…Uh, yeah, sure.” He agreed, distractedly, and shot a glance to the fox as it waltzed leisurely through the doorway, the wards rippling happily around it. He closed the door as soon as the distortions left by its tails were clear, and sighed into the warm air of his house. “Sorry, I’m a bit tired.” He added belatedly, removing his bag and setting to work at the fastenings of his coat.

His mother took the coat from him almost as soon as he had it off, tutting softly. “Did you stay up late at your friend’s house?” She asked, knowingly, as she went to hang up the thing for him.

“How was it?” The question seemed automatic. Kind of like ‘how was your day at school’, with pretty much the same level of interest, which was very little.

He shrugged. “I won it.” Having divested himself of his outdoor things, Hikaru held his prize furtively from view and made for the stairs. “I’m gonna go to my room now, okay?”

“Dinner will be at seven!” She called after him, and he made an acknowledging noise as he left her view.
Hikaru felt oddly, desperately relieved to close the door to his room. He hardly even noticed the fox walking through it and settling in the corner – all of his focus was on the precious piece of paper in his hands. He stumbled over to the kamidana, unwrapping the paper with shaky hands, and let his eyes run over the name written artfully on the ofuda.

*Fujiwara no Sai.*

He opened the kamidana’s doors, and set it carefully inside. He stared at the name, silent, for several more seconds, and then closed the doors on it.

His every sense was so, so desperately honed on that piece of paper. He wasn’t sure what he was expecting – the same sense of awareness or presence as from an Inari shrine, perhaps – but in the end very little happened. The tiny, dormant spark in the ofuda loosened, almost imperceptibly, and settled into the kamidana. That was all.

Hikaru remained half-kneeling in front of the kamidana for who-knows how long, watching, waiting.

But that was all.

Slowly, he came down to sit in seiza on the floor.

He wasn’t disappointed, was the weird thing. It should have hurt, for his newly endowed shrine to have no waking awareness inside it. It didn’t. He still felt like he was...waiting. The entirety of his attention was arrested by that little, somnolent ofuda-spark – so faint, and yet so much more alive than the traces he carried were. *Sai.*

Surely, surely, something was going to happen. He felt oddly, quietly certain of it.

He waited.

It was only when his mother called him for dinner that he realised he’d been sitting, *waiting*, for over an hour. It had just...slipped by, in a sort of calm and watchful expectance. Nothing had happened, but...he was so certain that he was waiting for something real. So certain that the lack of activity didn’t disappoint him at all.

Something was building within the shrine that had not been there before.

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Eating dinner with his mother, and the subsequent after-dinner chores, served to rouse him from the odd state he had fallen into, waiting in front of the shrine. Hikaru felt as though he were steadily coming awake, becoming aware of his surroundings as if he had merely been sleepwalking before, and the difference in experience was quite disconcerting. He noticed that he’d missed a number of messages from Utagawashi, having not even noticed his phone buzzing.

Hikaru returned to his room a little wary, eyes drawn unfailingly to Sai’s kamidana as he entered. It made his heart ache a little to feel the ofuda there, dormant and bereft of awareness though it was.

The sense of quiet, lingering anticipation remained.

With some effort, Hikaru pulled himself away from it, uncertain what he was actually sensing. He turned his attention to Utagawashi’s messages in an attempt to distract himself, flopping onto his bed with a sigh. His muscles exhaled their various tensions and aches all at once into the mattress, a blissful sensation if ever there was one. He opened Utagawashi’s messages and set to reading them.
He snorted.

Apparently, the priest had no compunctions about interrogating him on the subject of foxes if it was by text.

‘My fox started following me at the shrine I went to yesterday morning,’ he typed, leaving out the ‘where I prayed for your life’ part. ‘It started off really hard to sense, but I got better at it. It also warned me when Kaminaga was getting close one time.’ That was the first part of the information the priest had demanded, and the next...let’s see...ah, differences between the two foxes. ‘Your fox is smaller and weaker than my fox. It’s grumpier and hides behind the other one when it can. They’re both white, and wearing red neck cloth things.’

He thought carefully back to what he’d seen, and spared a glance for the fox in the corner of his bedroom. It made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up a little – once again, it wasn’t making as much of an effort towards stealth while inside the wards, so it was a vaguely white shape in the corner of his eye. Needless to say, having a white spirit in the corner of his eye in his bedroom was causing him some uncomfortable feelings.

‘Yours has two tails, I think.’ He typed, after a pause. ‘Mine has four.’

Hikaru glanced at his vulpine probably-bodyguard periodically as he and Utagawashi began gossiping furiously.

The priest informed him that white fur on foxes was meant to be a sign of them being Inari-servants, which was pretty obvious by this point. The red bibs, likewise. He also mentioned that foxes were supposedly meant to grow a tail per hundred years of ‘life’, which would put Hikaru’s follower at at least four hundred. This would have probably sounded more impressive if Hikaru hadn’t lived with a thousand-year-old ghost for two years.

In turn, Hikaru elaborated on the personality traits he’d observed in his fox thus far; namely, an amount of interest in various intellectual pursuits, and what seemed to be a deep enjoyment at watching people in various embarrassing or flustering predicaments. He also explained in depth what had happened at the shrine, including how he’d slapped a four-tailed fox spirit half-way across the shrine grounds with his fan.

‘Perhaps you could try that on Kaminaga,’ was the priest’s suggestion after that.

Hikaru was not so certain. ‘I think sword beats paper,’ He typed back, and tried not to think about how precisely that might work out.

Eventually, when Utagawashi had exhausted his knowledge on the foxes, he turned to the matter of Hikaru’s weird soul.

‘You say that Fujiwara-san’s energy has formed a layer over the surface of your soul,’ The priest began, and Hikaru swallowed at the evidence that apparently, writing the ofuda had solidified Sai’s name for the man. ‘Is it the same thickness everywhere? Does it exhibit any behaviour?’

And, well, he wasn’t really sure about that. Hikaru felt relatively sure that the layer wasn’t uniform, but he knew little else about it. He said as much, and then added that he would put aside some time to work on it when he could. He then took the opportunity to text Yashiro and assure him that he still had all of his blood in his body and that his skin was intact.

It was relatively late by the time he put down the phone, but there was still something important to do. He looked at the kamidana and swallowed, leaving his bed to extract some of the incense from a
He set it carefully into the burner and rummaged around for his lighter, then paused. He shot a glance at the spirit sitting in the corner of his room. “Could you maybe not be here?” He requested, more than slightly uncomfortable with the idea of actually talking to Sai in front of some random fox he barely knew. “Like, can you go downstairs for a while?”

The vulpine presence shifted languidly, and stretched. For a second, Hikaru could see pearly-white teeth in a red mouth as it yawned, and then it was back to being an indistinct pale shape. It walked through the door and headed down the hallway to the house shrine, which he supposed was good enough.

Why the hell was a spirit yawning, anyway? Didn’t that imply an ability to sleep? Sai hadn’t slept – was that just a Sai thing or a ghost thing or did it apply to all spirits?

Hikaru shook his head free of the pointless wondering and lit the incense, trembling a little at the first breath of it. It felt like it had been a very long time since he last smelled it. If he actually thought about it, though, it had only been about…five days? But so much had happened, it felt like an eternity. He removed his fan from his pocket and set it at the kamidana, very carefully.

He settled in front of the shrine with a sigh, closing his eyes for a moment to breathe in the familiar scent in the air. Something was different this time, and there were a lot of reasons for it.

Hikaru reached out, carefully, and touched his awareness to the spark in Sai’s ofuda. It was somnolent, empty of intent, but…alive. Compared to before, it was like the difference between a hearth of cold ashes, and one with just the tiniest glowing ember. And, interestingly, the presence of the fan seemed to…do something.

“Hi, Sai.” He said, quietly, and watched with his heart in his throat as the fan and the ofuda…melded, sort of? It was as though the densely saturated energy in the fan became the seat of the spark, the proverbial fireplace. *That* was definitely different. “It…actually hasn’t been that long, but holy fuck does it feel like it.” He could almost *hear* the reprimand his language would get him, if there was more than a dormant spark there. “To start with, I’m still in the Kisei league, which is good. I think I should be fine until the second preliminaries, at least, because no offence to them but I usually beat Isumi and Waya pretty well now…”

Steadily, some tension he’d been carrying fell away as he allowed himself to fall into idle babble, talking first about the few people in the first preliminaries he worried about, then about his estimation of Waya and Isumi’s chances against each other (in Isumi’s favour, for now, but it could go either way) and then he settled in for a replay of that day’s match.

“So, it was a pretty good game. I look forward to seeing what happens to this guy’s game once he’s had a few more years of seasoning.” And yes, he fully appreciated the irony of saying that when he himself barely had any years of practice himself. “Honestly though, things have been too fucking mad for me to play enough lately. You’d be in Go withdrawal by now, if it was you in my place.” He grimaced briefly at the thought. Sai *might* fare better against a hideously threatening sword spirit, but then again…he might not. “That sword isn’t making my life easy, that’s for sure.” He sighed, and then with reluctance went off into a tale of far less pleasant things than a decent game.

In a way, it was good to talk about it all, especially since he didn’t get into the emotional impact it was all having with anyone else. On the other hand, it was pretty unpleasant subject matter and that had its own effect.

“So now I have this fox following me around and I’m hoping I live long enough for that Onmyouji drawer.
guy to show up.” He finished, after a rather involved narration of his last several days. “So it’s mostly been shit, even if the fox is kind of interesting, and I finally figured out where all your energy is. And you’ve got an ofuda now, which…it feels…good.” He blinked at the kamidana, wondering if anything had changed about that feeling of waiting now that he was praying.

He felt for it, and…it wasn’t difficult to find. Which was odd, because he didn’t notice it unless he was paying attention, but…

That feeling was still there. Subtle, but very insistent.

Wait.

Hikaru waited.

Then he was quite rudely interrupted by a fluffy tail to the face. He spluttered, jolting out of his reverie with shock, and before he could push the tail away he was being face-slapped by another one. “Oi!” He said, outraged, and when the next one looked like it was going to have a go he reached out and slapped it, with hand and spirit both.

A very smug-looking fox, fully visible, backed away and snickered at him. Then it stealthed again, by some definition of the word. Its presence was still exceptionally obvious in the wards, so he wasn’t sure why it bothered.

“What’s even the point of going invisible again?” He demanded, getting shakily to his feet. He discovered that they were entirely numb, as though he’d been playing a seriously long game. The abrupt return of blood was painful. “Fuck,” He swore, and went to retrieve his fan from the shrine before falling onto his bed as an almighty case of pins-and-needles besieged his limbs. The fox snickered at him, again, and he glared balefully. “What was the tail to the face for?” He asked, belatedly.

Its presence rippled with a sort of contemplative shimmer. Then it shrugged. Spirit-trap maybe. It suggested, presence shifting in the direction of his shrine. Passage-of-time.

He frowned, then got out his phone. Then he swore again when he discovered that, at some point, it had become three in the morning. He was certain he’d not been talking to Sai that long, but…it hadn’t felt like he’d spent long waiting, either. It was kind of alarming to lose time in such a way, but at the same time, he really couldn’t bring himself to be threatened by that feeling of waiting hanging around the shrine.

It wasn’t a bad thing. Not at all. He knew it. But…even that had its risks, he supposed.

“I’m going to need to start setting alarms any time I go near my room.” He muttered, and then slunk to the bathroom to brush his teeth as quietly as possible so as not to disturb his mother.

---

It was somewhat fortunate that the following day was a Thursday, with no expectations of early-rising. However, this was somewhat ruined by the fact that, at slightly past eight in the morning, a new presence outside the house tickled at Hikaru’s senses and sent him wide awake. He blinked around, half-panicked and blinking grit out of his eyes, and flailed wildly around with his senses. He relaxed a bit when he found the fox nearby, which seemed settled and not at all alarmed.

Still, there was something new. He reached out to where he’d felt it and found…

Another fox?
He blinked, befuddled, and felt at it more insistently. It bristled uncomfortably under his spiritual attention, and he briefly discerned that it was one-tailed before it slipped away, feeling disgruntled.

“Why is there another fox there?” He asked, confused.

The four-tailed one crept a little closer, offering *clumsy young one isn’t sneaky enough.*

Hikaru scrutinised the white blurriness. “That’s why it woke me up, not why it’s here.” He pointed out, sweeping his awareness out again to try figuring out where it had gone, but it was outside the wards and therefore a little more-

He froze, feeling several presences flinch at his touch and make efforts to be stealthier. He looked back at the first resident, a little accusatively.

“How many foxes are *here*?” He demanded.

The four-tails considered his words, and then…the curl of its presence felt oddly grim. *Not enough.* It said, and then wouldn’t say any more.

Well…okay then?

---

Throughout his somewhat surprising morning, Hikaru identified fourteen foxes hanging around the vicinity of his house, all but three of them one-tailed. The remaining three seemed to have two tails, though there was one he wasn’t sure of. They were none of them as stealthy as his own follower and though they moved around a lot, he eventually became quite certain of the count.

He texted Utagawashi, of course. “I woke up this morning to 14 more foxes around the house. Mine won’t say why.”

The remainder of his getting-ready time was spent filling the priest in on pertinent details, like tail counts and apparent behaviour, and then he ran out of excuses to stay in the house.

He brandished his fan warily and left the wards, four-tailed fox falling in step behind him.

All of the loiterers got quite hastily out of his way as he walked. A good half split off to follow behind the existing stalker-fox and the other half formed a loose circle around his home.

It was…unnerving, to say the least.

Hikaru did not let go of his fan for a *second,* all of the way to the Touya salon. Even more weird, he kept finding *more* foxes as he travelled, apparently stationed all over the city. His followers tended to greet them as they passed, which made them easier to spot, though the much larger four-tails never strayed far.

As a result, he barely managed to raise his belligerence shields before he entered the Touya salon, and had to hastily prepare himself to face the music.

The lady at the reception counter whose name he kept forgetting looked at him with something approaching tired resignation, took his payment from him, and pointed him towards the back of the salon with a beleaguered sigh. Hikaru took that long-suffering look as a badge of honour and went on his merry way, pushing thoughts of fox-armies out of his mind as he went to bite the bullet.

Touya was at his customary goban, and appeared to be replaying his and Hikaru’s last game. He was
placing the stones with a sort of angry click, the look on his face more than slightly threatening. Then he paused, spotting Hikaru, and straightened to make eye contact. Hikaru saw nothing less than pure vengeance staring out at him, and grinned with relish. “You.” Touya snarled, and several nearby patrons glanced over in alarm at the pure venom dripping from that word.


Touya hardly seemed to notice the barb. “You,” He said again, apparently gone monosyllabic at the sight of him. “Game. Now.”

“Hikaru game now,” He agreed, mockingly, and sat down at the goban while Touya performed the most impassioned board-clearing he’d ever seen. Within seconds, its surface was pristine, and then a second later it wasn’t, with Touya’s hand obscuring a number of black stones.

“Nigiri.” Touya ordered, his eyes absurdly, intensely green.

Hikaru rolled his eyes and put a stone down. Begrudgingly, he was ceded the black stones, and he bowed to start the game. Touya’s answering onegaishimasu was in as much of a growl as everything else he’d said so far today.

He placed his first stone, and from there onwards it was exactly the glorious thing he’d expected of a rival he’d thoroughly pissed off and then left to stew for a while. Touya was ruthless, allowing not a single, tiny inch of give, and he went so thoroughly on the offensive that Hikaru barely managed to get a stone in edgewise.

Which wasn’t to say that he didn’t manage at all. A few times, Hikaru managed to spring some truly impressive comebacks on his nanadan rival, promptly eating his way into some delicious board-corners and then stamping his presence all over the place with subsequent stones. Touya was not to be dissuaded, though, and bit by bit gnawed his way into Hikaru’s territory, making a brutal invasion of any cluster that was even slightly less than perfectly defended.

He became aware around the half-way mark that he probably wasn’t going to win, so set to work preparing an especially mighty final blow that went off at around the two-hundredth move, striking true and beautiful as it killed one of Touya’s largest clusters in maybe three exchanges of stones. The look of outrage on his face was fantastic and the sight of his lovely new territory even more so, each of the empty points singing out like a gigantic ‘fuck you’ in goban form.

Still though, it wasn’t enough to make up the territory difference so Hikaru resigned pretty much right after that, nonetheless satisfied with what he’d managed and feeling like he’d scrounged a symbolic victory at the very least.

There was also that Touya looked a bit less liable to lunge across the goban and tear out his throat, now, which was always a good thing. Seemed like most of his ire had been channelled productively into the game.

“Discussion?” He inquired, idly, taking a moment to assess the proverbial spiritual tides around him. He found those proverbial waters full of foxes, somewhat unsurprisingly, but also that a number of them were alarmingly close, which was surprising. He flinched a little, finding that some particularly stealthy specimens had insinuated themselves around the goban while he was occupied with the game, their numbers comprising of Hikaru’s four-tails, one three-tails, and two two-tails.

He sent a wordless sweep of intent at the lot of them, made up of blunt demand, which translated handily to ‘what the hell guys’ in practice.
Hikaru’s first stalker was the one to respond, flashing back an amused watching.

“Pff.” Hikaru muttered to himself, getting an annoyed look from his rival, who was waiting to start the discussion. Well, it wasn’t as though he wasn’t used to audiences, even if foxes were sort of not the usual sort of crowd. He put the foxy observers out of mind and set to conducting the discussion in the most intentionally irritating way possible.

By the time his final bold move came about in the discussion, Touya was red-faced and visibly restraining himself from a good shouting match, since they’d both been told off about that and usually made passing efforts to keep things civil in public. It didn’t take much to push him over the edge, then.

Hikaru took a stone to the face with sunny grace, and then absconded from the salon, very pleased at having put off Touya’s interrogation by hopefully at least another day.

---

The day proceeded as laden with foxes as it had begun, and after doing his rounds of a couple of salons and raking in cash from some teaching games, Hikaru headed home to get some proper studying in. He printed off the kifu of every Honinbou game he’d missed in the tumult of his recent days, including Touya’s, and retreated to his room with them, ready to spend some quality time with his goban.

He was getting quite good at ignoring foxes by that point, so it came as something of a surprise when they started crowding around him again. He blinked, and suddenly there were foxes surrounding the goban, like right there, in his room, where only the four-tails had come inside before. And what’s more, they weren’t bothering with the subterfuge, sitting there all fluffy and white and inquisitive-looking.

Hikaru stared. “Everything okay?” he ventured, after a moment. It was all one-tails there, and they were a lot smaller than the four-tailed one was. Normal fox size, maybe, or even smaller. Definitely smaller.

Game talking, one of them requested, black ears alert and little tail twitching. He stared at it, aghast, because he wasn’t used to finding himself surrounded by fuzzy faces looking so…well…yeah, they were sort of cute. Please?

Like with earlier-boy, another agreed, its own tail swishing. Game talk?

He took a moment to wonder at what his life had come to. “You want me to talk through the game?” He clarified. He received a whole lot of affirming spirit-pushes at that, and he had to shove a couple of them away when they got too excitable. They were…fluffy. In a weird way. It felt like he wasn’t exactly feeling the fluff with his hands, more…something else. But the texture remained. “Yeah, okay,” He sighed, rubbing at his forehead incredulously. “But just this game, alright? I’ve got to study properly sometime.”

Little not-quite-audible yips went around the spectators as they settled in. The current game he was perusing was between Kurata and Ichiryuu-sensei, and was impressively high-level. Hikaru suspected that he might see it at a study session, sometime soon.

Hikaru exhaled, and then set about narrating the game to a host of foxes.

Later, somewhat furtively, Hikaru made a whole rice-cooker load of rice and set it outside in a plastic mixing bowl, giving a brief mutter of offering that consigned it to the appetite of Inari’s servants.
They all waited until he was out of sight, but the instant he was, he felt a good dozen spirits congregating around the bowl. The four-tails wasn’t among them, but instead projected approval at him as he climbed the stairs to go back to bed.

“I’m so glad you approve.” He said, dryly, and put himself to sleep at a far more respectable hour than the previous night, sparing a moment to text Yashiro and beat back the threat of blackmail.

By morning, the bowl was completely spotless.

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The Friday sun dawned on even more foxes. There weren’t any more in his immediate vicinity, so it took a little while for him to notice, but there was…something. Hikaru reached out towards it, wary, and happened to brush over several vulpine presences along the way.

The thing was kind of far away. He concentrated, and…yeah, it was at the shrine. It had the same sort of feel as the rest of them, which Hikaru was swiftly coming to associate with foxes, but it was also…very very different. It wasn’t hiding at all, to begin with. And, um, its presence was really noticeable?

“What the hell kind of fox do you have at the shrine?” Hikaru asked the four-tails, finally, once he’d been staring at the wall for long enough that his blink reflex was getting insistent.

It inspected him for a few seconds, and answered five-tails.

He blinked. “…Okay.” He said, slowly, and got out his phone to very promptly report that answer to Utagawashi. “Are there going to be any more foxes?” It shrugged unhelpfully. No response seemed forthcoming after a few seconds, so Hikaru rolled his eyes and went off to shower.

The alleged five-tails in the distance was…strong. Really strong. It practically radiated power, and felt bright in some ephemeral spiritual way he wasn’t sure how to put into words. It was almost like a kind of embodied foxy wardlight, blazing like a beacon in the distance. Whether or not it felt stronger than the demon, though…that was harder to say.

“Does one tail really make such a difference in power?” Hikaru asked his first follower, once he’d left the shower and dressed himself. “That five-tails is loads stronger than you.”

The fox rippled at him, then tried to push maths into his head. He blinked and waved the thought projection away, not having expected a spirit to present him with mathematics, which he was not great at. “I am a shit student.” He explained, patiently. “Can you use words, maybe?”

There was a pause, a shimmer of intent, and then the word “Exponential” resounded in the room, perfectly audible in what sounded like very well-pronounced Japanese. Hikaru jumped, profoundly shocked, and got laughed at when he almost tripped over his own feet as a consequence.

“You can talk?” He asked, astounded, because that had very much been out loud and he was quite certain that an average human would have been able to hear that.

Obviously, the fox replied, pointedly not out-loud. Focus.

“Oh wha- oh.” He thought back to what the fox had actually said. “…Exponential.” He repeated, feeling somewhat concerned as the meaning dawned on him. He wasn’t a great student, but he knew what that meant. “So, what, your power increases exponentially when you get a new tail?” That was insane. What the hell must nine-tailed foxes be like, if that was true?
The fox wavered pensively. *Not quite so much. But nearly.* It answered, oddly coherent.

Hikaru looked at it, wide-eyed. “…Are any six-tails going to show up?” He asked, warily.

*Ha,* it projected, almost morose, with a curl of wistfulness that said *I wish.*

He sat on his bed and thought for several minutes, quiet.

So, foxes were showing up by the dozen. The one-tails and two-tails, judging by how they felt, probably wouldn’t be any sort of match for the demon. The three-tails would be outclassed, and if he was going to admit it, he didn’t think this four-tails stood a great chance either. The five-tails, though? That was…quite a lot better. But the fact remained that a gigantic host of foxes were arriving in Tokyo, seeming to congregate around him, Utagawashi, and the priest’s shrine. *Inari* foxes, nonetheless.

“Are all of you here to protect us?” He asked, a little overwhelmed at the thought.

The fox’s aura did a sort of flopping twist that expressed *kinda.*

He fell quiet. Then: “So, it’s because of the demon? …Is it really that much of a threat?” Enough for a god to send his servants out in force, even a five-tails?

Very grimly, the four-tails reached out, and pressed words into his mind. *Worse than you think,* it said, firmly, and then retreated. It sank, once again, into a dark-feeling silence.

Feeling more than slightly threatened by the assertion, Hikaru packed up his things and went looking for something to distract him.

---

Despite the current chaos of his life, Hikaru was quite aware that tomorrow was a fairly significant day in the Kisei preliminaries, if only because it was the day that Waya and Isumi had their match. Last time he’d seen them they were starting to stew nicely in pre-match rivalry flavouring, so he expected they would both be somewhat manic with it by now. This presented an excellent opportunity for distraction.

Hikaru went to their apartment block and pinged Waya’s button on the intercom repeatedly and very obnoxiously, which resulted in the other boy’s voice coming out of the speaker in curses once he finally got to his door thing. “Shindou, that’s got to be you, no one else is that annoying,” He greeted over the intercom, once he was done swearing.

“Your glorious tutor is here to play with you.” He said, severely. “Show some respect.”

There was a loud snort. “Yeah, right.” He sneered a little, and then the door buzzed. “Door’s open. You know which flat is mine, right?”

“It’s not like I could have buzzed you if I didn’t.” He pointed out, and entered the building. A few flights of stairs later, he was being waved into a doorway by an unimpressed-looking Waya.

“What are you even doing here?” The boy asked, closing the door behind him. Hikaru winced because the fox was there and that made him slightly uncomfortable, but naturally it just walked straight through the door. “Don’t you know I’ve got a game to prepare for?”

“Why do you think I’m here?” He shrugged. “You need someone good to play so you don’t get all stupid stressed out studying.”
Waya made a show of looking around. “You brought someone good for me to play?” He asked, with mocking false-surprise.

Hikaru wondered briefly if a four-tailed fox spirit counted, but he had no idea if it’s interest in Go translated to a talent for it, so. “I brought myself.” He proclaimed, wandering into the tiny flat to appropriate Waya’s Goban. “And the greatest gift I can bestow on anyone.”

“Silence?” Waya guessed sarcastically, rushing over to clear the Goban himself.

“My presence.” He corrected, and settled into seiza. “What do you want, full length game or timed?”

The boy considered it. “Timed.” He decided, eventually. “Same as Insei games.” He disappeared briefly to retrieve his game clock from a nearby shelf.

Hikaru remembered, looking around the room, that Waya did not have a house-shrine in his flat. The knowledge made him oddly uncomfortable. He waited as his opponent set the timer and arranged the bowls, gathering some stones for nigiri. Hikaru got black, like he had the day before, and they began.

It became increasingly evident as the game went on that Waya’s play was a bit…off. He was clearly stressing far too much about the various individual stones and not reading properly, and it was kind of a mess. “Stop thinking so hard.” Hikaru said, at around the seventieth move, unable to help himself. “Loosen up, it’s not like tomorrow’s is the last league game you’ll ever play.”

Waya scowled at him, then at the wreck of his game. “Fuck you.” He said, but it was very half-hearted. “Whatever, I resign. Can we start over?”

“Yeah, sure.” Hikaru nodded agreeably, and they cleared the board away. This time, Waya got the first move, and they set about a new start.

He was a bit better, that game. He still lost, but he loosened up a little. Hikaru pestered him into another one and he was almost back to normal on that one, posing a decent challenge.

“That was better.” He declared, at the end, and launched into an explanation as to why this was the case. They powered their way through a very efficient discussion and then Hikaru abandoned Waya to his fate. “I’m going to go bother Isumi, now.” He said, grabbing his bag and heading for the door.

Waya eyed him balefully. “Consorting with the enemy.” He commented, not bothering to stand up from the Goban.

“Isumi was surprised to see him. “Shindou-kun,” He greeted, his appearance far neater than Waya’s. Despite this, the bags under his eyes and a sort of haggard air around him betrayed his own pre-match nerves. “I wasn’t expecting you.”

“No one ever expects me.” Hikaru agreed, and made himself at home. “I’m here to play you, and distract you from your game nerves.”
The young man smiled, ruefully, and followed him to the board. “Much appreciated.” He murmured, sitting down. “Have you visited Waya yet?” There was a subtle undercurrent there, a hint of an information probe.

“Yeah, and I played a few games with him. He’s stressing out, too.” Hikaru initiated the nigiri, since Isumi seemed distracted, and ended up with the first move.

“I don’t think I’m that stressed,” Isumi said with dignity, but obediently bowed into the game when Hikaru gestured at him insistently enough. His standard of play promptly ruined any hope of Hikaru believing him about his stress levels, because while he didn’t play as badly as Waya did when he was stressed, he took absolutely ages to make moves. Hikaru began to wish he’d demanded a clock for the match.

Unsurprisingly, he won, but it took so long that he was reluctant to give Isumi another game once they were done discussing. He waved the other professional away and then raided his fridge for something to eat. “I’m not playing you again unless it’s on an hour-clock.” He insisted, shoving a cereal bar into his mouth and completing his next sentence around it. “Actually, better yet, make it speed Go. Might loosen you up a bit.”

Isumi gave him a withering look, but nodded reluctantly. “Perhaps.” He agreed, and fetched his own clock. He looked at Hikaru hopefully. “Forty-five minutes?” He asked.

“Thirty.” He countered, firmly. The older professional sighed, resigned to his fate, and set the clock.

Hikaru apparently had very good instincts about how to unleash his friends from their shitty stress-playing, because after some initial floundering, Isumi started thinking quickly again, having no time for the anxious rumination that drew out his moves so much. He wasn’t the best at speed Go in general, so Hikaru looked upon the completed game with some lenience, powering through the discussion and then demanding another go.

“Speed game, again?” Isumi sighed.

“You obviously need it.” Hikaru told him, and so they set to it again.

Another good thing about speed games was that, well, they were quick. The first game had been a two and a half hour beast, so he wasn’t going to give Isumi too much more time, but he did consent to a third game, and by the time that was done he felt a bit more confident in Isumi’s ability to not bring shame upon his house in his match tomorrow.

“There. Now both you and Waya should be able to put up a decent fight tomorrow.” He said, with satisfaction, and stretched. “Now I need to go prepare for my own game, so I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Isumi looked somewhat reluctant to let him go, but saw him out with good grace. “Tomorrow,” He agreed, and Hikaru left with the four-tailed fox in tow.

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It was coming up to late afternoon by the time Hikaru left the apartment building, and he was very hungry. The cereal bar he’d shamelessly liberated from Isumi was not nearly enough. As such, despite dinner probably not being all that far off, Hikaru stopped by a convenience store on his way to the nearest station, inspecting its selection of lunch goods critically.

After some dithering, he settled on a little package of onigiri despite being hungry enough to eat far more than that. He felt somewhat proud of his restraint, and turned to go to the counter.
Hikaru glanced surreptitiously at the fox following him around. “Do you want anything?” he asked, in a low voice, because there were people around.

The fox seemed startled, if the little jump in its presence was anything to go by. Hikaru felt its attention shifting unerringly to the sushi section before it focused back on him. It appeared somewhat baffled.

“Inarizushi, maybe?” He said, as though musing aloud.

The fox extruded a tendril of intrigued intent. ‘I couldn’t possibly’ it seemed to demure, despite the rest of its aura saying yes quite insistently.

Hikaru rolled his eyes at it and picked up the little package of crappy store sushi, and went to pay for the items. He put the sushi in his bag and ate the onigiri on the way to the station, polishing off the last one just before he got onto the train. It was raining by the time he got off, and he pulled up his hood to hurry home, wondering idly if spirit-foxes got wet in the rain. Sai hadn’t, but he hadn’t been capable of audible speech, either.

He shook rain from his coat as he passed through the edge of the wardlights, muscles loosening a little as he entered the considerably warmer interior of his home. “I’m home!” He called, but his mother must have been out or something, since there was no answer. He shrugged, and divested himself of shoes and coat before he retrieved the sushi from his bag. He brandished it at the fox, whose silhouette shimmered in a pleased sort of way. “Do you want this in a bowl or something?” He inquired.

Unnecessary, decreed the fox, so he went to the kitchen to dispose of the lid and then awkwardly put it on the floor. The fox approached, then looked at him.

“Are you going to be weird about eating in front of me?” Hikaru asked, raising an eyebrow.

The fox appeared to consider that, then shrugged, and dropped stealth. It then proceeded to scarf down the inarizushi in all its fuzzy four-tailed glory, utterly unconcerned with his presence. Hikaru, for his part, stared without shame. It really was pretty big. And the paleness of the fur also made its defined muscles really obvious.

In very little time, there remained only a few trace scraps of food in the plastic packet. Then the fox…did something, extended itself and burned, somehow, and those scraps were gone too, leaving only the plastic. Gratitude-for-meal, it expressed, and then just sort of…stood there. Still plainly visible.

Hikaru tilted his head, staring a bit longer, and noticed that it had black ears and sort of amber eyes. Then he retrieved the packet and threw it away. “You’re welcome.” He said, finally, and then grabbed his bag to head upstairs.

As it happened, the fox did not re-stealth, and it turned out that having a large fluffy creature in one’s room was far more distracting than an indistinct white haze. Hikaru spent fifteen unfocused minutes looking at kifu and determining that tomorrow’s opponent really, really wasn’t going to be a problem before he finally asked “Why aren’t you, you know, hiding?”

The fox, who had curled up in an impossibly soft shroud of furry tails, projected an indolent kind of indifference that said couldn’t be bothered.

Hikaru scrutinised it. “Well, okay then.” He shrugged, and returned to his preparations.
He did not have anything against the fox spirit’s presence in his life. In fact, having a guardian creature there whose agenda seemed to be taking down the demon was exceptionally welcome, and it had very been helpful on the matter of Sai’s energy. This did not mean, however, that it was very easy to wake up and see *white* in the corner of his eye, when he was still fresh from the piercing dreams that hardly ever let him alone, and vulnerable to the trappings of his unconscious mind.

The part of him that still expected to see Sai whenever he turned around soared, helpless and exalting, at the pale shape and the corresponding sense of *presence* that was *right there* – then he woke up, truly, and that part of him crashed and burned. Again.

Hikaru gritted his teeth, sat up, and breathed carefully while his fingers sought the fan at his bedside. He clutched it, burying his awareness into the energy within to find some fragile comfort, and sat quietly for several minutes.

When he felt a bit steadier, he stood up, greeted the fox, and then went to get ready for the day. His own game ought to be easy, but he was very interested in seeing what came of Isumi and Waya’s match.

When he arrived at the game hall, both Waya and Isumi were already there, and the aura of tension around them was…palpable.

Like, *actually* palpable, he could *feel* it, in a spiritual way. Hikaru eyed them from a distance, fascinated, and reached out with insubstantial hands to feel at the texture of the emotion they were both emanating. It was…interesting. First because, on inspection, he could actually feel their souls – normal, insensitive human souls – and he’d never felt his friends’ souls before. There was no possible way he could describe them in the limited terms offered by his language, but he went away from the experience with the oddly satisfying knowledge that the feel of their souls suited them perfectly.

The second interesting thing was that the emotion didn’t actually extend past their souls at all. It was just being…loud. Or bright, perhaps, in a different way to usual. When things were usually bright, in a spiritual sense, it was because they were powerful, but here it was just…it was noticeable. Distinct, maybe. Like a striking pattern viewed from a distance.

Hikaru briefly considered poking them in the souls. He decided against it, since he didn’t really understand what he was doing, and he could plausibly cause them harm and that would be awkward. Instead, he moved forwards and marvelled at the way they’d apparently been sitting in extremely tense silence for god-knows how long, occasionally making eye contact in the most hilariously intent way.

“Oh my god, have you seen yourselves?” Hikaru demanded as he drew near them. “You look like you’re trying to kill each other with your eyes.”

His remark handily broke their weird pre-game combat aura. They averted their gazes away from each other, avoiding eye contact as they looked at him instead. “Shindou, have *you* seen yourself and Touya, at any point ever?” Waya shot back, acerbically.

Hikaru ignored him, instead inspecting the lines of tension in their shoulders. “Holy fuck guys, I did not spend all of yesterday loosening you up for you to explode before your match.” He said, severely, and considered them. Who was more agitated, according to the emotion-texture-thing on
their souls?

…Probably Waya, he decided, and abruptly realised the potential for privacy-invasion this might lead to.

Worse, it could lead to unfair advantages across the Goban, he realised with dawning horror. He might be able to tell when someone was preparing a heavy blow, or was bluffing, or….any number of things. That was so not okay.

If my spirit powers make me cheat at Go I fucking quit, he thought in an incoherent, panicked brain-babble. I am so not okay with this-

The fox, nearby, sighed. Then it gave him a light slap with a tail. Pull reach inside. It said, rolling its eyes, and Hikaru discovered that a fox rolling its eyes looked seriously weird.

He listened to its thought-projection, and considered it. Then he did the opposite of reaching, which felt bizarre, squashing himself back into only the space naturally occupied by his soul, which there wasn’t a lot of. He hadn’t quite realised how reflexive reaching had become, or how he’d started doing it with numerous threads of attention, until he had to stop.

Everything was oddly muffled when he finished. Like he was missing a sense, somewhere. Which he sort of was. It made him uncomfortable, but he couldn’t feel Isumi or Waya anymore, so he wasn’t doomed to involuntarily cheat at every game for the rest of his life.

It was, he realised, kind of like games with Sai, in that both of them had a mental avenue to feel stuff from each other. This hadn’t been terribly useful for Hikaru, though, given that he mostly tended to feel interest and intrigued from Sai, with the occasional flashes of amusement/superiority/playful and so on. He’d never been good enough for something like emotion-reading to give him a significant advantage. But…well, other people couldn’t block him out, could they? And he was good enough for that to make a difference against a lot of his opponents. What a pain.

The fox tail-slapped him again. “What?” He asked, reflexively, and then noticed that people were trying to talk to him. Oh.

“Shindou, you’re zoning out again.” Waya told him, impatient. It seemed like being vaguely irritated with him was helping his nerves though, so-

Did I figure that out by looking at him or by looking at his soul? Hikaru wondered for a second, panicking, and focused on his spiritual awareness until he was satisfied that, yes, he was actually just capable of detecting emotional shifts the normal way and wasn’t reaching out again.

“If I am, it’s because your dumb pre-game drama is making me.” He claimed, and looked for a clock. “Well, hm. Games are starting soon. Are you going to go to the goban?”

Waya and Isumi looked at each other. Tension built again, immediate and obvious, even when he wasn’t sensing it. “…Yes, I think so.” Isumi said, softly, and Waya’s chin jerked down in a nod.

“Have a good game.” He told them, hoping neither of them would freeze up embarrassingly, and watched as they walked off stiffly. It was kind of hilarious to watch them, actually. Were he and Touya really that bad when they had an important match?

…Hikaru was self-aware enough to admit to himself that, probably, he and Touya were worse by a long way.

He watched his friends take their seats opposite each other and resume the intense staring, then shook
his head and went to find his own seat. His opponent, a kind of average Shodan, sat down across from him a few minutes later, and Hikaru nodded to her in greeting.

Then it was time to begin, and he immersed himself into the (not that great) game.

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Hikaru went to record his win and then promptly went to look at his friends’ in-progress game, standing quietly nearby. He raised his eyebrows, withholding a low whistle. It was close, and well into the endgame. He wasn’t certain, looking at the board, who would win.

Tentatively, he released the strict control he’d imposed on his spirit sensing, and found both of them firmly in the grasp of fierce, intent concentration. They were tense, they were excited, they were worried – so many things, squashed into a particularly intent cocktail of fervour. It was kind of infectious when he looked at it too hard, and he backed away a bit, spiritually speaking, to get some breathing room.

He found, as he ‘looked’ elsewhere, that a few more foxes had shown up nearby while he was playing, and he…hadn’t noticed.

Hikaru realised, uncomfortably, that he would be vulnerable to sneak attacks by demons whenever he played, now. Hopefully, once this one was dealt with, that wouldn’t be an issue any more, but…it wasn’t a nice thought. At least he had the four-tails to keep watch.

He shook out of his concerns and watched the game unfold. The current conflict was Waya trying to get a few moku out of Isumi’s upper-right group, and Isumi trying his best to kick Waya out and get some moku out of him. There was a fairly intense double ko fight in progress, with Isumi taking one of Waya’s stones and then Waya taking it back and then Isumi taking Waya’s stone at the other ko point and then Waya had to decide whether to defend the point where he’d taken the ko or the one where Isumi had taken it…

Hikaru read ahead, carefully. If Waya was attentive enough, here, he could win the ko fight, and maybe the match. Otherwise, Isumi would shore up his defences and inch his way inexorably into that little stretch of Waya’s ground, and it would be enough for him to win.

He watched. Waya took the stone at the second point, and when Isumi retaliated by attacking the first one, he…

Threatened the now-vulnerable cluster at the second point.

Isumi hastily fell back to defend it, all the while Waya poked him in the weak points, and once Isumi had been forced to fill in three of his own points to defend, Waya drew back and secured the first ko point.

Good. Hikaru thought, with satisfaction, and knew that Waya had won. Isumi knew it, too, if the way he stared at the board was any indication, if the whispering pattern of searching-hoping on his soul said anything…

“I resign.” Isumi murmured, resigned, and bowed. Waya bowed back, sighing as a small smile stretched the corners of his lips. They cleared the stones away, and then Waya went off to record his win.

Isumi stood up, meeting his eyes. “Good game.” Hikaru said, very quietly.

The young man nodded, pensive. “It was.” He agreed, just as quietly, and they headed out of the
“That was a really good game from Waya, better than usual,” He said, once they were away from ongoing games and they could speak properly. “But it was a good one from you, too. I didn’t see all of it, but that shape in the bottom half – you did really well in the opening hands, didn’t you?”

“It was a very strong start.” Isumi agreed, wryly. “Unfortunately for me, Waya was very stubborn today.”

Hikaru nodded. “Well, we’ll wait for Waya, and then we can go back to your place and replay it.” He said. “I guess I’m playing Waya in two weeks then.”

“And I suppose I need to find a new league to enter.” Isumi pursed his lips, a contemplative expression falling across his face. “Ouza, maybe.”

“Doesn’t that start in December?” He’d actually been thinking of entering that, himself.

“That’s only two months away.” Isumi shrugged. “If I train hard enough in the meantime, I might do better. Maybe get into the second preliminaries at least.”

“Hopefully.” Hikaru said, and then noticed Waya leaving the game room. “Hey, Waya. Congrats on your win.”

“Thanks.” The boy smiled, looking thoroughly exhausted but very pleased. “It was a good game.”

“One of your best in a while,” He agreed. “Want to go back to yours and replay it?”

He straightened. “Of course.” He sounded slightly offended that Hikaru would think any other answer possible.

“Well, come on then, we’ve been waiting for you.” Hikaru said, belligerent, and bickered with Waya all the way back to his place.

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Later, Hikaru checked his phone, and found it the recipient of very welcome news.

‘I think I finally got through to him, at least a little.’ Utagawashi’s text read. ‘He said he’d put another ofuda on, and was more coherent.’

Hikaru read the text out to his vulpine stalker with interest, even as he typed a reply. ‘Thank fuck. Hopefully that will hold him off for a while’. He sent it, then looked at the fox. It was frowning, which looked vaguely threatening on anything with that many teeth. “What’s wrong?”

It looked at him. Not enough, it said, eventually.

“Well, it at least buys some time, right?” He pointed out, considerably cheered in the wake of the message. “That’s not a bad thing.”

No, the fox agreed, though reluctantly. As ever, it was tight-lipped on the subject of the demon, going quiet and a little ominous in the aura.

“I’ll probably visit the shrine tomorrow.” Hikaru said, in an attempt to distract it. “That five-tails won’t eat me, right?”

It sort of worked. The grimness eased out of the fox’s frame, and it looked at him with amusement
curling in its soul. No, it answered, huffing slightly.

“I heard that people as messed up in the soul as me look really tasty to possessing spirits.” Hikaru said, suddenly interested. “Is that true?”

The fox rolled its eyes. Yes.

“Then are you sure that five-tails won’t eat me?” He persisted. “Aren’t foxes sometimes possessing spirits?”

It eyed him. *I’m more likely to eat you than it is.* The fox informed him, pushing a little to make a coherent thought out of it.

Hikaru thought to how he’d slapped the spirit across the shrine grounds. “I think I could take you in a fight.” He opined, waving his fan.

The fox’s whiskers twitched at him. *Maybe,* it said, huffing again, before laying its head on its paws, apparently leaving it at that. Hikaru obligingly left the spirit alone and went to lay on the bed. He had a thing to investigate, after all. He’d told Utagawashi he’d investigate the layer of energy on his soul and it would be a bit embarrassing to turn up to the shrine without having done it.

Still, closing his eyes and reaching inwards bore an uncomfortable familiarity to his early, very reckless soul-delving. He wondered how much damage he had done himself, unknowingly digging fingers into the flesh of his own soul and tearing. It was hard to say, now. He opened a set of not-eyes, and looked out across the scarred landscape. It had, after all, always looked this way to him. Hikaru sighed, and settled in to investigate.

The ‘colours’ of his and Sai’s energies were really remarkably similar, and the overall… ‘texture’, he supposed, as well. He wasn’t surprised he’d missed it for so long, but now that he was really paying attention, it became kind of obvious where the divide was. Hikaru wandered, and quite quickly determined that the most healthy part of his soul, where there were almost no jagged furrows and rips and tears, was almost completely bereft of the odd layer of Sai’s spiritual power.

There was, however, a kind of subtle dancing light that was everywhere. Like motes of dust, glowing in sunlight, or specks of bioluminescent matter. They danced in slow, evanescent trails, spinning after him when he disturbed them, and… he realised, that was Sai’s energy too, just a different kind. He reached out to touch one of the motes of light, and it scattered over his skin like a spark of pain. Then the others came, each one bearing tiny traces of memory, emotion, *feeling-*

*Rustle-of-robets, shift of a paper fan, feeling-of-shared-joy –*

Hikaru breathed, sorrow eddying over him like droplets of rain, and moved away from the tiny remnants. They weren’t what he was here for.

He focused and went back to investigating the layer. Moving away from the rather slim bit of healthy soul, he watched carefully for where the coating of Sai’s energy began. He traced the edges of the thin wounds that began to root through his spirit away from that healthy edge, and found it.

The wounds weren’t very deep here, but there was something of a layer, even so. It seemed to be wedged into the wounds themselves, a slightly more purple glow than the soul around it, and it emanated echoes of Sai when he poked. Interesting. Hikaru moved, and went closer to the edge to investigate the awful wounds there, and there, it was *so obvious.*

At the edge of his soul, where there stopped being light and was instead just empty, aching space, there were *horrible* injuries. They extended into the rest of his soul like the spiderweb shatter-lines of
glass, but so much more messy and visceral and painful. Near the edge, there wasn’t anything in those awful furrows except agony, tearing and shredding and oozing despair, but further in…

Hikaru observed the not-him glimmer of energy, inside one of the large wounds. Its interior was… smoother. Less like a messy wound with bits of skin and flesh hanging about, and more like a scar, except not. The wound was there, and it was just as messy as the rest, but…

Sai’s energy was covering it.

It took a fair bit of investigating to become certain, but once he felt he understood what the energy was doing, he withdrew at once and opened his real eyes. The sights and sounds and smells of his bedroom rushed back in, disorientating, but nothing like it had been back when he was accidentally doing himself harm.

He stared at his wall and processed what he had learned. It was a little difficult, since both the side effects of soul-delving and the implications were making him tremble with barely-leashed grief.

*Inquiry?* The fox prodded, from its corner.

“I was checking out the…layer of spirit stuff on my soul.” He explained, a little distantly. It felt like there was a lump in his throat, and more annoying: his eyes were pricking a little. He blinked rapidly to ward the feeling away. “I think I’ve figured it out. It’s…filling in my wounds, isn’t it? Like…I dunno, skin glue.” Holding the vulnerable deep tissues together, to make it easier for them to heal. Except…he was a living human. His soul wouldn’t heal.

*Yes?* The fox blinked amber eyes at him, which he noticed bore a slit pupil each. *Obvious.*

He shot it a glare. “Maybe to you,” he muttered, ruthlessly pushing away all of the stupid emotional influx. “Is this why I’m sort of doing okay even though most of my soul is gone, then? Because the energy he left behind is…helping?”

It nodded. *You’d be dead without it,* it claimed, and sat up, tails curling around its paws. Very, very dead. Or insane. Or both. It was the longest coherent thing it had bothered to say to him.

Hikaru inhaled. Exhaled. Tried not to feel very many things about the fact that, apparently, Sai hadn’t only accidentally mutilated him, but had left behind enough energy to stop it from killing him. “Okay.” He said, weakly, gathering his composure. “And…why is it doing that? It’s just…leftover energy. Right?” He was pretty sure it was just leftover energy, there was no reason for him to always get those idiotic flashes of hope whenever he asked stuff like that, dammit.

*No mind, no soul,* the fox agreed. *Just energy. But energy remembers.* It stood up in a languid flurry of tails, stretching briefly.

“Remembers what?” He demanded. Despite his efforts, he was a little shaken, and a lot off-balance.

It approached him, until it was at the edge of the bed, touching its nose briefly to the fan held tightly in his hand. Hikaru felt it investigating the energy, feeling it out, and then withdrawing. The fox stepped back and looked up at him. Emotion, wishes, sentiment… The fox shrugged, and let the thought trail off.

Hikaru breath faltered. “So…what?” His fingers trembled, a little. His eyes were stinging again.

*So, that spirit loved you.* The fox said, bluntly, knocking out all the breath from his lungs with one sentence. *He wanted you safe. Alive. What he left behind…remembers. So it protects you.* Amber eyes were sharp, with their slit pupils, but the feel of the fox’s soul was quietly sympathetic as it
spoke to him, and Hikaru…

His breath stuttered on a sob. He cleared his throat, tried helplessly to push it away, to stabilise his breath, to ward back the loss and heartbreak bubbling up through his chest and – couldn’t. He couldn’t. Hikaru clutched his fan and let his limbs curl inwards, hunching over to hide his face in his knees as grief lodged in his throat like a physical thing, like it was choking him, like it was extinguishing all the life in him-

He wept. He couldn’t help it. It welled up in him and pushed free, pushed past the grief in his throat and the pain in his chest and shook him in its grasp until he was weeping, salt stinging past his eyelashes and raking trails down his cheeks. Anguish clutched at him until every breath was a shaky, shuddering, pitiful gasp and he couldn’t, he couldn’t-

A large shape moved up beside him, its weight not affecting the bed at all, but it was there regardless. Fur pressed against his arms. Dumb, pitiful human child. It said, but without any derision. It sat beside him, one tail curling behind his body, and stayed there all the while Hikaru wept out what felt like the remainder of his soul.

The unrelenting anguish held him by the throat for what felt like forever. Hikaru soaked his shirt with tears and had to put his fan aside for fear of damaging it, but steadily, the absolute dominion of his grief did start to lose its hold on him.

Gradually, his breath came back to him, flowing a little easier every minute. The obstruction in his throat dissolved, almost begrudgingly, and settled back into the usual sick ache of absence. When Hikaru realised he wasn’t crying anymore, he felt…exhausted. Utterly spent, and completely drained, but the grief remained.

Fuck, I miss him. He thought, and it threatened to start the tears again. He clenched his eyes shut and forced himself into a steady breathing pattern. He cleared his throat. “It’s awkward for you to be all cuddled up like this when I don’t even know your name.” he muttered, after a very long silence, to the fox that was still there beside him. His voice sounded thick and hoarse.

The large fluffy form shifted, stood, and shook itself out. Fluff poofed against Hikaru’s damp face, and then it was on the floor again. For a moment, he thought it was responding to his comment by just not being snuggled up like this when I don’t even know your name.” he muttered, after a very long silence, to the fox that was still there beside him. His voice sounded thick and hoarse.

The large fluffy form shifted, stood, and shook itself out. Fluff poofed against Hikaru’s damp face, and then it was on the floor again. For a moment, he thought it was responding to his comment by just not being snuggled up any more, but instead it sat before him, four tails fanned out behind it. It held out a snowy forepaw, and for a moment, Hikaru thought comically of the handshake trick that most dogs were taught-

Yonbi no Setsu, it said, very coherently and almost grandly, and held the paw out until he finally consented to shake it.

“…Setsu, then?” He asked, wondering why a presumably pretty old Japanese spirit was shaking hands, of all things. The paw was very soft. The leathery pads on the underside seemed to lack any of the thickness you’d expect of something used for walking, and the white fur everywhere else was just as fine as it looked.

That will do. Setsu said, satisfied, and then it withdrew its paw to lay down again.

“Are you a boy fox or a girl fox?” Hikaru tried, since he seemed to be on a roll with getting identifying information out of the spirit.

Whichever. It shrugged, utterly unconcerned, and completely failed to do any clarifying.

Hikaru waited several seconds, but it didn’t say anything else, so he sat back and exhaled in a long.
shaky breath. Beyond the deadening emotional exhaustion, he was faintly surprised at his lack of embarrassment, having lost it in the presence of a spirit he barely knew, but...well, maybe it would come later. He wiped his eyes, finding them swollen and a bit sore. “Sorry about all the crying.” He mumbled, and forced himself to stand up.

Setsu shifted on the ground, curling a little tighter and looking up at him. For an alarmingly large and certainly sapient fox spirit, it was alarmingly cute. Nasty wounds, it commented, dismissively. Easy to set off.

“They really are.” Hikaru agreed with a sigh, inspecting the time on his phone. It was a bit early, but he could definitely use some sleep...

Die, the fox suggested, out of the blue. He stared at it.

“...What?” He questioned, taken-aback.

Die, it repeated. Souls heal when not in a body. No more problem.

....He supposed to a spirit who had presumably been dead for at least four hundred years, dying would seem like a very sensible option, but... “Um, no.” Hikaru said, tone strange. “No. I'll live as long as I can, thanks.”

Setsu huffed air at him. Suit yourself, it said, shrugging. Masochist.

He should be respectful to spirits, he should be respectful to spirits, especially ones guarding his life and soul, oh to hell with it- “Fuck you, Setsu.” Hikaru said, with some newly recovered cheer, and went to get ready for bed.

Thankfully, Setsu didn’t seem to give a shit about being sworn at, so Hikaru thought it could be the start of a beautiful friendship.

Chapter End Notes

I will readily admit that I did not proofread this chapter beyond what I did to get it on tumblr, which is still maybe two times reading it over. Still, let me know if you spot anything off.

This is actually the chapter that has received the most attention on tumblr to date - and I'm pretty pleased with it. People here on ao3 have been leaving loads of comments, too, which I really appreciate. Paper Cranes would absolutely never have become so dear to me without all the response it gets.

As always, next chapter is on tumblr. People should also be aware that I've been answering lots of questions and putting in misc worldbuildy and metaphysicsy stuff on tumblr under the fic: paper cranes tag. There's also an art I did of Setsu and also a fanart that was done of Setsu. Here's a link: https://www.tumblr.com/tagged/fic%3A-paper-cranes

We are making our way towards the arc climax. My writing always, always lengthens itself on me so my estimates are tremendously unreliable, but I'm thinking maybe the arc end chapter will be 21? Hell if I know. It will take as long as it wants to, I suppose.
Hope everyone enjoys this chapter!

04/06/18 – minor edits
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Hikaru makes an unappealing decision.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hikaru woke, very late on Saturday, to his phone’s shrill ringing. He blinked out of sleep, bleary-eyed, and fumbled clumsily for the handset on the windowsill for several seconds before he managed to pick it up and answer the call. “Yeah?” He said, in a kind of garbled slur.

“Shindou.” Yashiro’s voice came through, sounding mildly scolding. “Well, you’re alive, at least.”

He struggled to parse the meaning of the words, then remembered: “Oh, right.” He mumbled. “I didn’t send a text. Sorry.”

“Set an alarm or something.” The other boy sighed. “Everything alright?”

“Mm, yeah. Utagawashi thinks he’s stalled the crazy guy. Only a week to go.” Hikaru reported, not quite awake. “I’m going back to sleep now.” He hung up and put the phone next to his pillow, lacking the willpower to sit up and put it anywhere else. He glanced, briefly, at the curled form of Setsu in the corner, then closed his eyes and went back to sleep.

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When he woke, he could still feel the distant glow of the five-tails, standing like a brazier of blazing light. Setsu, closer to hand, was laying with one of its tails over its nose, and cracked an amber eye when he sat up.

“That fox is seriously noticeable.” He mumbled, sleepily, and rubbed at his eyes. He checked the time on his phone and found that it was already nine. His fingers were still clumsy with sleep when he typed to Utagawashi ‘I’m going to visit in a bit’, and he saw that the software ended up picking some weird kanji for it but he couldn’t bring himself to care. Utagawashi would figure it out.

Hikaru pushed himself out of bed and raised a hand in greeting to his vulpine roommate-of sorts, before stumbling down the hallway to wash up a bit.

Ten minutes later, he was considerably more alert as he pulled on some clothes, feeling the first stirrings of nervousness at meeting a powerful spirit. “You’re sure the five-tails won’t eat me?” He asked Setsu, again, and the fox bared its teeth at him in what felt like a mock-threat.

“It won’t eat you.” The fox said, slightly exasperated.

“Well, if you’re sure.” Hikaru said, dubiously, and went to investigate breakfast possibilities in the kitchen. Once he had something in his stomach, he got a bag together and left the house, wincing a little at the bite of the increasingly-cold air. “Fuck, this is a cold October.” He muttered, walking briskly to try to get a bit warmer. Setsu trotted along beside him, looking quite smug. “I guess you don’t feel the cold.”
Not embodied, the fox agreed, with a swish of several bushy tails.

“…What does embodied mean?” He asked, first out loud, then he noticed that there were people around and winced.

The fox gave him a look. Obvious, it pointed out.

He reached back in a way he hadn’t tried to do properly for the purposes of communication since, well, Sai. He shaped his thoughts as clearly as he could into a coherent response: Yes, but how? Do you make a body? Possess one?

Setsu shrugged. Make one.

“…Isn’t that meant to be hard to do?” Hikaru asked, vaguely bothered.

He received another you’re-dumb look for his troubles. Yonbi, the fox reminded him.

“Well, how am I supposed to know how strong you have to be to make a body?” He shot back, annoyed, then realised he was talking out loud again. He was really out of practice. The thought of exactly why he was out of practice was ruthlessly suppressed. An unpleasant thought of a different sort occurred to him, and he blurted it out without bothering to worry about nearby people. “Wait, if you’re strong enough to make a body, why hasn’t the demon?” he demanded.

The fox’s aura immediately soured, as it always did when the demon came up in conversation. It has. It said, shortly. Sword.

Hikaru stared. “So, what, it’s not like…a real sword that it’s attached to. The sword is actually its body.”

Very dangerous body. Setsu agreed, darkly, and then shook its head. There was a slight snarl edging its features. Hikaru wanted to ask why he got so bothered every time the demon was discussed, but he was shot a narrow-eyed stare before he could speak, as if the intent had been guessed and thoroughly disapproved of.

Hikaru felt slightly intimidated, and reminded himself of the fan in his hand to reissue some confidence. Still, though, he refrained from asking.

Then, as he walked a bit further, something else became obvious. He squinted into the distance, a little perplexed, and muttered “Are those more wards?” even as he reached out to inspect it himself. It wasn’t the shrine, wasn’t Utagawashi’s house, and was a hell of a lot weaker than even the wards on his own house, but…

The direction of it registered and clarity dawned. “Oh, right, my grandpa finally put up some ofuda.” He realised, becoming a little concerned at the weakness of the wardlight he could feel there. “Man, those wouldn’t keep away one of the one-tails, let alone a demon.” His tone was a little dismayed.

Setsu looked up at him, some of the ire slipping from its frame. A line of bristled fur along its spine settled. Less powerful, less sensitive, less devout. He pointed out. All matters.

So, those were the factors involved, then? “Can I make them any stronger?” He asked, frowning. If not, then there would be basically no point at all in getting Akari to set out some ofuda.

Pray, the fox recommended.

Hikaru blinked. “Yeah, okay.” So now he’d be making offerings for the protection of other people’s
households as well as his own. He wondered at what point Inari got sick of warding people’s houses.
He supposed not many people asked for that sort of protection these days, so maybe it wouldn’t
make a difference?

He pondered the likelihood of getting all of his close friends to ward their houses, and how much
bullshit it would require. He was fairly sure that Akari could be bribed, and Yashiro could probably
be nagged into it….Waya, though, would resist just to be contrary, Touya would refuse unless every
aspect of it was explained to him, and Isumi…he had no idea about Isumi. That guy could be weirdly
unpredictable sometimes. He considered his chances of stealthily planting ofuda without the various
occupants knowing about it, and decided them exceptionally low. Unless…Hikaru eyed Setsu.

The fox’s ears flickered, the movement in the soul itself feeling like suspicious/wary. It angled itself
slightly towards him as they walked. Query? It asked, expectant.

“Would you plant ofuda in my friends’ houses for me?” He inquired. “I couldn’t do it, because
whenever I’m over at their places they expect me to play Go with them. But you’re sneaky, you
could do it.”

Setsu sighed. No.

“Not even if I buy you fresh inarizushi?” He prodded, temptingly.

The fox’s aura wavered, then clamped down firmly on itself. No, it repeated.

Hikaru hadn’t really expected anything different, but even so…“Why?” He asked. “Because you’re
meant to be following me?”

Sort-of, it hedged, then relented. Ask small ones, maybe.

He took a moment to parse that. “…One-tails, you mean?” He clarified, and watched the assent
flicker in the other spirit. “Can they even carry ofuda? Can they, um, embody?”

Most, no. Setsu rolled its eyes. Inari ofuda are easy to carry, though.

“Hmm,” Hikaru tapped his fan against his other hand, thoughtfully. “Well, I might try that, then.
Thanks.” All of the small foxes seemed pretty spread out at the moment, though, and it wasn’t like he
had any more ofuda packs at the moment, anyway.

He’d have considered following up the matter and asking how exactly incorporeal foxes would go
about putting corporeal ofuda onto corporeal things, but…well, he was getting pretty close to the
shrine. And that five-tails…it’s light was increasingly overwhelming. Sort of like the demon had
been, but without the accompanying aggression and madness and lust-for-blood. He fell quiet as he
approached, a sort of instinctive part of him saying excuse me, I notice you’re approaching
something very strong, would you like to reconsider-

Hikaru regarded the torii, took a steadying breath, and strode the final metres to pass beneath it, the
shrine’s otherness washing over him even as he found himself vaguely blinded by the wards again.
And then, of course, there was the fox.

He stopped and stared for several seconds before he remembered his shrine etiquette and went to
purify himself. Utagawashi apparently felt him and approached while he was at it. The two-tail that
had been shadowing him went to greet Setsu, their varied tails flickering all over the place. It seemed
to be a happy greeting.

“Shindou-kun,” The priest greeted, happily. “That five-tails you said is here – I can feel it!”
“If you couldn’t, I’d be seriously worried.” He said, drying himself off and turning to the priest. His eyes slid, irrevocably, to the bright shape sat beside the fox statue where they’d made offerings, before. Cautiously, he brushed by the priest and approached it.

It was big. Bigger than Setsu by a pretty large margin. He’d seen bears smaller than this thing – black bears, mind you, which weren’t that big, but the point remained: it was big. In terms of appearance, it was the same as all the other Inari foxes – white all over, except for the black ears and the red bib-scarf thing around its neck. It stood quite still, its eyes calm as it regarded him, and five tails billowed gently around it.

The feeling of its actual spirit was immensely bright. Brighter than the wards, certainly.

When Hikaru felt he was at a respectable distance, he offered a short bow of greeting. “It’s good to meet you.” He offered, as politely as he was capable of. “I’m Shindou Hikaru.”

The gobi inclined its large head. Unlike Setsu, this fox’s eyes were vividly blue. Well met, human child. it whispered to him, reaching out with a faint tendril of its presence to touch him with the thought. It didn’t offer a name of its own.

Utagawashi came to stand beside him, looking where he was looking. “You can see it?” He asked, lowly. “Hear it?”

“Well, easy.” He nodded, eyes still riveted on the rather powerful spirit. “It’s…really not trying to hide. At all.” Amusement flickered from the five-tails, and a tail or two twitched at the tips. He turned to it, feeling both intimidated and vaguely awkward. “You’re…here because of the demon, right?”

The five-tails remained calm, pristine, and positively incandescent. Yes, it agreed.

“Why this shrine?” He asked, carefully. “I’ve got some foxes following me, and so’s Utagawashi, and I guess that’s because Kaminaga might come after us. But why this shrine?”

It seemed to approve of the question. When the enemy breaks free, it said, each thought-word burning into his mind with the near-heat sensation of its power. It will come for you. This shrine is closest: you will bring it here. This will be the battleground.

There was the distinct sensation of hairs rising on the back of his neck at the words. So, the foxes were here because they thought the demon was going to completely break free of Kaminaga’s restraints? “We…have an exorcist coming, though.” He said, uneasily. “An onmyouji. If he can’t exorcise the demon…can’t he…I dunno, re-seal it? It’s not completely out yet, so…” Hikaru shrugged, well aware that he knew precisely fuck all about how demons or apparently-sealed demons worked.

The gobi blinked, slow. Perhaps. Was its response.

A skilled human may be able to seal it again, and put the threat away for another thousand years. Then we would not be needed.

Hikaru stared. “…Thousand years?” He repeated, weakly.

It is very old. The fox informed him, sedately. The eldest remaining in this world, yet sealed for a very long time. The last time it threatened to break free was nearly a millennium past – it was resealed, then. There was a shrug of tails. Perhaps history will repeat itself.

“Shindou-kun.” Utagawashi said, with a quiet insistence. Hikaru looked over and found him looking quite impatient for a translation. He held up a hand in a universal ‘wait’ gesture and returned his eyes to the fox.
“Can’t you seal it?” He pressed.

Its ears flicked. *That is beyond my power.*

“Shindou-kun.” The priest repeated, more firmly, while Hikaru was puzzling over that response. Some human guy could plausibly seal a seriously old demon, but a spirit as strong as this one couldn’t? That was…weird.

“So, the five-tails says that demon’s seriously old.” Hikaru explained, distractedly. “And that maybe it can be sealed again, but all the foxes are around in case it can’t be, and they have to fight it.” He hesitated, and added “I’m supposed to come here if it comes for me.” He would much rather abscond to Osaka again, but…if Kaminaga came in the middle of the night again, it wasn’t like he could get to the train station, so the shrine really would be the best place to head to.

“Then, Arakawa-san should be aiming to seal it?” Utagawashi asked, and Hikaru nodded. “In that case, I suppose I ought to contact him and tell him so.”

“Make sure to mention that there’s foxes everywhere.” Hikaru suggested. “I don’t think spirits like this guy—” he jerked a thumb in the direction of the five-tails, “—show up without a good reason. Might finally convince him that we’re right.”

Utagawashi eyed him disapprovingly, possibly because of his blasé way of referencing the gobi, and nodded. “True.” He murmured, extracting his phone from somewhere in his robes. Hikaru experienced a brief flash of disorientation, watching it, as he wondered if that was where Sai would keep a phone if for some bizarre reason he had one. The priest typed somewhat slowly and awkwardly on the keypad, then apparently sent off the message because he put the thing away again. Then he looked at Hikaru. “Why was it you came here today?” He asked, curiously.

“Mainly I wanted to meet the five-tails.” He answered, glancing briefly in its direction. “But also I wanted to see that message from Kaminaga.” He remembered what Setsu had said on the walk over. “And also get some more ward ofuda.”

“More, really?” Utagawashi questioned, disbelievingly. “For who?”

“My friends.” Hikaru shrugged, deeply uncomfortable at the topic. “I wouldn’t put it past that bastard to take someone hostage to get me to meet him.” Seeing the look on Utagawashi’s face, he added “if he gets more possessed, anyway.”

The priest stared at him for several seconds. “Tell me, Shindou-kun.” He said, pensively. “You can feel warded houses from a distance, correct?”

Hikaru frowned at him. “Yeah, duh.”

“So, Kaminaga-san almost certainly has that ability as well. Wouldn’t warding their houses just be…well, marking them out? It isn’t as though the inhabitants can tell when he is nearby, and stay inside.”

He stared at the priest in horror, then turned to Setsu. “Why didn’t you mention that?” he demanded, noticing just after he spoke that there was a feeling of chagrined surprise in the fox. It hadn’t thought of the danger, either?

The four-tails flicked all four tail-tips at him, its aura moving a little guiltily. *I can’t think of everything.* It claimed. *Besides, would still be useful for other spirits.* Hesitation. *Best wait, though.*

“What about Akari?” Hikaru considered the weak wards around his grandfather’s house with renewed horror. “She lives right next door to me. Is it worth getting her house protected?”
Indecision flexed in the yonbi’s energy. *Probably not.* It concluded, after some thought.

Hikaru scowled a little, and rounded on Utagawashi. “Why did you even give my grandpa the ofuda?” He asked, shuffling with agitation.

“…It was a few days ago.” The kannushi admitted, with a quiet sigh. “He must have taken his time, putting them up. Remember, it’s only recently that I became aware that ofuda could make a detectable ward at all.” There was a slightly pointed note to his last sentence, as if he were saying *stop taking your worry out on other people.*

“Bah.” He muttered, forcing his shoulders out of their uncomfortable hunching. He glanced around and found the five-tails looking exactly as peaceful and unruffled as it had the whole time. It was kind of annoying, actually. Was it completely unconcerned by everything that was going on? Was it so confident in its skills? Why all the doom and gloom, then? “Well. I guess, tell that monk guy that he’s going to need to seal the sword?” He suggested, suddenly very tired of the conversation. “Let me know how it goes, alright? I’m going to go…” He waved, unenthusiastically. “Home, I guess.”

Utagawashi eyed him. “Alright,” He agreed, slowly. Hikaru might have tried to figure out what that expression implied, but he was abruptly very sick of absolutely everything and did not have the patience.

“Okay.” He said, and then turned to stomp out of the shrine grounds without so much as a goodbye.

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Hikaru spent the walk home sinking more and more thoroughly into his own bad mood, irrationally bothered by everything. Like, cars. Why did they have to be driving down roads when he needed to cross them? Why couldn’t they be driving past a few seconds earlier, or later? And, ugh, *weather.* The wind kept blowing strands of his getting-too-long hair into his mouth and it was far more annoying than it had any right to be. The air was cold and annoying, his fingers were numb and that was also annoying, and *everything sucked.*

Setsu kept a little more distant than on the walk out, and didn’t attempt to communicate with him, which Hikaru was grateful for. He was probably not fit for company at the moment. He arrived home and divested himself of his outerwear, except he was too irritably impatient about it and turned his coat sleeve inside out and caught his sleeve on the zip-

Hikaru snarled at his clothing and pulled some threads loose with his less-than-graceful yanking, kicked his shoes into their place, then stormed upstairs. He closed his door with perhaps more force than was necessary and then flopped almost aggressively into his bed, face-first.

He breathed into the covers, breath making them uncomfortably warm against his face, and contemplated how utterly *sick* he was of this whole ridiculous situation. Why the fuck did he have to get a demon after him? Why did it have to be *the oldest one still around,* for god’s sake? He didn’t *want* to be worrying for his life, or Utagawashi’s life, or his grandpa’s life, or his friends’ lives, or *anyone’s lives.* He was a fucking *teenager.* He should be worrying about being awful at karaoke, or something equally senseless. He didn’t *want* to have to worry about being possessed, and for that matter he didn’t *want* to have to deal with his fucked up soul either, or the constant grief and shitty dreams and…fuck, everything. He was so damned *sick* of it all.

He spent several miserable minutes face-down in his duvet, feeling thoroughly sorry for himself, and…really, very tired. It was *exhausting,* having to maintain force-of-will at all times, having to constantly modulate despair with determination, but if he stopped he’d be depressed and hopeless and useless on top of everything else and that wouldn’t do him any good, would it?
Hikaru experienced, for a moment, a very strong urge to abscond to Osaka and just not worry about the demon. Arakawa and the foxes would deal with it, right? Except, the five-tails seemed to have a plan that involved him being the bait. Was that necessary? Was it really necessary?

He extracted his face from the bedding, blinking blearily. Setsu was present, but was keeping its aura quiet.

“Why do I need to be here to be the bait?” He asked, voice sounding kind of dull even to his own ears. “I’m pretty sure Utagawashi could draw Kaminaga and the demon to the shrine without me. Can’t I go and hide for a week?” He rolled onto his side, so as not to strain his neck.

Setsu raised its head and looked at him. Its eyes were dark, and there was a quiet grimness to its own mood. *Your choice.* Was all it said, but its aura…twisted. Resignation. *I won’t go with you.* It added, after a moment.

Hikaru eyed it tiredly. “You’d stay here, to fight the demon?”

The fox sighed, and wrapped all four tails around itself. *Yes.*

“You don’t seem too happy about that.” He said, in what was a fairly significant understatement.

*I don’t want to die.* It said, simply, and wow that was depressing-

“Very optimistic.” His mouth said, and Hikaru felt pretty disconnected from it. “You’ve got a five-tailed fox with you. Don’t you think that will be enough?”

*If it comes to a fight?* No. The fox’s black mood was, by this point, nearly a mirror of his own.

Hikaru stared at the wall behind the fox. “Why fight then? If you’re just going to die?” Every word out of his mouth depressed him more, fucking hell.

*Because,* Setsu said, with a quiet dignity. *Evils like that one should not exist. I can fight it, so I will.* Weary, forced humour. *I might even win.*

*Fuck you,* Hikaru thought, and wasn’t entirely certain he stopped himself from projecting it. But…just…fuck it. *Fuck everything.* “And I guess I, with my wondrous magical fan, would make a difference.” He said, flatly.

The fox lifted its head, staring at him carefully. *Well. Yes.* It offered. The thought-words felt neutral, but…there was a little spark of hope there. Small. Cautious. Guarding against disappointment, like Hikaru did when he thought of finding Sai. Ugh.

Hikaru collapsed heavily into the bed. “Okay.” He told the pillow, fed up but resigned. “Okay.”

That was that, then.

*It is your choice,* the fox insisted, after a couple of minutes of silence had passed. *I chose to fight. You don’t have to.*

Hikaru raised his head just enough to speak clearly. “It’s not a choice.” He pointed out, voice far calmer than he felt. “Not really. Even if I wanted to hide – you’d just die, and then…I can’t stay in Osaka forever, you know? I’d have to come back.” *And then I’d get eaten,* went unsaid. The fox stared at him, but didn’t try to deny it. “Besides,” He added, allowing his face to fall again, and muffling the remaining words with bedding. “I’m…not that much of a dick, you know.”
What the hell else could he do, except agree to stay and join the fight? It wasn’t a choice. Not at all. Not with Utagawashi’s life on the line, and Setsu’s, and maybe even his own. Sai would be seriously disappointed in me if I left, I think, he mused to himself, and the harsh yank on his emotions went a long way towards solidifying his resolve. Still, what a shitty decision to have to make…

Setsu’s aura twisted, conflicted emotions stamped there. In the end, it didn’t say anything.

He breathed into fabric for a couple more minutes, then got so sick of being awake with his thoughts and no distraction that he pulled his phone out and stared at it, briefly. Then he dialled Yashiro’s number. It went to the answer box, but more or less as soon as he’d cancelled it off he got called back.

“What’s up?” The other boy’s voice came with a kind of subtly-veiled urgency, a bit of worry. “Are you bleeding out on the pavement? Is this your goodbye call?” The words were clearly not serious, but there was a very real note of concern there. Hikaru found it abruptly hilarious, and snorted.

“What, you think you’d be who I’d call if I was dying?” He asked, with half-hearted mirth. “Not, like, my mum?”

“I bet I’m up there on the last-message list.” He said, with certainty. “You’re too much of a headache to have that many close friends. I’m definitely in the top five.”

Hikaru listened to this proprietary bullshit with a sort of weary bemusement. He was too emotionally wrung out and exhausted to muster a very strong reaction to anything, but… “Yeah, you’re totally right.” He admitted, rolling over and allowing his back to sink into the mattress.

“Naturally.” Yashiro said, sounding a bit more genuinely nonchalant now and less like he was preparing to call in the cavalry. “So, what’s up with the call? That’s not usually your thing.”

Hikaru considered that. “I’m bored.” He lied, because it was much less complicated than saying ‘my thoughts are currently the devil and I desperately need distraction’. “You want to do some blind Go over the phone?”

“What, and you don’t have any salons to go to?”

“I could go play Touya, but I think he’s going to torture me for information the next time I see him.” He informed the other professional. “Ideally I want to play someone that can absolutely destroy me, but if I spend too much time around Ogata he tries to blackmail me, and I don’t have the numbers of any other title holders.”

“…I don’t even know where to start answering that.” Yashiro decreed. “I guess I’m flattered I’m your next choice? But...what the fuck is Ogata Judan blackmailing you about?”

“This NetGo player he thinks I know something about.” Hikaru replied, with a twinge of pain. “He’s only trying, though. It’s not gonna work.”

“…So you do know something about the NetGo player?”

His bullshit reserves were pretty low at this point. He paused, and said “Yeah, but if you tell anyone I said that I’ll deny it until I die.” He shook his head. “Anyway, blind go or no blind go?”

“I hardly want to let you go off and get blackmailed by some title holder with a drinking problem, do I?” Yashiro answered, wryly. “Sure, I can manage a game. Who has black?”

“You take it. Let’s play without komi, too.”
The other boy whistled. “Want a challenge, huh?”

“I literally just told you that I do. Are you going to play or not?” A hint of impatience, now.

“Duh. Hm…16-4.”

Hikaru relaxed into the bed, and put the goban into his mind. “4-4.” He answered, and the game was on.

As he’d hoped, the mental focus involved in visualising each of the moves while simultaneously thinking very far ahead was more than sufficient to distract him from his woes. The game took forty minutes, was a loss for him, and went a long way towards gaining him some equilibrium. Once the discussion had been concluded, he felt considerably more human.

“Thanks, Yashiro.” He said, building the prelude to hanging up. “Good game.”

“I beat you for once.” The other boy said, with good cheer.

“So of course it was. Anyway, remember to message this evening. You know the drill.”

Hikaru blinked. “Why? I’ve just been on the phone with you for like an hour.”

“You could easily get slaughtered in the next few hours.” He explained.

“I’m probably not gonna leave the house again today, so…nah.”

“Remember you can always come stay here for a few days, and not have to worry about death by crazy swordsman.”

Hikaru eyed his ceiling ponderously. “Yeah, sure.” He said, wistfully. “I’ll let you know if I decide to flee to your waiting bosom.”

Yashiro snorted. “You do that.” He said. “Remember to message.” Then, without further ado, he hung up.

He sat up, after a few minutes, and contemplated his not-quite-empty room. He looked at Setsu, who had largely ignored the half of a blind game he’d been privy to, and who was curled up in a corner again. He eyed the fox thoughtfully.

It lifted its head. “What?”

“Could you get a fox to disrupt my grandpa’s wards?” He asked, leaning forwards. “Like, pluck a couple of ofuda off the walls, get the wards off of the house so Kaminaga can’t sense them?”

Setsu tilted its head, apparently considering it, then produced a really loud spike of his spirit that felt like an oddly specific concept. Hikaru made a face, having no idea of where to start with interpreting something like that, and then was distracted by the small white fox that approached with alarming speed.

Four-tails-called? It yipped, delightedly, curling around the much larger fox with its single tail flicking and frolicking. It occurred to Hikaru that the oddly specific concept might have been some sort of…like, a name? Some kind of identifier?

Go to weak-ward-place and steal master-ofuda. Enough to break-down wardlight. Setsu instructed, every dip and ripple of its aura easily ‘audible’ to Hikaru, and weirdly different from what he was used to. It was…concise, and again, oddly specific. What would have been longer thoughts were
squashed down into something weirdly-shaped but much quicker to communicate with. It was kind of like the difference between using the kanji for something or writing it all out in hiragana, he decided, oddly fascinated by it.

The small fox’s reaction to its task was best translated as ooooh, with its aura twisting in noticeable patterns of pleased-to-receive-task as well as delight-at-mischief and a bit of sneaky-sneaky-me frittering into everything. Hikaru watched with bemusement as some more tail frolicking occurred, the little fox twisted in a happy circle, and then absconded as quickly as it had come.

“…Do you, like, have a spirity language?” He asked, honestly intrigued, and Setsu returned its focus to him.

Less a language, more a way of…abbreviating. Patterns-of-thought. Setsu hedged, and that last bit felt like its own…well, thought-kanji, if he was going to use that metaphor. It was kind of weird, because if he paid attention it was really obvious what was being communicated, but it was…arranged differently.

Hikaru thought of the very specific concept grouping that seemed to be the small fox’s name, and tried to twist his own energy into the same shape. Setsu openly snickered at his attempt, and reproduced the pattern for reference, in the spiritual equivalent of large print. He squinted, and tried again, coming a little closer this time. It felt…weird. How was he even doing it?

Hikaru took a very close look at what he was doing, perplexed. It didn’t seem like a soul in as dire a state as his should be able to move that way, after all. But…it wasn’t quite the same thing, was it? When he reached out with his senses, it wasn’t really his soul that was stretching. It was…something else. Something that was really hard to quantify as anything other than ‘spiritual energy’…which was the same stuff his soul was made of. Hikaru found himself suddenly very full of questions regarding the nature and composition of souls, and what exactly he was using to try to spell out some random fox’s name.

Instead, he asked “Do all spirits have a…name thing, like that?” Then, before Setsu could answer: “Is it some sort of bullshit fantasy true-name, or something?”

Setsu stuck out its tongue and made a rude noise. Then it laughed at him. No, dumb child. It said. We choose the names. They contain information about ourselves that we are comfortable sharing. Look at the little one’s name.

Hikaru peered at it, closely. It was so specific, way more complicated than the concept-thought, but if he really looked at it, it was shaped like recognisable things. This one mainly had likes-to-sneak-around in it, with enthusiastic overtones of really-likes-Inarisama-because-Inarisama-is-cool. It was kind of like reading the online profile of a twelve-year-old, actually. “…I’m guessing you can change these, then.” He said, reluctantly amused. He could imagine that lots of spirits would end up with names that embarrassed them eventually, otherwise.

Yes. Usually every few decades or so. Setsu nodded, then looked at him pensively. I changed my own recently. Look. A new shape-concept formed, much more streamlined-feeling than the younger fox’s had been. There was almost a handwriting difference, in a sense – as if the younger fox’s name had been messily formed, and this one was composed with long practice and care.

Bestows-obscure-knowledge, said Setsu’s name-concept. Explains-the-way-of-things. Another part stated has-four-tails. There was also a weird sort of add-on to it, shaped like attached-to-this-one with the hint of someone else’s name there.

Hikaru attempted to form it, very awkwardly, and received a lot of toothy laughter for his troubles.
He scowled and made several more attempts, becoming progressively neater about it, and wondered a little at the contents of Setsu’s name. “So, like, did you translate that into Japanese when you called yourself Setsu?” He inquired. “If you write it with the character for ‘theory’, it would sort of match.”

Yes, the fox confirmed, several tail-tips twitching. It was evidently enjoying the topic, and very entertained by his fumbling attempts to shape its name.

“What’s this bit on the end?” Hikaru asked, isolating the bit that seemed to be referring to another spirit.

Setsu appeared to consider his words. It shaped the name, which read like *clarity-of-thought-and-purpose*, and then said *is my wife.*

Hikaru eyed the fox, taken-aback. “Spirits get married?” He asked, dubiously.

The four-tails bared its teeth. *Have you never heard of a fox wedding?*

He had, actually. Just a little piece of folklore most people heard at some point, generally when there was rain from a mostly-sunny sky and the older people started talking knowingly about sun-showers and fox’s weddings. The general gist of it seemed to be that a sun-shower indicated that some foxes were getting married, and if you showed up uninvited something unspecified but bad would happen to you.

“…Huh.” Hikaru said, not knowing what else to say on the matter. He tried to shape Setsu’s name again, and managed it a bit better this time. “Do all spirits have these?”

*All spirits who interact with other spirits. Or most.* Setsu shrugged its shoulders in a furry shift of muscles. *You could choose one, if you wanted?*

Hikaru stared. “I wouldn’t know where to *start.*”

*But then you could introduce yourself like a civilized spirit.* Setsu grinned at him again, the spirit-words forming a mocking undertone.

“I’m not a spirit.” He pointed out, shaping *obvious* in his own energy for emphasis. Then he paused. “How would you say ‘Go’ in spirity language thing?”

Setsu pushed a word at him, because there was apparently a specific and fairly complex word for Go which was composed of *old-game-of-stars-in-black-and-white.* It was very pretty, actually. Poetic, even. Hikaru eyed the word, fascinated, and then set swiftly to work trying to reproduce it.

He spent the next couple of hours soliciting various word-concepts from Setsu and practicing them until he could shape them pretty fluently, especially the one for Go.

By the end of the evening, he’d settled on something simple, but effective. Setsu assured him he could change it in a timespan shorter than ‘decades’ if he wanted to, so for now, Hikaru would be introducing himself with a concept shaped like *Go-playing-human-boy-on-a-quest.*

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The main problem with Monday was that he had the Serizawa study session to go to. This itself was not precisely a problem, but…well, Touya also attended the Serizawa study sessions. Which meant that the boy would have another opportunity to corner him and start the interrogations.

Hikaru woke up feeling mildly apprehensive about this, and bothered Setsu about his name-shape to
take his mind off of it.

“How’s this?” He asked, forming the pattern of it more quickly and efficiently than he’d been able to the night before. “Anything I can do to clean it up?”

Setsu rolled its eyes at him, but obligingly inspected his spiritual ‘handwriting’ for him. Your young-male pattern needs work. It pronounced, after some thought, and demonstrated the shape which translated approximately to ‘boy’, switching between what he was doing and what it should look like to outline the difference. Hikaru inspected it, and tried to correct the pattern, receiving a nod of approval for it.

“What else?” He’d practiced the ‘Go’ pattern religiously, almost literally, so he was quite sure he wasn’t making any mistakes there. It was a really nice one, too. Aesthetically pleasing, in a way that was hard to describe. He was full of approval for one of his favourite things having such a nice representation.


Hikaru acquiesced, focusing. Go-playing human boy on a quest, he shaped, again and again, as quickly as he could. From what he’d seen, spirits were generally very speedy about the presentation of their name-shapes, and he wasn’t quite up to par. Go-playing human boy on a quest, he repeated, and idly wondered what Sai’s shape would be.

All spirits who interact with other spirits, Setsu had said. Sai, to his knowledge, had never interacted with other spirits.

Hikaru wanted, badly, to ask Setsu about ghosts. He was fairly sure that the fox would answer him. Hell, that was in its name. ‘Explains the way of things’ was very definitely in there. He would finally, finally have answers. He could ask. He could ask now.

Hikaru opened his mouth, wavered, and did not ask.

Setsu looked at him, curious, because he was surely displaying fear for all the spirits around to see, but he…couldn’t ask. He’d been searching for answers for so long, and now they were close enough to grasp, but…

Coward, he told himself, savagely, but failed to struggle through the terror of what answers might be forthcoming.

Query? Setsu asked, and he shook his head at the fox.

“Not now.” He said, and pressed the answer into his mind. Later, he told himself. I’ll ask, but later. And, he reasoned, it was even logical. It was possible that Setsu would have answers he really didn’t want to hear, after all. The loss of any part of his resolution could prove seriously, substantially bad when there was this demon thing going on – he really couldn’t afford to collapse into a despairing sack of flesh when lives were at risk.

It made sense. It was a bit of a stretch, but it did make sense. It still didn’t remove the scathing thread of thought that accused him of cowardice, though.

“Is it rude to make spirit name things for other people?” He asked, instead of what he really should have been asking.

Setsu blinked at him. Who?
“Like... human people I know who probably won’t ever be able to make their own names.” He said, a little evasively.

The pattern in the spirit said *not-a-problem*. Setsu added after a pause *some spirits refer to others with self-made names for them. Only done by close-friends, though. Rude otherwise.*

Hikaru really wasn’t sure how he’d spirit-name any of his friends. He wasn’t nearly familiar enough with its conventions to try. But, he supposed Touya could be easiest? Something like Go-playing-rival-boy? He knew most of that already.

After a break for thought, he asked after the shaping of *rival*, and then had a name for one of his friends. That he would probably never use. Still, Setsu informed him that it was a pretty standard sort of friend-name.

*Usually involves reference to your connection. ‘Rival’, here. Setsu explained. Sometimes, can include reference to events, or close-held-humour.* That last bit, itself, was a weird looking concept, which turned out to translate to ‘inside jokes’.

And then suddenly Hikaru had an idea for Yashiro, and later, a name which Setsu decreed a perplexing but typical example of the inside-joke type friend name. Yashiro was christened *Go-playing-boy-I-made-a-dog-with*, and it was wonderful. Pity he’d never have opportunity to use it.

He was half-way through contemplating a name for Akari when his phone rang. He fished it out of his pocket, slightly wary, and then became even more so when he saw that it was Utagawashi calling. He answered, and wondered if this was what Yashiro had felt like when he called – guarded and concerned. “What’s up?”

“*Good news,*” Utagawashi said, voice very pleased, and Hikaru cautiously allowed himself some optimism at the words. Not too much, though.

“What kind of good news?” He asked.

“*Apparently Arakawa-san trusts me enough to know I wouldn’t lie about the presence of foxes. And he considers it a worrying sign that they’re here.*” The priest said, a little triumphant. “*He’s coming earlier. Should arrive here late Thursday afternoon.*”

A slight thrill of shock, and a weird suspense, jolted through him. “What, really?” He said, taken-aback.

“*Indeed.*” Utagawashi confirmed. “*He wants to see the foxes for himself, and also to meet you, Shindou-kun. After that he’ll be taking a late train to Yokohama.*”

“He thinks he can seal the demon?” Hikaru wasn’t sure what to think. Part of him had put the monk, very firmly, into ‘unreliable adult’ category, and from there on he had fully expected to not be able to rely on the guy to do anything sensible. It was a bit weird to try to mentally reclassify him as a decent human being. “Did you mention how the foxes all think it’s super bad news?”

“*Obviously.*” The man said, a little tartly. “*He’s bringing a sealing receptacle, and a small fortune in ofuda and blessed items.*”

Setsu, by this point, was looking *very* interested. It was sat upright, ears fully erect and twitching in Hikaru’s direction. *I will speak with this one.* It said, and Hikaru blinked at it.

“The monk?” He asked, and the fox nodded. Utagawashi made a sound of confusion over the phone and he returned his attention there. “Setsu says that it’ll speak to Arakawa. I guess maybe to pass on
some tips or advice or something?” The fox nodded again. “Yeah.”

Utagawashi was silent for a few seconds. “And the five-tails?”

Hikaru looked inquiringly at Setsu, whose furry shoulders shrugged. “Dunno.” He related, in response to the gesture.

“I’ll send a message that the four-tailed fox apparently wants to speak to him, then.” He sighed. “Well, that was all I had to tell you. Is there anything new on your end?”

He mulled it over, and decided that his having to stay in the path of danger was still too raw a topic for him to be comfortable discussing. “Not really.”

“I’ll get back to work, then.” As usual, he provided no further conversational embellishments before he hung up.

Hikaru put down his phone, and wondered what to do for the rest of the day, until the afternoon’s study session. Finding someone to play would be the sensible thing, but…

He thought. He looked over at Setsu. “Hey. You’ve seemed kind of interested in it, so – do you play Go?”

The fox’s ears perked with interest. I dabble, it said, and inched closer, eyeing the goban.

Hikaru was eyeing the goban himself. “Can you hold the stones?” he noticed that Setsu’s paws did not look especially good at the fine sort of coordination that stone placement required. And it was a spirit, besides.

Setsu considered it. Could embody, but not necessary. It trotted up to the goban, sat at one side of it, and then unexpectedly dissolved into an amorphous blur of spiritual light. Hikaru jolted in shock, brandishing his fan as the light swiftly turned spherical, gaining the appearance of a kind of glassy-looking object, the size of a tennis ball and approximately the ‘colour’ of Setsu’s soul. Sort of an amber-gold, maybe?

It didn’t keep the shape for long. White surged outwards from the sphere in another bright, amorphous mess, and swiftly reformed into a not-quite-human looking thing.

Hikaru stared. “What the fuck?” He expressed.

Setsu blinked at him out of a vaguely human-shaped form that was mainly made of translucent, shimmering light. The amber eyes were there, and the red neckerchief thing, but everything else was…indistinct. There was the suggestion of white clothes, maybe along the lines of a basic yukata, but nothing like facial features. The four tails were there, though, as similarly vague-looking lines of light. Lazy transformation, Setsu explained, and waggled a hand full of white, glowing fingers at him. They were the most solid-looking part of the spirit. Easier than embodying. And has hands.

“That’s the weirdest thing I’ve ever seen.” Hikaru said, half-shocked and half-fascinated. He was certain he was being laughed at but there was no facial feature to suggest it – just the tell-tale movement in the soul. “I guess you can take a proper human shape too, then? Like in all the stories?”

If I embody, Setsu agreed, vague head-shape inclining. Would prefer not to use that much energy now, though. It delicately avoided mentioning the demon.

Hikaru stared for several more seconds, then sighed explosively and went to sit by the goban. “Well, what the hell.” He said, settling in seiza and reaching for a bowl. “You’ve seen me play. Do you
want a handicap, or…” he thought. He was not going to accept a handicap, even if Setsu was way stronger than him. “Well, I dunno.”

Setsu scrutinised the board. Or, well, it seemed like it was scrutinising the board. It was hard to tell when it lacked all facial features except for eyes, and even the eyes were just sort of amber-coloured slits. *I will take black.* It said, finally. *No ‘komi’.*

He nodded, and passed the black stones over, watching as fingers made of bright white light closed around the bowl. That implied Setsu thought it was at a lower level than he was, then. He took the white stone bowl and set it to his side, the lid next to it, and contemplated his situation. Here he was, about to play Go with a spirit several hundred years his senior, for the first time in years. It was kind of a painful position to be in, with reminiscence stabbing at him every other second, but…just different enough, in a number of ways. It wasn’t so bad.

Hikaru sighed, and eyed the spirit across the goban before he looked down. “Well then, let’s play.” He said, and bowed. “Onegaishimasu.”

A very specific-looking concept shape formed across from him as the bright shape bowed, and the game began.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter notes: So, in this chapter, the spirit naming thing spontaneously arose the moment that Setsu called for the one-tail. I absolutely had not planned it before then, but it fits in so nicely. The chapter itself was meant to cover a lot more ground than it did, but chapter 19 more than makes up for it - available on tumblr here: https://tenspontaneite.tumblr.com/post/165412107211/paper-cranes-chapter-19

General notes: Chapter 19 itself is 14k long! It's an absolute beast, and brings us all the way to the cusp of the arc climax, which chapter 20 will cover. There's a bit of a cliffhanger. In addition, I've had a bonus scene from Kaminaga's perspective written for coming on a year now, and it's one of my proudest examples of writing. It covers an off-screen event that occurs during Chapter 19. When Chapter 19 arrives here, I'll be posting a separate story for it, and any future bonus scenes/alternate POV things I write in this universe. Working title is 'Paper Chains'.

And, another note! We are kind of in the leadup to 2000 kudos and that excites me a lot. I have no idea how that even happens in a fandom this small. I mean, I know some people find ways to give extra kudos, but otherwise...Where on earth are you all coming from? Blimey.

I'm seriously looking forward to people's responses to the next couple chapters. The arc climax is almost upon us: I hope everyone enjoys the ride.

04/06/18 – minor edits
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

Hikaru meets a monk.

Chapter Notes

Cliffhanger warning (Note: chapter 20 is up on tumblr, and is not a cliffhanger).
Also: new story will be published in series. See end notes for details.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It really shouldn’t have been surprising that a spirit with several centuries under its belt would have old-ass joseki. But it was.

Hikaru played somewhat haltingly in response to the downright antique sequences of stones and responses that Setsu laid down. On one hand, it was just profoundly weird to see the moves the fox made – almost as if he’d gone in expecting a conversation in Japanese and been greeted with Korean instead. While no Go game was the same, and no player played the same way, there were just certain sequences of moves and responses that were standard. Accepted. You conducted them in different ways and different places and at different times, but you expected your opponent to behave in a certain way to certain moves.

However long ago Setsu had learned Go, or however long ago it had last seriously played it…those accepted patterns, accepted joseki, had really changed. It was, he thought, even more dated than Sai’s Go had been, in the beginning.

Some of it, though…some of it was almost familiar. Whenever Setsu had learned Go, it wasn’t that far removed from Shuusaku’s time. And that kind of hit like a punch to the lungs.

Still. Hikaru had read a hell of a lot of old kifu. He knew a lot of this joseki. And he also knew why some of those patterns weren’t standard practice anymore. Sai, after all, had become horrifically powerful once he’d adapted, far more so than he’d been before.

As a result, while Setsu’s standard of play led Hikaru to think ‘weak shodan’, or maybe ‘likely contender for pro exams’, he was quite sure that a bit of practice would see the fox displaying a far greater level of skill.

Once the difference in advantage began to yawn between them, Hikaru settled more-or-less on reflex into a teaching role, though he didn’t speak. He left the offensive, and prodded at the weak spots in that old, old armour. Just enough to threaten, not enough to cut. Setsu took a while to realise it had lost – another indicator of being very out of practice – but did so eventually, a flicker of resignation sparking in its energy just before it actually bowed to resign.

“Interesting game.” Hikaru said, and he was being entirely honest. “Been a long time since I saw joseki that old.”
Setsu shuffled its glowing, indistinct shape. *Haven’t played Go in long-stretch-of-years,* it admitted, and ‘Go’ was again *old-game-of-stars-in-black-and-white,* that very lovely looking word.

“Yeah, I can tell. I figure the last time you were playing properly was…” he squinted at the board. “…Two hundred fifty years ago, ish? No more recent than two hundred.”

Setsu’s featureless head tilted. *You know the game very well.*

“A hell of a lot better than you do.” He agreed, remorselessly, and grinned. “C’mon then, let’s discuss it. There’s a reason some of the plays you used aren’t done any more.” He began to remove stones from the board, fixing the game carefully in his mind. A flicker of light caught his eye, and when he looked up, Setsu’s vaguely humanoid shape was melding into the amber sphere again, expanding into the familiar fox shape a second later. He paused. “What’s with the ball?”

Setsu inspected him, a thread of uneasy caution curling in it, as though it’d been asked something uncomfortably personal. After some hesitation, it formed an unfamiliar but aesthetically pleasing word, made up of *sphere-of-the-light-of-self* and *radiance-of-stars.* Then, carefully, it followed it up with the Japanese: *hoshi no tama.*

“Like in the stories?” He asked, intrigued. He had, in fact, brushed up on his folklore once all the demon stuff had started, so he remembered that fox spirits were sometimes said to have an orb they treasured deeply – a ‘star ball’ that, if ever stolen from them, they would do anything to reclaim.

The fox stared at him, all the while *sensitive-topic* and *desire-to-impart-information* quarrelled in the eddies of its energies. Finally, it conceded. A fox starts as a sphere. The fox shape comes later, with age. Setsu informed. *For all foxes, it is the heart of the soul and the seat of power – destroy it, and the fox dies.*

Hikaru blinked, somewhat taken-aback by the fact that Setsu had actually told him that, if it was such a weakness. “How the hell did anyone steal them, then?”

Setsu shrugged, shoulders and tails. *When embodying, the sphere is physical, too. It is uncomfortable to keep inside our bodies, but if we hold it outside, it is vulnerable to theft and destruction.* It eyed him. *I keep mine always-within. Caution is more important than comfort.*

“But, like, you have to go…into it, kind of, when you transform?”

The fox’s stare was a little baleful, now. *Mid-transformation is a very vulnerable time.* It admitted, begrudgingly.

He considered that. “I’m *touched* that you trusted me to be around for that. Truly.” He said, half-teasing but also half-sincere. He was actually slightly astonished that Setsu *had* trusted him to be around for that. Like, even if he hadn’t intended to, the transformation had been pretty shocking. Hadn’t the fox worried he’d lash out or something?

Setsu bared its teeth at him. *At least my heart isn’t dangling out for any passing maw to snatch at.* It said, severely, and turned pointedly away.

Hikaru recalled his alleged extreme vulnerability to possession in a new light, and grimaced. “Is it that bad?”

The fox shifted slightly back towards him again. *You look delicious,* it offered, in a particularly disconcerting thread of communication. *Like a wounded snake. Get past the teeth, and you’re an easy kill. Almost any spirit would be tempted.*
He brandished his fan, warningly. “I will slap you if you try.” He promised.

Setsu pretended not to hear.

Belatedly, the Go stones in the corner of his vision reminded him what he was meant to be doing, and he said “Anyway, don’t think your exposition gets you out of discussing the game. Sit down and listen up, Setsu.” He said it with an intentional edge of goading; the fox peered at him with narrowed eyes, and pointedly bared its teeth again. Hikaru bared his own right back. It felt oddly natural. Like bantering with Waya, or needling Touya.

**Annoying human boy will offer its lessons.** Setsu conceded, eventually, though its eyes were still somewhat squinty.

Hikaru grinned at the fox, with a few too many teeth showing to be polite. And then he demonstrated, at length, exactly how much Go expertise this annoying human boy had to offer.

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Hikaru arrived purposefully on the edge of late to the Serizawa study session, quite aware of who else would be in attendance. He bowed, apologised for missing sessions, and took his seat by the goban after a few short pleasantries. Finally, once he was settled, he dared to look at Touya, who was of course already present. Abruptly, he felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise.

Touya…was not angry. He was not riled up or frustrated. He did not look even the littlest bit peeved. He looked **intent.**

Shit, Hikaru thought, on reflex, and looked away quickly to seemingly focus all of his attention on Serizawa-sensei. He steadfastly ignored the focused, **intent** stare of his rival as the study session began, and an intriguing game from the Honinbou league was brought into discussion.

Still, though, no matter how intriguing the game was, he…kind of couldn’t properly ignore Touya. Because **determination** was written all over him, like some sort of steely-edged presence that positively yelled to his spirit-sense, and Hikaru didn’t think he was imagining that it seemed directed his way.

**Go-playing-rival-boy?** Setsu inquired, from the side of the room, shaping the name that Hikaru had made to refer to Touya. Hikaru confirmed it with a small sigh. **Amusement.** The fox expressed, with a little curl of curiosity. Hikaru supposed it hadn’t been around for the time when he’d very stubbornly refused to explain his weird actions to Touya, so it wouldn’t know that this particular determination heralded all sorts of difficulty and annoyance for him.

He eyed the goban as Serizawa-sensei put down another stone, and prepared contingency plans for escaping Touya.

Worst comes to worst, he could poke him in the soul and run away, right?

Hikaru considered the idea, then poked Setsu. The fox slapped the extended tendril of energy away and looked at him expectantly. **Is it okay to do that to normal people?** He asked, silently, knowing that it hadn’t seemed to hurt Utagawashi…but Utagawashi was spiritually sensitive. Did that make a difference?
Not a problem. Setsu replied, dismissively, then paused. Light poking only. It added hastily, in a not-quite-reassuring addendum.

He sent back question and watched the ripple of tails.


Hikaru sent the four-tails a very alarmed look. What, like kill them? The thought had something of an exclamation to it, and he barely restrained himself from making suspicious faces in front of the study group.

That is what happens when you remove a human soul from its body, yes. Setsu explained patiently. Perhaps a little sarcastically.

He stared determinedly back at the goban. And I can do that?

The fox considered him. Probably easily. It admitted, and then withdrew to leave Hikaru with that fascinating answer.

Thoughts of Touya mostly forgotten, Hikaru listened to the ongoing discussion as he tried to process the idea that he could apparently kill people with his mind, what the fuck. How did that even work? Were all people as spiritually sensitive as him capable of that? If so, how much more terrified of Kaminaga should he be?

Eventually, he couldn’t hold in the worry and poked Setsu again, demanding can Kaminaga hit a soul out of a body?

The fox stared at him, and rolled its eyes. No.

He exhaled, a quick puff of relief, and tried to look nonchalant at the looks it got him. Why not? He prodded.

Two of Setsu’s tails flicked to the side. Not enough energy. It answered, looking pointedly at the study group. Will explain later.

Hikaru puzzled over the response but nodded, very slightly. Now was not the time for exposition. He couldn’t help being rather frazzled, though – it wasn’t every day you learned that you had unexpectedly become capable of doing severe harm to your fellow humans with almost no effort.

As a result, he was perhaps not as quick to leave as he could have been, when the study session ended.

“Shindou.” Touya said to him, almost pleasantly, a second after intent had borne down on him so intensely that Hikaru noticed his presence. He looked over, alarmed, and found absolute, indomitable willpower on his rival’s face.

Nice, Setsu said, appreciatively, as it looked at the set of the resolve. That one will leave a spirit when he dies. Good force-of-will. It regarded the boy as a jeweller might regard an exceptionally promising lump of valuable rock.

And that was all well and good, but, um. “Touya.” Hikaru greeted, eyeing the exit furtively. “…What’s up?”

“I was wondering if I could talk to you.” The boy said, voice deceptively mild. He wasn’t fooling
Hikaru though, not with his eyes looking like he was walking into a title match.

“I’m sure you were.” He answered agreeably, and inched ever so slightly towards the exit he’d been eyebrailling. Touya stepped subtly, but very unavoidably, into his path. “But, like, I have a thing. Yeah.” He observed the boy obstructing him and scowled slightly. *Don’t make me poke you*, he thought, the idea of it somewhat terrifying after learning what exactly he could do to a human soul. “And….I’d best be going.”

“To your ‘thing’?” Touya inquired, an eyebrow raising, his voice still frighteningly level and polite. There was a curl of anticipation in him and it was not reassuring.

“Yes.” He agreed. “To my thing.” He side-stepped his rival and made haste to the door, and…Touya did not attempt to stop him. He just stood there, and when Hikaru glanced back at him on the way out, he looked perfectly calm and collected. His soul, though…it was written over with a sort of mingled *patience* and *anticipation* that felt extremely threatening.

Hikaru absconded from his rival with somewhat embarrassing fervour, Setsu snickering at him as he went. Once he was far-away and safely ensconced in a train carriage, he allowed himself to relax.

“Fucking Touya.” He muttered to himself, earning some looks from fellow passengers. *Predator, that one.* Setsu opined, settling beside him. *Waiting-for-time-to-strike.* That was a new word, and a distinctly militant-looking one.

Hikaru repeated it, a little clumsily, and considered his game plan. Tomorrow, after all, was the Touya-sensei study session. It took place in enemy ground, and he thought it entirely possible that Touya was planning to ambush him there. Even if he managed to avoid that, though…

Touya knew where he lived, and if he got impatient enough he might well just come over and make a nuisance of himself. But…he’d worry about that later.

After some thought, Hikaru extracted his phone, and took stock of his contact list. Ogata, he knew, would be at the study session tomorrow, and they’d had games after those sessions fairly often in the past. It wouldn’t be unusual. He’d need to have it planned in advance, though, or Touya might get him.

‘I’m going to the study session tomorrow.’ He typed, considering the words. ‘Want a game after?’ He debated offering a bribe of beer, but decided to reserve that for any unexpected resistance. He sent the text.

Half-way through the walk home, he got a reply. ‘*Only if you’ve improved since last time. Your last game was pitiful.*’ The bastard.

He itched to type something very rude in reply, but he sort of needed this game to happen. ‘*Of course I have, you drunk. Who do you think I am?*’ There. Almost polite, for him.

‘*We’ll see.*’ Was the response, and Hikaru sighed, secure in the knowledge that he had an escape route handy for the next day.

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“You were going to explain why I can punch people’s souls out and why Kaminaga can’t.” Hikaru said to Setsu, pretty much the minute he’d settled in his room.

Outwardly, the fox looked somewhat beleaguered, but there was no concealing the pleased little flip its spirit did at the idea of imparting obscure knowledge. *Yes*, it agreed.
“Is it to do with spiritual sensitivity?” He pressed. “You said ‘energy’.”

Setsu huffed at him. *Nothing to do with spiritual sensitivity. Everything to do with energy.* It explained, and its own energy reached out of its body and curled around. *This is energy.* Then, the more condensed presence in its body rippled, as though it were about to change shape again. *That is soul. Spirits have both. Normal humans only have the soul.*

Hikaru stared, and looked inwards to his own state of affairs. The soul was obvious and easy to identify, because it was extremely bright and riddled with wounds, and generally hurt anywhere he poked at it. He couldn’t move it like Setsu could, and when he tried it was painful. “Ow.” He complained, and immediately stopped the attempt.

*Don’t do that.* Setsu snapped at him, ears flicking back for a moment. *Idiot human. Not-a-fox. Human souls aren’t flexible.*

“Well, I know that now.” He muttered, and considered everything he’d been doing, spiritually speaking. He reached out, much as Setsu was doing, and squinted at what he was reaching with. “So…is this energy?”

*Obviously.* The fox sighed. *What else would it be?*

“I don’t know,” He defended. “You said humans don’t have it.”

*I said ‘normal humans’. It countered. You are not normal. Obvious, this.*

Hikaru thought about what Setsu had said earlier. “And…this energy is why I can punch human souls out?” He guessed. “And Kaminaga doesn’t have any?”

*He has some. Not enough to do more than talk and sense with.* The fox shrugged.

He extended his considerable amount of energy with a sort of sinking feeling. He thought he understood, now. The connections were fairly easy to make once he was thinking of it. “…And why do I have so much more than him?” He asked, a little quietly.

Setsu looked at him for several moments. *You know why.* It said. *I see it in you.*

Hikaru felt, *really* felt, at the energy he’d been using so much. He’d been using it for sensing, for talking, for poking Setsu….“It’s…not mine.” He guessed, deflating. “It’s Sai’s. Right?”

*Not only soul-pieces left behind.* Setsu confirmed, eyeing him a little cautiously. *Lots of energy, too. Much less potent than the soul, but…useful.*

He considered the energy that had been poured into his fan. He thought of the appearance of his soul – its bright, shredded surface, with the nearly-indistinguishable layer of Sai filling in the worst of it – and he thought of the ambient light that seemed to be everywhere. “I can’t even tell it’s not mine.” He admitted, and brought out his fan. With some focus, he *could* tell that the energy in there wasn’t his. The spark in the ofuda, likewise, was achingly familiar. The rest, though?

*Unsurprising. Energy is never as distinctive as soul.* The fox informed him, tails unfurling. Carefully, it got to its feet. *And your soul is similar enough to his that the difference is easy to miss.*

“We had pretty different personalities, though.” Hikaru pointed out, subdued.

Setsu huffed at him. *That has nothing to do with personality. Think of the soul like a body – tall or short, fat or thin, one skin colour or another, one hair colour or another…the soul is the same.*
Shape-colour-feel is a physical characteristic.

“…So, in soul body terms, me and Sai ‘look’ basically the same?” It was a strange thought.

Very similar. Likely made his possession of you much easier – it is easier to interact with similarly shaped souls.

Hikaru sat quietly. He wondered if Torajirou, once upon a time, had also had a soul very similar to Sai’s. He wondered if that was why he, and Hikaru, had been the only ones in a thousand years to hear Sai’s voice. His heart clenched, and he hastily shifted the subject. “So I have all this energy, and Kaminaga only has a bit. From…the demon, right?” He’d said, after all, that the demon had been the one to wound him, so it kind of had to be the demon’s energy, right?

Yes, the fox agreed. Which likely made his possession easier, too. The exorcist’s soul is not much like the demon’s. If it were more similar, he would have been taken decades ago, with that energy as the first root.

“Eergh.” Hikaru made a face. “That’s something, I guess. Though it doesn’t really make a difference right now.”

True. The exorcist is at the edge of his endurance. There was that dark twist to its soul again, a depressingly bleak look on the fox. Your energy is a large benefit, though. You are a human, and that means that you can use it in ways spirits cannot. The fox shook the pessimism out of its fur and regarded him seriously. Hikaru straightened a little, automatically.

He frowned at the spirit. “Like punching human souls out?” He suggested, because if spirits were capable of that, he was fairly sure that he’d have heard about it. Probably in the form of being forcibly disembodied.

Yes. Setsu nodded. Also, sealing demons. These are things that only humans, anchored to their physical bodies, are capable of.

“So that’s why the five-tails said it couldn’t seal the demon.” He said, that suddenly making far more sense. He had wondered why some random monk would be capable of it when a five-tailed fox wasn’t.

The connection to the physical world is necessary for it. The fox elaborated, nodding. An embodied spirit is not the same. It is not…tied down. Sealing, in particular, requires a strong anchor. It squinted at him. You are not terribly well anchored, it added. I would not recommend you try to seal a demon this powerful. You would have more luck attacking it.

“Er.” He attempted, a little nonplussed.

Your fan is a useful weapon. Setsu went on, heedless of his obvious confusion and utterly ignoring the worry. You should avoid using it against the physical body of the demon, but it will work well enough against its energy. A pause. If it breaks its seal. The fox’s muzzle furrowed into a snarl at the thought.

“…Yeah, about that. How does sealing work? How is the demon sealed if it can be messing with Kaminaga like this?”

It’s breaking the seal. Obvious. Setsu shuffled a little. Sealing confines all the soul and energy of the spirit into a physical object. It will have been working on the exorcist ever since he was foolish enough to allow it to injure him.
“…Allow it?” He repeated. Why the hell would anyone ever intentionally let a demon injure them? But…well, Kaminaga didn’t seem to think the demon was all that bad a demon. Was that just because it was manipulating him, or had he always thought that?

That’s not important. The fox said, dismissively, and tilted its head. You ought to practice hitting things.


Setsu’s ears flickered back. It shuffled a little. …You ought to practice the motion of hitting things, it corrected itself, and edged away. Hikaru snickered at it a little, then seriously considered the words.

He gathered some of his energy, and tried to extend it very fast. It sort of worked? “Like that?”

More cohesion. The fox corrected. Don’t let it fall apart.

“Uh.” He focused on keeping the energy condensed and…firm, for lack of a better word, and flung it like a punch. Except it didn’t go nearly as quickly when he was focusing on the cohesiveness, and was decidedly unthreatening.

Setsu regarded him, and sighed.

“What?” he demanded.

This may take a while. The fox said, and settled down to wait.

---

Hikaru’s lessons in punching things with his mind resumed in the morning, in a somewhat baffling form.

“Um.” He said, regarding the line of two-tailed foxes in his room. There were eight, varying in appearance from excited to apprehensive, and he wasn’t sure what they were doing there. “Hello?”

There was a cheerful little chorus of spiritual greetings all around, and a hell of a lot of tail movement. Most of them pressed greetings! and left it there, but a couple shoved their names at him as he tried desperately to interpret and remember them. He only managed to get the highlights, really, since they presented the names far quicker than he could properly read.

So that one was likes-to-steal-tea-from-annoying-humans, the one over by the left was makes-friends-with-grumpy-tengu, and that surly looking one in the middle was clarity-of-thought-and-purpose….

…Wait. He inspected the third one, eyes narrowed. Both the name and the fox were familiar. He turned to Setsu. “Isn’t she the fox following Utagawashi?” He paused, and added “And your wife?” He was quite sure he remembered the spirit giving that name for its wife.

Setsu’s tails flicked cheerfully. Another fox guards the priest in her absence. It claimed. She is strongest among the two-tails, and volunteered.

“Volunteered for what?”

Sparring. The four-tails proclaimed, grandly. Two-tails are too weak to participate in battle against spirit, but strong enough to not be outright killed if you hit too hard.

Hikaru looked out over the eight assembled foxes, and understood the apprehension of some of
them. “You want me to punch foxes?” He clarified.

*If you can.* Setsu agreed. *Don’t use your fan. Put it down somewhere.* Hikaru hesitated, finding himself exceptionally reluctant to part with it. *Now.*

“Oh, fine.” He muttered, and withdrew the fan from his clothes to put on his bedside table. He eyed the foxes with some apprehension of his own. “So, what now?”

Setsu made the name-shape of its wife, *Meikai,* and gestured.

Meikai bared her teeth, and her spirit rose with anticipation. That was all the warning he got before she lunged at him.

Hikaru yelped, reflexively bringing up his hands to halt her, but seeing as they were physical and she wasn’t, it accomplished absolutely nothing. A moment later, he felt *sharp* sinking into his – Sai’s – energy, *sharp* in many pointed teeth-

*That* prompted a reflex of an entirely different sort.

He lashed out with the energy she was biting, just like he’d tried to for several hours the previous evening without much success – except this time he *meant* it, and he *felt* it as his energy impacted hers and shoved her back a metre or so. She was back on her feet almost immediately, twisting in an agile motion of paws and tails, and she jumped again.

Hikaru scrambled to his feet – because he’d not been given enough warning to even stand up, dammit – and lashed out again before she could reach him. Again, he made contact, and again she was pushed back, but it was weaker this time and her teeth were in him again before he knew what he was doing.

“Ack!” *Get off get off-*

He *shoved,* and she went flying through the wall. He stared, heart thudding as he felt her land and get up in the next room. She trotted back through the wall and drew back her lips, showing pearly white teeth and pink gums.

*Almost-hurt,* she taunted, a little viciously, and lunged again.

Hikaru was, in fact, quite good at learning under pressure. That time he slapped her away again before she reached him, and this time got her through the wall again. There was a trick to it, he mused, staring guardedly at the wall she’d shortly be returning through. He had to sort of…project intent into it? He had to be *thinking* a certain way to make it more effective, it seemed. Simply moving energy around didn’t seem to be enough.

In the end, he hit Meikai four more times with increasingly powerful strikes before she conceded defeat, her spiritual energy oddly depleted.

Setsu promptly sent in what felt to be the next-strongest two-tails. And then the next. And once they were down to five…well.

The four-tails grinned, and shaped *two* names at once.

Hikaru stared at it, and braced himself.
In the end, Hikaru spent a good half of the day hitting foxes around, and by the end was good enough at it that he felt kind of bad about it. They were just...small. And fuzzy. But they were also lunging at him, and he sort of couldn’t ignore that.

He learned, over the course of the lesson, that spirits tended to deplete their energy in combat, but that their souls would regenerate it after a while. His own energy had actually grown, since apparently the greater spiritual mass tended to attract energy more strongly, and he’d been sort of hitting it out of them. As a result, the edges of his reach now had...colours. A trace of yellow in some places, or a little green elsewhere. Setsu was right that the energy itself didn't seem very personalised – he could barely tell which fox the energy had come from, and that was with the lot of them right there for comparison.

By the time he left the house, he’d had a fairly productive crash-course in spiritual combat, and had a bit of a power boost, even.

Hikaru had a late lunch at a cheap sushi bar, on the way to Heart of Stone, and discreetly gestured Setsu over to take an attractively-presented inarizushi where no one would see it disappearing. The fox did not hesitate, and yanked it from his hand as soon as it was within range, snapping it down in seconds.

He looked around, and found the bar loud enough that him apparently talking to himself wouldn’t be noticeable. Probably. “How do you eat that without embodying?” He asked, quietly enough that the hubbub ought to drown it out.

Selective embodiment and the mysterious mechanics of offerings. Setsu answered, promptly.

Hikaru was tempted to inquire further, but decided that he didn’t really care. Instead, he asked “How much energy did I actually get from Sai?” The name almost lodged in his throat as he spoke it; but this was a question he cared about. For all intents and purposes, he’d absorbed a fair portion of the energies of eight two-tailed foxes today, and yet it barely seemed to add anything. A lot. Setsu said, and sat back under Hikaru’s stare. I never met your ghost, so can’t say for certain. But.....a lot. It paused, and added for the soul, though, that’s easier. You have maybe a tenth of the spirit’s soul in your keeping, all in your wounds. Perhaps more – but no more than a fifth.

Hikaru swallowed, and very determinedly did not react to that knowledge. He took another plate of sushi from the conveyor instead. “Won’t that...hurt? If he’s missing that much?” He pressed down, rigidly, on the grief that threatened to flare up.

Spirits’ souls heal. The fox dismissed. A tenth is easy. A third is manageable. Once you get to a half...you start needing help to heal. It looked up at him, amber eyes staring. When you die, someone will need to be there to hold you together. Or you’ll fall apart, without the body to anchor you.

“...That’s great.” He managed, and put perhaps more wasabi than was wise onto the raw fish. “Great news, really. Hearing my soul will fall apart once I die, what could be better.” He succeeded in getting the second part to sound sardonic, and then was coughing from the sheer heat of the pea-sized lump of wasabi he’d imbibed.

Setsu rolled its eyes. It’s not that difficult to do. It scolded. Painful, though. You could always get sealed into something until you heal, too, that also works.

“Sure.” He mumbled into his water glass, as his eyes streamed a little at the edges. “I’ll use Sai’s goban. It has a history.”
Easier to seal spirits into objects they have an affinity for, the fox claimed. So yes, that would work. Probably bursting with energy, too.

Hikaru blinked, and turned sharply. “What?” he demanded.

Setsu tilted its head. He possessed the goban for over a hundred years. It explained, patiently. It will certainly be full of energy. Somewhat like your fan.

Almost before the fox had finished explaining, Hikaru had come to the firm and unshakeable conclusion that he needed to liberate the goban from his grandfather. Like, as soon as possible.

“Oh.” He croaked, and took another swig of water. He drained the glass and felt somewhat less like he would shortly be dying from spiciness overload. Instead, he felt himself in dire need of distraction, and got out his phone.

‘Nine foxes gave me a fighting lesson today’ he typed, and sent it. To his knowledge, Utagawashi was keeping the phone on him at all times, considering the dire circumstances afoot, so he would probably see the message soon.

And…yep. A response came through within the minute; Utagawashi was, as always, very keen to converse on the topic of the foxes.

Distraction found, Hikaru typed out his reply and considered how many more plates of sushi he could justify eating.

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Ooh, ambush, Setsu commented, as Touya let Hikaru into his family’s house. What with the appearance of the boy’s soul, Hikaru couldn’t disagree.

His rival was perfectly, immaculately polite…which was a sign on its own that trouble was afoot. He shouldn’t have been anywhere close to polite considering how much Hikaru had screwed him around, but here he was. Polite. All the while his soul was practically screaming I am eagerly awaiting the perfect opportunity to pull you into a dark alley and garrotte you.

Hikaru felt distinctly threatened. He bowed to the study room as he entered, briefly, and then quickly took a seat next to Ogata. The man hadn’t said anything about cancellation, so he assumed they were still on for the post-session game. Thank god.

The game up for discussion was actually one that Touya-sensei had recently played with one of the top Chinese professionals, online, apparently just for the fun of it. The former Meijin did a lot of stuff like that now that he was firmly retired, though he generally chose to discuss prominent games from leagues and tournaments in the study sessions, rather than his own games.

Despite the impending doom that his rival was putting out like a beacon, Hikaru couldn’t help but be drawn into the game. Touya-sensei was just so good a player, his games were basically irresistible. No matter what else was going on in his life, be it considerations of spiritual combat workings or wariness about Touya or fear for his soul, he couldn’t see a game like that and not be utterly absorbed by it. It just…wasn’t optional. The game unfolded and he was glued to it, nothing to be done.

Of course, it was a pretty high-level study group, so occasionally Hikaru noticed that some of the commentary was going over Setsu’s head. In those cases, he spared some attention to explain out the prognostications more fully, given Setsu wasn’t quite used to the twisty mental workings of most Go professionals.
The study session itself was made a bit more interesting by Hikaru’s developing ability to read the emotions of the people around him. Touya-sensei was suffused with a kind of calm enjoyment, with subtle currents of pleasure whenever someone pointed out something he’d hoped they would. Other people around the goban were fascinating, too, with quicksilver flashes of insight flaring noticeably in them, generally when they realised something about the game, or heard someone else speaking about something they’d noticed. It was kind of cool, actually, even if he had to be careful not to sense anything while playing now. Interestingly, both Touya males seemed to have more expressive souls than the others, somehow. Or…maybe not more expressive, but brighter? More noticeable? It was a little difficult to put words to, especially when so much of his attention was commanded by the goban.

Eventually, though, the good and pure enjoyment of a well-played game had to end.

Touya-sensei dismissed the session, and people began to bow themselves out of the room, Ogata among the first of them. He met Hikaru’s eyes and made a sort of gesture in the direction of the outside door as he left. Hikaru, eyeing his rival with trepidation, moved swiftly to excuse himself, only to be stopped by Touya-sensei.

“Shindou-kun,” The man said, calmly. “Akira showed me a game the two of you played recently – it appears you are improving very swiftly. If you have time this evening, would you consider staying for a game?”

Hikaru stared at the honorary Meijin, paralysed with indecision. On one hand…opportunity to play Touya Kouyou! But on the other….um, Touya. Touya who remained in seiza by the goban, looking so serene that the expression had veered sharply into smugness, and really the look of his soul said it all. The ambush was set.

He did have a prior arrangement, though, and Ogata was waiting for him. Hikaru cleared his throat, feeling somewhat as though he was committing a terrible crime, and spoke. Awkwardly. “I’d like that, Touya-sensei.” He said, truthfully. “I’ve already got plans for this evening, though.” It was, admittedly, very satisfying to watch the serenity fall from his rival’s face at those words. “Would it be possible to have the game after next week’s session?”

After all, while that meant he’d have to face Touya next week…that was a whole week away. And he’d get a game with Kouyou out of it.

His rival’s father considered that for a few moments, and nodded. “I see no reason why not.” He said, and inclined his head. “Next week, then.”

Hikaru bowed again, and this time, managed to successfully excuse himself. Touya’s eyes threatened to set fire to his hair as he left, but he escaped without any spontaneous combustion, so he considered it a victory.

Ogata was waiting by his car, a lit cigarette in his hand. He exhaled a mouthful of smoke as Hikaru approached. “Ready?”

“Yeah, sure.” Hikaru said, and got into the car.

To give the man credit, he was conscious of his passenger, and extinguished the cigarette before he entered the car. Hikaru eyed the title-holder, remembering all the fretting his mother had done when she realised that he frequently got into cars late at night with weird adults, and snickered.

“Something funny?” The man drawled, as he turned the keys and the engine rumbled to life. Setsu walked through the side of the car and settled on one of the back seats.
Hikaru considered it. “I was thinking about when I told my mum why I’d been back so late from one of these sessions once.” He said, watching eagerly for Ogata’s reaction to the next words. “When I told her I’d been at yours, it took like twenty minutes to convince her you weren’t a pedophile.”

Ogata apparently inhaled some of his own saliva or something at that, because he had to change gears to stop the car so he could choke for a bit. It was very satisfying to watch. Setsu was snickering at it, too, so apparently they were of a mind over what constituted humour.

“I did manage it though, which is why you’ve not had any awkward police visits.” He added, enjoying the man’s reaction thoroughly. “You’re welcome.”

The Judan rattled off one last cough, cleared his throat twice, then set back to work getting the car off of Touya-sensei’s property. “You brat.” The man said, flatly. “If you lose by more than five moku tonight, you owe me a beer for that.”

“For what?” Hikaru’s eyes widened, faux-innocent.

“For bringing that up with your mother in the first place. And for trying to shock me.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” He declared, and then they were off into the surprisingly familiar breed of banter that he shared with this weird, weird man.

*This one seems like fun.* Setsu commented, from the back seat, and Hikaru snickered.

This time, Ogata didn’t ask.

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For all that he’d arranged it to get out of spending too long in an isolated location with Touya, the game with Ogata was one of the most enjoyable and absorbing he’d had in a long time. There were the games with Touya himself, of course, but they were…different. Games with his rival felt almost like an entirely different game, sometimes – not literally, but there was a pronounced difference in the feel and style of his play when he was playing Touya.

Just like there was a pronounced difference in how he played opponents who were considerably superior to him. And, *for now*, Ogata remained in that category.

Hikaru locked his senses in, that itself feeling even more unnerving than it had before, and set himself into the game with peerless ferocity. He took territory and then defended it, *loudly*, hissing and spitting and clawing at every attack Ogata fielded against his precious ground, and set every trap he possibly could. Layers and layers of contingencies, tripwires around every corner, and for every four that Ogata disarmed there was a fifth to bleed him.

Slowly, inexorably, Ogata pressed through anyway. He took territory, stone by stone, and used every ounce of his superior firepower to seize the advantage and keep it. Still, Hikaru was *stubborn*. He could see potential paths to victory, so he pursued them. They weren’t terribly *likely* victories, but if he could see them, they were worth following.

Steadily, though, those victory paths closed off. He sat, eyes narrowed, and *looked*. He threw every ounce of his mind into reading ahead, searching, searching…

He paused. And placed another stone.

Ogata had expected his resignation then, but there was still a path remaining to victory, if he could only keep the man from seeing it…
Hikaru pretended, very carefully, to have considered one of the futile paths salvageable, and concealed his true advances within that. Ogata had a good game face, and didn't give much away, but Hikaru thought the slight easing of his posture indicated that he was buying it. Well, maybe.

He waited, carefully, for Ogata’s inevitable cut at his supposedly doomed strategy. The stone came, as expected, and he nodded. And placed his own stone, bringing his carefully-sculpted attack to life. If the next, hm, ten to twelve hands went his way, he could conceivably win.

Glancing up, he saw the moment that the Judan realised what he was up to, saw the eyebrows raise. He snorted, quietly, and countered.

In the end, unfortunately, Ogata was a damn good player, and the next ten hands did not go according to Hikaru’s wishes. It was damn close, though, and in the end he only lost by a moku and a half.

Hikaru sat back, once the territory had been conclusively counted, and sighed. “So. Do I owe you a beer?” He asked, and let his senses out again, becoming aware of Setsu’s presence about two metres behind him, of the fact that Ogata had been genuinely impressed by that bit at the end...

The man regarded him, pushing up his glasses. “Not tonight.” He answered, dryly, and began to clear the board for the discussion.

Setsu came closer for that, listening carefully as each hand was picked apart and ruthlessly examined for its use.

“It was a damn good game from you, brat.” Ogata finally admitted, somewhere around discussion of the midgame. “If your joseki had been a bit tighter here, when you were defending this corner, your trick at the end might have worked.”

“I didn’t have enough room to manoeuvre to pull that off properly.” He agreed. A couple more points would have made all the difference, but that was fine. This wasn’t a league game. “It was close, though.”

The man nodded, slightly, and went back to discussion of the rest of the hands.

“Well, you know I’m not lying about getting better, at least.” Hikaru said, once they were done, and clearing away the stones. “It’s been a while since we last played, but I know I’ve improved lately.”

“You’re not wrong.” The ninth-dan professional conceded, heading to his kitchen. “You want a drink?” He called.

“Yeah, why not.”

Ogata did not, apparently, have any compunctions about giving alcohol to minors, because he returned with a beer for each of them. Hikaru received his and took a minute to reacquaint himself with the taste of alcoholic beverage.

“It’s a surprise, honestly.” Ogata said, once he’d drained enough of the can to have settled. “With all the study sessions you’ve missed, I would expect your progress to slow.”

“I’ve not missed that many.” Hikaru grumbled, wondering if one beer would be enough to get him tipsy when it had been hours since he ate anything.

“You’ve missed enough.” The man said, voice very critical, but that was just the way he was. “And you missed a game recently, didn’t you?”
He glared half-heartedly. “I was ill.” He complained. “It’s not my fault.” Having a murderous demon after him definitely wasn’t his fault.

“I drink daily and chain smoke and I’ve not missed any games lately,” Ogata said, unimpressed. “I’m a lot older than you, too. You should be practically immune to illness.”

“…Ogata,” Hikaru said, very slowly. “I hate to break it to you, but that’s not how humans work. Or illnesses.”

“Pah.” The man took another gulp of his beer and sighed. “Go players all have such terrible health, these days.”

“I hate to break it to you,” Hikaru repeated. “But I’m only one Go player. Or has someone else been sick a lot?”

Ogata eyed him. “Have you forgotten Touya-sensei’s heart attack?” He demanded, and stood up to go in search of another beer, already. He returned within seconds, the route to the fridge apparently a well-traversed one. He clicked the tab of the new beverage even as he spoke. “Kuwabara is completely immortal, of course, the old coot. But most of the older players…” The can hissed, and Ogata grunted.

Hikaru was, honestly, a bit curious. “What, all the geezers have health problems?”

“Damn near it. And some of the not-so-old ones. Kurata is diabetic, did you know that?” Ogata waited for the head-shake before he continued. “And Ichiryyuu-sensei has been on medication for a while, though he won’t say what for. The former Ouza has a lung problem, I think, by the sound of him…at this rate I’m worried they’ll all die off before I can take their titles.” He paused. “Well, Zama can die, if he likes. He’s not Ouza anymore, after all.”

“That’ll be you soon, if you keep up the smoking.” Hikaru told him, cheerfully, and took a draught from his own beer.

Ogata rolled his eyes. “We’ll see about that.”

“It’s probably all of the sitting in one place all day.” Hikaru mused to his can. “That’s meant to be bad for you, right?”

“Keep an exercise routine and you’ll negate that.” Ogata advised him. “Not many Go players keep in shape, and I can’t imagine that helps anything.”

He was, in fact, of a considerably lower fitness level than he’d once been. “I used to be pretty active.” He commented. “Not so much since I started playing Go.” In fact, fleeing Kaminaga at their first proper meeting had been very exhausting. Maybe he should start running with Akari again? Once all the demon stuff was dealt with, anyway.

“And there’s the problem.” Ogata grumbled, and inspected his watch. “Hm. It’s pretty late, brat. I’ve probably drunk too much to give you a lift, though.”

“It’s fine, the trains run way later than this.” Hikaru waved him off, and checked the time himself. “Uh. I’d probably better be going, though.” Evidently, the game and its discussion had taken a fair while.

“Don’t get mugged.” The man advised, and stood to see him out.

Hikaru barely restrained a giggle at the words, realising suddenly that he probably had little to fear
from human criminals, now. He could punch foxes a good six metres away and could allegedly punch a human soul at least that far out of its body. He supposed he could still get shot, if someone had a gun, but…really, gun control laws were not at all lenient in Japan, and he hadn’t done anything to get a gunman after him, so he was probably fine.

“Good game, Ogata.” Hikaru said, as he left the apartment. “We’ll have to do it again sometime.”

Ogata nodded at him and grunted, which was probably his way of saying ‘Yes, Shindou, your play was unexpectedly good and you are a sort of worthwhile opponent, I would be up for another game’.

_You know strange people_, Setsu said to him as they exited onto the dark street.

“This coming from the four-tailed fox.” Hikaru pointed out, and dodged a tail to the face.

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Having not actually prepared for his game on Wednesday, Hikaru successfully convinced Setsu to hold off on the training so that he could look over some _kifu_ in the morning. The game itself, against a fairly fresh yondan, was challenging – but nothing compared to the game he’d had with Ogata, only a night before. Still, the yondan was strong enough that he did end up deploying his giant-slaying tactics against him, and won by a good margin when he turned out to be not nearly as good at defence as offence.

Setsu insisted, following his victory, that the remainder of the day be set aside for training. He had rallied four more two-tails for the cause, and Hikaru conceded to the necessity.

“We’ll go to the shrine, though, alright?” He decided, firmly, as he left the train at his home station. “I’m not going to be clattering around my room again.” His mother had become somewhat peeved with him for all the noise, last time.

The foxes were perfectly happy with that, so Hikaru sent Utagawashi a heads-up and trudged through the cold October weather to the shrine grounds, where the distant beacon that was the Gobi remained.

Hikaru’s sensitivity to the nuances of human souls had increased enough that, when he came in range, he could actually see the reflexive revulsion that shuddered through the priest when he approached. He seemed fairly good at controlling it, but it was plainly visible that the sensation got worse the closer Hikaru got to him.

Meikai was there, too, sitting by a fox statue within sprinting distance of the priest. She stood as he approached, utterly ignored Hikaru, and went to greet her four-tailed husband. The five-tails, by the feel of it, was inside the _honden_.

Hikaru shook his head at the display of vulpine affection, and went over to greet Utagawashi. “Hey,” He said, noticing that the priest seemed a little on-edge. “What’s wrong?”

The man blinked at him. “Nothing in particular, I don’t think.” He said, cautiously. “Why?”

“You feel kind of….” Hikaru made a wavy hand gesture. “Nervous, maybe?”

He stared. “You can feel that?” His voice was dubious. “Well, it’s just that Arakawa-san is arriving tomorrow, you know. There’s a lot to think about.” The man shook his head. “No sense worrying too much about it before the fact, though. You said you were coming here to…train?”

“Yeah, Setsu has had me hitting foxes around as practice, but there’s not much room to move at
home.” Hikaru nodded to where Setsu was sat, four two-tails gathering nearby. “So here seemed the best place.”

“I wonder if I’ll be able to detect anything.” Utagawashi mused, interest lighting in his eyes. “Well, please don’t damage anything on the grounds, but otherwise, please feel free to practice.”

Hikaru nodded, a little awkwardly, and turned to Setsu. “Can I keep my fan this time?” He asked hopefully.

His harsh taskmaster rolled its eyes. No. It said. Put it away.

He inspected the surroundings for a safe place for the precious item, and did not find anywhere that seemed particularly suitable, given the cold and the recent damp weather. Finally, he turned to Utagawashi, practically having to force himself to hold it out. “Keep hold of that for now?” He asked, and watched with a gimlet eye as the priest took it and carefully tucked it into his robe.

Hikaru turned back to the foxes, and that was apparently their signal to begin.

Later, when all four two-tails had depleted their reserves, he attempted to explain it all to Utagawashi. “So, from what Setsu says, spirits have soul and energy.” He said, sitting down onto a damp bench with a sigh. “I do, as well. And weak spirits and humans have souls that are easy to damage, so you kind of need to use the energy to keep attacks away from it?” He paused, and added “That’s how I beat the possession attempt last time – I used energy to burn out the bit of the demon that was there. It’s how a spirit would have done it.”

“And most humans don’t have any of this…spiritual energy?” Utagawashi inquired, brows slightly furrowed.

“Only if they get it from a spirit, I think.” Hikaru said, looking to Setsu for confirmation. “So, you’ve got a tiny bit, from the spirit that attacked you. You can’t really do anything with it except sense stuff, there’s not enough.”

“And Kaminaga-san?” The man’s eyes were sharp.

“He has a bit, but the demon’s probably using it to make possession easier.”

“And you have so much of this energy because your Fujiwara-san left it behind?” The name, as ever, elicited a painful pang in his chest.

Hikaru breathed through it. “I’ve got a little bit from the foxes. But yeah.”

“I suppose hardly anyone tends to have any spiritual energy as a human, then.” Utagawashi glanced over to Setsu’s approximate location. “Is that why every exorcist I’ve heard of has to use tools, like holy weapons and ofuda?”

Hikaru glanced over at Setsu in time to see the fox nod. Without their own energy to use, they must use items imbued with it, or they can’t strike against a spirit. It elaborated, and Hikaru repeated it for Utagawashi’s benefit.

“Interesting,” The priest murmured, and then asked another question. And then another. And another. In the end, Hikaru sat there for over fifteen minutes, becoming steadily more chilly and irate as Setsu dispensed exposition and he was obliged to translate it. It was vaguely interesting, he supposed – discussion on the best ways to imbue objects with spiritual power, whether some objects worked better than others, and how ofuda interacted with it all – but not enough to to make the cold worth it.
In the end, he lost patience when Utagawashi’s questions shifted onto the topic of wards, and what factors influenced their strength, and how big of an area you could ward, and-

“Okay, that’s enough talking.” He said, and stood up. Utagawashi cut off mid-question and shot him a wounded look.

“But, Shindou-kun, this is very useful information.” He protested.

Hikaru sighed, and looked at Setsu. “I know you can talk out loud.” He said, severely. “Why make me do all the work?”

*It burns energy.* The fox replied innocently. *Best not to do that, for the moment.*

He scowled, and turned back to the priest. “Setsu says it’ll answer all your dumb questions once we’re done with all this demon bullshit.” He said, to a flare of indignation from the fox in question. It cheered Utagawashi up, though, so he felt utterly unrepentant. “Anyway, I’m going home now.” He swallowed, suddenly apprehensive at the thought of the coming day. “Let me know when that guy’s getting here tomorrow, alright?”

“Mid to late afternoon, he said.” Utagawashi reminded him, and walked with him to the torii. “I’ll call you if he arrives earlier than expected.”

Hikaru nodded jerkily. “And. Uh, nothing new from Kaminaga?” He checked.

A sort of tense pensiveness crossed the priest’s face. “I checked with him yesterday, to ask him when the last time he prayed to Hachiman was.” He said, slowly. “It took two messages to get a reply from him, and the reply was…not helpful.”

“Said it was none of your business?” Hikaru guessed.

The pensiveness became a light grimace. “Exactly right.” Utagawashi sighed. “I suppose we should be thankful that Arakawa-san agreed to come earlier.”

“He should have come when we first asked.” He refuted, sourly, and shook his head. “Well, whatever. If Kaminaga comes anywhere near here, I think I’ll hear about it from the foxes, so keep an eye on your phone, alright?” From what he could tell, the one and two-tailed foxes were more or less patrolling the city, and would all run to inform Setsu and the five-tails if the demon was ‘sighted’ in Tokyo.

“I will.” The priest promised, and Hikaru nodded at him before leaving through the torii.

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The evening was…tense.

“…Do you think this guy has a chance of sealing the demon?” Hikaru asked, unable to keep the question in for very long.

Setsu shifted, spirit flickering somewhat furtively. *Hard to tell until I see him.* It said, curling its tails tightly around it. *Sealing works on very powerful spirits, though. There should be a decent chance. Especially with my advice.*

He snorted, quietly, and was tempted to make a remark about Setsu’s high opinion of itself. In the end, though, it died on his tongue before he could utter it. He was just…worried. Realistically, he didn’t think the guy could deny that there was a problem when the foxes had shown up in force like
this, with the Gobi so powerful that almost anyone sensitive should be able to feel it. So he probably wouldn’t be doubting them that something nasty was going on.

But…on the other hand…what guarantee did they have that this guy wasn’t playing with his own demon? He was supposedly very good friends with Kaminaga, so he could even be possessed by the same demon, the possession growing in him at a distance like it had tried to grow in Hikaru. He could be a waiting puppet, needing only to get in range of the demon itself to be utterly consumed…

Hikaru exhaled loudly to clear the probably pointless thoughts away. Possible, maybe, but there was no point thinking about it. He’d just…have to have his fan ready, and be ready for trouble.

He sighed, and got out his phone to text Yashiro. ‘Still alive,’ he started. ‘And I guess you’ll be happy to know that the crazy guy’s friend is getting here tomorrow. He’s going to stop by and talk to me and Utagawashi and then go deal with Kaminaga.’

Yashiro could occasionally forget that his phone existed, so Hikaru wasn’t really expecting an immediate response, but maybe the other boy was also practicing increased communications vigilance in these troubled times. ‘What, seriously? I thought he wasn’t coming for days yet?’

‘We convinced him to come sooner.’ Hikaru typed back, and rolled out of bed. He fished in a drawer for some kaya incense and a lighter and headed out to the hallway.

He felt…restless. Anxious. Worried about what the next day would bring. What better time to invoke a benevolent kami?

Hikaru lit the incense on the house shrine, and settled down before it, eyes closing. He felt the spark in the ofuda gain something. An awareness, perhaps, that the spark in Sai’s shrine lacked completely.

He couldn’t think of anything poignant to say to the echo of the god in the shrine. The words wouldn’t come. In the end, he merely thought please let this all turn out okay and sat, voiceless, until the incense burned out.

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Hikaru had, in advance, cancelled all of his commitments for the Thursday, which were for the most part teaching games at a variety of Go salons. As a result, he spent a number of very nervous hours sat at home, fitfully reading through kifu in an attempt to distract himself.

Eventually, though, the uneasy waiting came to an end.

His first indication that something was up was that, in the distance, a fox approached another fox, rather quickly. Then that fox sprinted solidly in Hikaru’s direction. Both he and Setsu noticed, and stared at the wall in the messenger’s direction, waiting silently for it to arrive.

Given this sort of fox relay was the warning system for Kaminaga approaching, it was not a particularly relaxed wait.

Setsu! The fox said, as soon as it reached them, shaping the yonbi’s spirit-name in a flash. Hikaru noted, with a little relief, that the fox did not appear worried. Mainly…excited, and sort of hyperactive. The onmyouji is approaching! It shaped an unfamiliar name; -said that it was coming on a train into the city.

Setsu nodded to the little one-tail, some of its own tension loosening from its frame. Good. It said, nudging the smaller fox with its nose. Well done. Best return to your post, now.
The one-tail yipped and then was away in seconds, speeding back where it had come from. Once it took its position back, the fox which had apparently relayed the message left as well, straying beyond Hikaru’s ability to sense. Hikaru already had his phone out, texting Utagawashi to say ‘the foxes say that Arakawa is on a bullet train into the city. I’m gonna go over to the shrine now.’ He looked at Setsu. “We should probably go now.” He said, and got up to make good on his words.

By the time Hikaru reached the shrine, Arakawa had strayed close enough on the intracity trains that Hikaru could actually feel his presence at a distance. It felt…human. Just like a human soul, but with a noticeable scarring that bristled with sparks of spiritual energy. More noticeable were the things he was carrying – Hikaru had no idea what any of it was, except the ofuda, but there was a hell of a lot of energy in whatever it was he had.

A good sign. Setsu said, when he mentioned it. He brings powerful artefacts.

Hikaru agreed, and entered the shrine, where Utagawashi was waiting. He cleaned himself in between explaining what he could detect, and steadily, an assembly of foxes built up in the area.

The five-tails emerged from the honden, where allegedly it had remained unmoving for days. It was as gloriously incandescent as Hikaru remembered, shining with spiritual power, and with his new knowledge Hikaru noticed that its soul seemed larger and denser than any other spirit he’d had a good look at. Setsu went over to greet it, quicksilver spirit-words passing between them, and three-tailed foxes drifted in to form a pearly-white crowd. Meikai lingered back with the two-tailed foxes, near the back of the honden.

Their massed presences were enough to make Utagawashi flutter with nervousness, casting wide-eyed glances there every other second. And, really, it seemed warranted. When they gathered closely like that, they were…noticeable. Like their presences were bouncing off of each other and spreading far further outwards than they would have alone. Hikaru was certain he could have felt them from twice the distance of his house, and wondered what sort of a range the monk had.

Steadily, Arakawa’s presence drew closer, and when Hikaru reached out he could feel his apprehension. Clearly, he was aware of the congregation he approached.

Eventually, after a lot of tense and fairly awkward waiting around, he drew into eyesight, visible through the red arch of the torii. He was somewhat shorter than Hikaru had expected, but broad-shouldered and oddly powerful in appearance. He walked with a well-grounded gait, and had one hand on the sheath of a katana as he approached: one of the spiritual artefacts that they’d detected.

He bowed through the torii, and stared at the presences amassed there. His face was held carefully neutral, while his soul betrayed apprehension, dismay, worry. He seemed younger than Kaminaga, perhaps by as much as a decade, and wore a similar outfit: plain and nondescript hakama and gi, with a fairly old-fashioned haori-type coat over the top.

He stood, for a moment, without word, then bowed to the shrine and went to cleanse himself, the stiffness of his motions suggesting either ill health or tension. When he finished, he approached the gathering at a calm and sedate pace, and Utagawashi stepped out to meet him.

“Arakawa-san.” Utagawashi greeted, breaking the quiet, and bowed politely to him. “It is good to see you again.”

Arakawa bowed back. “Likewise, Utagawashi-kun.” He said, eyes straying over to Hikaru, and the foxes behind him. “Though it seems the circumstances are less than pleasant, unfortunately.” He stepped towards Hikaru, his posture revealing none of the tension and instinctive revulsion that his aura implied. “You would be Shindou Hikaru, then?” His voice was quiet.
Hikaru nodded, once. “Yeah.”

Arakawa bowed to him as well. “I am Arakawa Katsuo. Again, I’m sorry that we are not meeting under better circumstances.” He turned slightly aside, to better face the foxes there. “Honourable foxes of Inari-sama, I offer greetings.” He bowed very deeply indeed to them.

Hikaru watched as all of the foxes inclined their heads, and asked “Can you see them all?”

“I can see the honoured Gobi-san, and Yonbi-san.” Arakawa said, raising elegantly from the bow. “The others I can only feel.” He looked between the foxes and Hikaru himself, and sighed. “It seems I owe you an apology, young man. I have always had the greatest faith in Keiji – he is my oldest friend. I have known him since we were children.” He closed his eyes briefly, as if in pain. “I did not want to believe what I was hearing. But if Inari-sama has sent his foxes here in such numbers, nothing else can be true.”

Hikaru held his tongue. He wanted to say yeah, it was stupid of you. He wanted to decry the man for his blind faith, for leaving them to try to ward off such a powerful demon alone, but…that wouldn’t help anything. In the end, he stayed silent.

Setsu stepped forwards in the dead space left by Arakawa’s words. You are here now, it said, projecting the words out far more strongly than it bothered to with Hikaru. And you intend to seal the demon that is consuming your friend. Is that correct?

Utagawashi couldn’t hear it, but Arakawa clearly could. He rocked back on his heels, very slightly, as his eyes widened. “…Yes, that is correct.” He said, lowering his gaze. “I’m told you have some information for me.”

The five-tails stirred, then, and all the other foxes rustled in its wake, like leaves disturbed by the rippling of the water they’d fallen to. It raised its great head and stared with bright eyes, bright fur, incandescence seething from every inch of it, and spoke. Its voice was silently, deafeningly strong.

Hear me, he-who-would-face-evil, and listen well.

Hikaru sucked in a breath, clenching his eyes shut as every word thrummed through him, bright and loud and painful in every respect. He drew up his energy as a shield, trying to prevent it from searing through him so terribly. Arakawa did not seem to feel it as keenly, but his aura shimmered with awe all the same.

“I listen, honoured Gobi-sama.” The honorific, far more deferential than he had used before, seemed to slip out of its own accord, in response to the fox’s words. Slowly, he settled down on the cold ground, sitting in respectful seiza before the powerful spirit.

The five-tails stepped incrementally forwards to look down at him, five tails fanning out like sunbeams behind it. Its eyes burned.

You come here in defence of righteousness, in defence of your friend, and in defence of his victims. It said. It is commendable. But know this, onmyouji: the demon which you would face is old, and powerful, and may destroy you.

Arakawa stirred. “I do not doubt the truth of your words, Gobi-sama.” He said, respectfully. “But I do not understand. To my knowledge, the sword in question is a minor demon, sealed and kept as a family heirloom. Sons of the family would cut themselves on it, ritually, once they were old enough to take up their duties as exorcists.”

His words did not please the foxes. Setsu, all of the three-tails, and all of the two-tails that heard it –
Then, onmyouji, you have the answer for why the demon is breaking loose, despite having been sealed by Hachiman-sama himself only one thousand years past. The words came like thunder, and Arakawa gasped for breath, directly in their path.

“Sealed by Hachiman?” The monk said, breathless, and Utagawashi stiffened in the corner of Hikaru’s vision. And, actually – the foxes seemed shocked, too, Setsu included. Had they not known that?

The Gobi bared its teeth fully, now: each of them white and curved and wickedly sharp. Know this: the enemy you face is no trifling creature. It is Kaminagi no Tsurugi! The god-cutting blade! It has bathed in the lifeblood of humans and spirits beyond counting, and the god who made it – the god it slew – is remembered for nothing except his folly in creating such a vile thing!

Hikaru’s fists clenched in a white-knuckled grip as the name rippled through the shrine grounds. There was something ominous to the mere utterance of it, as though the invocation called to the menace it named.

Kaminagi no Tsurugi. Kaminagi. Like Kaminaga? The kanji were surely different, but…

Arakawa was white-faced and silent with his own shock, and the Gobi apparently took that as invitation to continue, bright fangs flashing in the dim light of the afternoon.

You stand before me, with intention to renew the seal of the God-Cutter alone. Knowing what you do now, what will you do? White fur rose on the great fox’s neck. Will you flee, drowned in the fear that I sense in you? Will you flee, monk?

The monk swallowed, audibly. “I will not.” He said, voice barely a whisper. “My intention remains.”

The Gobi drew close enough that it had to tilt its head to look at him properly. Its eyes narrowed, and it withdrew. The bristled fur along its neck settled, and its teeth closed.

Good.

It said, simply, and turned away.

Hikaru, Arakawa, and all of the other foxes watched mutely as the five-tails retreated into the honden, out of sight.

“…The five-tails left?” Utagawashi hissed, in a low whisper. “What did it say?”

Arakawa remained in seiza, staring numbly at the ground. Hikaru couldn’t blame him. “Uh. It told us about the sword.” He said, clearing his throat.

Don’t say its name! It snapped.

“I wasn’t planning to.” Hikaru retorted, quite honestly. He’d felt the invocation of that name, and had no desire to try it himself. “The point is, the thing was apparently made by a god, killed that god, and then…got sealed away by Hachiman, apparently.” He looked at Setsu. “I thought only humans could seal things?”

Humans, or powerful spirits who are born into a human body. It said. I knew that it broke free of several seals before the last one finally held; I was not aware that that sealing was done by Hachiman-sama.
Hikaru repeated that for Utagawashi’s benefit, and looked back at Arakawa as he spoke.

“Honourable Yonbi-san,” The man said, clearly shaken. “If this demon is truly so powerful…do I have any hope of succeeding?”

Setsu whipped its head back around to regard the onmyouji, eyes narrowed, and moved to stand before him. That the last seal was placed by Hachiman-sama is a considerable boon, it said, sitting down. If any of it remains at all, the existing seal should work very well with those ofuda and artefacts of Hachiman I see you have there. And there are other things you can do, to tip the balance in your favour.

“I would be grateful for any information you can give.”

If you can, take the host and the demon to a shrine of Hachiman. A larger one is preferable. Setsu instructed, amber eyes particularly intent. You will want to hang one of these ofuda about your neck, and offer a prayer to Hachiman-sama for your safety. If you can, prepare the shrine grounds with ofuda before your arrival, and pray to activate the wards. You may have difficulty convincing the host to follow you there, however, so beware. The fox’s gaze slid to the sword at the man’s hip. Your blade, there. It is blessed?

“It is.”

It will be a suitable sealing receptacle for the demon. The fox said, glancing briefly at Hikaru. Spirits are far easier to seal into items that suit them. If you were stronger, you might be able to reseal it into its own body, but as it is, you will need that sword.

Hesitation and reluctance flashed, for a moment, in Arakawa’s spirit. Clearly, the sword was an item he treasured dearly. But the hesitance was only for a moment. “Thank you.”

Cut away its miasma of power. The more you destroy, the easier it will be to seal. Setsu instructed. If you can place ofuda upon the host, or the blade, it will limit how much power it can bring to bear. The rest – the chants, and invocations of Hachiman-sama – I believe you already know.

“Yes, Yonbi-san. Thank you.” Arakawa raised his head. “Is there anything else I should know?”

Setsu bared its fangs. If it comes to it, throw yourself upon the blade, rather than allow yourself to be possessed. It said. You would be a far more malleable host than your friend is.

The man exhaled, slowly. “I sincerely hope it will not come to that.” He said, and watched as Setsu stood and moved away. Slowly, the crowd of three-tails dispersed, though they remained at the shrine, watching the humans.

…I don’t suppose I could trouble either of you for a translation?” Utagawashi ventured, uncertainly.

Arakawa stood, and turned to him, his complexion distinctly ashen. “The four-tails offered some excellent advice on how to survive the sealing.” He said, resting a hand carefully on the hilt of the blessed sword. “Or, alternatively, how not to.”

Hikaru watched as Setsu, slowly, came to sit beside him. Was all the doom and gloom necessary? He asked, silently. Arakawa wasn’t the only one who’d been thoroughly frightened and unnerved by the whole thing – he had no idea how he was going to sleep tonight.

Its projections back down to a ‘normal’ volume, Setsu shrugged. The situation is a grave one. He needed to understand that.
Arakawa looked between them, brows lightly furrowed, as though he could see their interactions but not read them. “At any rate, I believe I should head to Yokohama as quickly as possible, if I’m to prepare a shrine for the sealing.” He said, glancing towards the torii. “It will have to be one close to Keiji’s home, but…”

“If it’s too close, he might feel you and come looking.” Hikaru pointed out.

The monk raised a hand to rub at his temples. “Precisely.” He sighed, looking suddenly very tired. “I’ll do what I can. I’ll aim to perform the sealing at…eight or nine in the evening, perhaps, when all shrine staff and visitors should be gone.”

“Please let us know how it goes, as soon as you can.” Utagawashi requested, receiving a nod in turn.

“I will.” He said. “Though, given Keiji must be at least partially possessed – I expect he’ll need medical care after this. Please don’t be concerned if there’s a delay in communication.”

“Um.” Hikaru expressed, because he felt that he would be very concerned at delays in communication, here.

Utagawashi seemed to be having similar thoughts. “…Do what you can.” He answered, eventually.

Arakawa inclined his head, and turned to Hikaru. “Shindou-kun.” He began. “I’m sorry that you ended up in this situation. I hope that everything can return to normal for you soon.”

“Uh. Yeah.” Hikaru answered, at a loss for words, because…well, so much had changed since Kaminaga had turned up and become a gigantic problem. He’d played Go with a four-tailed fox, for pity’s sake. How could anything go back to normal after that?

The monk nodded gravely, as though he’d had a long and poignant reply, and then bowed to them both. “I’ll be going, now.” He said. “Best of luck to all of you.”

“And you.” Utagawashi returned, offering his own bow. “I will pray for your success.”

And, with that, Arakawa was turning to leave.

Silence lingered far longer than the sight of him. Eventually, Hikaru turned to Setsu, who was still beside him. “So?” He asked, quietly. “What are his chances?”

The fox regarded him. Better than I had thought, if anything of Hachiman-sama’s seal remains. It answered, ears flicking outwards slightly. With his sword as the receptacle, there is a decent chance. We will have to see.

Hikaru repeated the words to a curious priest, and sighed, hopelessly shaken by everything he’d heard. “I’m going to go home, now.” He turned towards the torii. “Let me know the minute you hear from Arakawa, alright?”

“I will.” Utagawashi assured him, his voice sounding as worried as his soul looked. “And you tell me if you hear anything.”

“Yeah.” He agreed, and practically ran out of the shrine grounds.

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It was just tension, at first.

He didn’t question it. Tension was normal. He’d learned that the demon trying to eat his soul was, in
fact, a millennia old horror that had killed a kami, and was apparently bad enough that one of the major kami had personally had himself born into a human to seal it. Whatever Setsu said about the monk’s chances against it – of course he was going to be worried, and agitated, and nervous, and also extremely scared.

Especially when the hours dragged on, into the evening and past the time Arakawa had mentioned, with no news. His mother noticed that he was off-colour and commented on it – he claimed to be feeling ill, and was hustled off to bed early.

He informed Yashiro that he’d met Arakawa, and also that he was meant to be dealing with Kaminaga that evening, and allowed the other boy’s uninformed optimism to buoy him a little. It was unspeakably challenging to avoid just…breaking down, demanding to go stay in Osaka for a while, where he didn’t have a giant target painted on his back.

But they’d already been over all the reasons why that wouldn’t help.

Hikaru stared at Sai’s shrine, and considered praying. In the end, he lit the incense and sat before it, but didn’t say anything. The grief and the anguish that the wisteria scent prompted was almost more pleasant than the awfulness of the wait.

The incense burnt out, and without much hope of it being productive, Hikaru tried to go to sleep.

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He managed to fall into a shallow, disturbed slumber for an hour or two, but no longer. Tension and fear pervaded through the veil of sleep, and Hikaru sat up in bed to read 02:33 on his phone-screen. The numbers swam in his blurred vision, and he blinked them into clarity.

Something felt…unsettling.

Hikaru looked to Setsu, who was sat upright. Tense. Its ears were folded back and its fur was very slightly on end. It noticed him looking, and stared up at him. There is an ill feeling in the air tonight. It said, subdued, and he could only agree with it.

He checked and double checked his phone, but there was nothing new there. No messages. No calls. He sighed, and in a fit of paranoia, reached his senses out, past two layers of foxes keeping watch, but found nothing. There was no demon. No malignant presence. But…the unease persisted.

Hikaru laid down again, and slept in fitful bursts until morning, whereupon there was still no news. But the air felt…different. A bit less oppressive, perhaps.

“How long does sealing take?” Hikaru asked, realising that he probably should have asked that ages ago.

Anything from minutes to weeks. Setsu sighed, and stretched. It is entirely possible that the monk is still trying. The demon is no easy foe. The lessening of the tension in the air is a good sign, though.

Hikaru wondered what the shrine staff would think of that, arriving in the morning to whatever sight a sealing involved. His stomach lurched a little at the thought of all the potential hapless bystanders. “Yeesh,” He muttered, messaging the new information to Utagawashi. “I hope Arakawa picked somewhere out-of-the-way.”

And then, well, he had to get ready for the day. He’d cancelled Thursday’s teaching games, but not Friday’s, and so he had work to do.
His mother fretted over his pale face and the bags under his eyes but eventually let him out of the house to get to his students. The patrons of the salon didn’t let his condition go unmentioned, either – the proprietor greeted him with raised eyebrows, saying “Are you sick, Shindou? You look like shit.”

“Might be coming down with something.” He lied, scanning the salon for the student he had booked. The man was already at a goban, and obviously listening to the conversation. “I guess if any of you catch it, you can consider it a bonus for the lesson.” He added, with a grin he didn’t really feel. “My treat.”

“Very generous.” Said the proprietor, amused, as Hikaru went over to sit with his student.

Since he was only teaching, Hikaru didn’t bother to block off his sensing capabilities, which was just as well. Despite the network of fox scouts through the city…his skin was practically crawling with unease, and he felt vulnerable enough as it was.

His second student arrived towards the end of the first’s lesson, pulling up a chair to shamelessly listen in to the tail end of it, and then Hikaru chased him away so that he could go get some water between the sessions.

His morning, and a good part of the afternoon, passed that way. At around lunchtime he left that salon to get some food, and shortly after went to Heart of Stone to play his afternoon students. Throughout all of it, there was no news from Utagawashi, except messages to say ‘no news yet’. Utagawashi, of course, was at work himself.

Throughout the day, the awful ambient oppressiveness steadily decreased. Setsu seemed cautiously optimistic about it, but…Hikaru couldn’t quite share it. It could have just been pessimism, or paranoia, but…it didn’t feel right. His tension remained.

Still, there was no news. Why was there no news?

It was maddening. Almost enough for him to want to go mess with Touya, just to take his mind off of it. But that had its own risks, at the moment. Bad idea.

Hikaru sighed, and in the end, got home at around five in the afternoon. His mother was preparing dinner with one of her soaps on in the background – a re-run, by the looks of things. He grimaced at the television screen, and in the depths of his restlessness, volunteered himself as a sous-chef to pass the time. He ate his dinner somewhat listlessly, and under the watchful eye of his mother, was ordered upstairs to bed to ‘get some more rest’.

Shortly after seven, a full day past when Arakawa Katsuo ought to have arrived in Yokohama, Hikaru’s phone buzzed with the tell-tale pattern of an incoming call.

Hikaru was face-down in his bed at the time, stewing in tension, and had to do some truly graceless scrambling to grab at his phone. His heart thudded rapidly as he pressed the answer button without looking at the screen, holding it up to his ear. “Yeah?” he demanded, none-too-quietly. Setsu, in the corner, sat upright, ears alert.

Except, it wasn’t Utagawashi. Or Arakawa. Or even Kaminaga.

“Shindou?” It was Yashiro, of all people, sounding unusually tentative. Nervous, even. Hikaru blinked, utterly taken-aback. Why would Yashiro be calling him? …For an update, maybe?

“If you’re calling to find out how the thing went, you’ll have to wait.” Hikaru said, an uncomfortable sensation of dread crawling up his spine. “I don’t know yet either.”
Something wasn’t right.

“That’s not…” Still, Yashiro sounded hesitant. A little awkward, perhaps, but… “Look, Shindou, have you seen the news today?”

His fingers felt unusually cold. “…No?” He answered, uncertainly turning it into a question.

“Oh.” There were six very uncomfortable seconds of silence. Yashiro cleared his throat, and continued. “You said the crazy samurai guy lives in Yokohama, right?”

Hikaru was getting a very, very bad feeling about this. “…Yeah.” He kept it at that. Waited. He shared a grim, tense glance with Setsu.

“…Uh.” Yashiro cleared his throat again.

“Spit it out, for god’s sake.” He snapped, nerves frayed, heart thudding heavily in his ears. *This isn’t right*, he thought, again and again. *I don’t like this.*

“There’s been a murder,” The other boy burst out, and Hikaru’s blood ran cold. “At some shrine, in Yokohama –“

“At a shrine.” Hikaru repeated, numbly.

“Yeah, and the police are saying it looks like it was a katana-“

“Fucking hell,” He swore, and stood up quickly enough to make his head swim. Setsu was on its feet and visibly bristling, eyes wild and teeth bared. “I’ve got to go – did you see this online? On a TV?”

“On a TV, in a Go salon.” Yashiro answered, voice increasingly worried. “Listen, Shindou, you really should come to Osaka tonight, call the police about this…”

And neither of the salons he’d been in today had been playing news. Only one of them had a television, and it had been on the *sports channel*. All day he’d been waiting for news – *ha!* – and it had been *there*.

“I’ve got to go,” he said, his own voice sounding faraway, and he hung up with Yashiro’s protests ringing in his ears.

Chapter End Notes

Notes: Hello, all! Since last chapter we broke 2000 kudos and then went on to very much clear 2100 kudos, so that's awesome. Also, today (yesterday?) I discovered that Paper Cranes is recced on tvtropes now, which I was really hoping would happen at some point, so I'm slightly over the moon. Also, this chapter is long as balls and chapter 20 isn't much shorter. Happy Halloween!

Chapter notes:
As of this chapter, Paper Cranes has a character body count. Currently, this is 1. That number increases drastically next chapter.
Chapter 19, is the penultimate of the arc. Next chapter is on tumblr and concludes the story arc (but not the story! there's at good couple arcs left). Here's a link:
Somewhat significant note: I'll be posting a story called Paper Chains into the Paper Cranes series soon. This will contain bits and pieces like alternate povs, extra scenes, etc etc. I'm mainly posting it as a place to house the extra scene I wrote of a certain critical moment in Yokohama, which I am very proud of. It will shed light on events in this chapter and is recommended reading before chapter 20, but it's not required. You can skip it and still follow the story.

Cheers.

04/06/18 – minor edits, altered Arakawa’s described age a little, capsaicin is not involved in the spiciness of wasabi
Yashiro tried to ring him back, almost immediately. Hikaru stared at the flashing screen of his phone and didn’t answer.

He sat, near motionless, for what felt like a very long time. The phone buzzed in his hand almost without pause, for long enough that the skin started to go numb, his fingers feeling even more shaky and disconnected than the rest of him. He felt oddly faraway, oddly unreal. Like the world had greyed out around him, while he sat lifelessly in the unmoving shell of his skin. He sat on the bed, there and yet not there, the room around him a strange and unconvincing facsimile of reality-

Setsu shaped his name, just once. That felt real.

Hikaru shuddered out of a daze, realising that his grip on the buzzing phone was slick with sweat, feeling his fingers tremble, finding that his other hand had taken hold of his fan without his conscious awareness-

Cold fear trickled over his flesh. He brought the phone up, and watched the calling screen fall away to display a blinking notification: 6 missed calls. There was another notification there, for a text message, but he didn’t have the chance to open it before the phone was buzzing again. Numbly, he pressed the button to reject the call, and opened the message, the device’s light bursting in little motes across his vision. It was blurrier than it should have been.

Hikaru wiped sweat out of his eyes, and it helped somewhat. There was light behind his eyelids, still, as though he’d looked at a lightbulb for too long, but he could read the screen. He muddled his way through the message threatening retribution and blackmail if he didn’t reply, and typed out a response with clumsy fingers.

‘Fuck off, I’m checking the news’, he typed, and sent it. He stared at the screen for several seconds, and no new call was forthcoming.

Setsu shaped his name again. It occurred to Hikaru that the fox had never done that before now. He looked at it, and amber eyes looked back, narrow and grim. The fox’s frame was edged with tension, fur just slightly bristled, ears pointing outwards and back. The demon will come. It said, simply. Just that. Just...bald statement of irrevocable fact.
Hikaru swallowed, and put his phone in his pocket, and stood up. His legs felt wobbly underneath him as he crossed the room and then the hallway. There was still that...disconnect. As though he were cycling in and out of presence in his own body, as though he wasn’t even real. As though none of this was truly a part of real life, a part of the world he lived in...

*It's real.* Setsu told him, spirit-energy snapping at the end, and Hikaru flinched back from it.

“I need to see the news.” He said, his own voice sounding strange and distant. “I just need to...see it. Myself.”

It couldn’t be real. It was, he knew it was. He knew. But it couldn’t be. Surely, surely it couldn’t...

His mother looked up at his approach as he entered the sitting room, drowsy eyes becoming more alert at the sight of him. “Hikaru,” She said. “You look awful. I shouldn’t have let you leave the house today, you’re obviously ill.”

He stared at her, trying to figure out what he was meant to do. Words felt as far removed from him as everything else did, and he didn’t know what to say. “I do feel pretty shitty.” He expressed, in the end, voice void of inflection, the sounds falling unnaturally from his tongue.

She inspected him with the analytic eye of an experienced parent. “You need to get to bed.” She told him, experienced authority practically radiating from her. “And stay there. You can take tomorrow off.”

Tomorrow… “Tomorrow’s Saturday. I have a Kisei game.” He felt his mouth shape the words, and also felt like he was feeling someone else shape the words for him. He reflexively felt for his soul at the thought, and found it bereft of unexpected outside influences. Yet, the feeling remained. “I’ll...” Tomorrow. “I’ll be fine.” Hikaru said, eyelids shutting downwards. I’ll be fine echoed in his thoughts as a dark and bitter shadow. Would he be fine? Would he really? Would tomorrow ever come?

“We’ll see about that.” She looked tremendously unimpressed.

This wasn’t why he was here. “I just wanted to watch the news.” He said, abruptly, raising his eyes to the television screen. Two men complained about a woman, and he recognised the characters from countless instances of looking over his mother’s shoulders. “I heard something happened in Yokohama.”

She blinked at him. “Well, yes, there was a murder.” She inclined her head. “It’s been on the news all afternoon. I’ll see if I can find a channel running it...” She raised the remote and flicked out of the rerun of her favourite soap, browsing channels until she found something that looked newsy. “Ah, there.” She said, pleased. “I expect they’ll be back to talking about the Yokohama murder once they’re done with the weather. It’s an odd thing for you to be interested in though, Hikaru. It’s not like Yokohama is close enough to worry.”

“Eh.” He answered, shrugging weakly. A well-worn impulse reared, briefly. Suggested that he make an excuse, come up with a story. Instead, he kept quiet, and watched. The weather was declared to be headed for cold and damp territory, with a light frost expected the following morning, and probably light rain through most of the afternoon. Wind speeds were discussed for a while, and Hikaru felt the phantom touch of impatience.

Eventually, though, it cycled back around.

Hikaru watched silently, almost thankful at the strange distance that yawned between him and the
feeling of his sick, shuddering heart. He watched the camera footage taken of the crime scene, of police tape stretching around the leg of a torii, the hint of a dark stain in the earth. There was no visible body in the video, but the newscaster said more than enough. At one point, a photograph as one might find on one’s ID was shown on screen. The face was…familiar.

*Early forensics suggest the murder weapon was a traditional katana,* he said. *The victim has been identified and his family informed. The police are asking for any witnesses, or anyone who may have seen Arakawa Katsuo-san in the area around the time of death…*

Hikaru listened, and listened, until he couldn’t listen anymore and just felt sick. “I’m going to bed now.” He said, voice wobbly, and turned on his heels.

“Good. You need rest.” His mother nodded. “Take a glass of water with you.”

“…Yeah.” He agreed, and went to obey. He trudged upstairs, the glass in hand and a fox at his heels.

He put the water on his windowsill, and sat on his bed. He stared at his hands, held in loose fists, and they looked like someone else’s.

*Calm down.* Setsu ordered, eyes sharp. *This isn’t going to help.*

Hikaru blinked, slowly. “I am calm.” He said. It felt…not quite true.

*You’re drifting-from-self. That’s not the same thing as calm.* The fox huffed, and then drew closer, reaching out with its energy and pressing down on him with it, shaping calm, calm, calm with every second.

Hikaru felt something snap back into place, and a second later wished it hadn’t. His next breath caught in his throat, and he was choking, coughing, wheezing on air-

*Calm!* Pressed down on him, wrought so imperiously in the energy that it flattened the spikes of panic out of his own.

He slumped forwards, face settling over his knees. “Fuck.” He expressed, thickly, into the fabric of his jeans.

*Accurate.* Setsu assessed, with a grim curl of energy. It waited patiently for him to get his wits together.

Hikaru breathed, and breathed, and breathed. Eventually, he sat up again, blinking vestiges of stickiness from his eyes. “What now?” He asked. Such a stupid, inane question, but what else was there to ask? What else could he possibly ask, right now? Someone, a real person that he had met, was inescapably dead, exsanguinated on sacred ground, and the one who did it….  

*It will have taken time for the demon to properly subjugate the exorcist.* The fox’s tails were stiff and still, a considerable departure from their usual animation. *Not this long, though. Now, it is only waiting for the right time.*

He contemplated what would constitute the ‘right time’ for a sword demon to hunt him down and possess him. “Later tonight?” He guessed, quiet. “When there’s no one around?”

*Probably.* Setsu agreed, eyes gone narrow and dark. *I would suggest not being here, when it comes.*

Here, where there was his mother. Where Akari was, next door. Yeah, no. He shook his head, and
thought. “I’ll need to wait for my mum to go to sleep, or she’ll stop me leaving.” He pronounced, grimly, and withdrew his phone. Yashiro was threatening blackmail again. Hikaru stared for several moments, then dialled Utagawashi.

It rang four times, then connected. “Shindou-kun?” The voice was, understandably, nervous. “Have you heard any news?”

News. Ha. “…Yeah.” He answered, dully. “It’s on all the news stations, so yeah, I’d say I have news.”

There was an anxious pause. He thought of himself, not much earlier, in Utagawashi’s place on the end of a call. Waiting, listening, knowing that what he heard wasn’t going to be good-

He cut it short. “Arakawa’s dead.” He said, abruptly, and the words speared through him in time with the priest’s sharp inhalation. “Setsu says the demon’s probably going to come tonight, when there’s no one around to get in the way.”

The silence on the other end was painful. Shocked, and stretched tight with fear.

The priest’s voice, when it came, was barely a whisper. “Arakawa-san? Dead?” There was a helpless thread of pleading to it, and Hikaru knew that sound, knew what it was asking for. Tell me otherwise, it said. Tell me this isn’t the world I live in, tell me that this terrible thing is not real…

Setsu moved closer, and pressed its furred side to his leg. Hikaru looked down, and breathed, and nodded jerkily. “Dead.” He repeated, the word hollow. It sounded awfully, sickeningly final in the quiet of his room. “I can’t leave here, not until my mum’s gone to sleep, or she’ll know something’s up. But you…you should go somewhere. Away.” His heart thudded; no longer fast, but very heavy. “It’s not after you. Maybe you can still get out of this.”

There was an appalled, tremulous pause. “Shindou-kun.” Utagawashi said, voice shaken, yet very resolute. “If you think I will allow you to face that demon without me, clearly you are out of your wits.”

Hikaru thought of saying you could die. He thought of saying you probably won’t even make much difference. He didn’t. Utagawashi knew those things already. “Yeah.” He agreed, quiet. “I’ll see you later.” A grim silence held for several seconds at the thought of exactly what circumstances would herald that meeting.

“Good luck.” The priest said, the sound still tight and miserable. “Be sure to come the instant you feel anything. You can’t risk being caught at home.”

He looked up, staring at the cocoon of light that whispered in the walls, and could not bring himself to believe that it would protect him as it had before. “Yeah.” He said again, at a loss for words, and ended the call. He lowered his hands to his lap and felt every thud of his heart like a drum-beat, felt it in his ears, his throat, his wrists, felt it beating ponderously against his ribcage…

Setsu shifted, and called out a name in its energy. One of the scout foxes on the periphery of Hikaru’s senses heard it, and left its post to approach.

There was another missed call from Yashiro. He must have tried to call while Hikaru was on the line with Utagawashi. Hikaru eyed the notification, and wondered when the next call would come. He contemplated his surroundings, and wondered what he’d do if Yashiro spilled the beans too early, if Akari was alerted…

He drew his curtains and turned out the lights. The dark window ought to deter her, and if it didn’t,
his mother probably would. Sickness was actually a fairly helpful cover, now.

*Enemy-expected-tonight.* Setsu was saying to the scout it had called, and the smaller fox shuffled nervously. *Spread word.* A moment later, the phone was ringing again. Hikaru regarded it, silent, for several seconds.

He answered. “Yashiro.”

“Well?” The boy demanded, his usually calm voice prickly with agitation. “Did you see the news yet?”

“…Yeah.”

“And?” The word pressed. Demanded.

“It’s the guy I met.” He admitted, tonelessly. “And probably Kaminaga killed him.”

Yashiro hissed. “You’ve got to call the police.” He said, authoritatively. “This is fucking nuts, Shindou. You need to call the police and tell them about this guy.”

Hikaru pondered, very carefully, what to say. “Yeah.” He acquiesced, in the end. “Tomorrow, though. And I’ll come stay with you for a bit, after my Kisei match.” He waited for the sound of protest to arise, and cut it off. “Tomorrow. Okay? This is…fucked up.” His fingers tightened around the phone. “Let me sleep on it, for fuck’s sake. One night isn’t going to make a difference.”

Ha.

The other pro’s voice audibly wavered. “What if he gets away because you held off? Or kills someone else?” He questioned, and Hikaru damn near shuddered.

“He’s crazy, and he just killed his best friend.” He countered. “When he comes to his senses he’ll probably turn himself in. He’s an asshole, but he seems like the type.”

Still, Yashiro hesitated. “You really should call this in now.”

“Fuck you, I’ll call it in the morning.” He denied, with some asperity, and then flat-out lied. “Nothing’s going to happen.”

“Shindou.” The boy complained, and Hikaru evaluated the tone of his voice. He thought that Yashiro probably wouldn’t call the cavalry if he cut off now, so that was exactly what he did. He ended the call and put the phone on his bed, and then laid back to contemplate what the fuck was going on in his life.

The ceiling was white, with an assortment of cracks and blemishes that he was very familiar with. His eyes ran over them, aimlessly, while he breathed. Inhale, exhale. In, out. “I might die tonight.” He said, to no one in particular, and the words sank caustically into his veins. Terror might have seemed a normal response. Or horror. Instead there was just…tension, quiet but potent, threaded so thoroughly into him that he could hardly imagine ever being free of it. There was only that, only the dread that pressed down, down, thrumming darkly in his thoughts.

Still, none of that sensation felt as insistent as it should. It was as though he’d passed through the gauntlet of stress and terror, and on the other side, there was…this. Staring at the ceiling, thinking about death, all the while feeling several steps shy of reality. Hints of the most gut-clenching terror he’d ever felt taunted the edges of his awareness, but he was just…absent. The dread was there, but he was not.
“What happens, when your soul’s eaten by a demon?” He asked Setsu, who had kept still and silent since the one-tail had left.

Setsu looked at him. You end. It said, shortly. Unless you’re released before it digests you, there’s nothing afterwards. No passing-on. No reincarnation. Just... conversion to energy.

Hikaru exhaled, eyes still heavenwards.

So. Tonight he might die. Die, and not even be able to pass on properly, or see Sai at the end of it.

How utterly horrible.

It occurred to him that feeling pre-emptively defeated was probably not a good state of mind to have when anticipating a spiritual battle, but he wasn’t sure what to do about it. He glanced down, to the side, and saw the kamidana there.

Hikaru sat up, stood, and approached the shrine, nearly falling over as blood returned to his legs. He sat down, and reached almost desperately for the spark in the ofuda, the quiescent mote of light, the something that hung in the air like a warm promise-

Waiting whispered into him like a breath of fresh air. Calm, wordless reassurance in it. Something will happen, the feeling said, so inexorably that he couldn’t even begin to doubt it. He shuddered, bleak tension sloughing from him like a putrescent skin, and the plummet to serenity almost painfully intense as he settled.

Wait, said the feeling in the shrine.

Hikaru waited.

He waited. He waited for over an hour unmoving, fears and doubts and the vicious weight of stress withering in the face of that unyielding presence. Eventually, he stopped waiting, when Setsu alerted him to his mother approaching and he had to go pretend to be asleep. And then, when she had passed his room by, and been and gone from the bathroom, and seemed to have gone to bed, there was still time to pass. He needed her to be solidly asleep, after all.

Now utterly calm, Hikaru considered how to pass that time. It occurred to him that he had left a great many things unsaid.

He retrieved some writing supplies from his drawers, and sat on the floor to make good use of them. He wrote letters, short and blunt, to everyone he felt deserved an explanation from him, in the event of his death. He consigned his goban and stones to Yashiro in said event, because Yashiro was in dire need of a proper Go set. He consigned his shrine supplies, the ofuda, and his fan to Touya, because he thought the boy would have the right sort of respect for them. He consigned other things, too, but those were the most important.

When he was done he had several short, utterly inadequate missives. He folded each of them carefully, labelled them, and hid them under the incense boxes in one of his drawers. They ought not to be found for a while, even if he did die.

It occurred to Hikaru that he’d just hastily written a will, pretty much, and that he was earnestly planning for what happened if he died, and-

Hikaru went back to the shrine before the threat of panic could penetrate too deeply, and sank with immense relief into waiting.
He sat, calm again, for a long stretch of silence.

He stood, and looked over his clothing and made sure he was ready to leave quickly, and was calm. He drained the glass of water on his bedside, and remained calm.

He sensed a fox on the edge of his reach, shooting like an arrow for the nearest sentry. Alarm flared in the distance, a tiny leap of light, and both of them started flaring warning, very loudly. The other sentries in the area took up the call, echoing it out in coruscating ripples of alert. It was nearly eleven o’clock, and the foxes’ reactions could only have one explanation.

Still, Hikaru was calm.

He shared a grim glance with Setsu, stood up, and fetched his phone, tucking his fan into a pocket. He messaged Utagawashi: ‘He’s coming. I’m heading over.’ He pocketed the phone, too, and crept out of his bedroom. Like any self-respecting teenager, he was acquainted with precisely which spots in the hallways and stairs would creak when stepped on, and which would keep silent. He picked his way slowly, carefully across the dark hall, padding down the stairs, and then a little more confidently towards the door. He bent to pull on one of his shoes, and -

a thread of unease –

Hikaru faltered, pausing with laces curved around his fingers. He blinked, and completed the tie, pulling the first cord tight, and reached for the other one

Red, red, red waxed in the distance

And Hikaru was not calm.

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The shock of it was awful. From one moment to the next, he passed from utter calm to utter panic, like waking to immersion in icy, burning water, mind and breath stolen away. He gasped, thoughts gone white with fear, and scrambled with the last shoe, pulling at the laces almost violently, the tie an inelegant and frantic knot rather than a bow.

He didn’t care. He couldn’t find anything in himself other than fear, pulsing red-and-black behind his eyelids as horror curled over the lip of the horizon. He scrambled for the door and barely remembered to close it quietly, turning to sprint down the deserted street. Some houses still had lights in the windows. Most didn’t.

He passed through the wards in seconds, and the sensation of distant menace doubled. It bore down on him so heavily that it was like it was right there, taunting him, snatching at his heels as he ran and stumbled in the dark. He barely even noticed Setsu running with him, utterly captured by the terror of it being right there, going-to-catch-him-

It is nowhere near, Setsu snapped at him, and lunged at the empty air behind him. The feeling of imminent doom dissipated, just a little, and Hikaru sucked in air. He paused to get his breath, feeling at the space around him as he did, and… “What…?”

Miasma. Very highly dispersed. The fox told him, and lashed its tails through the sludgy air. You can hit it! Eat it! Take every advantage away!

“I am not eating that.” Hikaru refuted, eyes wide, but did retrieve his fan and lash out at the thickening haze of fear in the empty space. It… was as though he’d swept it through a room full of smoke. The demon’s presence scattered the same way, dispersing around his strike, though it
regathered almost immediately. He cursed, and started running again.

Late October air bit at his arms, and Hikaru realised without much care that he’d forsaken a coat in his panic. The coldness of the air rushing over his skin was utterly irrelevant in the face of what was chasing him. Breathlessness built, part from fear and part from exertion, and half-hysterically he remembered what he’d said to Ogata about needing to improve his physical fitness-

His footsteps resounded and echoed in the dark streets, mapping the space from one street lamp to the next, with only the occasional car passing by in light and sound and puffs of exhaust fumes. Hikaru pushed through the burning of the cold air in his chest and kept running.

By the time he reached the shrine, he’d retreated from the demon faster than it had approached, and there was almost an illusion of safety in that. The implication that it was possible to escape. That it was possible for this to end without conflict. Hikaru stopped in front of the torii, breathing in shallow gasps, and then passed through. The otherness inherent to shrine-grounds washed over him, more prickly and insistent than it had ever been. It pulsed against the heaviness in the air, and as he fell through the wardlight, the residual fear passed away.

He looked back, blinking, and saw that the thinly-dispersed miasma could not seem to penetrate the cocoon of light. It was an exceptionally comforting sight. His posture loosened, and he tried to breathe a little more deeply, heading to purify himself even as he glanced around for Utagawashi. He identified the man by feel, but almost not by sight – once he was done at the fountain, he did a double-take before he identified the figure, who was dressed in perfectly ordinary clothing.

Hikaru had never seen him in anything other than a kannushi’s kariginu, hat and all. He stared for several seconds, flummoxed by how skinny the man looked without the robes, and his thoughts inevitably flickered to Sai. Would he, too, be so slight in regular clothing? It was an utterly bizarre thought, and served fairly well to distract him from impending doom.

“You look weird.” Hikaru said bluntly as he approached, glancing around at the more obvious occupants of the shrine. Foxes had gathered around the shrine-grounds, just as when Arakawa had visited, but…they were quieter. Focused. Still. They slunk around the boundaries, and stared as one into the distance where the shadows bloomed.

The five-tails lingered just outside the honden doors, and there were twelve three-tails situated around the shrine. The only two-tails present was Meikai, who trotted up to greet Setsu as he pulled up behind them, both of their energies solemn. A fluttering anxiety entered Setsu at the sight of her that had not been there before, fear-for-loved-one flaring in its fur. Should not be here! It snapped at her, hackles risen.

“You mean, I don’t look like a priest.” Utagawashi responded dryly, and he would have sounded normal if not for the edge of tension in his voice.

Will not abandon you to fight-for-soul alone Meikai was saying, agitated, two tails flicking just at the corner of Hikaru’s vision.

He took in the first part of Setsu’s response before he replied, thoughts caught between the two conversations. Two-tails, and depleted from training! Cannot-remain! The older fox snarled, even as Hikaru shaped words out loud into “Well, yeah, I’ve never seen you in normal clothes before.” The sentence was halting, as he tried to do two things at once and naturally failed.

I will not live alone again was Meikai’s response to that, and Hikaru winced, feeling emotions flare around the two foxes with painful intensity. There was history there, it was obvious, and he felt uncomfortably like an intruder as he stood there and felt the eddies of it ripple over him. It seemed
like a very personal discussion they were having and that was awkward, but it wasn’t as though there was anywhere else for him to go-

*Then you will find another!* Setsu snapped, four tails flaring out as emotions spilled like ink into the air, and yeah, this was not something Hikaru really wanted to be aware of-

He inched towards the closest three-tails, and it turned to look at him, head tilted. “Let me know when they’re done, okay?” he requested, and waited for its slight nod before he squashed his awareness inwards. He shuddered, and then noticed that Utagawashi was trying to talk to him, and cleared his throat. “Uh, what was that?”

“I asked what the foxes are doing.” The priest informed him.

“…Arguing.” Hikaru answered, awkwardly, and looked away. “So, how come you’re not in priest clothes? Don’t you get more…? I dunno… spiritual oomph, if you’re all dressed up?”

The man sighed at him. “I am a priest whatever I happen to be wearing at the time.” He said, and brandished his shaku, that mysterious priestly baton that was presumably going to be useful against a demon. “I do have some things with me, though.” He inspected Hikaru. “…How far away is Kaminaga-san?” His voice tightened on the question.

“Um.” Hikaru said, because his senses were still uncomfortably squashed in and he didn’t know the answer to that question, but then there was a nudge at the edge of him. He unfurled, cautiously, and found the three-tails looking up at him expectantly. Hikaru looked over and saw that where Setsu and Meikai had been arguing, only the former remained. Traces of spirit-energy were lingering oddly into the air, flickering with after-shocks of intense emotion. In the distance, he could feel Meikai receding from the shrine.

Even further in the distance, a mere hint behind the bright wards, a demon approached.

“…It’s hard to say.” He answered, eventually, glancing at Setsu. The fox’s fur was bristled and its emotions clearly still agitated from the recently concluded disagreement, though it seemed the four-tails had won. “I’m bad at judging that sort of thing.”

Setsu looked over at him, tersely. Fifteen minutes, maybe less. It estimated, and visibly gathered itself, the sharp spikes of its emotion starting to smooth out a little.

“Setsu says maybe fifteen minutes, tops.” Hikaru reported, and watched the priest’s shoulders hunch a little at the news. Having caught his breath, he was…less bothered, now. The feeling of the approaching demon was far less immediate and frightening inside the shrine grounds, and inside the wards. The *otherness* made it seem almost as though the place existed in a separate, inviolable world. It felt…safe.

Evidently, though, it was not. Setsu shook out its fur, and looked up. *Battle strategy will be different from practice with foxes,* it told him. *Use fan. Use it very hard. Disperse the demon’s miasma and try to directly attack the soul in the blade.*

“What, physically?” Hikaru asked, dubiously. He didn’t think it necessary to point out that swords, in general, cut paper very handily.

*Obviously not.* The fox’s tail-tips twitched, agitated.

Hikaru considered asking for more detail, but reconsidered at the increasing snarl that built on Setsu’s lips as it beheld the distance. The foxes were all still watching, eyes fixed unerringly on the demon’s approach. It was a little eerie; fourteen white shapes pointing sharply the way of danger.
A tense vigil held. Occasionally, Setsu or one of the three-tails would break away to pace around, sniffing around the ofuda and the shrine grounds with evident agitation, fur bristled and tails stiff and spiky. Once, Setsu whirled around to Utagawashi and snapped at him, clearly expecting a translation from Hikaru.

You will not enter blood-range, it commanded, and Hikaru blinked and stumbled to relay the words. You have no martial training, and are useless for the demon’s purposes. It will cut you down in seconds! Do not draw close enough to be bled, priest of Inari!

Utagawashi’s eyes went wide at the words, and he jerked his chin down in a nod. “Then…what should I do?” He asked, tentatively.

Pray for divine aid. Strike at the shadows in the air. Throw ofuda. Setsu answered tersely, and then whirled away again, slinking around the shrine.

Hikaru repeated the fox’s words, watching it go. He shifted, uneasy, and reached out again. The wardlight here was so much stronger and brighter than the cocoon around his home; it was hard to detect anything properly beyond it. But…Kaminaga was close, now. The foxes were gathering near the front of the shrine, and the five-tails stood at the head of them, so bright that Hikaru could scarcely sense the wards through it, let alone the demon. In the honden, the god-spark was brighter than he’d ever felt it. The otherness of the shrine-grounds waxed in ebbs and flows, like a great beast gathering breath to roar, or like a building wave.

He removed his fan from his pocket, and opened it. Held it carefully at his side.

Setsu completed its circuit of the shrine and stopped beside him, the hint of sharp teeth flashing at its jaw. It looked up at him, and its energy flickered. The knowledge in it echoed, coruscated, taken up by each fox in turn.

Soon, they said, and gathered to stare at the torii.

The night was quiet. They heard him before they saw him; the innocuous clap of footsteps on a paved path. They echoed, just a little, into the cold damp of the air.

Through the torii, Hikaru saw Kaminaga’s head rise over the slight slope of the path. In the dark, with only the shrine’s lanterns to go by, his face was wreathed in shadow. Three more steps brought the sword into view, an anonymous shape at his side, still sheathed, a hand ready on its hilt. A snarl bubbled from the five-tails’ lips, tumbling from bright fangs, and thirteen other foxes took it up. Threat! spiked around the shrine in a procession of teeth, and the wardlight mantled with fury.

Hikaru stood numbly beside Utagawashi, who was himself still and silent, his grip white-knuckled around the shaku. He waited, heart pounding, as Kaminaga approached the torii, and…stopped.

Would he say anything? Could he say anything? Was there even anything left in him that could speak?

The snarl cut off into a tense, bristling silence. Kaminaga stood before the torii, body oddly stiff. His head tilted, ever so slightly, and it looked…wrong. Halting, crooked, like the jerky motion of a puppet on frayed strings. He observed the shrine gate with hooded eyes, and his right hand settled around the sword-hilt. Pulled. Lamp-light glittered on the edge of the blade.

Instantly, the wards flared, so brightly that Hikaru hissed and drew his senses in. They raged, blazed, alight with protective fury as the demon’s energy broke upon them. They felt impenetrable, inviolable. He could scarcely see, they were so powerful, flexing like a guardian beast at the red arch
of the torii.

Kaminaga tilted his head, eyes distant and unfocused. He raised the sword, and *that* motion was fluid, effortless. He raised the sword to the bright, furious wards-

And the demon tore through like a hurricane.

Beside him, Hikaru heard Utagawashi inhale, but he scarcely noticed it. It was all so *fast*. In the space of a *second*, the wards were shattered, fractures tearing out across the whole bright dome, the pieces falling and writhing and bleeding from the ofuda as aimless energy. The light vanished between one moment and the next, and then the dark came.

Kaminaga stepped through the torii, and miasma broke upon the shrine ground like a tide of blood. The lamp-lights snuffed out just like the wardlights had, and Hikaru-

He-

A sharp bite to the ankle snapped him back to awareness, grip tightening on the fan he’d *almost dropped*, and he had to scramble not to fall over. Hikaru gasped, vision swimming, red and black, the air so saturated with terror that he could hardly move, hardly think

Setsu’s tails lashed through the air, scattering miasma, and Hikaru found space in the darkness to bring his arm up, to ready the fan, to *strike*.

Energy *slammed* outwards, scattering the demonic force in a huge wedge-shape in front of him. It had been so thickly dispersed that he couldn’t sense past it, and he couldn’t see in the dark, but now-

The foxes were fighting.

Kaminaga stood to the front of the torii, the demon-sword up and ready, and the foxes were attacking. From a distance, breaking a path through the miasma. And closer, the five-tails was dancing, a viciously bright streak with a soul full of fury. It swallowed and shredded the energy sent at it, exhaling its own energy into the air like a white mist, and lunged for Kaminaga – Kaminaga, not the sword – at every opportunity it had. Every time, the sword came up, deadly blade flashing in the dim moonlight, and the fox darted away again. Setsu spared a quick glance for Hikaru before leaping into the fray, snapping at a vile spill of energy that was trying to reach past.

Beside him, Utagawashi was speaking. Haltingly, with wide eyes, he intoned a prayer to Inari, formal and poetic and unsettlingly loud in the darkness, and the *something* building in the shrine grew stronger.

By now, the vast tide of miasma the demon had brought to bear was scattered and faltering. More spilled into the air with each passing second, yes, but the three-tails were snapping at it and dispersing it as it came, while Setsu and the five-tails attacked at close range. Hikaru breathed, tentatively encouraged, and lashed out with his fan again, scattering the dark energy that spilled out from the bared blade. Or…not. The energy was relentless, pushing out like water breaking from a dam, but…it wasn’t coming directly from the demon. It was…ripping its way through Kaminaga, first. *Brutally*.

Hikaru shuddered with horror at the sight of it and swung his fan blindly, retching at the feeling of another vicious tide of miasma forcing its way into the air, tinged with bloody shreds of Kaminaga’s *soul*. It was *awful*, like watching someone being physically ripped apart in front of him, thorns and coils and *teeth* stretching into reality through a mutilated conduit that couldn’t even scream.

His grip went numb on the fan from the vision of horror. He convulsed, unable to help it, and
vomited onto the floor. His throat burned with acid as he straightened, tried to raise a shaky arm-
The holding pattern broke. Setsu took a direct blow through the spirit-flesh of its side, soul pierced and amber energy spilling into the air with shocking speed. Pain flared out from it, in tandem with the sick, oozing, crooning satisfaction of the demon, and Setsu scrambled to retreat. Dark, thorny tendrils of energy followed it, burrowing into its soul through the wound made, and the fox fell, heaving. It twisted, trying to get its teeth around-

Two three-tails joined the melee, snarling in time with the five-tails as they made a direct assault on Kaminaga, forcing the demon’s attention away. Hikaru swung his fan at the extended length of teeth and thorns, wide-eyed and horrified, and went dizzy with relief to see it shatter under the force of his blow. He caught three of the other three-tails in the eddies of the blow, and they staggered under its force, flaring reprimand at him as they fell back to recover. Hikaru was more occupied with Setsu, though.

Setsu’s teeth sank into the truncated, writhing mess of shadow inside its flesh and tore, the barbed intrusion scattering into bleak, denatured energy. It stood, panting with exertion, the sight of it strange to Hikaru’s spirit-sense – half vision, of a white fox soaked in blood, and half feeling, of a core of amber energy ruptured and bleeding out. The blood looked red one second, then amber the next, but either way it was spilling too fast.

Hikaru moved forwards and reached, pressing energy to the pierced spherical heart of Setsu so firmly that the fox’s own energy could not spill past it. “What do I do?” he asked, urgently, and the fox hissed.

Get away, idiot boy, too-close-to-demon-

Tell me what to do.” Hikaru demanded, cutting off the fox’s protests, and it hissed again.

….Burn. It said, and braced itself.

Hikaru blinked, and remembered what he’d done to himself in the wake of a very similar attack, and gathered energy. More, and more, not reaching or tearing, but pressing, so tightly gathered that it burned blue in his vision, burned like the wards did, like the five-tails-

Setsu howled, pain lancing over its fur, but…the wound closed. It snarled, unsteady on its feet, and snapped at a length of gathered miasma that drew too close.

“Is that okay?” Hikaru pressed, and two of four tails came around to slap him backwards.

Yes, fine, thank you, just get back! It snapped, drawing around the front of him as though to hide him from the demon’s sight. It didn’t try to join the melee again, seemingly aware that it had sustained a very nasty blow and was not up to that kind of high-speed combat any more.

Hikaru stumbled backwards, Setsu darting to the left to disrupt a gathering tangle of thorny shadows. Sparks burst across his awareness, startlingly sudden, and he glanced back to see that Utagawashi had scattered ofuda, their subtle glints of awareness present and awake and waiting.

Waiting, like the ofuda in his shrine. Building, in time with the ominous otherness that waxed and breathed with Utagawashi’s every word. Each ofuda in the shrine pulsed, glittered, like starlight. All in time with each other, growing steadily brighter.

We have a god on our side, Hikaru thought, looking at it, feeling a little numb at the concept. Active, obvious divine aid. It didn’t seem to be doing anything for now, but it was there, it was building, something was going to happen and it was almost exciting-
The foxes screamed, and Hikaru whipped around just in time to see the demon-blade strike directly through the heart of a three-tail’s soul. The sphere, a delicate and glassy yellow-green, split in half, and bled. Just like the wards, the fox shattered and scattered and spilled into the air in the space of a second, the sight of the destroyed soul unimaginably visceral.

The other three-tails in close range, still screaming, lunged at the same time as the five-tails, dodging around the cut of the shining blade that came for its neck. The five-tails dodged, too, as Kaminaga tilted the blade and lunged forwards, darting under the strike and teeth snapping close enough that he had to defend against it, stepping backwards and swinging deadly steel down.

Thus distracted, the three-tails took advantage of the opening left and lanced forwards, teeth ripping into the thorns extending through Kaminaga’s soul. Triumph flashed in its energy at that strike – the first true hit scored! The triumph held, for that moment.

But only a moment.

Rather than defend against the teeth in its host, the demon’s blade went for the five-tails, and caught it against the tip of one tail. It was enough. The fox pulled away, alarmed, the black tendrils already pressing inwards from that tiny point of contact, and it tried to tug itself away, caught literally by the tail in an alarmingly firm grip. The three-tails diverted, pulling its teeth out to snap at the thorns pulling at its elder, and Hikaru didn’t dare help for fear of hitting both of the foxes. He swept his fan widely to the left of Kaminaga instead, the outer corner of the wedge-shaped blow scattering the demon’s miasma in the air. The traces of the dead three-tail’s energy scattered, too, and it was enough to make acid rise in his throat again.

The five-tails pulled free, darting away to cauterise its own wound, and Kaminaga swung around. Looked at Hikaru.

Hikaru stared back, fear cresting at the sight of the unfocused eyes, and then the man was striding forwards into the space left by the repelled foxes.

At the threat of the approach, the other foxes immediately gathered, darting into the danger zone heedless of their prior reluctance. The five-tails, finished with its wound, returned to the fray, and Setsu looked like it was seriously considering joining. Instead, Hikaru’s guardian fox drew closer to him and started drinking in the very considerable amount of energy scattered in the air, losing its previous nature more and more with every second. It was kind of disturbing, actually.

Focus strikes more, to not hit foxes. It told him, gulping down shadows. Strike without the fan, if you have to. It lashed out at a gathering spire of energy that reached their way with a snarl.

“I’ll try.” He said, tightly, and and tried to limit the amount of energy he focused into the fan. The wedge was considerably slimmer, this time, and while the foxes successfully dodged it, Kaminaga did not. His soul noticeably shuddered under it, the thorny tendrils inside squirming, and the man’s head snapped up to stare at him.

His eyes weren’t unfocused any more. There was a shadow in them, a deep and angry malevolence rising like the glow of a wildfire in the distance.

Enough split its way into the air, Kaminaga’s soul straining as shadows streamed through it, red and black and full of teeth and thorns and barbed claws-

Deliberately, the demon stood still and took two sets of teeth onto the soul, blade tilted outwards, ready. Three other foxes, fully-committed to a lunge they’d expected to be dodged, flared their energy out in panic – the five-tails and the three-tails with teeth in Kaminaga tried to pull him away,
but they weren’t physical. They couldn’t do more than tear at the soul, and it wasn’t enough.

Eyes dark and pleased, Kaminaga slashed the blade outwards from his right in a wide, deadly arc, and all three foxes died. The others screamed at the sight, souls flaring with rage and grief, and the five-tails itself had to duck away to avoid another blow.

The three-tails wasn’t fast enough.

The demon blade sank into the orb of its soul, and sat there. Kaminaga didn’t move, didn’t complete the cut. Merely rested the blade within the fox, and watched dark thorns spread. The three-tails twisted and howled on the blade, already hopelessly entangled. The remaining foxes lunged forwards to give aid and Kaminaga did move, then, removing the blade to defend against his attackers, but…

Hikaru watched, stricken with horror, as the demon’s bloody roots proliferated within the three-tails with shocking speed. Within five seconds they had utterly choked the bright, beautiful teal of its soul, the fox itself shuddering and twitching on the ground. A moment later, the creature’s soul was vomiting darkness, another broken point in the seal’s dam, hurling shadow into the air far quicker than Kaminaga could.

Hikaru raised his fan, sick and conflicted. Should he strike, when that poor fox was the source of it? Could it even come back from something like this?

*Strike!* Setsu snarled, standing ready at his side, and. Well. That was the answer to that.

He struck, as hard as he could, and the energy scattered again. But…

It was spilling too fast, now.

He felt darkness building at the side, and gagged at the sight of one of the other three-tails screaming as the demon tore it apart from within, demonic force tearing into the world through the shredded husk of the fox’s soul. The five-tails had sustained another already-burned injury somewhere in the last few seconds, and there were still six three-tailed foxes left unharmed, but-

Three points. Kaminaga, and the two foxes. The demon surged from them in vast tides, floods of bloody thorns and barbed wire, enough of it now to gather around the man in an inky tide too vast to reach through. The foxes were all forced to retreat and snap at the writhing, hungry reaches of its grasp.

*Get back!* Setsu snapped, dodging to the side as Hikaru swung another shattering strike of his fan at the building, roiling mass of demon.

He scrambled back to Utagawashi, who was increasingly pale but still chanting. He shoved the man backwards as he went, mind going stark-white with building fear. What was there now wasn’t just miasma – wasn’t just the condensed and almost physical spiritual energy of a demon – but soul. A vast, twisting, thorny soul, so much of it, and more every second, breaking more and more of itself through the seal. It was spiritually visible, just like the bodies of the foxes, an endless tangle of tentacles and mouths and twisting eyes that grew with every passing moment.

“How much of it is there?!” He gasped, senses weakening as miasma clogged the shrine grounds, exhaled from the writhing nova of the demon’s power. He felt, distantly, the surge of corruption grow again, and knew that another fox had been caught. At the same time, the first one finally gave out under the strain of the demon’s horrific brutality, the thin shell of its soul shattering into nothing. The surge slowed again then, but there was so much terror in the air that he could scarcely even tell.
Setsu didn’t answer, instead snapping at the miasma around Hikaru’s arm and then jerking its head sharply towards one of the surge points. *Hit there!*

Hikaru didn’t question it, and slammed his fan forwards, shattering a cluster of thorns and miasma with the bright snap of Sai’s energy. He felt one of the demon-taken foxes break under the blow, and had to fight back his nausea. The five-tails darted out of the gap made, periodically surging its energy outwards in a scalding blaze, and two more three-tails sprinted past, coming to stand near Setsu. They were wild-eyed, coats and tails all bristling and their souls shuddering with horror.

The five-tails sped back and to the side, flaring out energy to sear away the reaching tangle that the demon sent their way.

*There!* Setsu directed, pointing with its snout, and Hikaru obeyed. This time, he expected it when he felt the fox break, but it was no less horrible. By now the presence of the demon was so vast that he had no idea whether any of the other foxes had been *caught* – he could barely sense the five-tails, for god’s sake.

The five-tails in question jerked its head to the side and *flooded* the leftmost reach of the demonic tangle with light, burning it away, and the flicker of intent in Setsu was enough for Hikaru to aim an extremely nasty strike that way. The thorns crumbled and another fox came through, and then another-

Red-black madness slammed down on the screaming creature, fixing it inescapably to the ground. The first one fled, crying, and the five-tails *snarled*, flaring foxfire at the thick tangles holding the three-tails down. Hikaru struck too, scattering the last of the grasp, but the fox had barely scrambled to its feet before the encroaching darkness took it again. The five-tails lashed out again, but visibly wavered, the coils of energy building around it at an alarming rate.

Nothing *helped*. Hikaru lashed out, again and again, but it wasn’t enough anymore. The three-tails on the ground was further and further away, harder and harder to reach – but it wasn’t *taken* yet! It was just being held! If he could just break it out-

Setsu flared *alarm* and bit him on the ankle, and only then did Hikaru see the spreading bank of the demon’s power growing to the left. Blocking them off from the honden.

“*Shit,***” Hikaru cursed, face utterly white.

*Back!* Setsu snapped, extending the thought to the five-tails as well. The older fox visibly *snarled at* the idea. It *detested* the idea of retreat, of leaving a fox behind. It wanted to rip and tear and *burn*.

*Back!* Setsu said again, the order cracking on the air, splitting the miasma. Hikaru swung his fan again and again, arm growing shaky and tired from the repeated strain, but it wasn’t as though he could *stop*.

With a final, furious snarl, the five-tails did jump back, and as a group the humans and the five remaining foxes retreated from the encroaching wall of darkness.

Quite deliberately, the demon left a line of sight to the trapped fox, extending its reach everywhere else. A taunt, or a demonstration. Quite evidently, the reaching tendrils weren’t capable of assaulting the soul directly, and had to get through the fox’s energy shroud first. It was a slow, gory process, the three-tail’s shrieks ripping into the air with the shreds of its energy, scattering out like clumps of white fur.

Miasma grew thicker and thicker in the air, until it felt like a physical force. Like he was pulling his
arm through sludge. The foxes around him did their best to clear it from him so that he could swing his fan unimpeded, but it was getting difficult to breathe, let alone move. Utagawashi was still chanting, voice thin and desperate, and he gasped for breath between words as the air thickened. And it was only getting worse.

The demon’s macabre display peaked with a spurt of soul-spill and the victim’s terrified shriek. Thorny tendrils curled through the breach in the soul, down the fox’s throat, tearing inexorably inwards.

Hikaru gasped, half from breathlessness and half from sheer horror, and looked away. It didn’t help with the feel, but at least that way he couldn’t see a fox torn apart in front of him. Desperation clawed at his remaining breath, and the pressure grew, and he couldn’t move any more.

He couldn’t move.

Utagawashi fell to the ground behind him, still praying, still pleading. His voice was thin and barely audible, barely a whisper, but the shrine presence was still building. Still waiting. Would it be like the spark in the Sai-shrine? Waiting, waiting, but never happening? It was building, but…too slow.

It was too late, now. He saw it in the terror of the three-tails, the grim defiance of Setsu, and the way the five-tails blazed like a fire on the cusp of burning out. Only six foxes left of fourteen, now, if you counted the one who was still writhing and crying around the thorns twisting through its body, its lifeblood spilling onto the hungry roots. It seemed like the demon’s sword worked differently, because this fox wasn’t another fault point in the seal – it was just…being torn apart. Eaten.

Hikaru thought he might have been sick again, if he were strong enough to do it. If he had enough breath in his body. He lowered his eyes, gasping shallowly, and swayed on his feet. “Setsu?” He managed. Barely a whisper. It was a struggle to move his energy, even. To ask what can we do?

Setsu bared its teeth. Fight, it snarled, and struggled against the miasma. The five-tails seemed somewhat less impeded, but it was…too bright. Burning fiercely, but too quickly. Its energy was draining away very, very fast.

A flicker of movement.

Hikaru looked up, and saw Kaminaga emerge from the monstrous, writhing tangle of the demon’s emergent soul. Even now, he was spewing shadow, murderous coils of thorns and teeth ripping free of him with sickening splatters of miasma and shreds of his own soul. It was like seeing a single human form spilling a river of fluid – blood, pus, ichor, bile – from within a far-too-small body. But still, there he was. Approaching, almost sedately, with sword held at his side in a single hand.

He tried to move. To lash out. To do anything. But the fan was loose in his numb fingers. The air was pressing down on him, he couldn’t breathe. He managed to raise the arm with the fan, slowly, by forcing it upwards, but he couldn’t bring it to bear with enough speed to swing. Could barely move his own energy outside his body. The five-tails snarled at the sight of Kaminaga’s approach, low and angry, and struggled against the ever-heavier miasma. Resolve sealed itself in the fox’s own spherical heart, painful and determined and unshakeable. It offered a quick and solemn prayer in its soul, forming the name-shape Inari-sama with exquisite care. Then it pushed.

The bright, blazing energy of the five-tails seared outwards, breaking against the tide of madness. But it didn’t stop. It pushed, and burned, and blazed, brighter and brighter, scorching and tearing against the endless coils of the demon. It screamed foxfire into the dark, fangs and eyes streaming with light, breaking its own soul as fuel for the flame. Pain flared across every shred of its being, achingly bright and terribly beautiful.
The five-tails’ soul shattered, and became fire. It blazed for three glorious, incandescent seconds, and then it was gone. In its wake, the something in the shrine brightened considerably, but…nothing happened. The five-tails was gone, and nothing had happened.

Those remaining of the three-tails uttered low, awful wails. Setsu lowered its head. Hikaru stared at the spot where the fire had been, utterly gutted by the sight of its emptiness. The five-tails had burned itself out rather than be consumed, and now…

Kaminaga stopped before him, sword held carefully at his side, hilt supported against the strong edge of his right hand. His eyes were blank again, vacant and dark, but triumph was exhaled into the air around him with another distinct, putrescent splatter of miasma. The coils of the demon were upon him, now, upon them all – the shadows circled their helpless forms, their slow advance a goading artifice of terror. The demon had them all near immobile; it knew it had won. But it enjoyed their fear, and enjoyed drawing it out.

Miasma surged again, sickly and vile, directly against his energy. Hikaru gagged, and lost even more breath, and shuddered under the weight of the air. His fingers trembled, tried to lift the fan, and then finally dropped it. The weight of the miasma near-doubled, then, and despair flooded his lungs in place of air. Numb, weak, and defeated, Hikaru fell to his knees on the cold earth.

Kaminaga smiled. The expression was unnatural beneath the dead, vacant stare of his eyes, and thoroughly chilling. His lips opened, in time with the finally that seeped gleefully from every nightmarish coil of thorns. The shrine had become wholly, unnaturally quiet, unbroken except for Utagawashi’s desperate whispering and Hikaru’s terrified gasps. He stared upwards, knowing that his neck was bare and exposed and there was nothing he could do.

The demon blade lifted slowly, inexorably. Hikaru watched it rise, the lingering light of the moon glinting cruelly on its killing-edge. Slowly, almost tenderly, the demon’s puppet pressed it to the skin of his neck, mere centimetres below his left ear. Directly over the pulse point. The tip of the blade rested there with the lightest pressure, horrifyingly sharp and yet not breaking skin, the murderous thirst of the blade held at bay by only its own will.

Then, with exquisite care, Kaminaga pressed.

The blade was almost too sharp to feel the cut at all, but the effects – those, he felt. The line drawn on his neck was terrifyingly, horrifyingly cold – it was wrong, awfully so, and he needed to get it away-

Sheer force of atavistic horror drove his arms weakly upwards, the movements feeble and horribly shaky. The air was too heavy, but he needed to get it away before it was too late, too late, too cold. Thorns spilled into his mind, slipping past the guarding shroud of Sai’s energy like it wasn’t even there, and it was too late, already too late, but maybe, maybe.

He pushed desperately, mindlessly, at the blade at his neck, at the horrid burning cold there. The dark was slipping in and horror was breathing covetously on his soul, but maybe it wasn’t too late, maybe, if he could get the blade away, please, he could survive. His hands shook, stumbled, pushed at the killing edge and drew lines of numbing cold through his own flesh, and didn’t move it at all. He needed to get it away, but his hands were slippery and the stench of blood was thick in the air-

It was cold. Cold, but light enough for him to see the blade, and the blood, and the writhing shadows. Quiet enough to hear the foxes’ low snarls, Utagawashi’s desperate wheezing, caught on the shred of a god’s name.

The cold built, burned, crested with the thorns streaming into the empty space in his soul. It built and it crested and so did the otherness of the shrine, just on the edge of ruin, of salvation. Almost there,
two opposing forces just a hair’s breadth away from breaking though…With the last of his wits, Hikaru gathered a helpless plea for divine aid, and-

It was enough. The demon froze, both within and without Hikaru, sensing threat

Then the full weight of the massed divinity broke upon the shrine.

*Power* slammed into the grounds like the fist of a wrathful god. One moment the surroundings were choked in tangles of shadow, and the next nearly clear, every extruded inch of soul shattered into impossibly thick miasma that scrambled to gather again. The ofuda came alive, then – all the burned out ward ofuda, all of the ones Utagawashi had thrown – light bursting out of them in a spiritual fire eerily reminiscent of the five-tails’ last blaze. The miasma was burnt instantly from the space around them, utterly obliterated in the wake of the divine force.

Blissfully, Kaminaga stumbled back. The sword fell from Hikaru’s neck and some part of the horrid cold receded from the wounds. But the demon was still there, still spilling ceaselessly from Kaminaga’s mutilated spirit, still burrowing into the flesh of Hikaru’s soul-

The remaining foxes, freed from the miasma, sprang to life around him. Utagawashi gasped in breath as the pressure in the air vanished, stumbling to his feet and forwards to Hikaru. He shook him by the shoulders, calling his name, but he couldn’t focus on that when he was literally fighting for his soul.

Without the blade in his flesh, without the nightmarish presence of so much of the demon’s own soul, he could fight. He could lash out and struggle and tear at the proliferating roots of dark eating into his light, he could take heart from the bursts of god-light still streaming from every ofuda in the shrine, he could find determination again, but he certainly couldn’t focus on whatever the hell Utagawashi was trying to say-

Accompanied by a shocking, beautiful burst of clarity, the priest pressed his fan into one bloody hand.

Hikaru opened it in a reflexive motion and had swung it before he even knew what he was doing, the wedge of force slamming directly out from his soul, taking a number of twisting roots with it. He gritted his teeth and swung again, though this time it didn’t do as much good because the demon’s presence was inside his soul, but it was good to focus with. He gathered the energy from the fan and around him and pressed, making it brighter and brighter until the intruding presence began to burn away.

Shaking hands pressed pieces of paper against him, they themselves streaming light just as the rest of the ofuda were. The first one pressed against him was an immediate balm, flooding through an entire section of his soul and utterly expunging any hint of taint. It was an unimaginable relief, and now feeling earnestly optimistic, he brought the full force of his anger and desperation and pain down on the awful remnants left in him. The rest of the ofuda were just overkill, really, but there was no way to describe how it felt to find himself kneeling on the cold ground with absolutely nothing unwelcome in his soul.

Hikaru gasped for breath, and allowed Utagawashi to help him to his feet. He looked over and found that the foxes were harrying Kaminaga again, utterly furious and very careful not to let the sword touch them. He scowled, and straightened shakily, glancing briefly at the damage to his forearms and looking quickly away again.

“We’ve got to – fucking stop this, already,” He managed, slurring the words, his head swimming and spinning and hurting. He could barely string two thoughts together but he wanted this over, and to that end: “Push him over.” He said, and then staggered determinedly forwards.
“Shindou!” Utagawashi yelped, forsaking the honorific in urgency as he hurried forwards. “What-“

“He doesn’t want to kill me. Go to the side.” He explained, very inadequately. He stumbled and nearly fell but didn’t stop, moving stubbornly towards the sword-wielding puppet in the midst of four very angry foxes. *Move over!* He broadcasted loudly, and the foxes all glanced up and darted away. Hikaru swung the fan, noticing dizzily that it was far harder to grip the thing than it should have been, and saw Kaminaga stagger from the blow to his extremely damaged soul.

The foxes thus out of the way, Hikaru walked straight at the sword. Still blank-eyed and slack-faced, Kaminaga didn’t display any particular expression, but he thought there might be confusion in the way the demon averted its blade, quickly, to avoid running him through. It *did* bring the blade around behind him, though, and cut shallowly into the nape of his neck in a line of awful, flesh-numbing cold-

Hikaru gritted his teeth and *fought*, gripping onto Kaminaga’s bloodied gi and *pushing.*

The teeth and thorns of the demon flooded straight into his soul from the blade, ripping through in a frenzy. It knew it had lost the advantage. It knew it had to work quickly, to take him quickly, to win before its enemies could isolate it and break it. It flooded into his mind faster than he could burn it away, the force of it overwhelming.

And…really, in some sick way, it was like playing Go against an overwhelmingly powerful opponent. Like playing the mountain, and feeling your loss pressing unerringly towards you with every passing *click* of a stone. Hikaru could never have won against Sai when he met him, or Touya Kouyou, any more than he could win against the entirety of this demon’s power. If it were a Go game, he’d have not the slightest chance. But it was *not* Go, and the key difference here was that he was *not* playing alone.

Having taken his words to heart, Utagawashi barrelled into Kaminaga from the side, taking excellent advantage of the man’s distraction and the glaring weak point inherent to almost every sword stance. Hikaru ducked his head forwards with a curse, the blade of the sword drawing across the back of his neck as Kaminaga fell, but thankfully not beheading him.

*I really should have thought of that,* he thought, dazed, as he set to work expunging the new thorns from his aching, bleeding soul. The ofuda on him had apparently lost their effect so he was alone there-

-or maybe not. Setsu jumped at him and latched on, teeth sinking painfully into his energy but pulling out bits of demon with unerring accuracy. Its energy joined his a moment later, burning out the remaining traces of darkness in seconds.

Breathing heavily, Hikaru extracted the fox from his personal space and whirled around to look for Kaminaga. As it happened, Utagawashi had successfully taken the man to ground, and was currently slamming his sword hand into the earth again and again with little shrieks, with unfortunately no success at disarming him.

Hikaru snatched at a nearby ofuda on the floor, still blazing with energy. It seemed weaker than before, though, so he hurried over, helping Utagawashi pin Kaminaga’s arm down and carefully slapping the ofuda onto the bottom of the sword’s hilt.

The outpouring of demonic energy noticeably lessened, and the man’s grip slackened. It only took a little more vigorous shaking and then the sword was mercifully out of his grip, though Kaminaga himself was still streaming soul and miasma into the air.

“Oh! *Ofuda!***" Utagawashi said, voice strained as he tried to hold the struggling man down. He and Hikaru combined were managing it, but Kaminaga was a *lot* stronger than them, and this could still
go very wrong very fast if they weren’t careful-

One of the three-tails arrived with a piece of paper and pressed it into Hikaru’s hand, instantly bloodying the thing. He slapped it onto Kaminaga’s forehead, the still-present divine energy blasting directly through him and rendering an entire stretch of mutilated soul forcibly clear. Kaminaga’s struggles weakened, abruptly, giving Utagawashi a chance to apply two more ofuda, and then the struggles stopped completely.

The energy put out by the charms was swiftly dying out, the flood nearing depletion, and all the foxes piled in to help with the purification. They took tooth and claw and energy to the remaining tangles left in Kaminaga, and half way through, he started screaming.

Hikaru pushed himself up and off of the man, averting his eyes from the twist of genuine agony on his face. Instead, he looked to the bared blade, its edge red with his blood.

It was helpless. Trapped in its body, and unable to reach out except through a man nearly purified of its essence, there was nothing it could do. There was something almost poetic about the demon being the one rendered immobile and defenceless on the ground, now.

Hikaru’s face twisted, and he lashed out with his fan. Once, then again. And again. The demon’s soul, condensed and confined, shuddered under each strike. It had been powerful but now it was helpless, and he liked it, and even though his hits grew progressively weaker and the movements increasingly painful, the sheer desperate relief of watching it creak and crack was worth it every time. Somewhere half way through, Kaminaga’s screaming stopped, and four foxes came to stand beside him and watch.

It took twelve hits to destroy the soul of Kaminagi no Tsurugi. On the last, it finally shattered, its stunted sealed-self cracking open like the dead foxes’ hearts.

The seal broke.

Energy flooded the shrine ground, and Hikaru stumbled back with a yelp, having come alarmingly close to being blasted. The foxes were much quicker about it, even weakened as they were, and they all hung back with wide eyes to watch the demon’s soul, now broken, exhume the entirety of its constituent energy into the air.

It exploded like a pillar into the sky, overwhelmingly vast and immensely bright, and Hikaru knew without a doubt that if they’d been up against it unsealed, even divine intervention wouldn’t have been enough. The pillar of light persisted, burning brighter and brighter, all hint of its malevolence leaching away.

Half a minute in it was still going strong, and Hikaru had to sit down. His head was swimming and everything hurt, and he was pretty sure he’d taken some really unpleasant damage during all of that, and…shit. He’d lived, hadn’t he?

“Fuck, I lived.” He mumbled, dazed, and let himself fall backwards onto the ground.

Utagawashi moved over and sat beside him, tired and shaking. “You say that like it’s a bad thing.” He sounded utterly exhausted, and looked it, too. Or, well, he thought so. It was hard to say when his vision was so blurry.

Hikaru snorted, closing his eyes. “Mm.” He agreed, hazily, the grip on his fan slackening. “Now I’ve got to deal with Touya.” He remained conscious for long enough to hear the priest’s weary laugh, but no longer.
So it was that, after a long and very unpleasant fight, Hikaru passed out next to a priest, an ex-possessed exorcist, four foxes, and a gigantic pillar of light.

Chapter End Notes

Notes: This chapter was pretty much the most intense writing experience of my life. Everything from the shrine onwards was written in a gigantic push, I was writing for like seven hours straight, blasting unnerving music into my ears and intentionally freaking myself out to be more in the zone for it. My notes on the tumblr version are considerably more vehement about this.

On death toll: I did not know, going in, how many foxes would die. Killing off the five-tails was a blow, but it kind of had to happen. Without his sacrifice, there never would have been enough oomph for Inari’s deus ex machina, and they’d have all been fucked. At any rate. Nine of twelve sanbi died, the gobi died, the demon died, also an aspect of Inari died. Everyone else is varying levels of alive.

Link to post on Hikaru’s hand damage:
https://tenspontaneite.tumblr.com/post/167025656686/so-a-few-people-were-asking-about-the-damage-to

Link to chapter 20 Q&A post:

04/06/18 – minor edits
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Hikaru wakes.

Chapter Notes

Warnings for: hospital stay, detailed discussions of injuries, surgery, discussions of permanent loss of mobility.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Hikaru’s first hint of consciousness mainly consisted of pain, and the impression of a fox nearby.

Concern, someone expressed, the emotion flickering out to meet him. It hurt. Not-looking-well.

There is much damage. A second agreed, and this one was familiar – Setsu? Hikaru struggled to focus, to wake, but….everything hurt. He could barely twitch his fingers. There was a brief spark of surprise at that, and then the fox’s energy pressed in. Wake up, idiot boy. It coaxed him, and the other fox drew closer. It was a semi-familiar shape of pale yellow light, well matched to Setsu’s amber.

Hikaru couldn’t open his eyes, and couldn’t move his lips, but he could manage some motion in his energy. What? He shaped, clumsily, unable to focus.

Setsu pressed something strange to his soul. It was pale yellow, like the other fox, and echoed with little aftershocks of pain as it touched him. Take it. The four-tails told him, gently, pressing the condensed light into the bloody shreds of him. Take it, like you would energy.

He tried. He reached out to the foreign yellow, grasped at it. Held it where Setsu had spread it, and felt a little better. But he couldn’t focus any longer.

His grip on the light failed, and he was unconscious again.

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When he next woke, there was still a fox there, and it was maintaining a baffling blanket of pressure over him. He probed at it, reflexively, as he tried to move. This time, his muscles obeyed a little better, and he managed to crack open an eye.

The fox on top of him was three-tailed, and was regarding him with a curious yellow eye. You’ve woken, it said, and Hikaru recognised it as one of the foxes from the shrine. One of the survivors.

“Uh.” He managed, voice rough and scratchy. He coughed, and cast his eyes around, finding an unfamiliar sterile room and an alarming amount of medical technology. A clock was ticking nearby, though he couldn’t see its face. Not quite in time with it, there was the soft and vaguely irregular
beep of a heart monitor. “Hspitl.” He concluded in a poor excuse for a word, and looked back at the fox. Its energy was pressed quite insistently over his soul, and it felt quite bizarre. Sort of like being covered in a heavy, numbing sapient duvet.

The fox tilted its head, then flared its energy in a familiar name, quite evidently calling for Setsu. It then shifted, and explained _Human-boy quite injured. Here-to-aid._

Hikaru blinked, and tried to look at himself though the distracting presence of the fox. He instantly discovered that the back of his neck was painful to move, the motion pulling very obviously at the cut there. He also got a glimpse of both of his thoroughly bandaged and braced hands before his head returned involuntarily to the pillow. Trying to move his fingers only yielded pain.

“Shit.” He expressed, in the clearest example of speech he’d managed since waking up. “How long…?”

*Wait for Bestows-Obscure-Knowledge,* it told him, sternly, shaping a sort of short-hand of Setsu’s name with the energy it wasn’t using to squash him. He should probably ask about the squashing. It seemed unusual, and important.

Still, he did as he was told, and took the opportunity to glance around and assay his surroundings. It appeared to be night-time, with only dim lighting on the ward, and he thought he could see the various cords hanging down to his wrist, though he couldn’t really see that from his current angle. Hikaru recalled the sound of the heart monitor, becoming slightly concerned about the potential length of his unconsciousness, and looked around for clues. Inconveniently, the clock he could hear seemed to be lower on the opposing wall than he could see, what with the tiny range of motion he had.

Well, it wasn’t an emergency clinic. That much seemed obvious. He couldn’t quite tell what ward he was in, though, just that he was alone in the room. There was another bed, past a drawn set of curtains, but it was unoccupied. He located a nurse call button at the side of his own bed, but given the state of his hands, he probably couldn’t press it even if he wanted to.

He felt Setsu drawing near perhaps two minutes after the three-tails had called for it, though reaching out to feel its approach was unexpectedly painful. Like trying to move an injured limb. He frowned, and attempted to assay the state of his energy. He had enough time to be alarmed at how much of it there was before Setsu arrived to distract him.

*I arrive,* the four-tails declared, its aura flaring almost cheerfully. *Human boy has woken up. This is good!*

*Keeeps trying to move.* The other fox informed Setsu, with a sort of tolerant exasperation. *Talk to it before it hurts itself.*

Hikaru cleared his throat and explained “I have no idea what’s going on.” His voice came out hoarse and scratchy still, but considerably more understandable than before.

Setsu ignored him for a second, shoving the other fox off of him. *Give me that,* it demanded, and in the intervening time between the first fox removing itself and Setsu pressing down, Hikaru abruptly became aware of his own soul.

“Holy shit that’s disgusting.” He said, horrified, having bare seconds for the feel of it to become viscerally evident, nausea tightening his throat. Setsu’s energy sank down and numbed him again, and the sensation faded, but it wasn’t like he’d forget that. “No wait, hang on, was there something hanging off me?” He demanded, before the spirit could get any word-shaping done.
Setsu, who appeared to be in possession of more energy than Hikaru remembered it having, settled sedately on his chest and inspected him from unnervingly close range. Several somethings, the fox agreed, its whiskers twitching practically in his face. Should-be-grateful.

Hikaru stared. “Uh.”

The fox sighed, and relented. You are more injured now than you were before. It explained, and waited for him to react to that overwhelmingly obvious piece of news.

“Well, duh.” He stared uncomfortably, and fought against the urge to edge his face back from being so close to the fox’s. It wouldn’t do anything and he was trapped in the hospital bed, anyway. After brief consideration, he carefully hefted his confusingly-vast reserves of energy, and pushed the fox a little further down his chest to a less weird distance. It looked confused. “Personal space.” He said, in response to the unasked question, and waited for Setsu to start talking. He was fairly sure it would. The fox liked explaining things.

Predictably, after a short pause to shuffle its tails, the four-tails proceeded to shed some light on the situation. I said before, it began, tilting its head. That when you die, you will need a spirit to hold your soul together long enough for it to heal.

He did indeed remember something along those lines. “Yeah?” Through the haze of his generalised pain and grogginess, it wasn’t tremendously easy to focus, but he was nonetheless aware of a sense of uneasiness. Good news would likely not be forthcoming, he was sure.

Souls are not stable once injured badly enough. They fall apart on their own. Setsu elaborated. Yours was well-enough because of its anchor to your body, and because of the soul-remnants in your keeping.

Hikaru sighed, and let his head fall back. He steeled himself. “I’m guessing that’s different now.”

Too damaged to be stable, now. The fox agreed, apologetically. Even anchored.

He swallowed. “Get off, will you?” He requested. “I just…want to see.”

The fox eyed him uncertainly, then dipped its head. It rose and stepped away, the pressure of its energy rising carefully away, and…

Bile rose in Hikaru’s throat. He swallowed, the taste of acid in his mouth, and breathed. Salt prickled at his eyes and he closed them, looking at the wreck of himself with barely-controlled horror. Even before the battle, his soul had been in a sorry state, but now…

Some of it was just…gone, now. Not much. But it was a noticeable difference. And what remained was…shredded. Lacerated. Before, there had been places in his soul where the light was almost intact, almost undamaged, but now there wasn’t a single place he wasn’t scarred. The traces of Sai’s soul were still there, still filling in the worst gaps and keeping the pieces of his soul together like hastily-applied adhesive, but there wasn’t enough. It wasn’t enough.

He hurt, like he had all those months ago when he’d foolishly poked and prodded at his wounds and made them worse, waking each time to an odd lack of sensation and a feeling of terrible cold. With a sinking feeling, he noticed the state of his limbs – tingly, and numb in places – and he wasn’t sure whether all of it could be attributed to the bed rest or not.

He was…bleeding. He could actually see it – in one of the worst areas, the edge of the wound was slowly loosening, the dense light of soul giving off wisps of energy as it lost cohesion. Slowly, very slowly, he was…bleeding out. And, somehow, he doubted that meant anything positive for his
Hikaru breathed, and redirected his attention to the other thing, before he could be overwhelmed. There was a large chunk of pale yellow soul spread loosely over a part of his own, slowly disengaging from it and floating away. He inspected it, allowing it to distract him from his dismay, and identified it as belonging to the second fox in the room. And...there was another piece, there, a little smaller. Setsu’s.

He blinked. “…Why are bits of your souls on me?” He asked, reaching out to scrutinise each of the two foxes. They were missing parts of their souls, though the edges were quickly healing over and seemed to be regenerating. He felt briefly, intensely jealous.

Emergency aid. Setsu answered, watching him sharply. When the pieces of soul continued to detach and drift off, it snapped don’t let it just float away! Idiot boy. It reached out and pressed the coatings of soul firmly back to him.

“Oh!” He complained, but did as he was told, curling his energy inwards to hold the chunks of soul in place. It was…weird. Energy was one thing, but this? The bits of soul didn’t have the foxes’ minds in them, but they felt the same. The colour, the texture, the haze of memory and emotion…it was almost uncomfortably personal. He held the pieces in place regardless, pressing them gingerly into his wounds. “….What’s this for?” He asked, a little helplessly.

Like what your ghost’s soul is doing. Setsu explained. Keeps you together, inhibits bleeding.

Hikaru eyed the spiritual patchwork, dubious. It certainly wasn’t sinking into the injuries and pulling their edges together, like Sai’s soul did. It was just...there. Aimless and vaguely ambivalent, and very obviously not his soul. “Is it meant to be like that?”

The fox rolled its eyes. Press it in. It ordered. Not-my-injuries; up to you to distribute this. You will have to focus. This soul is not like the ghost-remnants. It will not stay on its own.

That was why it had been drifting away, then? He supposed that was why the foxes had been sitting on him. It probably was not a painless process, ripping a bit of your soul off; they likely wouldn’t want it wasted.

Carefully, he tried to spread the soul-chunks into his wounds. He gritted his teeth against the jolts of pain, odd tingles shooting down his body as he worked though, but he kept at it. Setsu’s bit was easier to manipulate than the three-tail’s, though not by much.

The foxes, for their part, seemed content enough to sit in silence while he messed around with their truncated soul-pieces. Hikaru, on the other hand, became increasingly uncomfortable, questions spilling steadily into his head.

How long have I been out? He wondered, smoothing over a piece of yellow fox-soul. What’s up with my hands? What happened to Utagawashi? What happened to Kaminaga? What about the other foxes? Did Yashiro call the police? Does my mum know I’m here? He couldn’t sense his fan nearby – where’s my fan?

The three-tails huffed at him, after a while, and nudged Setsu in the side. This is your job. It informed the larger fox, and received a tail to the face for its troubles.

Nonetheless, Setsu did sit up and cut off the spiralling of his thoughts. It is three days since the demon was killed. It said, and Hikaru jolted with shock, almost messing up his work with a particularly delicate wound.
“Three days?” He repeated, immediately thinking oh god I missed my game. It somehow hadn’t come to mind before, but…he’d missed his game. It was a travesty.

Priorities, the four-tails said, pointedly.

Hikaru scowled at the ceiling, because trying to move his neck was painful. “Shit.” He muttered.

The priest is fine, and the surviving foxes too. The exorcist…isn’t. Very badly injured. I believe the priest is hiding him at his home. Setsu shifted, its energy curling with intrigue at its next words. Officers-of-law have been here, and it was very interesting. I think your friend did call them, and told them what he knew. Your mother has been here through all ‘visiting-hours’. I took your shintai-fan to your home and hid it there so that it would be safe. It looked at him expectantly. Anything else?

He blinked, taking several seconds to process the flood of information. “…My hands?” He asked, because that hadn’t been addressed.

Injured, possibly quite badly. I do not understand the medical terms yet, but I have been reading. You have some severed tendons, I believe? The fox sounded tremendously pleased with itself at that. The hand-healers have wanted to take you to their part of the building, to repair them, but you have been unconscious for a long time, so they have not been allowed.

Some of the arguing has been very fun to watch. The three-tails commented. Least-boring part of this.

Hikaru stared blankly upwards. He tried to twitch his fingers, and received several jolts of pain for the effort. “So what, you’ve just been sitting here holding my soul together for three days?”

And listening to humans argue. Setsu nodded cheerfully.

He exhaled, and thought through all of the new information. Was he missing anything? “Who brought me to the hospital?” He asked, suddenly.

Setsu flexed, a little smug. I did. At Hikaru’s incredulous look, it added embodied, brought you to emergency-place, and then ran away. It was very exciting. Humans tried to call officers-of-law on me.

Hikaru considered that, and wondered if he dared ask whether Setsu had embodied as a fox or a human. The thought of being carried to an emergency clinic on the back of a giant fox was almost too ridiculous to contemplate.

He shook the image away and set back to work on his soul. It was weird, the reactions he had to it. On one hand, the mingling of the yellow and amber lights with his blue was objectively quite pretty. On the other, it caused pretty much the same reaction as seeing a large chunk of someone else’s viscera smeared onto his own shredded innards. It was vile. He wondered if Utagawashi would actually vomit, next time they met. He wondered if he’d vomit, when he saw Kaminaga.

He wondered exactly how badly wounded Kaminaga was. Involuntarily, he remembered what it had looked like when the demon tore through the middle of the man’s soul, agony staining the air despite his inability to voice it.

Surely, after something like that…there couldn’t be a lot of him left.

The thoughts were very unpleasant, and he pushed them away as best he could. He still had work to do.
Hikaru spent many, many ticks of the unseen clock pushing spiritual gore around, steadily inuring himself to the pain and horror of it. It was exhausting, though, and he still hadn’t finished by the time that exhaustion began to press heavily upon him.

Sleeping-soon? The three-tails asked, as the motion of his energy slowed.

He blinked, eyes scratchy and gritty. Ordinarily he’d have rubbed at them, but that wasn’t currently possible, since he couldn’t move his hands. Of course, the moment he realised that, an itch on his left leg that he hadn’t been paying attention to suddenly became ten times more insistent. He tried not to focus on it.

“…Yeah.” He said, eventually. He wasn’t finished, but…it was good enough for now. Probably.

The three-tails exchanged a glance with Setsu. Your turn. It said.

Setsu sighed, and approached again to settle itself on his chest. It was an odd feeling. Just like when he’d interacted with Sai, he could feel the spirit, as though it were physical. Its weight felt real. Unlike with Sai, though, the feeling didn’t seem to go any further than that. It didn’t actually compress his chest, didn’t actually make it harder to breathe, just…felt heavy.

Its energy settled over his own, keeping the mostly-spread pieces of soul firmly in place. Sleep. The fox told him, and Hikaru had no trouble doing precisely that.

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The next time he woke, it was daytime, and Setsu was curled up over basically his whole body, like a severely oversized cat. Hikaru blinked groggily, and pushed at the energy blanketing him. One of the fox’s tails twitched and lifted away from its face, and slowly, it unfurled.

Slept most of the day, it informed him, and stepped off of the hospital bed.

Abruptly, without the pressing presence of its energy, Hikaru became aware of several human souls in close proximity. One was his mother. She seemed to be sitting nearby, but apparently hadn’t noticed his eyes opening.

Carefully, he lifted his head, and found her reading a book. Both the stiffness of his neck and the pulling at the wound were severely unpleasant though, and his answering groan immediately alerted her. She looked up, eyes wide, and immediately fixed her gaze on him. “Hikaru!” She said, in a very intense whisper, as though she were afraid to speak too loudly. “You’re awake.” She reached out and compressed the nurse call button in the space of a second, her whole soul shuddering in relief.

“Mhuh.” He attempted, groggy, and tried to clear his throat. It turned into a cough instead, and then several coughs. Thankfully he didn’t seem to have anything going wrong in his chest or throat, so it only hurt in that it jolted his neck.

“Are you alright?” Mitsuko fretted, pressing another button at the bedside. The bed itself sort of… buzzed, and the top half lifted, bringing him into a sort of semi-sitting position. He blinked water from his eyes as he cleared the last spluttering coughs away, now able to see the clock and a window on the opposite wall. It was six minutes past four in the afternoon, apparently.

“M’fine.” Hikaru expressed, clearing his throat again. “What…” He tried to orient his thoughts to important things. There would be lots of questions soon, right? He needed to get his wits together.

His mother shushed him, and reached forwards to tuck a bit of hair behind one ear. “The nurse will be here soon.” She promised, as though he were in great distress and desperately needed to hear that.
“Hold on.”

Absently, Hikaru got a hold of his energy, because the un-spread bits of donated soul were starting to wander, and the bits he’d pasted into his wounds were feeling unruly. “…Okay,” He agreed, and tried to remember what he was supposed to say had happened. He supposed it depended on whether Yashiro really had called the cops, and if he had, what he’d told them.

True to his mother’s word, the nurse did indeed appear quickly. She strode through the door with a steadfast and self-collected cast to her soul, and when she set her eyes on him, he could practically see the thought-fast analyses she made of his appearance. Hikaru had enough time to get the impression that she was probably a pretty badass lady before she said, cheerfully, “Shindou-san, it’s good to see you awake.” She crossed the space to his bedside in seconds, politely ushering his mother out of the way. Her ID badge proclaimed her to be Nurse Furutani. “How are you feeling?”

He considered that, taking a mental step back from his spiritual situation and taking stock of his body. He noticed that he felt exceptionally stiff, that his head hurt, his neck hurt, and his hands definitely hurt. “I hurt in lots of places.” He replied thoughtfully, and experimentally twitched several muscles in his body. They mostly just felt stiff.

The nurse leaned over and pressed the button to bring the upper half of the bed more fully upwards. “Could you elaborate?” Furutani inquired, procuring what was apparently his patient notes from somewhere at his bedside. Setsu slunk behind her to read them.

He shuffled upright, though he didn’t try to lift his neck from the back of the bed. He stretched his legs out with a sigh. “Headache. Also neck and hands.” With his new viewing angle, he could see how thoroughly wrapped-up the hands in question were. They were positively drenched in gauze. “Makes sense, I guess.”

“Do you remember what happened to cause your injuries, Shindou-san?” The nurse asked, eyes sharp. Her spirit gathered itself carefully. She was waiting for a particular answer. His mother seemed to be doing something similar, albeit far more anxiously.

He considered his response, and sighed. “Sword.” He said, shortly. “What’s wrong with my hands?”

“I’ll let the orthopaedist talk to you about that.” She said, cautiously. “If everything checks out, you’ll be moving to that ward soon, but we were concerned at your prolonged unconsciousness. I’d like to go through a few questions with you while we wait for the doctor.”

“Sure.” He sighed, and obediently submitted to several minutes of questioning regarding his memory, state of being, and ability to move properly. He was cautioned to be very careful with his hands, though they were still in a brace and mostly immobilised.

Eventually, the orthopaedist did arrive, and then she sat down to very seriously explain to Hikaru and his mother that his hands were at serious risk of being permanently maimed.

“A number of the tendons in your hands have been severed, Shindou-san.” The doctor explained, which Hikaru had pretty much already heard from Setsu. “The cuts are clean, which makes things a little easier, but without surgery you’re looking at a very serious loss of mobility.”

Hikaru eyed his wrapped-up hands with a sort of distant, curious concern. It was somehow hard to care too much about their state when his soul was so much more badly mangled. “How serious are we talking?” He asked, finally.

“You will probably not be able to bend the first two fingers of your left hand at all, or the middle two
fingers of your right hand.” The doctor said. “You may also be unable to straighten several fingers on your right hand. Additionally, there seems to have been some nerve damage. With surgery, we can hope to restore most of your mobility and sensation.”

Hikaru’s grimace deepened the further the doctor went. “Not all of it?” He asked, resigned.

“Given the length of time since the injury, I think it’s very unlikely.” She answered apologetically, and Hikaru’s mother made a distraught noise beside him. “Ideally we would have operated the day you were admitted, but the wounds were very dirty, and there was the matter of your unconsciousness to worry about.”

“But you can do it now, right?” He pressed. While he found himself oddly less bothered than he would have expected at the prospect of a permanent loss of motion, that didn’t prevent him from wanting it sorted out.

“As soon as possible would be best.” The orthopaedist nodded firmly. “We’ll want to do some tests to ensure everything is okay, but I have every hope to have you booked for surgery in the morning.”

“Well, alright then.” He agreed awkwardly, and they went on with the procedure of confirming that he was not in fact deathly ill with anything, or likely to collapse into coma at any moment.

Later, Hikaru detected something of a ruckus in the human souls downstairs. Several people seemed very agitated and in the end someone came up to Hikaru’s room and pulled the doctor out for a word. Utterly unashamedly, Setsu followed her out to eavesdrop, and when the doctor returned so did the fox.

_The officers-of-law desperately want to talk to you._ The four-tails said, gleeful at the mild drama. _But the healers are refusing to let them have access until you have had your hands fixed and recovered for a few days. The officers-of-law are arguing that if you’re well enough for surgery then you’re well enough to give vital information for a murder investigation, but the healers are being very stubborn._

Hikaru blinked at the report. _Do you think they’ll get their way?_ "The officers-of-law could get a warrant to question you despite the healers’ wishes, but it would likely take them at least a day, by which time you can probably be questioned anyway. Setsu answered, looking like it was itching to abscond and listen in on the ongoing arguments. _I think the healers will have their way, and the officers-of-law will not speak to you for at least another day._"

“Good.” Hikaru muttered. He didn’t want to deal with the police yet.

“What was that, Hikaru?” His mother asked, and he blinked.

“Just thinking aloud.” He said, and stared down the hospital bed at his hands. Hands which had apparently been debrided and cleaned out and kept as ready as possible for surgery, which was among the reasons they hurt so much, despite the painkillers they had him on.

He wondered what his hands would look like, at the end of all of this.

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As the doctor had hoped, Hikaru went in for surgery the next morning. Apparently, hand operations were occasionally conducted under a local anaesthetic, since it could help for the person to be able to flex their fingers to help the surgeons, but Hikaru’s surgery was deemed complex enough for them to just plain put him under.
I’ll watch, Setsu said, as they administered the general anaesthetic. If you like, I’ll give you the memory later.

Hikaru might have responded if his face wasn’t full of mask, but it was as it was. Bare seconds later, his consciousness surrendered to the medications, and a specialist surgeon went to work on his poor mauled hands.

Later, he woke in the same orthopaedics ward he’d been moved to the evening before, and his hands were surprisingly not thickly bandaged. Instead, they were in a thin layer of gauze, inside a large and somewhat intimidating set of braces.

Once the anaesthetic had worn off enough for him to be somewhat functional, his newly-assigned physical therapist got straight to work, sitting him up and explaining the situation at large to Hikaru and his mother.

“The surgery appears to have gone well, though as you were told, you should not expect to have the same level of mobility as before the injury.” The therapist was a man named Yoshida, perhaps in his late thirties, and bore a peripheral resemblance to Yashiro’s dad. Hikaru wondered how Yashiro was dealing with everything. Exactly how badly had he freaked out? He’d apparently called the cops, but all things considered that wasn’t exactly surprising. “In the next few weeks, it will be very important for you to perform the exercises I show you. Without them, you will likely never regain the mobility you could have done. If you’re worried about forgetting, set alarms to make sure you remember.” The doctor directed his attention briefly to Hikaru’s mother. “You can help him there, ma’am.”

“Of course.” She said immediately.

Yoshida nodded, and moved on. He took one of Hikaru’s hands carefully, and indicated the new brace, which was kind of hellish in appearance, bearing a sort of exoskeletal apparatus above his hand that lifted his fingers to a certain height and kept them suspended there. “This is the orthosis.” He said. “This is to be kept on at all times except when you need to bathe. Usually, patients only have one of these, so we can instruct them on the proper procedure for taking it off and putting it on. Given both of your hands are in orthoses, it will be important to rely on your mother to help you. I’ll demonstrate how it should be done now.”

Through the session, Yoshida instructed Mitsuko on what she needed to do for her son’s poor hands, and drummed the required exercises repeatedly into Hikaru’s head. Japanese hospitals liked to keep their patients around for a while, so there’d be a good while to reinforce the information, but the man wasn’t taking any chances of him forgetting.

The talk on recovery time was somewhat daunting.

“Twelve weeks?” He exclaimed, horrified.

Yoshida nodded sympathetically. “It can take half a year to recover fully, but twelve weeks is the general estimate.” He said. “You should be able to resume light activity such as writing after around six weeks, however.”

Hikaru eyed his therapist warily. “…Does playing Go count as light activity?”

At the man’s surprised look, his mother chimed in. “My son is a professional Go player, Yoshida-san.” She explained. “As I understand it, professional games are generally one to three hours long, and involve repeatedly placing stones on a board.”

The man considered it. “That sounds more like medium activity, to me. I would advise against
playing a full game until at least week eight.” He said, eventually.

“Eight weeks.” He moaned, distraught. Eight weeks without being able to play his own game. There was blind Go, sure, and he could always get the other person to place the stones for him, but…oh, the irony. He had a feeling he would gain a lot more empathy for Sai over his recovery period.

Yoshida nodded sympathetically at him. “At six weeks, you might be able to play a full game if you alternate the use of your hands. Generally though you want to be as careful as possible here – if your recovery is disrupted, it could have life-long consequences.”

“Six weeks.” He repeated, not all that mollified by the therapist’s addendum.

Setsu snickered at him from the corner as the session went on, progressing through what he should expect throughout his recovery period and concluding with a very early start to the rehabilitation itself.

“Now that all that’s done, we should start with your exercises now.” Yoshida declared, to the immediate alarm of both Hikaru and his mother.

“Isn’t it a bit soon?” Mitsuko questioned, eyes wide. “It’s not even three hours since his surgery.”

“Have you seen how swollen these things are?” Hikaru demanded, carefully brandishing his hands. What he could see past the dressings was red and puffy and hurt. “That can’t be safe, right?”

The therapist was very tolerant of their fretting. “Actually, with the kind of injuries you have, early movement makes all the difference. Your left hand, especially, was a tricky piece of surgery. The area your tendons were severed there is one of the most difficult to fully recover from, so early exercising is absolutely essential.”

Thus, with the weight of doctorly expertise and science behind him, Yoshida wrangled Hikaru into moving his poor pitiful hands. Very slightly. They were tiny, appropriately pitiful movements. Even so, the mere idea of moving hands as sore and battered as his seemed utterly ridiculous, and it certainly hurt. Hikaru was quite used to pain by now, and it wasn’t as bad as what he got from messing with his soul, but that didn’t make it any more pleasant.

The next day, they changed the dressings on his wounds, and Hikaru had his first chance to see the damage to his hands. He stared quietly as the nurse went about applying disinfectant and preparing the new dressings, holding his fingers carefully in the positions he was meant to for their safety.

He’d been warned that for the types of injury he’d had, it was usually necessary to make additional cuts to properly access and repair the tendons. He…sort of hadn’t been expecting how many cuts that meant, though.

The original cuts from the sword were ugly enough. After the debriding and surgery they were swollen and precisely as sore-looking as they felt, even stitched-up. The stitching was very neat but there was really no way around the fact that he’d sustained some pretty traumatic injuries. He’d done pretty extensive damage to the thumb web-space and muscles on both hands, though it was apparently much worse on the left hand. There were lots of stitches there, holding the muscle and skin together to heal. There were also two intersecting cuts on the back of the right hand, one stretching a fair bit down his wrist, and he could remember the feeling of his fingers, slippery with blood, trembling straight past the blade and catching the back of his hand instead-

Hikaru breathed through the memories and the sting of alcohol, and turned his hands over to let the palms be cleaned. Apparently, the tendons on the underside of the hands were a fair bit more
problematic, since that was where all the additional cuts were. The original cut on his right hand
wasn’t so bad, a thin cut near the top of his two middle fingers, just barely catching the tip of the
index finger. Still, it had completely severed the tendons in the middle two, even if it wasn’t that
depth. On his right hand there were two cuts almost joined at the end, sloping diagonally from half-
way down his ring finger to the top of his hand on the index.

On both hands, to properly retrieve and repair the tendons, the surgeon had had to make additional
cuts: zig-zag lines over the path of each severed tendon. The marks were particularly glaring, running
from the top corner of one joint to the opposite bottom corner, and then again over the next joint…
they’d make for striking scars. On the left hand, the incisions had actually gone halfway down his
palm, for god’s sake.

He stared at the finely-stitched incisions for several seconds, several conflicting thoughts running
through his mind. Once he got past the unpleasant memory of actually gaining the wounds…well,
there was no denying that they were extremely gross.

But holy hell would he be getting some cool scars out of this.

Involuntarily, he smiled a little at the thought. He’d certainly have a lot of people asking how he got
them, but…that itself could be fun. Really, it was a shame he’d have to wear the orthoses for so long –
they wouldn’t be nearly as disgusting to look at once he could take them off permanently. And the
idea of grossing people out with his shocking hand wounds was an extremely appealing one.

“I totally have battle wounds.” Hikaru announced to the room at large, making nurse Furutani quirk
her lips at him.

“You certainly do.” She agreed, amused, as she went to re-dress the wounds. “It will be a while
before you can show off the scars, but they ought to be quite impressive.”

“Oh hell yes.” It really was a shame that he wouldn’t get to show the actual awful-looking wounds to
anyone, but he could definitely get behind the scarring. The circumstances of their acquisition
weren’t ideal, and neither were the consequences for his mobility, but. Scars were cool. The end.

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By the time the Police managed to wrestle their way past the doctors to interrogate him, it was
November 8th, a full week since he’d been admitted to the hospital, and incidentally the day he’d
have been playing Waya in the Kisei league if life hadn’t been quite so vicious to him.

Hikaru had used the time wisely. His work with the soul donations was finished, and he’d
surreptitiously gained some valuable information. During the three-tail’s shifts, Setsu had visited
Utawagashi and performed some reconnaissance, and as a result Hikaru’s story was well-prepared
and well-rehearsed. It transpired that Yashiro had reported what Hikaru had said about Kaminaga
stalking him, as well as the apparent mental break, but had not mentioned Utawagashi. As such,
Hikaru left him out of the story entirely.

The hardest part to explain, really, was why he’d left his house in the first place.

“I was feeling pretty sick, maybe because I was...you know, all freaked out about Kaminaga.”
Hikaru said, after a careful pause to consider his wording. “My mum can back me up there. I woke
up late and went outside to get some air, but that turned out to be a really bad idea.”

The inspectors carefully took notes as he told the cover-up story, citing a fear for his mother’s safety
as the reason he didn’t just go back into his house.
“I really didn’t think the front door would hold up long against a master swordsman, okay.” He defended himself at the incredulous flare of the detectives’ energies. They hadn’t actually altered their facial expressions at all, but he could feel them doubting him. “Have you seen some of the videos on the internet?” Hikaru himself had not seen any of the videos on the internet, but he’d certainly heard of them. And one could hardly grow up in Japan without seeing a samurai movie at some point.

With his reasoning somewhat established, he went on to describe his mad escape allegedly in the direction of his grandfather, which had been cut off by Kaminaga himself. Hikaru described being herded towards the shrine, a certainly terrifying prospect after what he heard on the news, and his desperate struggle to overcome the man in the midst of his obvious psychotic break. He fell quiet for a while then. His mother, exercising her legal right to sit in on the questioning, was practically shaking at the tale.

“I…he really wasn’t trying to kill me.” He said, eventually. “He had his sword to my throat. See?” He indicated the small cut on the front of his neck. “He could have killed me then, easy. He didn’t, though. I ended up slicing my hands up trying to get it away, but…he didn’t kill me.” Of course, the actual intention behind it had been considerably worse than simple homicide, but that was not part of the cover story.

“And the cut on the back of your neck?” One of the officers asked, neutrally.

“That was a bit later.” Hikaru explained, carefully shaping his next words in his head. “Kaminaga went…kind of crazy, after that. He backed away and started screaming. I tried to push him over and it was kind of…it worked, right, but the sword was behind me by then so I was kind of lucky not to get my head cut off. That’s where the cut on the back of my neck came from. Anyway, once he was on the ground he let go of the sword and I threw it away and ran for it. I was heading home, but…I guess I must have passed out. And someone took me to the emergency clinic?”

“Is that everything?”

“Yeah.”

The lead detective nodded, and with the story established, the actual questioning began.

Thankfully, no witnesses had come forwards to report Utagawashi’s presence, and if his DNA were to be found at the shrine, it could be excused by the fact that he worked there. There wasn’t any evidence there to contradict his story, so really it was far from the most outlandish bullshit he’d told, and he fully expected it to be accepted. They might question his reasoning ability, but it was a perfectly solid story.

What he wasn’t expecting was to be asked about seeing a pillar of light.

“…What?” Hikaru asked, flummoxed, and the detective coughed delicately.

“I understand it’s an unusual question, but we’ve had an unusually high number of reports of people seeing a ‘pillar of light’ originating from approximately the area you described.”

Hikaru stared at the man dubiously. “Pillar of light.” He repeated, with a perfectly sensible amount of incredulity in the words. “No, I didn’t see anything like that.” What a stupid thing to ask, his tone heavily implied.

Thankfully, that answer was taken without suspicion, and shortly after, the questioning drew to a close.
The next two days passed in overwhelming boredom. His mother offered to bring in books for him, but it wasn’t like he could really read easily, so in the end he just requested that she print off a bunch of kifu from the Kisei league and bring it in with some of his various kifu books. At least when looking at game records he didn’t have to turn the page very much.

He’d have liked to have access to his phone, but there were apparently restrictions on that in the hospital. There was a phone you could pay to use, but he wasn’t certain it was worth it. His mother did report that she’d been fielding a lot of calls from his friends, though, which made him feel slightly guilty.

He didn’t even have any foxes to distract him, now. Since he’d finished spreading the donated soul-bits out, he wasn’t in need of constant spiritual supervision, and Setsu seemed to be off doing other things more often than not. It dropped in occasionally, but…well, it wasn’t like a hospital room was a very hospitable place for a discussion on complicated spiritual metaphysics, no matter how many questions he had.

He had noticed that there seemed to be a perimeter guard of various foxes in the area, though. He wasn’t certain what that was about.

On Monday, Hikaru woke feeling somewhat worse than before. That was a little concerning, but there hadn’t been any change in his soul, and the donated layering was still there. Nonetheless…he felt oddly, ambiently unpleasant, and his wounds felt somehow even more sore than they had before.

The reason behind all of this became quite clear when nurse Furutani came to do his check-ups, and tutted at the sight of his neck, which was a shallow enough wound that it hadn’t been dressed past the first couple of days when he was unconscious.

“Oh dear.” She said, looking mildly sympathetic but not as though she were about to declare his imminent death, so he felt only slightly wary. “Your cut is looking a bit swollen there. Let’s get you sat up to check on the other one.”

They did precisely that, the nurse removing the gauze on the back of his neck and nodding at what she found. “Infected.” She declared, applying disinfectant and re-dressing it. “We’ll have to get you on some stronger antibiotics.”

Hikaru had already been taking an alarming number of pills, both for pain and to help prevent infection, so that was not the most pleasant news to receive. “How come the ones I’m taking aren’t working?” He asked, resigned to his fate, and obediently presented his hands to be dealt with.

“A combination of poor luck and particularly strong bacteria, I’d say.” She replied apologetically, and peeled the dressings back from his hands. He grimaced at them pretty much in time with Furutani, because they too were infected. Every single cut seemed to be red and sort of shiny-looking at the edges, puffy in a way they hadn’t been the day before. “Definitely some stronger antibiotics.” She assessed, and matter-of-factly went about cleaning and re-dressing the wounds as she had every day. “Instead of making you take the usual ones now, I’ll go see if I can get the doctor to switch them out for you this morning. You can take the painkillers, though.” She presented him with half of his usual pill quantity and a cup of water and watched like a hawk as he imbibed them. Then she disappeared to presumably seek out his doctor.

In the end, he stayed on the old antibiotics, but was given an additional type to take alongside them. Those unfortunately made him feel quite ill, so he was in a rather sour mood when, in the afternoon, his mother arrived with Akari in tow.
“…Akari.” He observed, blinking out of a light doze. “I didn’t know you were coming. Hi mum.” He belatedly greeted his mother as she approached.

“You look terrible.” Akari said, almost chidingly, as she pulled up one of the seats by his bed. “This is why you tell people things, dummy. I hear you maimed your hands.” She leaned over, not waiting for a response. “What are the braces for?”

“They’re meant to keep everything in the right position while the tendons heal.” He answered, making a face at her.

“You are looking a bit pale today, Hikaru.” His mother said, having silently observed him while he greeted his neighbour. “Is it the new medicine?” She’d been called to confirm the change of medication, so she was aware of the switch.

“Yeah, I think so. Apparently I got infected.” He added, for Akari’s benefit, and bared his neck to expose the puffy and shiny looking cut on the left. “Not just this – my hands too. They’ve got me on some stronger stuff now.”

Akari looked appropriately grossed-out at the news, and he wished for a moment that he could show her the actual wounds. She’d make spectacular faces. “Does that mean you have to stay here longer?” She asked.

“There’s still most of a week before I get out. If the infection improves before then I should be fine.” He shrugged, and shuffled a little awkwardly. “So…you just felt like visiting?”

“Pretty much.” She answered, scooting the chair closer. “Also I have a ton of messages to pass on from your friends, you wouldn’t believe how many of them have contacted me. Especially that Yashiro guy. He said you’ve been getting stalked by some maniac, right?” She said it so overwhelmingly bluntly that he would almost be proud, if not for the subject matter.

Hikaru winced and so did his mother. “Please, for the love of god, tell me you’ve not been telling my friends that.”

“I haven’t.” She said, much to his relief, and then gave him a look. “I should, though. Then maybe you’d have more people to look out for you when you’re being a giant idiot. And you can bet that if you do absolutely anything to displease me over the next few months I am going to spill so many beans.”

Mitsuko eyed Akari somewhat warily, as though only just starting to notice the deep and terrible evil she concealed within her soul. “…Akari-chan.” She said, just on the edge of alarmed.

Akari’s facial expression and body language immediately underwent a drastic change as she remembered that an adult was, in fact, right there. “I wouldn’t really, if he didn’t want me to.” She lied blatantly, and bit her lip. “It’s just everyone has been so worried.” Her eyes were wide and innocent and deceitful.

‘Liar’, Hikaru mouthed at her behind his mother’s back, and the eyes went even more guilelessly wide.

To her credit, Hikaru’s mother had endured many years of deceitful offspring, and didn’t look entirely convinced by the act. She shook her head slightly and sighed. “Well, I’ll leave you two to catch up. Remember you’re not allowed to use your phone here, Akari-chan.”

“Of course.” Akari said, and held unusually still until his mother had left the room. She then immediately turned back to Hikaru. “You’re totally right, that was a vicious, vicious lie. You’d better
believe I stand by my blackmail.”

“Well, you’re definitely Akari.” He mused, lips quirking.

Her eyebrows ascended. “Who else would I be?”

“A possessing demon, obviously.” He answered, a little more grimly than he’d intended. “But that’s obviously not a problem here.”

“No, what the problem is is you being here. Because, you know, you kept some major shit from everyone and nearly got yourself killed by a crazy samurai.” She crossed her arms, stare challenging him to contradict her.

Hikaru was always happy to rise to a challenge. “I nearly got myself maimed by a crazy samurai.” He corrected. “The guy wasn’t actually trying to kill me, he just wanted to cut me up a bit.”

“From where I’m sitting it looks like you did get maimed, or was your mum lying when she said you had surgery?” Akari retorted.

He glared at her. “The maiming isn’t permanent. I still have all my fingers.” He defended, and neglected to mention his probable permanent impairment to mobility.

“That doesn’t mean you didn’t get maimed, though.”

“Temporarily maimed.”

“It counts!”

“How the hell does it count if it’s not permanent?”

“Because it happened, you idiot. You got maimed! That’s a thing that happened in your life! Accept it!”

“If I might interject,” An unexpected voice pitched in, very cheerfully. Both of them looked over to find nurse Furutani, that very formidable lady, entering the room. “I believe your physical therapist has told you everything you need to know about your prognosis, Shindou-san.” Her soul was twitching with merriment as she went about checking his vitals.

Akari turned to stare suspiciously at him. “And what does that mean?” She demanded.

Hikaru eyed the nurse. He was fairly sure that medical staff weren’t meant to disclose medical details of patients, but…strictly speaking, she hadn’t. What a sneaky lady. He begrudgingly approved. “I may be slightly permanently maimed.” He admitted, after a few seconds.

“I knew it!” Akari pronounced gleefully, then stopped. She frowned at him. “Wait, you are?”

“Only slightly.” He insisted. He’d have crossed his arms if that weren’t so uncomfortable with his hands as they were.

Akari was not impressed. “Oh my god, you moron.”

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They bickered.

They bickered extensively, for over an hour, to the entertainment of nurse Furutani and, once,
Someone who had been on the way to the drink machine and stopped by to see what all the fuss was about.

Since Akari already knew most of the details and swallowed the cover story easily enough, it wasn’t difficult to interact with her. It was nice, actually. She was nagging him and pestering him, but in perfectly acceptable ways. At no point did he feel compelled to exile her from his presence, and it was nice to communicate semi-amiably with an actual human friend again.

It was getting later in the afternoon when Hikaru paused mid-comeback and frowned at the wall, detecting something odd and familiar within the passive range of his energy, a couple floors down.

“…What?” Akari said, faltering a little. She’d been fully prepared to counter whatever he said and looked vaguely disappointed at his sudden pause.

Hikaru blinked, slowly, and focused on the familiar thing, which turned out to be a person. In fact… was that Touya? Was Touya visiting? He sat back, vaguely flummoxed; both at the visit and the soul. He remembered Touya and his dad having more distinctive-feeling souls than the other people in the study group, but he hadn’t realised how much they stood out from a crowd. He was just…shaped differently? Slightly brighter, maybe? From what he’d seen the shape and brightness of human souls was pretty variable, but he wasn’t sure what this level of difference meant.

“Hikaru?”

“Sorry, just thought of something.” He said, to cover his lapse in conversation. “Do you reckon I’ll need to speak in a court case?”

She scrutinised him dubiously, but went with the deflection. “If they catch the guy and try to convict him, duh.” She said, rolling her eyes. “He did attack you. And he was threatening you for a while, right?”

“Ugh, what a pain.” He’d never had to bullshit such a large audience as a courtroom before. It wasn’t an enjoyable prospect.

“I repeat: he was threatening you, right?”

Hikaru refocused. “Huh? Uh, yeah, I guess. Kinda. Mainly he was just being a dickhead.”

“And a stalker.”

“Mainly just a dickhead.”

“Do you or do you not deny that you got stalked?” Akari demanded, and he narrowed his eyes at her.

“It depends on your definition of ‘stalked’.”

“Yashiro said you got stalked.”

“Yashiro is a pansy.” Hikaru pointed out, and felt slightly bad for it. Yashiro was sometimes more of a pansy than one would expect, but not in a bad way.

Akari fixed him with a level stare. “Does being a pansy make him worse at identifying stalking?”

“Well, yeah. I only got followed like…twice.” He frowned, and attempted to remember the times Kaminaga had actively tried to catch him. “I think?”
His neighbour sighed at him. “Hikaru, honey, that’s stalking.” She explained, very patiently.

“It’s only slightly stalking.” He protested.

“Like your hands are only slightly maimed?”

He nodded, pleased. “Exactly.”

Akari nodded right back to him, but not from any sort of agreement with his sentiments. “Your hands are permanently maimed and you were definitely stalked. Get over it.” She informed him, utterly bereft of sympathy.

“I’m only slightly permanently maimed and I was only slightly stalked, you get over it.” He turned, blinked, and as a result was staring at the door approximately three seconds before Touya knocked on it. “Come in.” He said, wary, and watched the familiar shape of his rival appear. Immediately, Hikaru noticed that he appeared to be carrying a bag, with what looked suspiciously like a travel Go set in it. His mood soared at the sight of it.

As he watched, Touya’s eyes went first to him, then to Akari, then back to him. “Shindou. It seems I found the right room.” He said, stepping inside and closing the door. His eyes progressed to the location of Hikaru’s obviously-injured hands and narrowed. Instead of mentioning them, he nodded politely to Akari. “Fujisaki-san. It’s good to see you again.”

“Hi, Touya-kun.” She chirped at him, also noticing the suspicious grid pattern of the folding goban in the bag. “Aha. I guess I’d better make myself scarce, if you’re going to be playing a game. I’d hardly want to be pelted by flying stones.” She stood up and stretched with a few gross clicking noises.

Touya coloured, and Hikaru loved Akari with all of his heart for the look on his rival’s face. “You have a reputation.” Hikaru crowed.

The other boy scowled at him. “We have a reputation, you mean.” He corrected, and looked awkwardly at Akari. “You don’t need to leave?” He said, seemingly uncertain whether he had uttered a statement or a question.

Akari waved him off. “No, it’s fine. If you’ve got a goban here I can’t imagine I’ll get much from it except watching a game way over my level.” She went to the corner to retrieve her bag.

“You should watch more games.” Hikaru told her, a little disapprovingly. “You’re not going to get any better with that attitude.”

“Hikaru, I am inevitably going to watch more games. I live next to you.” Akari told him, hefting the bag to her shoulder. “I can always visit later.”

“Eh, whatever.” He shrugged. “I’ll see you later, then?”

“Don’t get maimed any worse when I’m gone.” She instructed him cheerfully, and waltzed out of the door.

It clicked closed behind her. Hikaru looked up at Touya. Touya looked down at him. Eventually, the visiting professional hefted his own bag. “I thought you might appreciate a game.” He said.

“Well, duh.” Hikaru said.

“Good.” Touya offered a brusque nod. There was a brief awkward pause, while neither of them did
anything. Hikaru watched the oddly expressive movements in the other boy’s soul and noted that Touya desperately wanted to interrogate him but was feeling too awkward to do it. Maybe the hospital room was throwing him off. Or the hands.

Hikaru looked down at the folded goban, and coughed. Eventually, he said “You know I can’t use my hands at the moment, right?”

“I was not aware of that.” His rival replied stiffly.

He sighed, and straightened up against the upright back of the bed. “Well, whatever, we’ll figure something out. Get out the damn board.”

Chapter End Notes

Happy New Year, all. Chapter 22 is live on tumblr and is another 12k beast. If I were in the habit of naming chapters, this one would be called Consequences, 22 would be Consequences Part 2, and god knows how many chapters that would go on for. There is a lot of Kaminagi Arc fallout to deal with. Next chapter involves lots of social consequences, and is almost entirely dialogue.

This chapter marks the start of what I’ve been calling the Integration Arc. By current plans it will be a relatively short one, but then again, the Kaminaga thing wasn’t originally planned to be an arc at all so please never trust me, okay.

On Hikaru’s injuries: As you may have seen in one of my other posts, I used my bokken to game out where to have the hand wounds. I then obsessively researched tendons and hand injuries and now I’m far more knowledgeable on the whole thing than I used to be. I’m still fudging hard-to-research details, like the exact types of orthosis needed and what sort of dressings you put on hands after this kind of tendon repair, but the plain medical stuff should be sound enough.

So, in sum.

Damage to flexor tendons (ones on underside of hand, allow fingers to bend): Two cuts in zone 2, severing tendons in index and middle finger, and causing a flesh wound in ring finger. Zone 2 is a gigantic pain for surgeons and has actually been called the ‘no-man’s land’ where allegedly many a resilient tendon has perished. Early surgery and early exercising has been shown to be really, really important here.

Also, zone 1 flexor damage on right hand, which is basically just over the last joints of the ring and middle fingers. Unfortunately for Hikaru the tendons were severed just low enough to get the whole pulley bundle thing, so the surgeon did need to cut the fingers open there, too, except the cut there was lateral rather than zig-zagging.

See, where possible, the surgeons will cut a line laterally down the side of the finger to access the tendon to help reduce the surgery scars, but sometimes it doesn’t allow them enough access. I’ve made the executive decision that on Hikaru’s right hand the lateral cuts were enough, but they needed to zig-zag on the left. Here is a link to a diagram of the different types of cuts surgeons use: https://goo.gl/images/LpJSL4

You can also do an image search for ‘zone 2 flexor tendon repair’ to see examples of actual hands with that type of cut, but bear in mind it can be a bit gory.
Damage to extensor tendons (ones on top of hand and wrist, allow straightening of fingers): nothing really in left hand, that’s all muscle damage. On right hand: zones 5, 6, 7. Those are some long cuts. Also basically everything is connected there, but on the plus side it’s much easier to transfer tendons to other fingers if the original one is wrecked. Extensors are generally much easier than flexors.

There’s also some pretty bad muscle damage into the muscles and web space on the left hand, that went very deep. Not quite as deep on right hand. Muscles heal quicker than tendons.

Also, nerve damage. The nerves usually recover if the surgeon succeeds, but it takes ages.

On the infection: wounds from a demon sword. The demon might be gone but….wounds from a demon sword, okay. One does not get off so lightly with wounds from a demon sword.

04/06/18 – minor edits, some minor changes to injury description
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

Hikaru has a number of unpleasant conversations.

Chapter Notes

Chapter warnings: Hospitals, discussion of wounds, covers topics of terminal illness. If you want more information on that last thing, see the end notes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Very carefully, Touya smoothed out the covers at the end of the hospital bed, and assembled the goban there. He withdrew the cardboard boxes of glass stones and placed them on top of it. Finally, he pulled a chair over and settled in front of the board. He stared at Hikaru wordlessly for several seconds, bearing the expression of someone whose capacity for sentence construction had unexpectedly deserted him.

Hikaru looked at him with vague encouragement until he eventually managed a word. “…Well?” His awkward visitor demanded, when the silence had finally grown too uncomfortable for him and Hikaru had won the contest of awkwardness-tolerance.

Feeling as though he had, in some small way, established dominance, Hikaru shuffled forwards to better witness the board and inspected it. He nodded decisively, pushing back the sudden choking wave of memory and regret, and said “Put both of the stone bowls to your side, like you’re replaying a game alone.”

Touya eyed him strangely, but obeyed, moving the boxes over. “And now?” He asked, expectantly.

“We play. I’ll call out my moves and you place my stones.” It would be quicker if I could gesture with a fan but – no. Hikaru shoved the thought away with ruthless experience and fixed his attention onto the board. How strange it was, to have gone over a week without playing a single game… “You take black.” He added, on impulse, and immediately regretted it.

Sai, after all, had played white more often than not. What was he thinking, putting himself even more into that position? Maybe Setsu was right, and he was a masochist.

“…Alright.” The boy’s eyes flickered to his and narrowed, slightly. Interest prickled at his rival’s soul, in a sharp-edged tracery of analytic thinking that Hikaru was not privy to. He opened both boxes of stones, setting the black stones closest to him, and looked up. “…You’ve done this before.” He said, quietly certain in his intuition, and waited for the response.

Hikaru went carefully still. Touya really was too observant for his comfort, sometimes. “Yeah.” He agreed, eventually, and exhaled. “We going to play, or what?”
Touya observed him for several more seconds, and then bowed. “Onegaishimasu.” He said, and Hikaru followed suit, albeit slowly. He had to be careful with the positioning of his hands. He noticed a second later that he hadn’t actually done anything about the wide reach of his energy, and scrambled to reel it in, finding the task unexpectedly challenging. It was certainly far more voluminous than it had been, and now…it was as though he couldn’t actually compress it that far anymore.

Touya’s fingers placed the first stone while Hikaru was still having something of an internal battle. He couldn’t rein his senses in completely – it simply wasn’t working. There wasn’t enough soul to host the dramatically increased energy, and he just…couldn’t. In the end, frustrated, he swept it all out behind him and intentionally omitted Touya from his range.

He breathed in, then spoke his first move. It wasn’t anything remarkable, but Touya still faltered slightly on retrieving the white stone for it, looking vaguely disconcerted. Hikaru wondered, briefly, how he would have held up, if he’d been Sai’s host, and hissed slightly at the bite of the thought. He didn’t think Touya would have been able to see Sai in the goban, his soul looked too different, but…it was hard not to think about it, with Touya sitting there playing Hikaru’s role.

It was an odd game.

Both of them were somewhat subdued in their playing styles. For Hikaru’s part, he was sick and hadn’t played in a week, and there was also the unforgettable pain of being in…this position. Sai’s position, unable to place his own stones, reliant on the hands of other people, and drenched in the memories of the many times he’d acted as Sai’s hands.

Touya, though…Hikaru wasn’t quite sure what was up with Touya. Part of it might have been the boy’s obvious awkwardness in the hospital room, and his discomfort at the sight of the intimidating braces on Hikaru’s hands. The procedure of the game was definitely a factor, though. While Touya had undoubtedly replayed many games alone and was used to playing stones for both sides, he seemed entirely unaccustomed to doing so in an actual game.

Hikaru felt somewhat sorry for him, really. Whenever he started to get really into the game, eyes going intense and focused in the usual way, Hikaru’s moves would shake him out of it again; either when he heard the move, or when several silent seconds had passed and he remembered it was his responsibility to place it. Hikaru had become accustomed to that sort of game fairly early on, so it was something he was well-acquainted with. Touya, however, had spent a lifetime playing the game without any ghosts or maimed friends in the picture.

In any case, the combination of unfortunate factors made it a pretty lacklustre game, and thoroughly uninspiring. At the end of the hour Hikaru resigned early just because he was sick of playing when neither of their minds were actually in it. Touya didn’t look annoyed, which was a pretty tell-tale sign that he’d not been any more invested than Hikaru.

They both stared at the board and the utterly unsatisfying game there for over a minute. The shapes were just…ugly. Bland. It was such a pathetic example of a game that Hikaru was almost embarrassed to look at it. “…I’m not certain this game is worth discussing.” Touya said at last, voice frustrated and vaguely lost.

“Let’s just leave it.” Hikaru suggested, sighing. He let his energy loose again and winced a little at the turbulent, displeased texture that was all over the other boy. “Sorry it wasn’t a good game.”

“You are in hospital.” Touya replied, not sounding particularly as though this absolved Hikaru in his eyes. He made an odd face as he reached forwards to clean the stones away, and went quite stiff before he added “I found myself…distracted, to be placing your stones as well as mine.”
“It takes some getting used to.” Hikaru agreed, shuffling backwards to lean against the upright half of the hospital bed. His back had gone somewhat stiff during the game and it was a relief to sit back.

The other boy swiftly went all sharp-looking again, and Hikaru hastily thought back to what he’d said. Oh, right. Whoops. “About that, Shindou,” Touya said, setting the cardboard stone containers atop the board. “Why have you played like this before?”

“I haven’t.” Hikaru said, truthfully.

His rival straightened, glaring a little. “That is not what you said before.”

“No, I mean I was – I was placing the stones.” He clarified, very uneasy with the topic of conversation. “I used to play with a…disabled guy, for a while. So yeah, it does take some getting used to.”

Touya’s eyes narrowed. “Who was-“

“Which you’ll have the chance to,” Hikaru interrupted, forcefully commandeering the conversation before it could go too far into dangerous territory. “Considering how long it’s going to take before I can hold stones again.”

His rival paused, visibly caught between two avenues of attack. Reluctantly, he took the conversational bait, though Hikaru had no doubt he’d be asking about the ‘disabled guy’ at some point. “And how long is that?” He asked, moving the stone boxes aside to fold the board. “I’ve not seen braces like those before.”

“I can’t do basically anything with my hands for like six weeks.” Hikaru bemoaned, and Touya nearly dropped the board.

He looked up incredulously. “Six weeks? What have you done to your hands?” He quickly slipped the board into the bag and leaned forwards to scrutinise the orthoses. “Surely if you’d broken them they would be in casts?”

“The bones are fine, I’ve not broken anything.” Hikaru said, lifting his hands carefully to show the thin dressings underneath the hell-implements that were the braces. “I’ve kind of messed up some muscles and tendons and apparently a couple of nerves too, so.” He shrugged. “It’s going to take a while.” And in the meantime, he would be playing like a ghost.

Touya stared at him, his face settling into a frown. “…I suppose that would explain the two months of medical leave.”

“Yeah.” He sighed, morose. “It’s going to be such a pain.”

The other boy scrutinised him wordlessly for several seconds, his expression becoming hard and almost confrontational. “…Shindou. What happened.” It wasn’t composed as a question. It was flat, uncompromising, and demanding.

Without any conscious effort on his part, Hikaru bristled. “I got injured, obviously.” He said, with an edge to the words.

“How?” Touya demanded, leaning forwards. His expression was fierce, and impatience was written all over the flesh of his soul.

Almost immediately, because Hikaru had been thinking about this, he shot out “I punched a wall.” He watched the renewed incredulity rise on his visitor’s face, and kept his own expression perfectly
“…A wall.” The seventh-dan repeated, slowly.

“A very sharp wall.” He added, with an utter lack of any sort of shame.

“And I suppose you punched this wall with both hands.” The words were…not quite mild.

“The first time was because I wanted to punch something.” Hikaru clarified. “The second time was because I was angry at the wall.”

Touya took a very deep, slow breath. His voice was increasingly strained as he spoke. “And your neck?”

“Wall debris.” He replied promptly.

“….Wall debris.”

“Yep.” He observed the increasing agitation of his rival with a conflicted eye. On one hand, riling each other up was just was they did, and he usually enjoyed it. But, on the other…

His rival’s fists were clenching, and there was something unfamiliar about the look in his eyes.

“That’s…what you’re going with.” He said, quiet. “That.”

This was…kind of a different feeling to usual. Hikaru watched angry red rise in the other boy’s skin, and couldn’t feel pleased about it as he usually could. He watched, gut twisting, as frustration frothed and contorted in the other boy’s soul, already too-raw and poised to snap-

“Why do you even bother saying anything when it’s obviously all lies?” The boy burst out, his anger and upset uncomfortably real, his shoulders drawing up and his soul bristling in a threat display, and.

And sometimes, Hikaru didn’t really know how to stop, or slow down, or de-escalate.

His response fell out of him on reflex, harsh and cold on his tongue – “Why do you even bother asking so many questions,” He said, voice flat. “When what I say is ‘obviously all lies’?” It was possibly the most genuine, honest thing he’d said to Touya in months, realer than he’d meant it to come out, and shit. This was actually a fight, wasn’t it.

At the thought, Hikaru drew back, feeling half-guilty and half-hostile. Maybe it wasn’t fair to be messing Touya about like this, but for fuck’s sake, did he never understand that sometimes Hikaru didn’t want to talk about things? Might not even be ready to talk about things?

The temperature in the room seemed to have dropped in the space of two exchanges of words, leech away to leave something tight and angry in the air. “Sometimes, I truly don’t know.” Touya’s voice was even colder than his, now. “Futile hope, I suppose.”

It was a world of difference from their meaningless squabbles. Those ran hot, furious but also inspiring. Fun, even, a lot of the time. This…wasn’t fun. This was cold, brittle, and painful like a lungful of glass.

Hikaru bristled, his energy churning erratically. He was guilty and angry and didn’t know what to do about it, but the thought of…of conceding, was near unbearable. “For what.” He bit out, and he was defensive, because what else could he be?

“I don’t know. Answers, perhaps?” Still glacial, but…edged with a raw, angry hurt. “Shindou. You’ve been…hiding things, for weeks, and now you’re in hospital. And you still won’t say
anything.” His expression was drawn tight, and Hikaru…sort of felt bad, at that. But then: “Don’t you think you owe me some answers?”

It was the wrong thing to say. Hikaru had been…not settling, but becoming more guilty than angry, but- “I don’t owe you answers.” He snapped, because that was what pissed him off. “If I don’t want to talk about something then I don’t want to talk about it. I don’t have to tell you.”

“Not even how you got hurt?” Touya demanded, and his voice was rising now. “Shindou, it’s all over the news. Everyone knows that there was an incident at the shrine near your house and then you turn up in hospital? It’s not hard to make the connection!”

Hikaru opened his mouth, and stopped. “…It’s on the news?” He asked, uncertain. His rival blinked at him, deflating slightly, and offered a jerky nod. “The incident is being reported as linked to the Yokohama murder.” He said, voice ruthlessly level. “They have a name for the suspect, now. ‘Kaminaga Keiji’. An iaido instructor, apparently.” He leaned forwards, eyes narrow. “I don’t suppose that name means anything to you?”

He flinched, and then wasn’t sure why. “Touya.” He said, warningly.

“He wouldn’t have been the one ‘stalking’ you, perhaps?” The boy’s voice was a cruel breed of mild, now. The daggers in him were roused and it seemed he didn’t know how to stop any more than Hikaru did. “Don’t think I didn’t hear that, just before I came in. So is that it? Is that why you’ve been so erratic recently – you were being harassed by a murderer?”

Hikaru’s hands ached horribly in several vicious lines. His blood beat against the wounds on his neck. “Touya,” He said, voice rising, and his energy writhed with warning, rising defensively at the memory of pain. A spirit would have seen that and known to back away. A spirit wouldn’t have risked the backlash, and would have stopped. “Shut up.”

Touya was not a spirit. He did not stop. “Was it Kaminaga Keiji who did that to you?” He demanded, gesturing in a rough, sweeping motion from Hikaru’s hands to his neck. “Because you certainly didn’t get those injuries from a wall, Shindou-“

Hikaru remembered blood, hot and slippery between his fingers, remembered his desperate pulse thrumming against the edge of a blade – “Stop.” He said, the sound of the word thin and far-away as his energy snapped outwards.

Touya was opening his mouth to refuse when it reached him. It wasn’t an attack, wasn’t shaped that way and wasn’t aimed that way, but the energy was thick with anger and didn’t avoid the human soul in its path. Hikaru’s energy brushed over him in a prickling, threatening snarl of motion, doing no damage and leaving no scars, but the soul visibly shuddered nonetheless.

And Touya stopped.

His mouth closed, expression changing rapidly from hostility to confusion. He shivered, almost imperceptibly, and stared blankly like he had lost his train of thought.

Hikaru observed these things and the faltering of the soul and…everything halted. His energy stilled, and then drew back sharply at the memory of I can kill people with my mind, horror rushing over him. He reached out again, half-terrified as he inspected his rival’s soul. He couldn’t see anything wrong, it looked like it had just been disturbed, but…

He took a steadying breath. “Touya.” He said, voice tight. “I think you should leave.”
Touya blinked at him, soul clicking its way back into rightness as the effect passed. Briefly, he looked like he had remembered to be angry. A moment later, it looked like guilt instead.

He rose to his feet, fingers curled neatly into fists at his sides. Then without a word, he turned and swept out of the room. His bright, conflicted presence pressed its way steadily out of the hospital.

Hikaru slumped forwards into the bedding, and breathed, and didn’t know what to do.

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He remained in a foul mood for the rest of the day and a good portion of the next, keeping quiet when he could and speaking very shortly when he had to. He was at turns angry and guilty, caught between two perspectives and uncertain which way to orient himself.

On one hand, he was just... so sick of everyone, but especially Touya, poking into things. He had pushy friends, that was just how they were, but – but, when it came to this whole demon business… it wasn’t fun to have to deflect them, on top of dealing with everything going wrong.

It had been emphatically not fun to have to fend Touya off that morning Kaminaga had come, trying to get the stubborn idiot to safety but – but he hadn’t listened. Why did he need to know why Hikaru was acting weirdly? Why was he incapable of putting an ofuda on without questioning every aspect of everything even vaguely related to it? And – seriously, if he thought Kaminaga had been responsible for the wounds, why the hell would he push him on that? That had been… really not nice.

He stewed in frustration, caught up in tiny details of memory that had become far more insistent than they had any right to be. He remembered dozens of times when Touya had pushed him on things he’d rather not talk about, other times when he’d been annoying that weren’t even relevant, as though every bit of negativity was determined to be heard. The minutiae clustered and clamoured in his mind, buzzing in the air around him as his skin crawled with conflict. The thing was… Touya had been worried. He’d honestly been worried about Hikaru. But he’d also pushed too far, too many times, and wouldn’t leave things alone when he ought to and Hikaru didn’t know what to think about any of it.

On top of his awful mood, the infection was being stubborn. Nurse Furutani said there seemed to be some improvement, but it was very slight, and he didn’t feel noticeably better. It was hard to tell what was infection swelling and what was just the obvious soreness from having had traumatic wounds and extensive surgery, but everything hurt and he felt awful and his angry energy seemed to have cleared the surrounding area of guard foxes.

Everything was just… utterly miserable.

That afternoon, presumably after classes, Hikaru was somewhat distracted from his stewing by the approach of a familiar human soul. It wasn’t particularly distinctive, like Touya’s was, but it was familiar, and he recognised Akari in the same way that he might recognise a familiar voice in a crowd.

Unsurprisingly, once she’d entered the hospital she made her way towards his room. More surprising, she came bearing gifts, sort of. She entered the room cheerfully, bearing what looked like a bouquet of flowers of all things and an uneven stack of colourful cards. “I am here with messages,” She announced, pretty much as soon as she had crossed the threshold. “And also flowers. Hey, what’s up with you?” She added the last part as soon as she got a look at him, tone dropping to concern.
He stared at her wordlessly for a few seconds from his position laying down in bed, and then sort of shrugged. “What’s with the flowers?” He asked, instead of answering. They were sunflowers, which really weren’t the traditional sort of thing to bring to a hospital room, surely. He thought he could also see some other yellow things in there but, lacking an education in gardening, was not aware of what they were.

“Your mother got them.” Akari proclaimed, setting the bouquet on his bedside where the intense yellow could burn his eyes. “They’re actually very convincing fakes, so they won’t rot. Maybe you can keep them in your room when you go home.”

“There’s no way my mum picked those.” Hikaru said, wary, and eyed the blooms with suspicion. They did look very realistic, actually, but now that he was looking…the texture on the stems and leaves did seem a bit plastic-y. After a moment he reached out and pressed the button (with his undamaged right index finger) to elevate the back of his bed, peering at the fake flowers as he rose.

“I picked them. She bought them.” His neighbour admitted, shuffling the cards out. Some were in envelopes and some were just notes. “I’ve got a load of things from your friends and some random pros, too. Most of them are telling you off for dropping out of that league, but there’s a few ‘get wells’ in there.” She deposited them on the table beside the flowers. “I’ll let you read those later, though. What’s up?” She planted herself into a chair and leaned forwards, intent. “Are you feeling ill?”

Hikaru stared at her, wondering if he should fear an interrogation from her like he did Touya. He… didn’t think so. Akari was very stubborn, but…she knew when to stop. She knew when not to push. Well, sometimes. “No.” He said, eventually. “Well, yeah, the infection is being a bitch, but…”

“Something else?” She asked sympathetically.

He inspected his braced hands for a few moments, considering his words, as always reluctant to speak about anything half-way serious. “…I had a fight with Touya.” He admitted, begrudgingly. “It was…” Annoying was poised to finish the sentence, but the word died in his mouth.

Akari observed him, the mood on her soul gathering into a sort of receptive, concerned focus. “I’m guessing it was worse than the usual.” He nodded, still not looking at her, and his eyes went to the plastic bag at the side of the room. In his haste, Touya had left the travel Goban behind, and its presence had served as a visual reminder of the argument all day. “Well, come on then, let’s sort this out. What did you fight about?” Akari prompted him, when he’d been quiet for a while.

“It was stupid.” He said, scowling.

“That’s not surprising.” She noted, with a sort of wry amusement. He raised his eyes to glare half-heartedly at her just before she continued. “It’s a problem though, right?”

Hikaru considered that he had spent pretty much a full day stewing over this. “…Yeah.” Akari didn’t prompt him to continue this time, even when he’d been quiet for a fair while. She just sat there and waited, while he struggled through his thoughts and his ever-present inclination to keep everything to himself. Eventually, he got there. “Touya was pissed that I wouldn’t tell him what had happened.” He raised his hands slightly. “You know, with the thing.”

“With you being stalked and maimed?” She clarified, and he rolled his eyes at her. “Well, why wouldn’t you tell him?” She asked, almost too sensibly, and settled in to wait.

He scowled at the question, because it was a big part of what he’d been angrily ignoring all day in his rumination, but….he breathed, and thought about it, and battled through the reluctance to speak.
“I just…didn’t want to talk about it.” He said, unable to keep the frustration out of his voice. A second later, he added “He never stops asking about stuff I don’t want to talk about and then gets offended when I lie.”

Akari nodded, her emotions still all gathered-in and receptive. *Listening-thinking*, her soul said, and it was kind of interesting to look at. “People usually don’t like it when you lie to them, Hikaru.” She informed him.

“Well, yeah.” He shrugged uncomfortably. “But if he keeps asking about stuff I won’t talk about, what else do I do?”

“Tell him you don’t want to talk about it?” She suggested.

“He just asks ‘why’.” Hikaru glared down at his hands again. “He’s pushy. He never leaves stuff alone unless I can distract him somehow.”

“Yeah, I can see how that could be annoying.” Akari mused. “And of course, since you’re so contrary, the more he tries to make you talk the less you want to, and now it’s becoming a big…. thing. Does that sound right?”

“Pretty much, yeah.” He nodded, torn between feeling uncomfortable at talking about feelings and grateful that Akari knew him well enough to do the hard work.

“Okay, so fair enough. It sounds like he needs to learn when to stop pushing.” Akari straightened slightly, and her tone became very firm. “That said. Hikaru…I am very very annoyed with you for keeping all of this stuff quiet when you were actually in danger because of it. If I didn’t know what had happened from your mum, you bet I’d be basically as pushy as he was.”

Hikaru’s shoulders hunched in. “I bet you wouldn’t push me on my trauma though.” He muttered, defensively.

She blinked. “…Well, it makes sense that you’d have trauma, given everything. Does he know that though? What did he do?”

He looked at his hands and tried not to think about feeling cold steel sliding through his flesh. “He just kind of…brought up the news. About Kaminaga. Wouldn’t stop pestering me about…” He thought of the exact wording. “Being ‘harassed by a murderer’, so yeah, he’d figured stuff out. I told him to shut up, but…”

“He didn’t?” She guessed.

“He didn’t.” Hikaru glanced morosely at the hell instruments on his hands. “Like, I had *flashbacks*, sort of. It’s so weird.” He’d hardly had some sort of movie-style flashback cutscene, but…it was hard *not* to remember the desperate, soul-deep *terror* of having the demon’s sword at his throat, when Touya brought it up like that – for god’s sake, the fear had been intense enough he’d been willing to mutilate his hands for the chance to get the blade *away*. There were…kind of a lot of unpleasant things to remember from that night.

“What, that you have trauma after a traumatic event?” Akari raised her eyebrows. “Yep, that’s *so* weird.” Her voice was heavy with sarcasm.

“Oh, shut up.”

“Seriously though, it’s a giant dick move to keep pestering someone about their trauma, especially when they tell you to stop.” She judged, glancing at him with an edge of concern. “You’ll *tell* me if
I’m bothering you with stuff, right?”

“You’re fine, don’t worry.” Hikaru shook his head dismissively. She might go on about how he got stalked and maimed, but she didn’t...press it, and was light-hearted about it. It made a difference.

“Okay, good.” She shuffled and squared her shoulders. “Okay. So, Hikaru, what you need to understand is that people who care about you deserve to have at least a bare explanation of something. Even if you don’t give specifics, you could say something like ‘I got attacked and I don’t want to talk about it, but I’m not in danger anymore’ – although strictly speaking that’s not true because they’ve not caught that guy yet-“

“What if they try to make me explain?” He interrupted, making a face at her words. “A lot of my friends are dickheads. They totally will.”

“Then you tell them to fuck off because you’re not talking about it with them.” Akari said firmly, redirecting her attention back to the matter at hand. “I do think you should talk about it with someone, but that’s up to you. You don’t have to talk about stuff if you’re not ready to. I know your first instinct to get people to lay off is bullshit, but leave that for the people who haven’t been worrying for your life. Okay?”

Hikaru eyed her begrudgingly. He liked using bullshit. It was a good deflection method. But...

He thought back to how Touya had reacted to it, this time. When it was over something serious.

“Okay.” He conceded, eventually. “But if they keep pestering me when I tell them not to I reserve the right to dick them around.”

“By all means, bullshit your little heart out if they won’t lay off.” Akari allowed generously. “Just...I think Touya probably wouldn’t have been so pushy if you’d told him something, at some point. I’m not excusing him for taking it too far, but you’ve got some blame here too, Hikaru. He was probably really worried for you.”

Hikaru inspected his lap furtively. “Yeah.”

“So with that settled.” Akari took a deep breath. “Not to pull a Touya here, but...I do want to know why you didn’t tell someone about getting stalked and threatened. You could have died. Why didn’t you get help?”

Hikaru swallowed back his first, automatic response. Then his second. Then he took a deep breath of his own and stewed over his answer, hunching into the bedclothes. He took Akari’s advice as best he could and, haltingly, spoke. “I...kind of did get help?” He said, choosing his words very carefully. “I don’t know what Yashiro told you, but I had one adult keeping an eye out for me and he called in Kaminaga’s best friend to try sorting him out.”

Akari’s expression became somewhat uncertain. “I didn’t know any of that.” She admitted.

“I actually met Kaminaga through the first guy. I...well, I said something. I think it made his... mental break, or whatever, focus on me.” It was hard, telling the sort-of truth, but... “We called in help, but. Uh. That didn’t turn out too well. You know. The Yokohama murder.”

She raised a hand to her mouth, eyes widening. “That was his best friend?”

“Yeah. It’s messed up.”

She took a few fortifying breaths. “Wow. Just...why didn’t either of you call the police before it got
that far?"

“It…didn’t seem that risky, till near the end?” He said, just on the edge of a lie. “There’s. Other
reasons. I can’t talk about them, though.” He stared at her, practically daring her to interrogate him
further.

Akari made a face at him. Very clearly, she wanted to interrogate him further, but she’d just finished
talking about how people should respect his boundaries. “Are those other reasons still dangerous or a
problem?” She asked, eventually.

“Nah.” He really doubted that there were many malevolent spirits that could trouble him much, now.

to someone about the whole thing, alright? I know you’re terrible at talking to people but you should
try anyway.”

Hikaru eyed her silently. The idea of telling her about all of the spirit stuff actually wasn’t that
repellent, any more. Still…she wasn’t exactly easy-going. It would probably be a lot of effort.
“Maybe.” He said dubiously, and left it at that.

Akari nodded at him, apparently satisfied. “Now. Do you want me to get Touya to visit again, so
you can sort yourselves out?”

He grimaced. “Not yet?”

“You should at least arrange a day. It’s not good to sit on these things.”

“Ugh.” He echoed her earlier sentiments.

She was unmoved. “Thursday, maybe?”

“That’s only two days away.”

“If you wait much longer you won’t be in hospital any more, and then you’ll have to deal with him at
home where it’s rude to kick people out.” She pointed out. “Not that you’ve ever let that stop you.”

“Ugh.” He grimaced at the travel goban in the corner. “Fine.”

“Great!” She chirped, standing up. “I’ll get in touch with him and let him know. In the meantime, do
you want me to take any messages to your friends?”

“Not really. I’ll be out soon, anyway.” He eyed the pile of cards and missives. “I’ll just read through
all that stuff, I guess.”

“Yeah, okay.” She went for her jacket and slipped one arm in, then the other. “I’ll visit…hm…
Friday, maybe? You’re getting out on Saturday, right?”

“If nothing changes.” Hikaru contemplated his unerringly painful hands. “The infection seems to be
going down at least, so there’s that.”

“Huh. Well, maybe I’ll just visit when you’re home and it’s less of a journey.” She said, retrieving
her bag from the floor. “I’ll sort out your thing with Touya for you once I’m out of the no-phone
zone.”

“Ugh.” He expressed again, and she snickered at him.
“Try not to have another stupid argument.” She recommended, cheerfully, and then left him with the glaringly-yellow fake flowers and a stack of cards.

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On Wednesday, Hikaru alternated between brooding about Touya and reading through the variety of cards he’d been sent, but these were by no means the most noteworthy events of the day.

It had been nearly a week since his surgery, and he’d been in hospital for quite a while. For most of that, he’d had almost no spiritual visitation, which was somewhat jarring after having grown used to round-the-clock insubstantial company again. The conspicuous lack of Setsu was proving inconvenient, as the bits of donated soul he’d been managing were beginning to concern him. They were, as normal, spread haphazardly over his own, but more worryingly were dissolving slowly at the edges. He wasn’t sure whether or not it was normal, but there was no one around he could really consult on the matter. He could detect at least one fox in the distance at all times, but it never seemed to be anyone he knew, and he’d not felt even a trace of Setsu in days.

Accordingly, when he felt a presence shimmer oddly on the edge of his awareness, one which felt a lot like Setsu but also different somehow, Hikaru sat up and paid attention. He stared at the wall in the direction of the sensation, concentrated, and reached out further than he’d bothered in a while. His probes coalesced around Setsu, who was definitely Setsu, but…not shaped the usual way. Setsu’s soul was generally spherical underneath all of the gathered energy, but this…wasn’t. There was a discernible spherical heart, yes, but the amber of the soul was distributed in a really strange way that he wasn’t sure what to do with.

As Hikaru’s energy poked and prodded at the fox, exasperation answered him and shoved him away, saying patience, so he begrudgingly retreated and waited for the fox to arrive.

It…took longer than usual.

The unusual slowness of Setsu’s approach roused some suspicions in him. These suspicions were considerably heightened when the presence reached the hospital and didn’t just go through the walls like it normally would. Instead, it took a slow and meandering path through the hospital that seemed to be in accordance with the usual travel pattern of his visitors.

As such, Hikaru’s expression was more accusatory than surprised when it was a human that walked through the doorway of his hospital room, the obviously foxy soul betraying Setsu’s identity in an instant.

“What the fuck.” Hikaru said, in what he felt was a perfectly reasonable greeting under the circumstances.

“What the fuck.” Setsu said, out loud, and it was possibly the weirdest thing he’d ever heard. The fox looked at him for a moment, then patiently loitered by the closed door as it waited for him to finish with the blatant staring. Tolerance settled in its energy like a roll of the eyes, the energy no less expressive for the weird reshaping of the soul. There did seem to be less of it than usual, though.

Setsu as a human was not particularly subtle. Its hair was in a short ponytail and was very conspicuously white – a sight even weirder than Yashiro’s grey – the eyes were an amber that was decidedly unusual-looking, and it was wearing a bright red scarf around its neck. Also, very few people of the age it looked, which was sort of early to mid twenties, tended to wear that sort of old fashioned haori over their clothes.

There was also the fact that Setsu-as-a-human looked and sounded mostly male, and Hikaru wasn’t
certain if that meant he was supposed to actually refer to the fox as male. It was a confusing situation all around.

“…What’s with the body?” Hikaru asked, eventually, entirely unsure how to proceed.

Setsu apparently took that as invitation to leave the entryway, because it walked over and pulled up a chair. And sat in it. Like a human. Setsu sat in the chair looking like a physically real human, albeit a really strange-looking one, and Hikaru found himself unexpectedly thrown by this state of affairs.

“I embodied.” It said, physically rolling its physical eyes. “Obviously.”

“Yeah, but…why?”

“Because life is full of mystery and also I felt like it.” It…was alarmingly like something he would say. Hikaru stared at the embodied fox with mild horror, confronted with the awareness that Setsu was actually just like him but with more tails and exposition, and somehow he’d failed to notice this before- “It would take more than similar conversation patterns to make me appreciably similar to you, stop freaking out.” Setsu interjected, apparently reading the general trend of his thoughts. “Anyway. I’m here to talk to you about spirit things.”

Most of that hadn’t been along the lines of how Hikaru would talk, so he settled a little, feeling somewhat more secure in his uniqueness. “…What if someone overhears us and thinks we’re crazy?” Hikaru asked, after a long pause, his reply delayed by a morbid fascination with the sight of Setsu talking. Like, actually opening its mouth and talking, with sounds coming out.

“If someone gets close enough to hear we’ll sense them.” ‘You idiot’ was implied but not outright stated. “And we can pretend to be having a staring contest while we talk the quiet way. I expect you’re more comfortable with verbal communication, though.”

“Uh.” Hikaru said eloquently. Before today, he would have agreed with that statement. However, the concept of Setsu embodied and talking was apparently far harder for him to process than he’d anticipated.

“Also I’ve gone to the effort of embodying now, so if you’re not more comfortable, that just sucks for you.” Setsu added, in another demonstration of word choices disturbingly similar to what Hikaru would make.

He was silent for several moments, then tentatively spoke. “…Is this how you took me to the emergency clinic?”

“Yes.” Setsu reclined slightly and picked up the garishly yellow fake bouquet on the bedside table. Picked it up. With its well-defined, properly physical hands. “Fake flowers.” It observed, taking a faux sunflower petal between two fingertips. “Weird.” Then, somewhat bafflingly, it ran its hand over the fake bloom and carded the petals back and forth between its fingers, looking oddly delighted by it.

Hikaru’s weirdness tolerance was reaching its threshold. “Hey, okay, what the fuck?” He asked, helplessly.

“The texture is pleasing. It’s been a long time since I had proper hands.” Setsu explained, and then looked at him slyly. “…You’ll understand that feeling yourself, soon enough.”

Hikaru stared at the embodied fox in disbelief. He just….didn’t have words. It was a rare experience for him.
“Too soon?” Setsu inquired, voice mock-innocent. It looked very pleased with itself. Its energy, in slightly more detail, suggested that it was quite smug about baffling him so spectacularly.

“…This is so weird.” He expressed, lost. “What name did you give at reception? Where the hell did you get those clothes? Just…” He looked heavenwards, and encountered the ceiling. The ceiling at least still made sense.

“Hakurou Setsu.” The fox shrugged. “The family name is one I’ve used before – that’s written with ‘amber’ for the first kanji, mind you, not ‘white’ – I wasn’t an Inari fox back then. Also I made the clothes when I embodied. It’s harder to do, but.” Its energy fanned out in four tail-shapes, pointedly.

Hikaru pondered that, and promptly asked the important question. “So…are you naked right now?”

“I’m as clothed as I’m real. Well, sort of. No one properly puts their soul into manifested clothing, that would be weird.”

“That would be weird”, it says.” Hikaru repeated, in disbelief.

Setsu rolled its eyes again. “Yes, I get it, you find this all very surprising. Are you finished yet?”

“Hell no.” He denied vehemently. “I have so many questions.”

“Oh no.” Setsu said, at a deadpan. “Not questions. Whatever shall I do.”

Hikaru ignored the sarcasm with ease. “Like, how does this even work? What the hell is up with your soul? When have you had to use a family name before?”

Setsu’s facial expression shifted slightly between various breeds of amusement as the questions progressed. “Explaining the metaphysics of embodiment would take a very long time.” It said, patiently. “Considering it usually takes spirits several hundred years to learn. In fairness, a lot of that time is because they also need to build the power for it, but the point is there’s quite a lot to it. Basically my soul and most of my energy are compressed into this physical form. If it gets killed, so do I, unless there’s someone around to do a rescue.”

“Er.” That sounded very dangerous, somehow, despite it not being any more than most humans thought their own lives worked.

“Also the family name was one I used a few hundred years back when I did the fox wife thing.” Setsu explained, raising far more questions with that sentence than it had answered.

“…The fox wife thing.”

“Of course, I didn’t keep it very long, seeing as I got married and took my husband’s name.” The fox added, serenely. “But it’s the thought that counts.” It paused, energy moving contemplatively. “Incidentally, that’s how I met Meikai.”

Hikaru stared. “…I don’t get it.”

“Meikai wasn’t born a fox. Technically she was my husband, when she was human.” Setsu shrugged again. “Eventually she died and a few hundred years later, here we are.”

“…Humans can become foxes?”

“Oh obviously.” The fox raised its brows at him. “I’d put a hefty bet on you becoming a fox, if you last long enough. We can talk about after-life soul changes later, though. I mainly came here to talk to
you about the gigantic spiritual mess going on in the city."

The whole ‘after-life soul change’ thing seemed highly relevant to the ghost-related topics Hikaru had been avoiding during the Kaminaga mess, so he readily acquiesced to the change in topic. “Okay?” He prompted.

“You probably haven’t noticed, since you’ve been stuck in here and you have a lot more energy now,” Setsu started, leaning forwards. “But the spiritual equivalent of a nuke went off when the God-Cutter was broken, and the city and the surrounding area are completely bathed in energy. Spirits have been flocking in from all over the country, the spirit layer is closer to the physical world than almost anywhere else I’ve seen it, and it’s a huge mess.”

Hikaru processed that, then asked “What the hell is the spirit layer?”

Setsu blinked at him. “It’s…the layer of spiritual energy that spirits live in?”

“No, I mean, is it another world? Is it the ‘spirit world’? What does it mean that it’s closer to the physical world?” He clarified, leaning forwards himself.

“It’s a layer, you dumb child, I just said that.” Setsu eyed him strangely. “I’m in the spirit layer a bit, you’re in the spirit layer a bit, Meikai is completely in the spirit layer and so are other non-embodied spirits – it’s not a separate plane of existence. It’s just…a layer.” This was, apparently, a fundamental and extremely basic concept to Setsu. It looked baffled to even be explaining it. “If you don’t know that, it’s no wonder you and the priest didn’t know anything about fighting spirits.”

Hikaru chose to ignore the last comment, and squinted. “…So, it’s layered on top of the physical world?”

“There’s a gap, but yes.” Setsu confirmed. “Basically everything about how humans interact with spirits and how spirits interact with humans relates to the spirit layer. I’ll sum it up though: if the spirit layer is denser and closer to the physical world, spirits can affect the physical world more easily. Also humans don’t need to be as sensitive to interact with spirits.” It looked at him significantly.

“I think people saw the…” He waved his hands and then realised he shouldn’t be doing that when they ached at the motion. “Giant spirit boom pillar. You know, the pillar of light. I had a policeman asking me about it.”

“Yeah, anyone even vaguely spiritually sensitive would have seen that if they looked. And on a related note, everyone even slightly spiritually interesting is going to have picked up some energy and extra sensitivity from this, so people might give you weird looks from now on. The main part you need to be concerned about is the influx of spirits.”

Hikaru inhaled slowly, and exhaled in a large gust. “Am I going to have to deal with more demons?”

Setsu’s youthful-looking human head shook at him. “Demons? No. Idiotic or opportunistic spirits, though…” It observed him for a few seconds. “Word is spreading about the defeat of the God-Cutter. It’s easily the most spiritually significant thing to happen in a very long time. You’ll get some spirits that will just want to pester you to get some gossip or details, probably. You might also get some that want to ambush you and eat you in your sleep.” Hikaru gaped. “That’s why we have a guard up until you can return home.” The fox added. “I don’t recommend sleeping anywhere without wards for the foreseeable future.”

“Why only when I’m asleep? Won’t they try to eat me when I’m awake, too?”

“You don’t automatically control your energy when you sleep and your soul gets exposed a bit
sometimes.” Setsu said, from the informed position of someone who had probably watched him sleep quite a few times. Hikaru felt briefly very uncomfortable. “Only the stupid spirits will try anything with you when you’re awake – you’re much too difficult a target for anything except a major spirit now – but sleep is what you need to be careful about. You’ll probably wake up if someone attacks you, but if they get you in the right moment, it could be too late. Consider yourself warned.”

It did make a certain amount of sense that his energy went aimless and pliant while he slept. After all, if he didn’t hold the donated soul-pieces in place, they tended to detach and drift off, and he always had to do some flattening and arranging of those pieces when he woke up. It had become part of his morning routine. “Will wearing ofuda help?” He asked, warily.

“Probably.” The fox confirmed. “And if you ever need to sleep somewhere without wards, either arrange for a bodyguard or ward the room you’re sleeping in. It’s a flimsy defence but better than nothing.”

Hikaru, who did on occasion stay overnight at hotels and such during large-scale Go events, found this very useful advice. “Yeah, okay.” He frowned at his lap for a moment, then looked up as he switched his attention to his earlier concerns. “So, about the soul bits. They sort of seem to be dissolving at the edges. Is that normal?”

Setsu looked at him sharply, then its energy reached forwards and performed a very thorough pat-down of his soul, shoving his energy unceremoniously out of the way to reach it. Hikaru didn’t protest beyond a flinch and a mumbled ‘hey’, and otherwise acquiesced to the impromptu examination. The fox inspected the edges of the donation layer for a while, then withdrew, expression smoothing out.

“Yeah, that’s fine.” It decreed. “It’s a detached piece of soul that yours can’t integrate, so it’s naturally going to dissolve slowly. If you keep your energy pressed in it will slow down, but you’re going to need to find a steady stream of donors to maintain your health.” It waved at itself. “You can’t really feel it as easily since I’m all squashed into the embodiment, but I’ve still got a fair way to go before I heal up. The three-tails and I aren’t going to be enough, I’m afraid.”

Hikaru stared at the unfamiliar face, deflating a little. “What happens if I don’t have enough donors?” The fox’s energy went distinctly uncomfortable-feeling at the question, which wasn’t the best of signs. Hikaru’s heart sank, and he braced himself as best he could.

“Well, your soul dissolves.” Setsu answered, apologetically. “Probably quite quickly. I’m not an expert on the physical effects of that, but I know it won’t be pleasant to go through and if you let it get far enough you won’t be able to pass on when you die. And obviously a body without a soul straight-up dies.” It shifted awkwardly, fiddling with the fake sunflower in its hands. “…To be perfectly honest, your soul is going to dissolve anyway, with or without donors. It’ll just take a lot longer if you manage things properly.”

He thought he reacted quite well for someone who had essentially just received a death sentence, even if that reaction consisted of a shocked inhalation that went the wrong way and set him to choking for the next half minute. Setsu watched him with a sort of mingled sympathy and odd, distant confusion as he regained his breath, and then listened as he asked “How long? With or without bits of soul?”

Setsu squinted at him, and its energy moved forwards to probe at his soul again. “…I’d say eight months or less, without.” It said, pensively. “Though you’d need to die at about six if you wanted to have a chance of passing on. With donors…that’s harder to say. Thirty-five years, maybe? Forty? You’d need to die earlier than that or risk dissolving on death, so thirty-ish, but…you’re not losing cohesion much at all at the moment. It would be a slow decline.” The fox eyed him carefully. “Those
estimates do depend on you not getting injured by anything else over the next few decades, though.”

“…Thirty-five years.” Hikaru murmured to himself, in quiet astonishment. Slowly, painfully, he took in the idea that he would very likely not live to fifty years of age, and then pressed his energy into a tightly-curled mass to stop it from reacting.

“Maybe a little longer, if you can get more donors.” Setsu allowed. “To be honest, the three-tails and I aren’t really enough as it is, and the three-tails’ donation will dissolve a lot more quickly than mine. It probably only has a few weeks left in it.”

“How about yours?” Hikaru asked, automatically, briefly wondering at the lack of a name for the three-tails. He allowed the practicality to distract him, and carefully did not think about his truncated lifespan.

“A few months, maybe.” Setsu estimated. “I can give you more by then, but you’ll need to get something from someone else before.” It shifted. “I’ll ask around the foxes. Soul donation is an extremely personal thing to do – most won’t go for it – but I ought to be able to find a few.”

“…Thanks.” He said, uncomfortably. “Is there anything else I should be doing?”

“Give nice offerings to your donors. It helps them to heal.” There was some heavy implication there.

He rolled his eyes. “I’ll get you and the three-tails something nice once I’m home.” He said, and breathed carefully. “Maybe I’ll take you two out for sushi or something. Also – doesn’t that three-tails have a Japanese name? I don’t actually know what it’s called.”

“Well, its name is-“ Walks-in-the-autumn-sun/Shapes-the-fog-of-morning/Has-three-tails “-but to my knowledge it doesn’t have a Japanese name.” The fox tapped the false sunflower against one hand, thoughtfully. “I’ll ask, next time I see it.”

“…You like that sunflower.” Hikaru observed, for lack of anything else to say.

Setsu looked down at it. “…It’s colourful.” It said, almost defensively. “And feels nice.”

He looked over at the bouquet. There were five other fake sunflowers there, as well as all of the other unidentified yellow things. It wasn’t like it would hurt to dispense one to a spirit. “You can have it, if you like?” He offered.

Setsu stared at him. Slowly, it drew the stem of the fake bloom to its chest. “…If you give it to me, it’ll be mine.” It said, cautiously. “You can’t have it back.” Its energy gathered subtly – half hopeful, half guarded.

“Yeah, that’s fine.” Hikaru eyed its aura strangely, blinking as it performed a brief but happy ripple at the words, all of the caution vanishing in an instant. “It’s all yours.”

The fox immediately tucked the flower stem into its top, the sunflower head resting cheerfully to the side of the bright red scarf. “Excellent.” Setsu proclaimed, sounding utterly thrilled. “That counts as an offering, you know.”

“…It makes you heal faster?” He guessed.

“It makes me stronger.” The four-tails corrected, standing up to arrange its scarf around the new flower. “Which makes me heal faster.” It looked down at the yellow shape at its collar, eyes positively covetous. Hikaru supposed it didn’t get lasting physical gifts very often. “I’ve got to get going now, but I’ll sound out some spirits for your donations.”
Hikaru tried very hard not to think about the donations. “Yeah, sure.” He said, holding his energy very carefully still along with the rest of his thoughts. He braced himself. “Uh. Once I’m out, I’ll need to talk to you.” It was really about time he got some answers, after all.

Setsu gave him a long, slightly concerned glance. “…If you need to contact me, find the nearest Inari fox and they’ll go find me.” It said. “If there don’t seem to be any around, just check a shrine. All of them are spending their downtime in Tokyo at the moment, so they shouldn’t be hard to find.”

“Ohuh.” Hikaru agreed, and the fox made its way to the door.

It hesitated just before leaving. “That infection of yours.” It said, slowly. “Keep an eye on it, alright? If it gets any worse, send someone to get me.” It paused on that ominous note, nodded, and then left the room.

Hikaru felt its presence recede, keeping his energy carefully quiescent, gathered close and unmoving. He held it there for several minutes, keeping his thoughts at bay, until Setsu had gone far away enough that he allowed it all to go loose again. It churned and frothed at the walls as he buried his face in his knees, breath gone ragged and too-fast.

For a single, awful minute, his mind ran away with him.

*I’m going to die.* He thought, distraught, as Setsu’s words pressed again and again into his mind. *Whatever I do I’m going to die, I lived through that demon and tried so hard and I’m still going to die…* Everyone died. That was fact. But…if Setsu was right, it would be optimistic to assume he’d live to his fiftieth birthday – and if he couldn’t find the soul-donors it would be far, far quicker. He might die younger than Torajirou had, even.

Helplessness sank into him, its claws as familiar as the despair that followed in its wake. Hikaru pushed them away, half-panicked, with the same old mantra that had become so awfully, terribly tired.

*I’ll find Sai,* he thought desperately, to a flood of anguish that was far more insistent than it had been before. *I’ll find Sai. I’ll find him, and everything will be okay, and I won’t have to die so young…*

Hikaru breathed the words into the bedding, white sheets going damp and cold under his face, but couldn’t quite muster the will to believe them.

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On Thursday, precisely one week since his surgery, Touya arrived in the morning at a fairly inconvenient time.

Hikaru had grown quite used to the morning routine. Assisted by Nurse Furutani, he’d consume a large number of pills, have his wound checked on and the dressings changed. By this point, the swelling from the surgery had gone down enough that the nerve damage was actually noticeable. Before, his hands had just been solid masses of pain and unpleasantness, but now the numb areas on a couple of his fingers and a large section of one hand were pretty apparent, and it was honestly a little daunting.

The wounds themselves were…better. Of course, they were still infected, so they didn’t look as neat and well-healed as most injuries that age would, but the skin was visibly healing and that was quite encouraging. Apparently, some people even had their stitches out at this stage in the process.

Nurse Furutani was in the process of explaining that his stitches probably would be sticking around for another week when Touya arrived, knocking hesitantly on the door.
Hikaru had felt him coming, but it wasn’t as though he could have told the nurse that. “That’s probably one of my friends.” He said to her as she looked up.

She carefully disinfected her hands and went over to open the door, looking at Touya with polite curiosity. “You’re here to visit Shindou-san, I suppose?”

Hikaru craned his head and noted the very uncomfortable expression on his rival’s face. “…Yes.” The other boy agreed, shoulders a little stiff with awkwardness. “Is it a bad time? The reception staff didn’t mention…”

“Shindou-san is having his wounds seen to.” Furutani looked over at him inquisitively. “If both you and he have no issues with it, you can sit in while I finish up.”

“Yeah, that’s fine.” Hikaru concealed a small thrill of glee at the idea; here was, at last, a chance to gross someone out with his still-healing wounds.

Furutani nodded, satisfied, and retreated back to her patient to disinfect her hands again. Touya cautiously entered the room, settling into one of the bedside chairs with a palpable tension. Hikaru held his left hand out to the nurse when she gestured and sat patiently while she swabbed around the wounds with stinging fluid, eyes primed on his visitor and his reactions.

Touya’s expressions were very easy to read. His eyes went pretty much immediately to the uncovered hands, making a very satisfying face at the sight of the several still-puffy wounds. He watched in silence while Furutani finished cleaning up and re-dressing the left hand, slipping it back into the hellish orthosis before she moved onto the right hand. Once they were both dealt with and back in braces, she proceeded to the other part of the morning session: making sure he performed his exercises.

Under her watchful eye, Hikaru obediently twitched his various fingers in the variety of pathetically small movements that were meant to promote their effective recovery. Finally, she tested the sensation in each of his fingers, confirming that he was still utterly lacking sensation in the index and middle fingers of his left hand, and the middle and ring fingertips of the right.

“The nerves should start to reconnect soon.” She said to him, relinquishing his hands back to his custody as she went to do the far-quicker check on the back of his neck. “Has Yamada-san spoken with you about that?”

“Yeah, the other day, a bit.” Hikaru agreed. He was apparently to expect some very weird sensations in the affected fingers as the nerves tried to figure out what they were doing, but for now they were just numb.

“Well, that’s everything for this morning, then.” She said, as she finished swabbing his back-of-neck wound. “The infection is going down, albeit slowly, so I think you’re still on schedule to be released on Saturday.”

“That should be fun.” He remarked, looking at his hands. It would likely take some adjustment to do basically anything without the use of both of his handling appendages. “I guess I’ll need to learn how to open things with my elbows somehow.”

“It is quite unfortunate that both of your hands are in orthoses.” Furutani sympathised, gathering up her things and putting his chart away. “Well, I’ll leave you to your visit, then. Feel free to press the call button if you have any problems.”

“Yeah, sure.” Hikaru agreed amiably, and the nurse smiled as she left the room. She gave Touya a
somewhat inscrutable stare as she passed, her soul implying that she found him suspicious in some way. Whatever she was thinking, she didn’t voice it, and closed the door behind her with a quiet click. She did not, however, immediately leave, and lingered outside the door.

Hikaru stared at the door with mild discomfort, then moved his eyes to Touya. For a few seconds, they just sort of…looked at each other. It was possibly the most awkward, skin-crawling silence he’d ever endured.

“…Fujisaki-san said she spoke to you.” Touya said, eventually, his words curt and stilted. His back was straight and stiff in the way that it only managed when he was particularly uncomfortable.

He glanced back at the door for a second and nodded uneasily. “…Yeah. She did.” He wondered how long the nurse was going to stay there. “I’m guessing she talked to you too?” It would be just like Akari. He was sure she’d been exceedingly polite as she told Touya precisely what she thought of the situation and what she expected him to do about it.

Touya’s soul shifted in a kind of bewildered, grudging respect at what was presumably the memory of whatever she’d said to him. “She did.” He shifted very slightly, and looked away. “I. Believe I owe you an apology.” The words were precisely as stiff as his posture, and his expression didn’t betray much more than extreme discomfort, but Hikaru had more than that to read from. “I shouldn’t have pushed you on a sensitive topic like…well.”

“How I got stalked and nearly died?” Hikaru prompted, a little ruthlessly, and watched as the boy’s expression faltered.

“…Yes.” He agreed, after a moment. “It was…poorly done of me.”

“Yeah.” Hikaru acknowledged, and the silence held for several more seconds while he struggled for his own words. “And…I guess I’m sorry for. You know. Worrying you, and being a dick about it.”

Touya’s face contorted oddly at the word ‘worrying’, but he didn’t make any move to deny it. “I don’t understand why you couldn’t just tell me that you were attacked.” He said, voice tight and frustrated. “Why lie about it? What do you think I’d do with the information?”

Hikaru scowled and stared at the door again. Finally, the nurse seemed to be considering leaving, perhaps since they’d not started shouting at each other yet. “It’s not like I think you’ll gossip, Touya. Who would you even gossip to? Your goban?” He made a rude noise, and Touya scowled back at him. Quietly, Furutani slipped away from the door and out of hearing range.

“Then what exactly is the problem?” He demanded, folding his arms.

“The problem is that you never fucking stop.” Hikaru said, a hint of genuine anger slipping out before he could stop it. He took a deep breath and tried to collect himself before he continued. “You always push. You always need to know everything and you don’t fucking listen. I mean…honestly, if I’d just outright said that I got attacked and I didn’t want to talk about it, do you really think you’d have just left it at that?” He stared at the other boy, challenging.

Touya held his gaze for a second, then let it drop away. “…Perhaps not.” He admitted, unhappily.

“I don’t owe you answers.” He pressed, soul bristling at the mere implication. “Some basic information, yeah, but if you keep pushing me on stuff I don’t want to talk about, of course I’m going to lie to you. What else do you expect?”

His rival grimaced. “I dislike not fully understanding a situation.” He said, almost defensively.
“Yeah okay, fair enough, but I also ‘dislike’ having to explain every damn thing that’s going on.” He countered, twitching his fingers in the orthoses.

“I suppose.” Touya jerked his chin down in the stiffest nod he’d ever seen. “What should I do instead, then?”

Hikaru stared at him for a moment, slightly taken-aback, and shrugged minutely. “Don’t push when I don’t want to talk about things.” He said. It seemed pretty self-explanatory, really.

Slowly, Touya nodded again. “And…will you tell me anything about this…” He raised a palm upwards. “Situation? I understand not wanting to talk about things, Shindou, but the way you’ve been recently…surely you admit it’s ridiculous?”

Hikaru shuffled. “…I have kind of messed you around a lot, yeah.” He admitted. “It wouldn’t have been as bad if you’d just…not pushed, though.”

“Like when?” The boy asked, voice almost neutral.

“Like that time when you wouldn’t put the ofuda on.” He said, because it was a particularly shining example of the problem and had been a very unpleasant situation all around.

“If you want me to do something, it doesn’t seem unreasonable to want to know why.” Touya retorted, posture closing in again.

“Maybe.” Hikaru acknowledged, because he knew he’d be pretty salty about being told to do something weird without there being a good explanation for it. “But…it was important, Touya. And I asked you to just put the damn thing on, and you wouldn’t, and you just…didn’t listen.”

“I still don’t understand why that was important. Or why you insisted that we leave so suddenly.”

Hikaru stared at him, impulses warring. Eventually, he said “Kaminaga was there.”

Touya faltered, his stubborn countenance falling away in an instant. He hadn’t expected that. “…the murderer?”

“Who else?” He fixed his eyes on his hands.

The boy scrutinised him sharply for a few seconds. “And…ofuda were relevant to that situation, somehow.” He observed, in that annoyingly perceptive way of his.

He made a face. “That is one of many things I’m not going to talk about.”

“I don’t understand why you need to keep so many secrets.” Touya answered plainly, clearly frustrated.

“And if you keep pushing I’ll never tell you any of it, so just deal with it.”

They stared at each other crossly for the better part of a minute, finding themselves at something of an impasse.

“…I’ll agree not to push on issues you don’t want to talk about.” Touya said, eventually. “But I would like more warning when something serious is taking place. And perhaps some answers, rather than ‘I punched a wall’.”

Hikaru flushed a little, and cleared his throat awkwardly. “In my defence, you were pushing me about my injuries, and how I got them is pretty fucking nasty.”
Touya’s eyes slid down to his hands again, and he twitched the fingers reflexively. “The wounds do seem to be quite severe.” He said neutrally, and…didn’t push. He clearly wanted to. Hikaru could practically feel him straining against the urge to press for details, but…he made the effort. He didn’t ask.

Hikaru appreciated that a lot. He watched his rival for several blissfully pestering-free seconds, and felt the obstinate resistance begin to slip out of his thoughts. Slowly, ponderously, he considered talking. The idea wasn’t quite so repellent as it had been. Akari was right; he really was a contrary bastard.

He considered what to say, and…said it. Just like that. “I got attacked with a sword.” He spoke, watching keenly for Touya’s reaction.

The boy’s head jerked up, and he stared at Hikaru with astonishment at the presence of an actual answer. “…Kaminaga Keiji?” He questioned, cautiously.

“Yeah.” He looked at his mauled hands again. “He finally went off the deep end, I guess.”

“…And, your hands?” He remained Touya, after all. Hikaru thought he would accept a refusal to answer, now, but that wasn’t going to stop him from asking.

“Why do you want to know so badly?” He asked instead of answering, honestly curious.

Touya considered that, face pensive. “I’m not certain. Morbid curiosity, perhaps.” He admitted. “I suppose it’s not very charitable of me.”

Hikaru snorted, because no. No it wasn’t. He understood it perfectly, though. He’d have been precisely the same way if it were him. “He had the sword to my throat.” He said abruptly, pointedly pushing away the memory. He raised a brace-enclosed hand to the cut at the front of his neck. “Here, see? Right there. I was trying to get it away, and that’s what happened to my hands.” He shrugged and lowered his hand to his lap again. “So really the worst of the damage is my own damn fault.”

Touya went very still. “…I’m sorry.” He said, and Hikaru wasn’t quite sure what he was apologising for.

“It’s not like you’re the one who held me at swordpoint.” He pointed out.

“Even so.”

Hikaru looked at him for a few seconds, and wondered what he’d say if he knew what had really happened. If he knew that Hikaru had been fighting for his life against an age-old horror, watching innocent spirits torn apart in front of him.

He wondered what Touya would say, if he knew that Hikaru was dying.

The strain of the knowledge was briefly so intense that he had to close his eyes to breathe past it, and when he opened them again, he just felt…hollow.

“…Did you want to play a game today?” Touya asked, when the silence had stretched long enough to grow very uncomfortable.

He glanced over briefly at the bag in the corner, the grid of the goban visible over the top. “…Not today. Sorry.” He said finally, slumping back. “Honestly, I think I just want to sleep.”

Mercifully, the words were accepted. “Alright.” Touya looked at him, paused, and then stood up to
retrieve the bag. “I should leave, then.”

“We can play once I’m out of here, maybe.” Hikaru suggested tiredly, eyes following the boy as he moved slowly to the door.

“…Please keep me updated on your health, Shindou.” He said, awkwardly, and reached for the door.

Hikaru watched him soundlessly. For a moment, words pressed against the inside of his mouth, poised desperately on his tongue. For a moment, I’m going to die fought to be given voice, the sound of it inside his own head so awfully raw that he couldn’t imagine saying it out loud, but couldn’t bear the thought of letting it fester there unspoken either. He bit it back, and breathed, and said “I’ll see you whenever, Touya.”

Touya hesitated, and left, and then Hikaru was alone with the words he hadn’t been able to speak.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter notes: Today I break the Great Hiatus. Chapter 23 will be going up on tumblr at 20.00 UTC+1 tonight.
Additionally, a masterpost has been made of all paper cranes versions, chapters, art, Q&As, fan stuff, and miscellaneous content. Also some easter eggs.
Click here for the Paper Cranes Masterpage
Click here for the TVTropes page

Now. Warnings.

**On terminal illness:** Consider this your official notice: from now on, the story will contain mentions and references to a fictional terminal illness caused by soul damage. I will outright state that you should not expect Hikaru’s physical condition to progress too far within the timeframe of original Paper Cranes, but Kaminaga? He is another matter entirely. I will warn for relevant chapters/scenes.

I have done and am still doing a great deal of research for this, because the symptomology and progression of the disease resembles some real-life illnesses. To summarise it, spiritual damage triggers an autoimmune response which attacks the nervous system. The physical effects of this relate to demyelinating diseases and dysautonomic diseases. Demyelinating diseases involve damage to the myelin sheaths on neurons, which badly affects their conductive ability. An example of a well-known demyelinating disease is Multiple Sclerosis. Dysautonomia is when one or several branches of the autonomic nervous system are damaged – meaning that automatic bodily functions such as respiratory, cardiovascular, gastrointestinal etc may be adversely affected. Both demyelination and dysautonomia can be caused by autoimmune responses, so my proposed aetiology should make sense.

I understand that some readers may have experiences with illnesses of this type, so I will always warn for chapters that heavily deal with the issue. I myself have a close family member with MS, so I’m not writing from a place of total emotional distance from the matter. If you have any concerns about my portrayal of certain aspects of Hikaru/Kaminaga’s physical condition, please let me know, and I’ll be happy to discuss it with you. I’m also happy to discuss in-depth details of the fictional illness itself.
On rate of spiritual decay: Setsu’s estimate is based on the current rate of soul dissolution it can observe in Hikaru. The rate of dissolution increases as the soul gets more badly damaged.

At present, Hikaru is losing slightly over 0.002% of his soul daily. Without the spiritual aid he’s receiving, this would be significantly greater – around 0.14% lost per day.

Hikaru has around 35% of his original soul remaining, which is about 5% less than before chapter 20. The remaining soul is also considerably more badly damaged than it was before chapter 20.

05/06/18 – minor edits
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

Hikaru’s stress, and also actions, begin to catch up to him.

Chapter Notes

Chapter warnings: stress, negative thinking. More detail in end notes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Of all the various friends Hikaru had dicked around during his demon ordeal, he probably felt worst about Yashiro.

Yashiro was just too nice. He was a grumpy bastard and too insistent on cleanliness for him to be a natural teenager, but he just...objectively was not a dickhead. After several unpleasant conversations, Hikaru could now (begrudgingly) admit that he felt guilty about how he’d treated Touya, but at least Touya had been a dickhead right back at him. He always gave as good as he got, especially when it came to being an arsehole. But Yashiro?

Yashiro had just been worried. He’d pushed once he’d overheard Hikaru on the phone to Utagawashi, yeah, but...he’d been pretty okay about it. It had been annoying, but okay. And Hikaru was hardly going to forget how he’d opened his home at the drop of a hat when he’d needed it. And he’d called Hikaru about the news, possibly saving his life in the process, because what if Hikaru hadn’t been prepared for Kaminaga to come that night? It...might have been nasty. Nastier, he amended to himself, because the night had already been plenty nasty.

Generally, Yashiro was not a dickhead, and that meant Hikaru felt much guiltier about being a cagey bastard with him than with Touya, and especially for what he’d probably put him through with calling the police and whatever else. So, logically, Hikaru had been steadfastly avoiding thinking about the boy.

This was made much more difficult when his mother brusquely informed him that she’d given Yashiro permission to stay over that weekend, because he’d wanted to visit Hikaru and couldn’t do it in the week.

Hikaru stared at her as the words sank in, feeling distinctly uncomfortable. “…When’s he getting here?” He asked, eventually, and felt far less cheerful about his imminent release from the hospital than he had been before.

“This evening, actually.” His mother said, casting a befuddled glance to the flower arrangement at his bedside. “He’ll be there when you get home tomorrow. It might be useful for you – he can be your hands while he’s here, after all.”

“Great.” Hikaru said, unenthusiastically.
“Don’t be like that.” She said, tone automatically shifting to the sternness that was her ingrained response to Hikaru-in-a-mood. “He’s your friend, isn’t he?”

“Yeah.” He sighed, a little morose. He had been hoping to get through at least two days without having any more highly uncomfortable talks, but that had probably been overly optimistic of him. “Well. I guess he can play Go, at least.”

“You’re not allowed to play a game for six weeks.” She reminded him, eyes wandering back to the flowers again.

“Verbal. Verbal Go. I’m not going to use my hands.” He clarified, shuffling on the bed. “He can place my stones for me.”

“That’s nice.” His mother answered distractedly, clearly not listening past the initial assurance. “Hikaru, weren’t there more flowers than this? I thought there were six of the sunflowers.”

He was honestly surprised she’d noticed that, but… “I gave one to a friend.” He shrugged. It was hardly a secret.

“Oh, I see. Akira-kun?”

“You think I’d give Touya a sunflower?” Hikaru asked incredulously, then paused to consider it. “…Maybe I should give him one. Just to fuck with him. He’d be so confused.”

“Hikaru. Language.”

“Yeah.” He said, already delighted at the idea. He could just imagine the faces the other pro would make. “Anyway, no, it wasn’t him. I gave it to Setsu.” He made sure to say it very casually. Dismissively, even.

Her eyes narrowed at him. “Setsu, you say. I was told that someone by that name had visited you, but I’d never heard the name before.”

Hikaru gave her an oblivious stare. “What, I haven’t mentioned Setsu before?” He said, affecting a tone of confusion.

“You haven’t.” She confirmed.

“Oh. Well, I guess we’ve not been friends that long.” He mused, consideringly, as though it all made sense now. “Well, anyway, we played a game a while back, and we’re friends now.”

“Oh.” She said, already sounding less interested. He could practically see her slotting Setsu into the ‘Hikaru’s Go friends’ category. Excellent. “I see. Is Setsu good at Go?”

“Good-ish. Better than most amateurs I tutor, but nowhere near as good as me.” He said, and threw in some more technical stuff to throw her off. “I mean, if I was going to guess, I think Setsu would probably either pass the pro exam or get one of the top spots. But, like, that joseki is old, and it’s old and clumsy so there’s tons of weaknesses. Any pro could win against that, probably.”

“That’s nice, Hikaru.” She said tolerantly, clearly not listening anymore. Success.

He nodded to himself with satisfaction, and allowed her to work out her remaining bits of small talk and idle news at him before she left for the day. He had, quite expertly, made it so at least one person would accept Setsu as an acknowledged real friend-of-Hikaru if it ever came up. After all, if Setsu was walking around embodied now, it was best to make some preparations. It wouldn’t be enough of
a bastion against the bull-headed curiosity of his crazy friends, but it was better than nothing.

Later that day, after his mother had left, Waya and Isumi came to visit. Hikaru felt them approaching not long after they walked into the hospital, identifying their somewhat-familiar souls once they were close enough to ambiently feel. He made a face at his bedclothes as they lingered at reception, presumably signing in.

Clearly, he had been far too optimistic in hoping he’d manage to go two days without awkward conversations.

He sighed, resigned, and sat up to watch the door as they approached. It was Isumi who knocked, calling “Shindou-kun?” through the door. “It’s Isumi, and Waya.”

“Yeah, I know.” He said, unthinkingly, and then shook his head. Ugh. “Come in.”

The door opened, and two faces poked their way in, eyes immediately fixing on him. The mood-patterns on their souls twisted oddly as they processed his appearance, and he wondered what it was that they were seeing. Isumi stepped in, and then Waya, closing the door behind him.

“…Huh.” Waya said, looking distinctly bothered by the sight of him.

“Don’t just stand there, it’s weird. Pull up some chairs or something.” Hikaru told him, a little crossly. If he was going to have more awkward conversations, he at least didn’t want them looming over him for it. There was a distinctly uncomfortable quiet as they followed his directive, situating themselves by the bedside. Hikaru made sure to plant his hands in plain view, just to get that out of the way.

“I’m glad you’re alright, Shindou-kun.” Isumi said, once he was seated. “We haven’t heard much, just that you’d been injured and ended up in hospital but it wasn’t serious.”

Waya nodded, taking the opening to speak. “I was just kind of pissed about you not coming to the Kisei match, at first.” He ventured, tilting his head a little to stare at Hikaru’s hands with a befuddled expression. “I guess no one called the Association until later, so at first your match was ruled as a forfeit, and, uh…”

“You thought I was being a match-forfeiting tool again?” Hikaru guessed, unamused. It seemed that streak of unpleasantness would, quite literally, forever be haunting him.

“I didn’t really think anything, I was just pissed off.” Waya denied, somewhat shifty-eyed. “I may have sent some angry messages.”

“You thought I was being a match-forfeiting tool again?” Hikaru guessed, unamused. It seemed that streak of unpleasantness would, quite literally, forever be haunting him.

“I didn’t really think anything, I was just pissed off.” Waya denied, somewhat shifty-eyed. “I may have sent some angry messages.”

“Don’t bother reading them.” Isumi advised him. “They’re terribly rude.”

“Anyway, we didn’t hear from you at all for like two days and that started to be weird, so we texted your neighbour, and she said you were in the hospital.” Waya went on, as though Isumi hadn’t spoken. “And she just didn’t say anything else, so…”

“I think I was still unconscious then?” Hikaru suggested, thinking it through. “I was out for like three days, so probably she didn’t know enough to tell you.” Both Isumi and Waya stared at him, visibly taken-aback.

“…I didn’t know that.” Waya admitted, unusually subdued. “Three days? That’s…I guess it makes sense we didn’t hear much from her, then. A day later she got back to us and said you were fine but had injured your hands, and that didn’t sound too bad, you know?” He gestured to Hikaru’s hands, which were still in plain view in their orthoses. “But that looks more serious than I thought, you
know. I guess I sort of thought that somehow this whole hospital thing was just more bullshit and I’d
walk in and you’d have, like, a tiny cut or something, but…”

Hikaru sighed. He was just…so tired of all of this. “I was unconscious for three days, I’ve got
permanent hand damage, and also I’ve got an infection.” He said, flatly. “It’s gonna be a good two
months before I can play a game with my own hands again.” Predictably, both of them looked quite
stunned at that.

Any moment now, they were going to ask what had happened. And he’d have to tell them, because
they’d been worried, and they were his friends, and that meant he should tell them something,
because it wasn’t fair otherwise. But he was just so sick of it. This whole week had been stuffed full
of horrible talks and he was completely, utterly tired. And he still had to talk to Yashiro.

At least he was starting to run out of people who he had to be somewhat truthful with.

“Do you mind telling us what happened?” Isumi asked, and despite himself, Hikaru felt some tension
release. That was…an unexpectedly nice way of asking. He shrugged tiredly.

“I got attacked by a guy with a sword.” He answered, dully, slumping back against the back of the
hospital bed. “And then I got away, but a load of my tendons were cut up so they had to do surgery.”

Both visitors stared at him. Isumi was observing him with a slightly furrowed brow, the look of his
soul somewhere between an instinctive flash of dubiousness and a more dominant understanding, but
Waya…

He folded his arms. “Shindou,” he said, a little tightly. “I swear to god, if you’re choosing now to
bullshit when you’re in fucking hospital—”

Hikaru’s face twisted in tandem with the tense, unhappy lurch of his guts, and he turned away with
an angry, hissing huff. “I’m not bullshitting.” He retorted. I learned my lesson there with Touya,
he almost said, but he bit back the words.

“A sword.” Waya said, voice rising with disbelief, and no small edge of his own anger. “Come on,
Shindou, who the fuck gets attacked with a sword? That’s not even a little believable!”

He supposed, really, that this was kind of his fault. If he hadn’t made such a habit of saying complete
crap when questioned about uncomfortable topics, it might be more believable, but…“Me,
obviously!” He shot back, the distinct and unpleasant sensation of stress seething in his limbs and
bubbling through his voice. “I didn’t ask to get attacked by a crazy swordsman, but it happened! If
you don’t believe me you can just fuck off.” His energy bristled and churned around him, but he held
it inwards, not risking something like what had happened with Touya.

Waya half-stood up, looking very ready to get argumentative, and while his soul wasn’t as weirdly
expressive as Touya’s, it was easy to see similar emotions there as during the fight earlier that week.
It just figured that Hikaru would get the same response by actually telling the truth, didn’t it.

Then, suddenly, like a breath of fresh air, Isumi held his hand out as though to bar Waya from
moving. “I believe you.” He said to Hikaru, voice quiet and sympathetic.

Waya stared at him incredulously. “What? Isumi—“

“It was on the news, wasn’t it? That man in Yokohama was killed with a sword, and it was reported
that there was a linked incident last Friday here in Tokyo.” He went on, looking perfectly calm,
though his soul didn’t quite match that outwards appearance. “Was that you?”
Hikaru averted his eyes from Waya, fixing them on Isumi. His shoulders loosened a little. “…Yeah.” He agreed, woodenly. “Same guy. I had to talk to the police about it, once they finished operating on my hands.”

“I’m sorry.” Isumi said, completely and sincerely sympathetic. “That must have been a horrible experience.”

He looked away again, because the sympathy was uncomfortable to look at, too. “I’m fine. I lived, didn’t I?” For a given value of ‘lived’, since one of the consequences was that he was now sort of dying. Hikaru grimaced at the thought, and then deliberately pushed it away.

Waya looked between him and Isumi, face contorted into conflicted confusion. “…What?” He asked, almost uncomprehendingly. “Are you trying to tell me you actually got attacked with a sword?”

“I fucking said so, didn’t I?” Hikaru bit out, voice positively caustic.

“Yeah, but most of the time when you say stuff like that it isn’t true.” Waya said, and Hikaru considered telling him that, in fact, a lot of the bullshit he spouted was actually true. “But…you actually, like, got attacked?”

Isumi sighed. “Waya.”

Hikaru considered saying something very uncomplimentary, but breathed, and fell back on Akari’s advice. “Yes, Waya. I actually got attacked. With a sword. And I don’t want to talk about it.”

Waya looked almost personally affronted at the last sentence. He leaned forwards in an quick, thoughtless motion. “Not even why it happened? I mean, why the hell did the murderer guy go after you? Is it someone you know, Shindou? Do you know if they caught him yet?”

It was like Touya all over again. Hikaru restrained another biting response. “I just said I didn’t want to talk about it. And no, they haven’t caught him yet.” That was probably something else he’d have to deal with, once he left the hospital. Kaminaga.

Hikaru really wished he could spend maybe two consecutive days just…resting. Not having to have horrible conversations. Not having to deal with someone who was partially responsible for some of the horrible things that had happened to him.

“So you do know him?” Waya pressed, as if he’d heard a completely different response.

Hikaru scowled. “When the hell did I say that?” He demanded.

“You didn’t, but you didn’t deny it, so-”

“That doesn’t mean it’s true! I said I didn’t want to talk about it!” Under ordinary circumstances, he’d have clenched his fists. Paced around. Maybe thrown something. Instead he held rigidly still, eyes fixed determinedly on his hands as frustration prickled at his throat.

Waya started to talk again, but barely got another syllable out before he was mercifully stopped.

“Waya.” Isumi said, firmly. Almost sternly. “He’s literally sitting in a hospital bed. Now isn’t the time to bother him, and if he doesn’t want to talk, you need to respect that.”

Cautiously, Hikaru looked over. Waya was staring at his friend, looking somewhat betrayed. “But-“
“No.” The older pro reiterated, and fixed him with a surprisingly steely look. “Don’t be unkind.”

Sullenly, Waya fell quiet. Hikaru was briefly very, very relieved that he hadn’t come to visit alone. It would have been a nightmare.

Isumi looked over at him. “Shindou-kun? Would you like us to stay for a while? We could discuss some of the games you’ve missed in the last week, if you like.”

He blinked, and leaned back. “No.” He said, bluntly. “No, I’m tired. I want to rest.”

His friend nodded, and…that, apparently, was that. He rose from his chair, pulling Waya with him. “We won’t stay any longer, then. Come on, Waya.” He ignored the younger boy’s protests as he herded him easily to the door. He looked back briefly. “I hope you feel better soon.”

“…Thanks.” He said, and held carefully still until the door was closed and his friends’ presences were receding down the hallway.

Slowly, he slumped into the bed, the beginnings of a stress-headache clawing at his brain. He wished he could look forwards to getting out of hospital, but…

Yashiro.

Hikaru sighed, and turned over to go to sleep. It wasn’t even late afternoon yet, but he was tired, and utterly fed up with dealing with everything. Sleep was easier.

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The morning of his release, Hikaru went through the usual wound-checking and hand exercises with a distinct feeling of trepidation. He nodded through the comments on the progress of his healing, made approving noises over the apparent slight improvement of his infection, and obligingly twitched his fingers in all the ways he was told, but his thoughts were manifestly elsewhere. He had slept off some of the tension, but his mood felt alarmingly fragile, and he was not at all looking forward to another unpleasant conversation.

Then nurse Furutani brought in the clean, non-hospital clothes his mother had dropped on, and Hikaru was instantly intrigued.

“That’s a real t-shirt.” He pointed out, oddly charmed by the sight of the completely normal clothing. “And real trousers. Not….hospital crap.”

“They are indeed.” Nurse Furutani agreed, looking secretively amused. “We’ll see how well you do at getting into them, hm?”

“Why would I-“ He started to ask, then looked at his hands. They remained, as expected, within the hell-implements that controlled their positioning, “…Right. So putting clothes on is going to be a pain now.”

“I think I can safely say that lots of things are going to be a pain.” The nurse nodded, looking far too cheerful about the whole thing, and cajoled him into accepting the clothing. “See how you do on your own to begin with, I’ll help if you need it.”
In the end, embarrassingly, Hikaru did indeed need help. It was just a normal t-shirt, no buttons or anything, but manoeuvring his hands through the thing without pulling his fingers into bad-feeling positions proved to be basically impossible, so he had so sit sullenly while the nurse did it for him and pulled the shirt over his head. He managed the trousers through sheer bull-headed determination, using judicious applications of weight through his elbows to hold them in place on the bedside while he pulled his legs into them. Actually fastening them proved to be a pain, though. He managed the zip but not the button, and stubbornly pulled his shirt down over it to conceal that small failure.

“I emerge victorious.” He said to Nurse Furutani, who obligingly offered some applause. After that it was just a matter of waiting for his mother to show up and sign a load of papers.

When she did arrive, she arrived with not only Akari but also Yashiro in tow. Hikaru was thankfully forewarned to this by his far-reaching senses, but it made the initial moments no less awkward.

Hikaru ignored his mother and Akari entirely in favour of staring tensely at Yashiro. Yashiro, for his part, folded his arms and looked very accusative. His soul revealed a great number of conflicting feelings and looking at them made Hikaru feel distinctly guilty.

“Oh god, am I going to have to mediate again?” Akari said, after looking between them for a few seconds. Hikaru was inclined to forgive her the words, because it neatly broke the awkward silence.

“Mediate?” Yashiro asked, as the group as a whole led Hikaru out of his hospital room. He’d only been down the corridor to go to the toilet in the whole time he’d been there, so approaching the stairs felt almost exciting. “What did you need to mediate?”

Hikaru noticed that his mother looked quite interested in the answer, too. “Hikaru and Touya-kun had a fight and they were being idiots about it, so I sorted it out.” She peered at Hikaru. “Did it go alright, on Thursday?”

“….It went okay.” He admitted, grudgingly. “But then Waya came yesterday and made a pain of himself, like I knew he would.”

“Oh dear.” His mother said, sounding mildly concerned.

“In fairness, I feel like you’ve been putting off all these conversations for a while, so I think you’re just overdue.” Akari pointed out, with just the slightest edge of sympathy. He didn’t feel particularly comforted.

Yashiro side-eyed him, and said nothing. The silence was very expressive. Hikaru instantly felt both guiltier and more stressed.

“Maybe.” Hikaru said, vaguely, and allowed the polite conversation of his mother and Akari to fill the quiet, interspersed with an occasional comment by Yashiro.

His mother had actually hired a taxi to get them home, which was unexpected, but pleasant. He wouldn’t have enjoyed navigating public transport with his hands as they were. Humiliatingly, Akari had to plug in his seatbelt, as he couldn’t move his fingers enough to get the necessary leverage. There would probably be a lot of things like that, in the weeks to come. Hikaru produced a long and rather depressed sigh at the thought of it, and turned his head to the side.

Hikaru stared out of the window, watching the streets progressively become more familiar. At the same time, he could feel a bright patch of energy growing closer, a familiar mesh woven into brick and wiring. The house-wards. He was surprised by how much he was looking forward to walking through them, considering what he’d seen happen to the ones on the shrine. They still felt safe, even
if he knew that they didn’t stand up to serious threats.

Eventually, they arrived. His mother paid the taxi driver, and then went to unlock the front door. At the sight of it Hikaru felt a lurch in his gut, and hurried after her, suddenly almost desperate to get home again. He passed through the threshold, the wardlight shimmering over him as he breathed in the familiar air of home, and felt suddenly far more emotional than he’d anticipated. He lingered in the doorway, closed his eyes briefly as he struggled for composure, and then stepped in to kick off his shoes.

When he looked up, Akari was just beyond the doorframe, and inspecting him with an annoying understanding look. “…I’ll leave you to get settled back in.” She decided, and stepped back. “I’ll drop by sometime this weekend, okay?” She didn’t wait for a response, merely flashing a smile at him and then turning away in the direction of her own home.

Yashiro shrugged, and stepped inside, closing the door. Hikaru didn’t pay much attention to him, though, instead turning to walk into the familiar space with something painful clenching in his chest at the sight of it. The walls, the doors, the light through the windows-

Hikaru shuddered, and breathed, and found himself near-running up the stairs before he could help himself. Distantly, he heard footsteps following after him, felt Yashiro’s presence trailing in unhurried pursuit, but couldn’t bring himself to care much about that.

He burst into his room, breaths coming uncomfortably fast, and wanted to weep at the sight of it. His room, his goban, his window, the kamidana-

Something guided him, some bright hint of power, something he needed – Hikaru stumbled over to his chest of drawers and pulled on a drawer-handle without even thinking about it, rummaging as carefully as he could with his mangled hands until his fingertips brushed against paper bright with energy.

He still. Carefully, he drew it out, balanced carefully between two fingers and the orthosis.

Quietly, he dropped to the floor, cradling the closed fan and struggling to calm his breathing. He trailed his fingertips over the paper, the contrast between the insensate skin and the undamaged fingers horribly apparent.

The door closed. Yashiro had stepped into the room and pushed it shut behind him. He stood for a moment. “…Shindou?” He asked, uncertainly. Concern moved on his soul, as oddly noticeable and distinctive as it was on Touya.

Hikaru swallowed. “Yeah?” He said, thickly, and tried to unfold his posture a bit.

“Are you okay?”

Despite himself, he laughed at that. A short, and unhappy noise. He decided against answering.

“…Stupid question, I guess.” Yashiro mused to himself, and carefully crouched beside him. “…is that your fan?”

“Duh.” Hikaru answered, and looked down at it. His gut twisted, because…it looked…well. He held it carefully and then flicked sharply with his wrist to open it, and…

The paper was stained. Almost everywhere, there were smears of blood, smudges, fingerprints. Along one edge, it looked as though it had spread out from the hand that held it, soaking along the paper and staining the ribs, dripping down in places. It was dry, red-brown, and crusted in places.
The intact white paper was far more sparse than the marred part.

How oddly appropriate. Hikaru choked down another bitter noise, and brushed off some of the crusty bits with his thumb, blowing the blood-powder off.

“…Is that your blood?” Yashiro asked, just a little incredulous.

He shrugged, heavily. “That’s what happens when you try to hold a fan when your hands are all torn up, I guess.” He said, unable to force the flippancy that the words would have been suited for. The sight of the stained fan was quietly, deeply painful.

“So you had it with you when…you know?” The boy sounded terribly confused. “How is it here then? Wouldn’t it…I dunno, be taken for evidence or something?”

“…It wasn’t. It got taken back here.” He carefully avoided saying who had conveyed it. “I guess I can’t carry it around anymore, all stained like this.” Could he have the paper replaced, maybe? Would that disturb the energy imbued in it? He sighed, heavily, and resolved to ask Utagawashi about it. “What a pain.”

Yashiro looked at him, wearing the scowl his face usually settled into whenever he was thinking particularly hard. He felt concerned enough that it was practically shouting out from his soul, enough that he was actively pushing down on the edge of wanting-answers that curled in strangely coherent spirit-shapes near one edge of him.

Hikaru felt even shittier at the sight of it. “I’m sorry.” He said, abruptly, unable to bear the weight of it anymore. “I’ve been a complete dick to you during all this – I just…” He wanted to bury his face in his hands, but his hands were in orthoses. Another pitiful surge of unhappy stress rose in him at that inability, no matter how trivial it was. “Sorry.” He said, again, unable to find words any less inadequate than that.

Tentatively, Yashiro shuffled around so he could look Hikaru in the eye. Sort of, anyway, because Hikaru wasn’t exactly feeling great about eye contact right now. “There’s some stuff I’d really like to ask about.” He said, voice awkward but very serious.

Hikaru nodded, jerkily, and braced himself. He owed answers to Yashiro, at least. He owed something. He could wait a little longer to collapse into a pathetic stressed mess. He inhaled slowly, and tried to press the ambient distress a little further away. Just a little further.

Yashiro eyed him quietly for a few more seconds before he spoke again. “That said,” He voiced, standing up. “You look like complete shit. I’m not going to grill you when you look like that. Have a nap, or something. I’ll just go sit with my laptop downstairs for a while.”

“…What?” Hikaru asked again, stupidly.

He gestured pointedly in the direction of the bed. “Have a fucking nap, Shindou. You obviously need some rest.” He straightened, nodded, and then went for the door.

Hikaru watched, utterly still, as the boy opened the door, stepped out, and closed it behind him. His
presence receded down the hall and down the stairs, engaging in brief conversation with his mother, and then settling comfortably into the living room. He…didn’t come up again.

It took at least a minute of confusedly monitoring Yashiro’s lack of movement before it started to sink in that…actually, he wasn’t going to have to talk right now. The relief came in a hesitant trickle, and then opened abruptly into a dizzying flood. Hikaru gasped for breath and shook and hunched over his knees as the rest of his denied emotions were dislodged, emerging in a horrible and stomach-twisting tide of upset.

“What the fuck.” He mumbled at himself, setting the fan aside to wipe at his face with his sleeve, and then abruptly descended into a thoroughly pitiful mess of a human being that cried all over himself for basically no reason. A while in, he wanted to go to the bathroom to wash his face with cold water, but the realisation that his hands would get in the way of that made him break out into another awful wave of blubbering. He wasn’t even that upset about his hands…was he?

It felt much as though all the collective stress and unhappiness of the last several weeks was clawing its way out through his eyes and throat, but not before it made an enormous mess of his stomach first, twisting it up into nauseating, thorny knots. Hikaru wept so hard he gagged, unable to get his breathing to settle down, even though he was fine. He’d lived, he’d survived, he was home and he was fine. He hadn’t even needed to make himself talk to Yashiro, but here he was, completely incapable of controlling himself. It was at least fifteen minutes until he managed to get anything approaching a hold on himself, and even then it was tenuous at best. Hikaru wrested a towel out of his wardrobe and buried his face in it, then finally tried to take Yashiro’s suggestion.

He crawled into bed and bawled a bit there for good measure, and then after who-knows how long finally managed to drop into the sleep of the completely exhausted.

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He had very little idea how long he slept for, but he woke eventually, a headache pounding behind his eyes and pressing insistently at his temples. He felt no less exhausted than he had before he fell asleep, but somewhat more settled. The seething stress was still there, but…lower. Less insistent. It felt somewhat less like it would boil up and bubble out of his skin at the slightest provocation. Instead, he just felt…drained. Oddly empty.

He heaved himself out from under the duvet, and staggered out to the bathroom. He negotiated his way around the various obstacles therein, eventually managing to turn the lock on the door, and then successfully navigating the issue of the toilet, and then finally the tap and its cold stream of water. He dunked his face under the spray of it, not particularly caring that he got his hair wet, and wiped at his face and head afterwards with the bath towel. He returned to his room, and sat on the floor, and felt somewhat better for it.

Hikaru sat purposelessly for several quiet minutes, eyes resting somewhere in the region of his knee and fixing there. He sat, and breathed, and after a while felt somewhat more like a human being.

Carefully, he retrieved the fan from where he’d left it, and moved to put it in front of the kamidana. He stood there, impulses warring. He wanted to light some incense and sit at the shrine, but that was motor coordination he didn’t think his hands could manage at the moment. His lighter was a bitch to work on the best of days, and even if he had matches, those might be even harder.

He sighed, and went to try anywhere, hoping he wouldn’t set fire to himself in the process.

In the end, judicious and careful manoeuvring of his thumb managed to ignite the lighter, but it took several frustrating tries to maintain the flame while also balancing a stick of incense precariously
between two fingers, and even more attempts to light the incense, and convey it successfully to the burner. All told it took a good twenty minutes to get the damn incense lit, but as soon as the smell hit he couldn’t bring himself to regret it.

He swayed back, staggered by the familiarity and the way a good part of his soul thrummed in response, choking up his throat with fresh and heart-twisting grief.

It was almost pleasant, was the thing. As always, it hurt like Sai had only just gone, like he was still reeling, like he was still looking for white robes when he turned around. But... it was clean. Clear. As long as he didn’t let himself sink into it too much, the anguish was sharp and awful in the same way as the shining edge of a blade, and so much less complicated than the thorny mire of stress and exhaustion he’d found himself in.

Hikaru supposed that was as good a sign as any that he really needed a break. His literally crippling soul-wounds were less unpleasant than the accumulated muck of the last few weeks.

He stared at the kamidana, and didn’t know what to say. I survived? I nearly died, but I didn’t? I was almost possessed, but I wasn’t in the end? I broke a demon that was even older than you? I saw spirits die? I’m going to have to deal with the damage to my hands for the rest of my life?

...I survived the demon, but I’m dying anyway?

His breath hitched, and he shook, and then apparently he wasn’t done crying yet after all.

The incense had burned out by the time he stopped, this time, but the scent of it lingered. It helped, in its way. The spark in the shrine remained, as quiescent and unaware as ever.

“…ugh.” Hikaru sighed, after a while, wiping his face with his sleeve again. He wondered how puffy his eyes were now, with the salt burning at his eyelids and scouring his cheeks yet again. “Fucking hell.” He expressed to himself, and then rose to walk over and collapse on his bed.

He had no idea what to do with himself.

After a while, it occurred to Hikaru that his phone was probably around somewhere. He got up and looked around for it, eventually finding it in plain sight on his bedside table, which for some reason he’d neglected to check in the first place. He tapped at the power button, but it seemed to be out of charge. He shrugged, and plugged it in, and left it on his bedside table where he’d found it.

He looked around his room, wondering if there was anything else he should be doing. Naturally, his eyes lingered on the goban, but it wasn’t as though he could meaningfully interact with it for a while. He shook his head, and for lack of anything better to do, laid back in bed and reached out with his energy to feel the house wards.

They didn’t feel as strong as he remembered. He wasn’t sure whether that was because he was stronger, the wards actually were weaker, or because he’d seen what happened to the wards on the shine. He felt at them dubiously, and wondered if a few offerings at the house shrine would brighten them up a bit. That, in turn, reminded him that he really needed to be particularly devout at the house shrine for a while. Inari had, quite literally, directly saved his life. There probably weren’t many people who could say that they’d been saved through direct divine intervention. It was quite a thought.

Hikaru sighed, and reached out further, and further, finding a couple of fairly weak spirits that felt like Inari-foxes, who twisted away from his energy with alarmed sparks of something-powerful-reaches. He didn’t find any spirits he recognised.
Hesitantly, he moved the reach around. Directed it in the direction of his grandfather, the shrine, Utagawashi…and, presumably, Kaminaga.

Something felt odd in the ambient energy, as his reach extended. As though something was spilling, churning, exhaling sourness into the air. For a moment, he felt a jolt of pure, instinct-level fear – but it wasn’t demonic. It was utterly different. The low-level energy he felt his way through was stained with pain, as though someone had dropped hurt like ink into water somewhere up-stream, and it had filtered down as it flowed. Dilute, but still evident. Pain, said the spirit-layer, like a ripple from a stone. Something suffers.

The further he reached, the stronger the feeling became, until it fed back through into his own energy like a stain. The eddies of someone else’s agony broke on him, vague and indistinct, with a choking edge of horror and shame.

Hikaru shuddered, and pulled away. He’d felt enough.

His awareness returned to his surroundings in an odd shift of attention. He had so much energy now, and so much reach, that the sensory feedback from it seemed to block out the actual sensations from his body, though only when he was actively reaching. He cleared his throat and blinked rapidly, finding that he’d apparently not been blinking while he investigated the surrounding area.

He became uncomfortably aware of Yashiro’s presence downstairs. A distinctive soul, like Touya, and very easy to notice.

Hikaru shifted on the bed, and checked the time. There was still probably hours to go until dinner. He’d slept quite a long time, but he’d arrived home in the morning, so it wasn’t that late. He sighed, and pulled himself upright, rubbing his face lethargically on his sleeve. His cheeks felt raw and sore from all the salt, and the edges of his eyes ached even more caustically. He offered an unhappy grumble to the empty room, and then staggered out of the bedroom door.

Yashiro’s soul flickered a bit at the sound of footsteps on the stairs, and Hikaru watched it as he descended. He wandered reluctantly into the sitting room, where Yashiro was sat with his laptop, and offered a vague noise of greeting.

The boy looked over at him critically. “...Did you sleep?” He asked, tilting his head. “You still look exhausted.”


“I was reading kifu for a bit, but now I’m reading manga.” He indicated his screen, where indeed there was what looked like a manga page. Hikaru blinked.

“On the computer?” He asked, utterly confused. “You can do that?”

Yashiro rolled his eyes. “You don’t get on the internet much, do you?”

“I look at Go stuff.” He protested.

“Exactly.”

Hikaru looked at him. Yashiro, very calmly, looked back.

Hikaru shifted on the sofa, and fell into an uncomfortable silence wherein he experienced both an
intense need to say something and an intense desire not to. He struggled wordlessly for several expectant moments until Yashiro finally took pity on him.

“Are you feeling any better now?”

He shuffled again. “Yeah. I mean…yeah, I guess.”

Yashiro inspected him for several seconds, and nodded. “I should maybe put my laptop upstairs.” He suggested, leadingly.

“…Yeah.” Hikaru agreed, and stood from the sofa, making his way awkwardly back towards the stairs. Yashiro shut his laptop, unplugged it, and followed.

He took a seat on the floor, not far from the goban, as though it might offer some moral support. Yashiro entered and shut the door behind him, setting his things down neatly in a corner. He took his time about it, arranging all the stuff so it looked immaculate, and seemed to be in no hurry to talk, so Hikaru gathered his courage and just…did it himself. Just to get it over with.

“You can ask things now.” He said, abruptly, forcing the words out in a brief moment of willpower. “You know, if you want.”

Yashiro made a thoughtful noise, still tidying his stuff, but sat down after a few seconds, back against the wall. He tended to look odd, sitting down like that. He was tall with particularly gangly limbs, and his legs always looked unnaturally long when he sat on the floor. “Yeah?” He expressed, amiably, as though he didn’t much care either way. He did, though. It was all over him. Outwardly he just seemed to be wearing his near-permanent serious-face, but the conflict between wanting-to-know and concern was abundantly obvious on his soul.

Hikaru stared at him confusedly, and made a face. “Yeah.” He echoed, since the other boy seemed to be waiting for some form of confirmation.

He brought a hand up to itch at an eye, and after a moment, fixed a look at Hikaru that was far more serious than his usual perma-face. “I can wait, you know.” He said, plainly. “If you don’t want to talk about it, it’s okay.” Hikaru’s head drew back at the words, in a sort of reflexive recoiling. It didn’t seem to go unnoticed.

“…But you want to ask things.” Hikaru pointed out, stupidly. He blinked quickly, trying to figure out what Yashiro’s angle was, but…

“Yeah, but you’ve been through some nasty shit.” Yashiro said sensibly. “I do have things I want to ask, but I figure I know more than most people already. I can wait.”

Hikaru flinched back in another almost-recoil, bizarrely flustered by the words. “That’s…” He started, and stopped. That’s not what you’re supposed to say, he almost said, but that barely even made sense to him. “That’s…not…” He shook his head, oddly frustrated and distinctly off-balance. He’d expected resistance, and found none, and now… “Just – ask your questions. It’s fine.” He insisted. Get it over with, he repeated to himself.

Yashiro observed him for several more frustrating moments, and nodded. “Alright.” He said, straightening slowly. “First thing, then. Did you know that guy was going to come after you, when you were on the phone to me?”

That…wasn’t a question he’d been expecting, somehow. Hikaru blinked rapidly, and set his shoulders rigidly. “I mean, I was pretty sure he’d come after me eventually?” He hedged, in a reflexive dodge of the real question being asked. Yashiro didn’t react outwardly to the vague
mistruth aside from a very slight shift in his expression, but...there was an obvious shade of
disappointment, to be felt by spiritual means. Hikaru winced at it, all the painful prickling guilt
surging up again, and exhaled gustily. “...Yeah, I knew.” He admitted, to the real question: did you
lie when you said nothing was going to happen? Did you know he was going to come after you that
night, when you made me wait?

Yashiro’s expression tightened, a little, and the breath that escaped him was almost a hiss. “That was
a shitty thing to do, Shindou. Making me wait to get the police involved.” He informed him, directly.
He wasn’t angry, was the thing. Wasn’t even annoyed. He was just sort of...unhappy, disappointed,
and a bit hurt. It twisted in him.

This was why Hikaru didn’t like telling the truth.

“...Yeah.” Hikaru agreed, offering no defence. If he’d died, Yashiro would have been in the
spectacularly shitty position of someone who could have got the police involved, but hadn’t. It
probably wouldn’t have helped. But he didn’t know that.

“Why the hell did you leave the house then, if you knew he was coming after you? Why didn’t you
get help?” This time, the frustration actually made its way into his voice, his expression. It rather
twisted the knife in Hikaru’s gut. “I don’t get that at all.”

Hikaru bit back the first three instinctive half-truths that tried to bubble out of him, swallowing them
down with considerable difficulty. How to answer this that was true? “A lot of people would have
died if I didn’t go out. Like, a lot.” If he’d called the police, it would have been them, to start with.
The demon would have clawed its way through their unprotected souls and murdered a path through
however many other people it needed to, to get to Hikaru. And if he hadn’t, and had just left the
city....Utagawashi would be dead. All of the foxes, too. And who knows who else.

Yashiro visibly processed that, a heavy scowl furrowing his brow. He always looked so angry when
he was thinking particularly hard. “...He was threatening other people? ...Did you agree to go out
and meet him?”

“No, he was just going to come for me whatever I did, and I wasn’t going to stay home for that.”
Hikaru exhaled, fighting back the reflex to run his fingers through his hair, because his hands were
out of commission. “I...look, I can tell you something, but you can’t tell anyone else about it.”

He looked up, at that. “If it’s something that could get you killed, I’ll tell whoever I like.” He
informed, without an ounce of guile or regret.

Hikaru flinched, and shook his head. “It’s not. It’s just...I had people helping me. With Kaminaga.
Not just Utagawashi. They were all at the shrine. That’s why I went there.”

Yashiro straightened, surprise more evident on his soul than his face. “So the priest guy was there?”
He demanded, after a moment, and then belatedly added “How many people?”

Hikaru stared down at his mangled hands. “Does it matter? We won. I’m alive. It’s fine now.”

“...If you ‘won’, ” Yashiro said, and when Hikaru looked up, the boy’s eyes were very sharp. “How
the hell did Kaminaga get away?”

“Uh.” Hikaru said, eloquently. He tried to say no one chased him, or they were more worried about
me, but it didn’t come out.

Yashiro stared with a sort of steadily dawning horror. “Shindou,” He uttered, slowly. “Do you know
where he is?”
He tried to say no, of course not. He failed. The silence was particularly telling.

“Holy shit.” Yashiro said, flatly. “Shindou, what the fuck.”

“It’s…not that bad.” He offered, weakly. “Like…it’s complicated, but he’s not dangerous anymore.”

“What, he magically saw the error of his ways?” His guest snapped, almost sarcastically. “He’s not dangerous when he killed a guy and nearly killed you?” he shook his head, as though vigorously trying to dislodge the notion.

“.….Yes?” Hikaru said, and then regretted it when Yashiro’s scowl deepened and he stood up, angling himself decisively towards the door. “Where are you going?” He demanded, alarmed, rising up himself.

The boy stared at him for a very short second. “I would be a really shitty friend if I made the mistake of keeping this crap to myself a second time.” He said, and walked to the door.

Hikaru panicked. He made an abortive lunge for Yashiro, the orthoses pulling oddly at his fingers as he tried to stretch them beyond their capacity to grab. “Yashiro-”

He didn’t even turn back to look at him. Just kept going. “No, Shindou, no. You don’t get to-“

“It wasn’t his fault!” Hikaru near-shouted at him, and then the over-straining of his fingers fed back in a shooting pain that quivered strangely at his fingertips and then speared up to his wrist. “Ow, fuck.”

Yashiro had reacted to the first part of that, and then turned around fully at the expression of pain. His expression transformed dramatically as he took in the sight of Hikaru cradling his right hand inwards to his chest. “Are you alright?” He asked, immediately, stepping forward to hover anxiously. “Did you fuck up your hand?”

“I dunno.” Hikaru said, worried, and carefully twitched his fingers like he was supposed to for his exercises. It felt fine, and worked fine, but… “It seems okay?”

That concluded, he was worried Yashiro would go for the door again, but the burst of righteous action seemed to have left him. The wind had gone from his sails, so to speak. The fight was no longer in him. “…How can you say it wasn’t his fault?” He asked, finally, tall enough that he loomed a bit, looking down at such short range. “And don’t just say ‘it’s complicated’.”

Hikaru shuffled backwards a little, since Yashiro no longer seemed like an imminent flight risk. “It is complicated, though.” He muttered, uncomfortably, and avoided Yashiro’s eyes.

The boy frowned at him, and then shoved him lightly back into the room, guiding him over to the bed. “Sit.” He instructed, and while rather perplexed, Hikaru obeyed. Yashiro stepped back and folded his arms, but didn’t sit down. “Explain it to me, then. Is this about the mental health thing? You said he was having a psychotic break?”

Hikaru made a face. “Sort of.”

“That sort of thing doesn’t really go away, Shindou.” Yashiro said, almost gently. “If he slipped on his meds once and killed someone, it could happen again.”

“That…was kind of a metaphor.” Hikaru said, instead of responding to what had actually been spoken. “The psychotic break thing.”
Yashiro tilted his head, looking unsurprised. “Well, I did know you weren’t telling me everything.” He responded, and waited.

Hikaru took a deep, shaky breath, slumping forwards. Thinking. “There was something wrong with him and now there isn’t. He’s not going to hurt anyone.” It was a weak explanation. He knew it was a weak explanation, and Yashiro obviously thought the same. His expectant expression didn’t change at all, as though he were waiting for the real reply. Which, well…he was.

Hikaru breathed.

Then: “There’s actually an explanation for everything,” He said, a little distantly, looking away. “But it’s not really believable.”

He couldn’t see what Yashiro’s face was doing, since he wasn’t looking at it. But the soul implied anticipation. Curiosity, even. “Yeah?” He prompted, like earlier. A sort of gentle, easy-going way to prod for a response. He even sat down again, in what seemed like a calculated move to put Hikaru at ease.

It didn’t really work. Hikaru’s pulse felt uncomfortably heavy, and the stress headache of earlier had resurrected itself, pressing painfully behind his temples. He exhaled, slowly, and then did it again. Yashiro remained patiently silent for a long time, probably at least a minute, while Hikaru attempted to conceptualise the idea of telling the actual truth.

Objectively, Yashiro might be the best person to actually tell. He didn’t live nearby, so couldn’t cause too much bother by pestering him. And, on top of that, he was weirdly good at not pestering unless it was really important. And Hikaru really didn’t want him telling the things he knew to the police. “If you get me put in an asylum, I’m going to get you haunted.” He said, feeling oddly breathless and slightly hysterical with nerves.

Yashiro offered him a look that was equal parts confusion and exasperation. “An asylum?” He repeated, incredulously. “It can’t be that unbelievable.”

Immediately, without giving himself any time to back out of it, Hikaru said “A demon did it.” The boy stared back at him incomprehendingly, expression not really changing, as though he were still waiting for words to emerge that weren’t complete nonsense.

“The killing.” Hikaru clarified. “A demon did it. It was….demonic possession. Kaminaga literally wasn’t in control of himself.” He resolutely ignored the way his blood seemed to all making a concerted effort to rip its way, screaming, out of his body.

Yashiro waited, blank-faced, for a few more seconds. When more words failed to emerge, he said, finally, “You’re right. That’s really not believable.”

Incongruently, Hikaru laughed. It was just…really ironic, that telling the truth was the best way for him to not be believed. Very ironic, and in a kind of shitty way. “Yeah, tell me about it.”

The other boy sat there, wholly perplexed, for a seriously long time. A whole gamut of emotions ran over his soul while he did, too complex and fleeting to properly identify. The thinking-scowl returned in full force, transforming his face into a dire glower that failed to make Hikaru feel threatened. Miraculously, there still wasn’t any anger. No annoyance or anything of the sort.

“That’s….probably the least believable lie you could choose?” He said, eventually, voice exceptionally confused, brows still heavily furrowed. “Like…if you wanted me not to tell people about Kaminaga, there’s got to be better lies?”
“Yeah, probably.” Hikaru agreed. His emotions had gone so far past ‘anxious’ that now he just felt sort of giddy, limbs trembling oddly and his foot tapping frenetically on the floor. He fought back the urge to giggle hysterically.

Yashiro stared. He waited, it seemed, for Hikaru to say something, but gave up after a while of that not happening. “Could you maybe elaborate on that bullshit?” He asked, almost hesitant. The affect of his soul was oddly flat, as though held tightly in place, but still quivering in quicksilver motions of intent and feeling.

Hikaru blinked. “Like how?”

“I don’t know. Just…explain?”

“Uh.” He offered, and then started producing disconnected bits of information. “Kaminaga’s demon wanted to possess me? So it was going to go through him and basically anyone else to do that. It got control of him and came after me?”

“And you went to a shrine.” Yashiro said. It wasn’t a question. There was an expression on his face that looked like a steady realisation, like he was thinking of things and finding they matched up. That Hikaru’s bullshit behaviour meshed quite well with this bullshit explanation. “And, you said that Utagawashi guy is a priest?”

Hikaru blinked at the reminder, and straightened. “Yeah, actually, if you ask him about this he’ll tell you the same thing.” He said, almost surprised at the realisation that, actually, there was another human person who’d back him up here.

“…Okay.” Yashiro stood up, and for a moment Hikaru was worried, but he just sort of paced in a brief agitated circle. He made no move towards the door. He stopped suddenly and looked straight back at Hikaru, soul coiling with apprehension and a quick spike of intent.

“So, in this story, what happened to the demon then? Is it gone?”

“…Yeah. We killed it.” He said, watching the other boy with a considering eye. Was he actually considering it? Without needing to be actively convinced?

“There was a thing on the news,” He announced abruptly, out of nowhere. “About how a lot of people in Tokyo said they saw a pillar of light near this part of the city.” The apprehension in him shifted more to something like panic, though it didn’t reach his face. His posture tightened, maybe, shoulders tensing and drawing inwards a little.

Hikaru stared. “That’s what happened when we killed it.” He explained, a sort of weird, wondering feeling poking through him like the stem of a plant through soil. “…Do you believe me?” He asked, unable to help the question.

“No.” Yashiro answered, immediately, but it sounded like a lie. And looked like one. His soul, by all appearances, was beginning a sincere and very chaotic bid to start freaking out. Possibly his worldview was in the process of being shattered.

“No,” Yashiro answered, immediately, but it sounded like a lie. And looked like one. His soul, by all appearances, was beginning a sincere and very chaotic bid to start freaking out. Possibly his worldview was in the process of being shattered.

“You do.” Hikaru observed, utterly stunned. “You actually believe this bullshit. If you tried to tell me this crap I wouldn’t believe it. Not for a second.”

“No, no, I absolutely don’t believe this shit. Of course I don’t. Of course not.” Yashiro flat-out lied, his Osaka-ben speech patterns especially pronounced in the emphatic denial. Then, apparently just to make himself less credible, he immediately followed that up with “Can I talk to that priest?”

He tilted his head at the boy who was trying very hard not to believe him, and failing. “…You know,
I was going to go visit him, soon.” He said, completely uncertain of what to do. He had not prepared for any of this – not for trying to tell someone, and certainly not for being believed. “We could go tomorrow, maybe? Then you could talk to him.”

“…yeah, okay.” Yashiro agreed, faintly, looking around until his eyes fixed on a particular point on the wall. “Shit, is this what the ofuda are about?”

“I thought you didn’t believe me?” Hikaru asked almost mockingly, restraining a desperate giggle. Everything had become, very suddenly, completely hilarious.

“I don’t.” He replied firmly.

“The ofuda put a sort of ward up around the house.” Hikaru volunteered without being prompted, oddly elated at the ability to just say it. “It stops most spirits from getting in.” Or he thought, anyway.

Yashiro very determinedly did not reply to that, so of course Hikaru had to up the game.

“Spirits are real. Ghosts are real. Kami are real.” He said, delightedly. “I’ve got weird spirit powers. I can feel people coming from half a mile away if I’m paying attention. I could definitely find you blindfolded, if you wanted to try that.”

The boy made no sound, but the expression on his face was beginning to look somewhat pitifully woebegone.

“You’ve had a spirit in your apartment. It was following me to protect me from the demon.” Hikaru elaborated, almost unable to help it. “That’s what I was doing when I suddenly started talking about that Honinbou game out loud.”

Yashiro looked like a kicked puppy. Albeit a very large, confused one. “Stop?” He asked, a little helplessly.

Hikaru nodded, because he was trying to be less of a dickhead now. “Yeah, okay.” He said agreeably, and held in all of the disbelieving remarks he wanted to make. Thwarted, they attempted to stutter out of him in shaky laughter, but he held that in too.

“I’ve got the kifu for the Kisei games you missed.” Yashiro offered, in a very blatant and desperate attempt to move the conversation elsewhere. “We could look at those?”

“Sounds good.” Hikaru said, stared at the boy for several increasingly strained seconds, and then burst into hysterical giggles. He couldn’t quite stop himself. After all the bullshit, and all the secrets, he’d just told Yashiro and he’d believed him. It was ridiculous. Completely ridiculous. He laughed so hard it went silent and soundless, wheezing slightly, chest starting to hurt from the force of it.

“What are you laughing at?” Yashiro asked crossly, folding his arms.

Hikaru took one look at him, managed to restrain the laughter for a second, and then burst into giggles again.

What the hell was he meant to do with something as ridiculous as this?
Detailed warnings notes: Hikaru has perfectly normal emotional responses but thinks some very uncomplimentary things about himself for having them. This involves a long-overdue stress meltdown.

Story notes: Hi all. As usual, the chapter ahead of this one is on tumblr. Less usual: it's 20k long. If any of you want to go there to read it, I would be delighted, because I've never had to work harder on a chapter of anything than I did on chapter 24. It was like pulling teeth, but I think it came out well.

News: Paper Cranes recently got a discord! It is composed of roughly 50 people at the moment, and has chats for Hikago and fanfiction in general in addition to Paper Cranes. If you feel like you're starving for Hikago content and are alone in a deserted fandom, you might enjoy it. We've had a lot of good delightful discussions.

Here is an invite link for the discord: https://discord.gg/ZeGECd

This will expire on 18th November 18 at 20.30 GMT-0, but there will be other invite links in the future. Lurkers welcome.

Also please, for the love of all that is holy, go to investigate the Paper Cranes page for links to new art and content I’ll likely be posting shortly. I’ve somehow attracted a bevy of artists and I practically died of joy from one in particular. The Paper Cranes page: https://tenspontaneite.tumblr.com/papercranes

Chapter notes: I always planned for Yashiro to be the first to find out. This wasn’t how I originally planned it, but having written the next chapter, I’m fairly convinced by it now. Something I'm very excited about is currently predicted for chapter 26. I'll be able to publish a 3k Paper Chains chapter from Akira's perspective shortly afterwards.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](https://tenspontaneite.tumblr.com) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!