Crimson

by TwoToTango

Summary

There is little Karma likes more than yanking Gakushu's chain. But when your opponent is brilliant, sexy, and not without his own impulses, it's only fair to expect being yanked a little yourself in return. Neither boy, however, can begin to guess how their entanglement will change them, or where that journey will take them.
Chapter 1

It wasn't long before the legend of the Crimson Beasts arose, muttered between classes and in the corners of hallways at Kunugigaoka High School. There were two of them, and although they were different, in some ways, they were deadly similar.

One had hair like blood, glittering gold eyes that cut like knives, and a smile that sent shivers down your spine. He was batshit crazy, brutally devious, and liked nothing more than fucking with whatever dimwit crossed his path. His physical beatdowns were bad; his verbal baiting and flayings were far, far worse. He had a few friends, but hated pretty much every single teacher who had the misfortune of seeing his name on the roster. It was a weird one, too – Karma Akabane.

Everything about the other should have made him seem soft in comparison; from his sunset hair to violet eyes to a charm so smooth, so sincere, his followers were legion. But he had a spine of titanium, with a prodigal mind and a competitive streak wide enough to cross oceans and continents. He was the best at everything, and once locked on target, he didn't care who he had to mow down, he was determined to succeed. The prince of the school, he had a pedigree to back it up – Gakushu Asano.

The two locked horns on a regular basis, constantly jostling for top spot across the board. In math, which was both of their best subjects, things got downright lethal. On the surface, it seemed like they had nothing in common – Gakushu was the perennial president, persistently perfect in every way. Karma was the deranged delinquent, apparently determined, even delighted, to cement his reputation as a certifiable psychopath.

But under that, they were cut from the same cloth; gifted winners who had a capacity for cruelty and a history nobody discussed, but everybody sensed. Apparently, shit had gone down their last year of junior high. It wasn't talked about, but from the look in their eyes whenever the subject came up, major didn't quite cover it.

As the years passed and they advanced through the ranks of high school, their legends grew, separate in some capacities, helplessly entangled in others. As much as they so obviously couldn't stand each other, for some reason, they just couldn't stay away from each other. Karma had rapidly discovered that few people were quite as interesting as Asano. He just had the best damn reactions, and always put up one hell of a fight – something he came to appreciate over time. Gakushu also had a perfectly good reason for this. Akabane was too much of a threat to let him out of sight – that fiasco with the last final of junior high had proved as much.

But most of the time, he enjoyed, even insisted, on the distance they cultivated. Even now, he was making his quick, quiet way to room 317. To be fair, though, Gakushu wasn't just avoiding Karma. Careful research had shown that this was the room of the Spiritual Enlightenment Club, which barely met its member minimum and whose attendance records were obviously forged right before the month end final tally. Most of the time, he thrived on his place in the spotlight, but Gakushu needed a few hours now and then in comfortable quiet. He had a slab of practice exams, thick enough to beat someone unconscious with, waiting in his bag, and a deserted club room only he knew about. It was perfect.

Of course, that meant Akabane, living, breathing bane of Gakushu's existence that he was, had to somehow smear his psychosis all over it. He'd closed the door behind him and was halfway to the
table when he saw the figure slouched by the window sill, the quick flash of silver a butterfly knife being hurriedly folded and hidden. He didn't even bother sighing in thwarted frustration before slamming his book bag down on the table.

Karma had slid his mask of innocence, creepily doll-blank at best, on when he'd heard the door opening. But it was just Gakushu, glaring at him like he was sludge splattered along the hem of his perfectly pressed school trousers. Karma couldn't help it – he almost sighed in appreciation. Because those eyes were anything but ordinary. They glittered like crystals; pretty, but deadly. It was that edge that drew people, and inevitably damaged some. But not Karma. No, his hide was tough enough to play with those edges, and come away grinning.

"What are you doing here?" Gakushu bit off, pulling back one of the chairs with a banshee scream. Neither flinched.

"Fucking around, same as you, rock star," he returned lightly, watching as Gakushu folded himself down and began unpacking his bag.

"I'm studying, asshole. What's your excuse?"

Karma just tipped his head. "Do I really need one?"

Deciding his time was better served in its original purpose, adamant that Karma's presence wouldn't veer him off-course, Gakushu set about the first test. Papers neatly spread, he tapped the end of his pencil against the curled metal binding of his notebook rhythmically, severe brows slightly knit as he worked through the problem he was tackling. It almost made Karma chuckle; it was just so damn textbook.

At least, he tried. Not five minutes after he wrote down the first answer, the first tiny chunk of eraser, whittled off by the butterfly knife that had reassembled itself in Karma's hand with a few articulate arcs of his wrist, landed on his paper. That started the slow artillery barrage, eraser bits bouncing off Gakushu's head, shoulder, and test, until they were scattered across the table and floor like gummy snow.

With grim determination, Gakushu ignored Karma and his immature nonsense. Finishing his first test, he set it aside and started on the second. The eraser salvo continued until, with a controlled jerk of motion reminiscent of a knife throw, Gakushu retaliated. Three inches from Karma's head, a pencil now quivered, buried past the shaved head in the cork board behind him. The student council president stared at him from the corner of his eye for a long moment before returning his attention to his exams.

Karma's eyes brightened like distant bomb blasts, slithering down off the window sill and stalking over. As he plopped down across the table in a study of nonchalant disinterest and reached for the finished exam, Gakushu's hand whipped out, slapping protectively over the test with a lifted brow.

"I'm just going to grade it for you," Karma said with an insouciant smile, internally skipping at the way Asano's eyes fractionally narrowed, his pencil stilling as he pinned those laser eyes on Karma.

"I don't need you to grade it."

That stiff, harsh tone always made Karma want to toy with him. For some reason, those burnished strands of hair drew his attention at the moment.

"Come on, Gakushu. It's efficient. You're not worried about me finding a mistake, are you?" He didn't miss the way a muscle slid along Asano's jaw at his bright tone, the only manifestation of the
way he was no doubt violently grinding his teeth. Finally, Gakushu slowly lifted his hand, reluctant until the very last moment, before returning his attention to his current test.

Lightly biting the tip of his tongue, Karma slid a red pen from Gakushu's pencil box, setting out on a raptor-like race to find the chinks in the perfect president's intellectual defense. Catching up to Asano's prodigious speed added spice to the challenge, but Karma fed on that sort of adversity.

And Gakushu was a hell of an adversary. Methodical and ruthless, his mind was his first, second, even third blade. The guy's brain was like a deadly encyclopedia, slicing the jugular of every question before moving on with determined, consistent lethality. That kind of meticulous destruction was endlessly intriguing to Karma – in a way, it reminded him of Koro-sensei.

When he couldn't find anything wrong, Karma doodled across the borders of the pages, some of them filthy, others outrageously stupid. Gakushu didn't understand his obsession with octopi, but if he drew another one, he'd retrieve the pencil he'd thrown at him and jab Karma in the eye with it. Anytime Karma marked an answer wrong, Gakushu demanded an explanation, some of which grated, because they were obvious. Others, though, tended to surprise him. When Karma explained how he'd come at the problem from a completely different direction, he was obviously employing a perspective that had to have been learned, as it didn't fall in line with his usual personality. How Gakushu wished Karma's intelligence was a fluke, a trick.

But he demonstrated repeatedly how, in reality, his mind was fluid and fast, fearless and fatal. He didn't allow himself to be bogged down by details, instead leaping over pitfalls like a jungle cat before closing in for the kill. When he had time, Karma liked to play and taunt, which both lulled his opponent and gave him a chance to think it through, to identify both his own weaknesses and the weaknesses of the question before committing to whatever scenario he faced. He was fiendishly observant, and when forced to do without the luxury of time, outrageously instinctive and brutal.

If he wasn't so damned irritating, Gakushu would be able to easily admit just how much he respected him.

As it stood, however, it was all Gakushu could do to resist the urge to snap his pencil in half, then jam the shards into Karma's jugular at that snarky little half smile that curled over his lips while waltzing through his explanation of the admittedly bizarre, but outlandishly effective, way of deconstructing a sentence in English. He shrugged at Asano's questions, muttered something that sounded like "Blondie," under his breath, and Asano was knocked nearly breathless by the tiniest flicker of soft affection and nostalgia that lit his hellfire eyes for the briefest second. Then he rolled his shoulders like a prize fighter, tipped his head to the side, and touched the tip of his tongue to the corner of his upper lip with a biting smile. Breathlessness bled into a grinding urge to drive his knuckles into Karma's glinting teeth.

But he restrained himself. Gakushu was quite good at it, actually – his years of constant battle with his father had honed his discipline to a scalpel-sharp edge. Upon their first clashes, he had condemned Karma Akabane as the most undisciplined twat to ever strut the face of the planet. Years of going head-to-head had taught him otherwise, however. And Asano was nothing if not a quick learner. Karma loved to play the insane delinquent, but the reality of it was, when he wanted something bad enough, he devoted himself. The guy had an incredible capacity for learning, growing, adapting, absorbing. Like any good supervillain, though, he applied all that absurd talent to the cause of evil. Gakushu didn't imagine himself as a hero opposing Karma's villainy – that was stupid and juvenile. More like a competing villain. One who was more mature and sophisticated, and didn't get his jollies from poking at the peons. Much more efficient to control them.
Karma would have laughed maniacally had he heard the 'mature and sophisticated' bit from Asano's thoughts. Luckily for Gakushu, he had yet to master telepathy. However, if he had, he would have giggled himself to tears. Because he saw something entirely different in his rival's dense armor and spear-straight spine – perfect little Gakushu Asano was trapped. Caged, imprisoned. By every shadow, ambition, and expectation he cast on himself, doubled by his father. For years, Karma had been filing away at the bars, thirsty for the sight of Gakushu breaking free and wreaking havoc. With Karma, preferably. He often thought dreamily about kicking in a few weakened bars, but he did actually possess restraint, no matter what Asano thought.

Although, admittedly, it had been weakening as of late. Like now. Why in God's name did Asano's hair look so soft? Karma had been that child, of course. When everyone else said don't poke it, he poked it. When his parents bothered to actually tell him not to do something, he expressly did it. He was self-aware enough to know that this was attention-seeking behavior thickly coated in his natural perverseness. But just as Gakushu looked so prickly and defensive as he beamed those unearthly eyes down at the exams like they offended him, practically radiating "Fuck off," Karma's mouth actually watered, his fingers twitching, then flexing on his pen. The plastic creaked in protest before a faint crack drew his attention.

Oh, how he loved winding up Gakushu with his superiority. It wasn't like Karma always got top score – more often than not, they toggled back and forth, that slightest burn of failure motivating the loser just that extra little bit enough to shove them back up. Until the next test, at least.

Usually, Asano had to work his way through the bloodlust before the motivation hit. He had vivid, detailed fantasies about killing Karma. Strangulation was often involved, because whenever the bastard opened his mouth, nothing good ever came out. Like now. Karma scrawled the final score across the last exam with a flourish, balancing the pen across the backs of his fingers as he smirked at Gakushu.

"Nicely done, Asano. Still have a little work to do in Science; those formulas tend to get away from you."

That sing-song teasing made the blood rush to Gakushu's cheekbones – he allowed the chemistry formulas to do no such thing. His burgeoning rage, however, was tamped a little by curiosity when Karma stood, skirting the edge of the table to ease his hip down next to Asano's elbow.

"Since I was such a nice fellow and graded those for you, I figure I deserve a reward."

His logic was ridiculous, his expression obnoxious. Reminding himself of such, Asano held his high ground, faintly rippling his brows as his eyelids lowered in dismissal.

"I didn't want you to grade the exams in the first place. Why would I reward you for bad behavior, like everyone else does?" It irritated Gakushu, how his voice sounded so stiff and prim. Because he knew, he knew, that nothing bated Karma's bull like the red flapping of rules.

"But imagine how much better you'll do on your tests now that I've helped you out. No small sacrifice on my part, I assure you." Perhaps his voice was more layered than usual; perhaps Gakushu was learning to read the insane intricacies that constructed the nut bag that was Karma Akabane.

"Are you asking me for something?"

Those stolen Nazi gold eyes flashed – Gakushu felt a reckless urge to engage in the looming fight. Running would be more logical, but something in Karma's face pushed him to stay and tug on the lashing tail of the panther.
"Maybe."

Looking back, Karma didn't ask. Then again, he'd promised nothing to Gakushu, and plenty to himself. Quick as a cobra, he snagged Gakushu's tie, yanking him up out of his chair and towards himself. It threw the golden child off just enough to have his palms crashing down to the table on either side of Karma's hips, just to keep from falling onto him. Not that Karma would have minded, but he had the president right where he wanted him. Practically nose to nose, those unearthly eyes blazing into his with shock and confusion. Oh, neurons were firing like comets in that admirable brain; Karma could practically see the lightning-fast connections. Before the last one quite clicked, however, he tugged a little, and pressed his lips to Gakushu's.

Karma was no stranger to intensity – he was a self-professed adrenaline-junkie, oft-accused psychopath, and a died-in-the-wool competitor. He'd assumed this would be fun; the reality of it was, a wave of heat rolled through him like a firestorm, scorching behind his eyes and leaving his brain reeling. Gakushu smelled of good soap and pencil shavings – he tasted like apples and sweet rice. And if he didn't gorge himself now, Karma thought with an almost giddy panic that he'd starve to death.

His knuckles had gone white around that strip of fabric; no way was he letting Gakushu slip through his fingers, not now. Greedy and desperate, the fingers of Karma's other hand speared into the hair he'd admired earlier, anchoring that pretty mouth against his to allow for thorough exploration. Just as he slid his tongue along the seam of Gakushu's lips, he became aware of a shiver coursing through the other boy. Before Karma had a chance to ponder whether or not he'd back off enough to check – he wasn't sure he was capable, or willing – Gakushu's hands clamped on his hips, pulling him closer as Asano's tongue swept into his mouth.

When the president had gone from shell-shocked to aggressively demonstrative, Karma had no idea. He also had no idea when Gakushu had nudged his knees apart and stepped between them, slicing the space between down to heated slivers all too easily done away with. Most puzzling, however, was how Karma had allowed himself to be sucked into this so completely. It was supposed to be yet another roll of the dice in a constantly evolving game – he'd gambled on dangerous retaliation once Gakushu regathered his wits about him, not devastating reciprocation. Maybe Asano Jr. had taken a page out of his dad's book and had mind-fucked Karma into aroused acquiescence. That had to be the only explanation as to why his head was solely focused on the press of their mouths.

Whenever he'd locked lips before, male or female, Karma had always felt a part of his brain drift, spinning and calculating like some deranged spider, even if he enjoyed it. Now, however, he was utterly, painfully present, aware of every shifting muscle and stuttering breath. Hungry and aching with a want he refused to admit scared him a little, Karma pressed his lips to Gakushu's pulse, hammering against his tongue in the fragile space below the sharp shelf of the other boy's jaw. As he nibbled and sucked, Karma was rewarded with a gasp he could almost taste, and a blooming mark on tender skin that appealed to the monster in him. Gakushu was his – his competitor, his rival, his equal. His. And now, he was branded as such.

Rattled by the press of Karma's mouth against his throat, Gakushu slid his hand up that strong, sleek back, bringing their lips back together as his palm trailed over muscle and bone. He knew, intimately, what drive felt like. But this push to taste Karma, to have Karma, was a curling flame to Gakushu's nerves. His liaisons were usually accomplished with control, and a sense of style. Both of which had been flung out the window like fucking Frisbees once he'd gotten over the mind-blowing shock of Karma's mouth against his. Gakushu still wasn't quite sure why he'd gone forward instead of pushed back, but at the moment, he couldn't bring himself to care. That incredibly novel thought was quickly forgotten, however, under the sudden desire to sink his teeth
slowly into Karma's earlobe. The jolt that raced through that deceptively powerful frame was like
tasting lightning, the tiny, restless sound that jerked from Karma like breathing wine.

If someone had told him an hour ago what would be happening now, Gakushu would have
laughed, then bloodlessly destroyed their hopes and future. He hadn't intended this; he never would
have intended this. But here he stood, kissing the brains out of Karma Akabane. And enjoying
every filthy second.

Karma was all heat and angles, the press of lean muscle and the faintest scent of sandalwood and
strawberry milk. That clever tongue was wiping out entire swatches of Gakushu's brain, a battle of
wills underscoring every movement and touch. If he hadn't been kissing Karma like his life
depended on it, Gakushu would have smiled – they were nothing if not consistent in their
competition.

Karma had absolutely no interest in reality at the moment; so, of course, it had to insert itself like
the asshole it was. Instincts sharpened by a classroom he missed to this day like a lost limb keyed
into the sounds of footsteps outside the completely unbarred door. Faintly, he could hear voices on
the other side. First, indignation at the door being closed still, as this was likely their club room.
Then, dismayed horror when someone remembered that the president himself had asked for its use
that afternoon, followed swiftly by the patter of retreat.

Gakushu had heard them too, and yanked away from Karma like his skin was radioactive. The
disappointment was poignant. Oh, he could have kept that up for another decade or so, with the
promise of delicious escalation enough to have him a little dizzy. That, and it would have been
quite fun to see students' reactions at seeing their precious president this way. Cheeks flushed and
eyes bright, breathing like he'd raced up a mountain, desperate not to be late for the bell. Staring at
Karma like he wasn't sure whether he wanted to shoot him or fuck him.

He had a preference of which, of course, but Karma was quite busy reveling in the blemish he'd
worked into Gakushu's pale skin. In fact, he nearly licked his lips, eager to do it all over again. It
was a shame that the president didn't share his sentiment.

Emotions, too fast to really catalogue, flickered in Gakushu's twilight eyes. His fingers twitched
once before curling into fists. Suddenly, Karma scented danger. It wasn't entirely unwelcome, but
what could have raised Asano's bloodlust so savagely, so quickly? After all, they had avoided
discovery.

He chose, however, not to elaborate. Instead, Gakushu deliberately packed away his things,
fighting not to shiver under Karma's lazy, silent perusal. He remained slouched on the table, almost
obscenely displayed. It was all Gakushu could do to keep his eyes on the innocent papers and
pencils, away from the slope of strong shoulders or the invitingly sexy splay of long, long legs.

Charged moments of silence ticked past.

Finally, Gakushu hefted his bag, sliding the strap onto his shoulder and turning towards the door
with determined intent. It was only once his fingers grazed the cool metal of the knob that Karma
spoke.

"My win."

Gakushu felt the flush of temper resurge. He refused to acknowledge that it could be
embarrassment. Because he was adamant that he had nothing to be embarrassed about. Giving
himself a moment to restrain his face and his impulse, Gakushu finally turned, meeting Karma's
mocking eyes.
"You sure? Felt like final point went to me." With that, he smoothly opened the door, vindicated by the sharpening of his opponent's eyes and the stiffening of his mouth. Just because he knew how soft and clever that particular mouth could be didn't mean anything. None of it meant anything. A whim easily forgotten, too unimportant to ever repeat.

Still back in the club room, Karma allowed himself a frown. He could admit that the whole kiss thing had gotten a little away from him. Next time, though, he'd be ready. Karma was nothing if not flexible. It was arguably his greatest attribute – to take in a situation, and adjust as called for. And this situation with Gakushu called for a greater presence of mind than any sexual interest of his had ever needed. Because there would be a next time. He'd gladly burn the school to the ground if that got Gakushu's mouth back on his. On any part of him, really, but the lingering taste of his rival was already sinking into his blood and his brain, and Karma was ready for another hit.

Of course, in his rush to get the hell out of Dodge, Gakushu had neglected himself. His normally neat hair and utterly tidy clothes were appealingly mussed from Karma's hands. And then there was that purple flower unfurling its petals over his pulse. Perhaps if he'd flipped up his collar, it could have been passed off as a fashionable fad. As it was, however, the whispers would move far and fast. Nothing like a good scandal to get the juices flowing, Karma thought with a smirk as he hopped off the table and strolled out into the hall, heading in the opposite direction of Gakushu's earlier determined march.

This was going to be fun.

Chapter End Notes

From the first moment we met Gakushu in AssClass, I was thrilled. No one brings out the most in someone like a rival, and as Karma was my favorite character pretty much from the get-go, I was so excited to see what this collision course they were on would lead to. It didn’t take long for fanworks to introduce me to the one ship I’m really invested in from the show.

There are a few I like, but there’s nothing quite like the mayhem and amazing sex that a relationship between these two would inevitably bring. I like too that being together wouldn’t really tame either of them, just make them somehow... better, without dulling their edges. Because that, to me, is some of the most compelling things about these two.

I have quite a lot planned, both from their high school days and onward. As this is a fun little exercise, it might not get much attention. But NDK always gets me inspired, and a binge re-watch reminded me of just how much I love these two morons. Enough to get this little boat launched.

*Edit – A reader pointed out that I veered a little too close to another Gakushu/Karma fic that, incidentally, I quite like. After pondering about it for a while, I reworked the first chapter, and made some tweaks to the second. Don't worry, the yummy bits are the same.

Hope you like it!

Love, Tango
Over the next week, the rumor mill churned at a downright alarming rate. Girls started eyeing each other suspiciously – occasionally, things got blatantly vicious. Karma nearly peed himself laughing when he watched one territorial display devolve into an honest-to-God catfight. With scratching nails and hair-pulling and the whole nine yards. And still, the culprit had yet to be rooted out.

The subject of all this mayhem drew even more reluctant admiration and resigned hatred from the rest of the guys at school than usual. Because honestly – just how popular could the bastard get? Someone had laid a hickey the size of a five-yen coin on Gakushu Asano, in obnoxiously plain sight right next to his voice box. Since he wasn't in an acknowledged relationship at the moment, this particular marking had whipped a large portion of the female population into the sort of frenzy that promised bloodshed.

As Karma strolled down the hall, passing pockets of whispering girls, which sounded distinctly like the hissing that emanated from snake dens, he struggled against the smug smile that wanted to spread across his face. Oh, if only those backbiting, power-mongering hussies knew that the target of their vitriol strolled by at that very moment. That he knew Gakushu better than any of them could ever hope to, and he'd only just begun to work his way through the labyrinthine expanses of the president's mind.

Speaking of, he thought, the gleeful shine to his eyes dimming a little. Gakushu had treated Karma like a leper since their encounter in the abandoned club room. Never anything as obvious as a direct retreat, but the guy had an incredible ability to shield himself with bodies or distance with such subtlety that Karma almost didn't notice what he was doing before he was irrevocably out of reach. Almost.

As if Karma had attacked him. Well, he sort of had, but he didn't feel bad about it. Not when Gakushu had responded like they'd suddenly become magnetized. Five more minutes, and it would have evolved to a lot more than kissing, both parties wildly willing. But this whole bobbing and weaving thing was starting to piss him off, Karma thought as he ran his tongue contemplatively over his teeth. He stopped at the doorway to class 2-A, eyeing Gakushu in the midst of his court. Propping a shoulder against the doorway, he angled his head, keeping his hands negligently in his pockets, watching the way Gakushu would track his eyes from one courtier eager for his attention to the next with the kind of controlled deliberation that sent tiny shivers down Karma's spine.

He was testing them, holding them all at arm's length, daring them to impress him. God, it was beautiful watching him work, Karma mused with a suppressed sigh. Then he flashed a smile at one – it was as brief and bright as a comet, and even from across the room, Karma could feel the shockwaves of it. A compelling, even drugging combination of impossible distance and tempting encouragement; it was the kind of behavior modification that Gakushu had no doubt learned at dear old dad's knee, keeping his masses, which at this point accounted for pretty much the entire school, easily within his control. He was so disturbingly perfect.

Then he turned his head a little, and there it was. That damning bruise, marring his throat like Karma's stamp, an ink-stain of secret passion. He had to swallow against the way his mouth suddenly watered at the sight – then, their eyes met.

Gold and violet locked, ancient colors of prosperity and power suddenly tangled in a challenge both
refused to bow to. This was Gakushu's home ground; he'd surrender it to no one, least of all Karma. Whereas Karma was growing more adamant by the second that the president would have to own up to what was growing between them – if Gakushu didn't want it, he'd have to cut it out like a cancer. Well, at least he could try. Karma was a little surprised to realize that it'd have to get brutally, tragically bloody for him to back down at this point. Pride, he distantly wondered, or something more?

Karma could sense people at his back; no doubt classmates of Gakushu's that were too scared of him to muscle their way past. His satellites hadn't yet noticed their king's attention was elsewhere yet, the moment burgeoning between them still largely private. Fine. Karma didn't mind keeping this particular battle to themselves for now.

Gakushu's brow faintly lifted; the corner of Karma's mouth barely kicked up.

Excellent – challenge accepted.

Karma pivoted away, not straightening until he faced away from Gakushu, flashing a little crazy in his eyes with a jerk of his brows at the three white-faced students who'd let him bar them from their classroom with his mere presence.

They startled like deer at his eye contact, bolting into the room once he was clear of the doorway to the relative safety of their leader. Rolling his shoulders, Karma resisted the urge to snigger on his way back to class. He was so focused on Gakushu that he didn't notice the slightly hollow, frantic sensation unfurling in his gut until he was busy enough tormenting his math teacher for it to fade into strangled silence again.

Karma had discovered room 317 months ago – he knew the movements and working of this school the way the instinctive brain knew how blood flowed and neurons fired. Now that it had turned into the unofficial battleground between him and Gakushu, he couldn't wait to get back there. The evil smile that moved across Karma's face as he glanced down at his phone on the way to room 317 had a passing student shuddering in instinctive terror, the ingrained fear of prey at a predator baring its teeth.

Karma made his way back there with a swift stride, hoping to throw Gakushu off by claiming the high ground. Instead, they ended up arriving at exactly the same time, stopping abruptly and staring at each other in consternation outside the empty room. Finally, the president cleared his throat, looking determined and untouchable. Karma was ready to change that.

"I have more practice tests to complete. You're welcome to find somewhere else to waste time."

"But I like it here. After you," Karma said silkily, politely gesturing for Asano to precede him. Gakushu was immediately put on the alert – Akabane didn't have manners unless he intended to choke you with them. Asano struggled against the urge to twitch under his idle, yet oddly intense, scrutiny, laying out the exams and his pencil with calm grace. Meanwhile, Karma painted his face with a snotty smirk, sauntering over to stand by the table, hip cocked like he was ready to draw a cowboy's pistol. Instead of commenting, Gakushu seated himself, twirling his pencil around his thumb as he met, and held, Karma's gaze.

For some reason, that stare had his muscles twitching, his skin quivering a little in angry, eager anticipation. Instead of plopping down in a mirror image of Asano, Karma twirled his chair around, straddling it and folding his arms along the back, eyeing his target with heated interest as Gakushu finally dropped his gaze to the test in front of him. It looked to be on Japanese, Karma's least favorite subject. So he dismissed it, and focused on the boy across the table. Just taking in the
details nearly had him worked up enough to gnaw metal – Gakushu's hair, shoulders, and hands. The glint of his belt buckle and jacket buttons. The peek of his wrists at the stark cuffs of his jacket and the perfect frame of his collar to the soft, sullied sweetness of his throat. But it was the fragile brush of dark lashes against the delicate skin under Gakushu's pretty, spooky eyes that was the last straw.

Lunging to his feet, Karma planted a palm on the table and vaulted over, landing neatly next to the president. Revved and battling the lust flooding his system at the fresh, warm scent of Gakushu curling in his nose, Karma was nonetheless impressed when Asano sprang to his feet once Karma began to move, his chair crashing to the floor with a sharp, hollow thud. As much as he loved taking people by surprise, it was such a rush when Karma couldn't take someone by surprise. Good reflexes were as much a turn-on as they were a foundation for Karma's elusive and rarely-granted respect.

They stood, straight and tensed like dogs about to fight, at exactly the same height – even the centimeters they've gained over the last few years had been doled out evenly between the two. So when Karma fist his hands around the lapels of Gakushu's uniform jacket, he couldn't loom over him or drag him around as he was accustomed to. If anything, Karma was the slightest bit leaner than Gakushu's clean, perfected strength, so manhandling him would likely end in a broken nose or rib. Karma, however – in a move that would surprise absolutely no one – didn't care.

"What are you doing?" Asano snarled, somehow managing to convey disdain, boredom, and fury all in four little words. Karma couldn't help but smile wickedly.

"I'm tired of dancing around. I've wanted another taste of you since that first bite." So he took it, swooping his mouth down to Gakushu's, the contact all clashing teeth and bruising lips. It was glorious, and Karma couldn't help the weak groan echoing from his throat at just how good it felt.

The overwhelming heat and want of Gakushu, silencing all the writhing corners of Karma's tireless mind.

Asano, however, was not so easily taken under. Yes, his brain melted under the hot press of Karma's lips. But still fresh and fervent in his memory was the last few days of dodging confessions and demands, more females than he cared to count driven to a hormone-induced frenzy by Karma's charming little hickey. The bastard had made his school days hell with that little maneuver, and his nights even worse with memories of the last time they'd clashed in the club room. The number of times he'd jerked off during his morning shower to the thought of Karma's mouth on his neck was starting to concern him.

Gakushu had told himself that he couldn't afford to start an all-out war with Karma – no one could compete with him like Akabane, not even the Virtuosos. Yet while he had absolutely no compunction about lying to others, Asano tried extremely hard to never lie to himself. And the last thing he'd wanted when strolling into this spare little room ahead of Karma had been someone of equal skill grading his tests. That truth had panic blooming through his system like ink in water, and his body moved on pure defensive instinct. Because he had to protect himself from Karma; not just the way he could fight, but the way he felt, the way he thought and moved. The way he kissed.

With the speed and accuracy of a cobra, Gakushu snagged Karma's tie and insinuated his limbs in such a way to send them both tumbling to the ground, locking Karma beneath him neatly and rendering him immobile. Even as the aftershocks of the kiss still thrummed through him, Gakushu locked his jaw, glaring down into those wide hellfire eyes.

Karma gazed back, trying to rein himself under control. Because that pin had been a thing of beauty, and he couldn't move his hands wonderingly up Gakushu's arms and into his hair like he
wanted to. That hadn't been the maneuver of an assassin; that had been perfect martial arts expertise, which, as a combat assassin, Karma found endlessly thrilling. It had been entirely too long since he'd gone up against someone of this caliber. And this was *Gakushu*. If he could have, he would have levered up to nip at his jaw.

"Enough," Asano eventually said with cool finality. Because it sounded like a challenge, Karma just quirked a brow. "I'm not going to play this game with you, Akabane."

"Really?" Karma chirped, and Gakushu struggled gamely past the instinct to gulp. "Seemed to me we were just getting started."

"I'm not interested," he threw back, Asano's voice as cold and flat as a plain of ice. Meanwhile, deep inside his head, his brain hissed, *Lie*. "This is juvenile," – *lie* – "I don't have time for this," – *lie* – "and besides, I'm straight."

"Lie, lie, lie."

Karma just laughed – obviously he found Gakushu to be as transparent as glass. Then, he arched, a slow roll of flesh and bone and muscle that ground them together. It was all Asano could do to keep his eyes from crossing at the decadent pressure shorting out the circuits in his brain. His imagination broke free like a wild horse, vividly painting this exact scene somewhere far more comfortable and with significantly less clothing. Only the vicious grind of his teeth kept Gakushu from panting at the thought of Karma, pale and naked and arching, beneath him.

"Sure. That why you're hard as an iron spike and keep looking at my mouth," Karma sneered, sarcasm thick as dark honey in his voice. Lust and fury tangled like lovers inside of Gakushu's brain, and he tightened his grip on Karma's wrists hard enough to grate bone against bone in warning.

"Will trumps instinct. Back off, Akabane." Only his eyes betrayed Asano, wild and wide with what was storming through him. His voice and body, however, remained utterly controlled. At least, until Karma's eyes narrowed and sharpened, burning suns threatening to sear straight through him. His hands curled around Gakushu's wrists in turn, hard enough to bruise. Then, he lifted his head a little, the curl to his lip revealing a sharp, white canine.

"Make me," he snarled. Then Karma threw his weight against him, and they collided like warring wolves. It was an ugly, bruising fight for dominance, the smack of joints and knuckles against flesh shoving the occasional grunt into the air. Otherwise, the boys made no noise, desire and anger bleeding into each other until red ate their vision and they weren't even sure what they were battling about.

Gakushu didn't know where Karma had learned to fight like this, but whoever his teacher had been, they'd done a superb job. *Of course*, he thought bitterly as Karma twisted and nearly got him in a hold. Of course he was a crazed genius at fighting too, nearly impossible to get a grip on and taking hits like a tank. Not to mention, he was *obnoxiously* fast.

Karma vaguely remembered a judo black belt, and maybe a few others in varying martial arts, in Gakushu's résumé. The guy could *fight*, and he felt his blood race at an entirely new level. In a way, Asano reminded him of Karasuma – polished, traditional lethality with zero chinks in the armor and blindingly fast hits that landed with the force of a train.

Eventually, the fight became its own reason; Gakushu forgot why he was so desperate to keep Karma away from him when he really wanted him close enough to taste. Insult and anger faded as at least a facet of Karma's desire was sated; instead of moving too fast for the rest of the world, his brain and body were fully absorbed, moving in sync with someone else. The brutal rabbit punches to his kidneys didn't even really hurt – not when he finally felt *real*. 
Their physical limitations were far beyond that of their peers, and outstripped those considered their superiors. But eventually, after it felt like they'd been going forever, even Karma and Gakushu had to admit they were running on fumes. They broke apart, staring at each other and panting for entirely different reasons than earlier. Karma's nose seeped blood; Gakushu would have a bruise to match his throat blooming around his left eye shortly. To be fair, it was from Akabane's knee, not his fist.

It was Karma who broke the dazed tension, laughing a little thickly from the blood he'd swallowed as he swiped at his dripping nose, rocking back on his heels in appreciation.

"Fuck, Gakushu. That was awesome."

Asano felt a smile twitch at the corner of his mouth before he managed to control it. However, instead of reveling in the strange, satisfied looseness permeating his pummeled muscles, Asano was rapidly remembering why they'd gone at each other in the first place. Yes, Karma was attractive, outrageously so. But this was so incredibly unwise. And Asano didn't do stupid things. He took great pains to avoid them. In fact, his dumbest maneuvers could be attributed solely to the sexy redhead gingerly touching the tip of his tongue to a cut on the corner of his lower lip.

"Jesus," Gakushu muttered in dismayed horror under his breath. Even knowing all of that, irrevocably and utterly, he still wanted Karma – the hollows of his collarbone, the erotic bow of his spine, the dangerous strength of his long legs. Just imagining them clamped around his waist nearly had Gakushu hard again. He had to get out of here, now. He didn't like to make mistakes, and he was about to make a colossal one if he didn't take a tactical retreat before hotter heads prevailed.

As he moved to snag his bag, Gakushu met Karma's eyes. And with as much grace as he could muster, he stoically shook his head, and walked out. It galled that, twice now, he'd been the one to retreat. But the risk of staying for that scrap of pride could cost entirely too much. This battle had come to a draw – he dared not consider the consequences of losing the war. And he feared that if he stayed, he might no longer care.

Karma was still riding on the high of the fight when Asano met his eyes, then left like a breath of wind. It had been the gaze of a prince, regal and distant, intensity banked under that damnable control. And it had Karma crashing back to reality more jarringly than actually punching through the atmosphere and returning to the surface of Earth from space. He'd taken a step in pursuit before a blip of a memory sounded in his head, stopping him in his tracks.

It wasn't the first time it had happened. Sometimes, snippets of Koro-sensei's voice played in Karma's mind, often at the oddest moments. He really only ever heard Karasuma during fights, such as the one he'd just tangled in. This was the first time, however, that he remembered a lesson so clearly from Professor Bitch.

"A really good assassin doesn't have to pursue her target; if she does it right, the target will come to her."

Slowly, Karma's eyes tracked to the door that Gakushu had disappeared through. With his slow customary smile and tilt of his head, he slipped his hands into his pockets, strolling out of the room, deep in thought. Come to him, huh? Now that would be a treat.

His lip stung, his nose throbbed, and he felt like he'd been run over by a truck. But Karma felt fucking fabulous at the prospect of Gakushu pursuing him, eager and honest. With the determination of a born strategist, Karma began to consider his options.
Because nothing between these goobers can be easy. This isn’t the first or last time they’ll tangle physically in a not sexy way. I kind of struggled with working my head around that fact initially, but if I’m going to be honest to the characters, especially Karma, it’s kind of unavoidable. These dummies fight, and not just with words.

Gakushu’s reluctance is another thing I had to sort of rationalize and work out, and hopefully avoided hitting the point of needlessly annoying. He’s too smart and careful to fling himself into something with Karma, who has “Complicated” written all over his shapely ass. He can’t control Karma worth shit, and control is very important to our lovely little president. He’s also a hormonal teenager with daddy issues and mountains of pressure. With all that in mind, I hope this stays true to both the character and the tension arc of the story.

Be patient, my thirsty pretties. I hope seductive Karma will be worth the wait.

*Edit – The initial premise veered a little too close to another story, so I tweaked a few details. All the fun stuff is the same.

Hope you like it!

Love, Tango
Chapter 3

Over the next week, several things happened.

The rumors died down.

Bruises healed.

Karma kept his distance.

And Gakushu began to go insane.

As the mark on his throat faded and no further developments on the relationship front manifested, the wild propriety over Asano sweeping through the school began to lose momentum. He was able to explain away his other new bruises with a fictitious rough bout during judo practice. Karma didn't visit his class, didn't text, didn't suddenly confront him in the library or any hallway – everything he was expecting, braced for a confrontation Karma never instigated. It should have been ideal; Gakushu should have been relieved.

Instead, Karma's absence seemed to take on a more uncomfortable weight than his presence. Maybe it was because of what had happened in room 317; now that he knew what Karma tasted like, what he sounded like when losing himself to passion, Gakushu was stained with that knowledge. So much so, it overlaid every glimpse of the red-headed psychopath, until Asano began to hunger for him. The only other thing he'd ever had that kind of appetite for was success.

Karma had insinuated himself into Gakushu's peripheral vision, a haunting driving him to distraction, but one he was reluctant to sever. And when he did see Akabane, it was never innocent. It should have been, but all Gakushu could see when he caught sight of Karma down the hallway was the way his perpetually loose tie drew attention to the smooth tendons of his throat – what would he taste like, Gakushu helplessly wondered. Watching him write something was torture, his eyes drawn to the beautiful articulation of Karma's lovely hands and imagining what it would be like to have those hands on him again. The sight of Karma walking, especially from behind, was a fresh hell Gakushu couldn't resist. Thank all that was holy they weren't in the same PE class, as Gakushu was positive it would be the unmaking of him.

He was losing his focus, his balance, and quite possibly his mind. Karma Akabane was an infection, and Gakushu was worried that, even given the choice, he wasn't sure he'd uproot such an infestation from his mind.

But none of it mattered – the most important thing was that Gakushu kept it under control, kept it invisible from everyone else. He had a reputation – no, an empire – to maintain, and getting distracted by the human train wreck that was Karma Akabane was not an option. His ability to hide what he felt was the only thing he was absolutely positive about at the moment.

Until Ren cornered him after a student council meeting, boxing him in with that tall, lanky frame and a deep, searching frown. Because it was so uncharacteristic of the cool-blooded, light-hearted secretary, Gakushu didn't fight back or push free, staring at Ren in undisguised shock.

"Is everything OK?"
Immediately, Gakushu bristled, then worked to regain control of his suddenly unmanageable temper.

"I'm perfectly fine," he promptly tossed back, surprised when Ren's dark eyes narrowed and his jaw hardened. His underling was being decidedly uncooperative. He vaguely wondered where all this gumption came from.

"Really? Because you don't look fine to me."

Gakushu just snorted, even as ants began to crawl up as his spine at being so closely inspected when he was less than his best.

"You have no basis for that kind of insult – my performance and school work have been flawless, as per usual."

Ren smirked, but the edge to it was largely unfamiliar.

"Of course. Yet imagine my surprise when the occasional muttered insult or cowardice goes unchecked by our fearless leader. Something's up."

Gakushu cursed virulently in his head at the lapse, but turned sanguine eyes to meet Ren's gaze. He chuckled with derisive sarcasm, even though it felt like he was about to choke.

"What is this, an intervention?"

"Less of a 'trying to save you from drugs and yourself' one, more of a 'what in the hell has you so twisted up you can hardly see straight' model. Either way, you've been acting damn weird, and I want to know why."

Gakushu angled his head, looking at Ren with slightly more considering eyes.

Sakikabara was both Gakushu's oldest friend and one of his most indispensable allies. He was also the only Virtuoso to survive Karma's reintroduction to the main student body with his ego intact, choosing to settle comfortably at third in his subjects of choice. Koyama, Seo, and Araki hadn't been nearly so tranquil about their falls from grace. They were still valuable assets, and responded when called on by their leader with reassuring alacrity. But they were just bitter enough that distance served better than proximity.

Ren, however, was different. Gakushu could call him a minion all he wanted – but the truth was he'd known Asano too long and well to be anything less than a genuine friend. No more apparent than when he was being ridiculously annoying, like now. Gakushu still wasn't sure how he felt about that kind of relationship, much more comfortable with the stark roles of leader and follower. But apparently, every line in his life was doomed to be smeared. First his father, then Karma, and now Ren. Did no one appreciate the sanctity of simplicity?

"I'm dealing with it," Gakushu finally said with brisk dismissal. Ren's brows lowered forbiddingly.

"That's not what I asked. I want to know what's going on; I already assumed you were dealing with it. Yet I'm inclined to question just how well, considering how you've been acting the last week or so."

Such disobedience made Gakushu's hackles lift. There was little he loathed more than being questioned. But his gut churned with the weight of distractions and doubts, things Gakushu had been certain he'd excised from his life and mind years ago. And yet here they were, rearing their ugly, bristling little heads. Perhaps this fiasco with Karma was giving him an ulcer.
"I've been dealing with a... temptation," Gakushu finally muttered, unsure how to confide in Ren without displaying weakness to a subordinate. He'd never been forced to walk this line before, and it was narrow enough to have him wobbling. He detested wobbling.

"Hmm. Does this temptation have anything to do with that hickey you were sporting last week?"

Part of Gakushu still fiercely regretted the arrogance that made him decline one girl's helpful offer of concealer last week. Yet even as it made his life hell, Gakushu had been bizarrely conflicted about the mark Karma had left on him, like some kind of brand. Irritated that he'd been sullied, and yet somehow... proud. Proprietary, even, of his body's manifestation of a claim he wasn't even sure he accepted.

"It does," he finally admitted, irritated enough to forgo the careful sidestepping that was his first and best defense. Ren nodded, slow and thoughtful.

"OK. And does this temptation have red hair and a completely unhinged mind?"

Gakushu's eyes narrowed in such a sudden, vicious way, Ren had to work to keep his spine straight – it instinctively wanted to curl, the expression was so like Asano Sr. at his most forbidding. After a moment of panicked indecision, he softened his stance and stepped back, rolling his eyes with a sigh that had Gakushu relaxing a little. It was like half-sheathing a drawn sword, but at least it wasn't glinting in his face.

"Come on, Asano. Do you really think I'm blind to the vibes you two have been tossing around like beach balls? If the chemistry got any more intense, you'd be a fire hazard. Give me a little credit."

Readjusting his bag strap, Gakushu just shrugged, the two of them heading out of the room shoulder to shoulder.

"Akabane and I... clashed a few times," Gakushu allowed. Ren just snorted.

"You guys have clashed in the past. I'm pretty sure it didn't involve making out." That askance twilight glare nearly had Ren changing the subject, but he held his ground. "So why change the choreography -- you two seemed to enjoy your dance the way it was."

"I didn't," Gakushu snapped. "I don't," he added on, a little desperately. "He's the one who cornered me."

Ren stuttered to a halt, shocked speechless. Gakushu, cornered? He'd just shown exactly how impossible that was. Even if you did catch him at a lull and physically backed him into a corner, Ren didn't know anyone more capable of getting himself out of it. And mentally? Asano had gone head to head with his dad, and hadn't allowed himself to be pinned in that conflict, either. Just what exactly was Karma capable of? Ren nearly shuddered at the thought.

"I dealt with him!" Gakushu barked, startling his secretary back into motion.

"Uh huh," Ren muttered. "I can tell. That's why you're dodging him like a girl after a one-night stand." The punch to his upper arm was by no means gentle or cajoling. Ren averted his face so Gakushu couldn't see the full glory of the curdling wince that pinched his face as he silently mouthed the "ow" that wanted to burst free. He barely resisted the urge to rub his arm -- it was definitely going to bruise.

"I'm not dodging him," he hissed. Then, his face turned thoughtful. "In fact, he's kept his distance from me."
Ren had known Gakushu long enough to know when he was trying to sound dismissive when he was, in fact, totally perplexed. Because he considered himself a love connoisseur, Sakakibara just smirked.

"Well, considering you 'dealt' with him, maybe he's just doing as you asked." Although, knowing Akabane, that was wildly unlikely. Obedience was as foreign to him as Sanskrit. "Oldest trick in the book, though. He's probably waiting for you to chase him."

"Then he's going to wait a long time, because I'd never stoop to pursuing anyone." Gakushu snarled under his breath. Not even him, he assured himself. Not even if I lose my mind.

Asano was certain that he'd timed it perfectly – later that evening, he strolled into the empty library, key in hand. Requesting the key had been a simple matter for the student council president. Hoping to get in some solid study time – blessedly alone – Gakushu stopped dead when he caught sight of a glinting, blood-red head bent over a notebook at the far end of the central, and perpetually packed, study table.

For a moment, he stood frozen, virulently filthy curses screaming through his head. How Karma had gotten into the locked library after hours was the least of his concerns. Choosing any other table would be a blatant show of avoidance, and Gakushu hadn't sunk that low. He'd die before letting Karma think he intimidated him – Asano refused to give ground. He couldn't be sure if it was simply a side-effect of his neurons being fried, or if he was just a glutton for Karma's punishments. Either way, he straightened his shoulders, coolly met the lion eyes that tracked up to meet his, the quirked brow making his guts clench and his blood warm. Without expression, he set his bag on the farthest end and opposite side of the table from Karma, sat down, and applied himself to his studies.

Or tried to.

This was… unprecedented. Studying was as easy as breathing for Gakushu - he'd been labeled a genius at this stuff since he was in diapers. He could, and had, successfully study in the most outrageous din or the most suffocating silence. With the pleasantly mild hum of the A/C, the occasional scrape of a turning page, and the soft scratch of pencil against paper, this should have been the ideal setting for some serious studying. Instead, Gakushu found himself tilting his head just enough to stare at Karma through the fall of his bangs, observing and cataloguing even as his common sense bellowed that this was a bad, bad idea.

Karma appeared to be elbows deep in Social Studies, making voluminous notes as he flipped through one of the six books that haloed his notebook. He'd abandoned his rebellious blazer over the back of his chair, leaving him in his white button-down and carelessly knotted tie. Gakushu's fingers itched to hook onto that knot, steadily pulling it undone, slipping it free from Akabane's collar, then folding it neatly and tucking it into the pocket of his blazer. Because that kind of slow deliberation could take Karma apart, and the idea alone had Gakushu's lips pressing together in a desperate kind of unconscious wanting.

Even as he thought it, Karma set down his pencil, leaned back in his chair, and undid his tie. Long, pale fingers tangled in black, silky fabric, the whisper of sound like the scream of a passing train in the breathless quiet of the deserted library. Black was, absolutely, Karma's color. It was striking against his coloring - sharp against his vibrant hair and eyes, dramatic against his white skin. Not to mention, Gakushu thought acidly, it was the color of his soul.

Since he seemed physically incapable of buttoning his shirt correctly, Karma's throat and the intriguing dip of his collar bone were now fully displayed. What next, Gakushu mused, a little
hysterical. Would he keep unbuttoning that linen shirt, soft from many washings and warmed from his body heat, and just take the thing off? He was a little dismayed when a part of his brain, not an insignificant percentage, thought Oh, god, please. Yes, take the fucking thing off. Gakushu's blood began to hammer against the pulse points in his wrists and neck.

Karma returned to his studies, raising a hand to swipe his silky hair back from his eyes, leaving his face vulnerable and stunning for a moment before his fringe fell back down again. His fingers dove through his hair, running from temple to crown - Gakushu was assaulted with the memory of what that skull felt like under his hands as he drove his tongue into Karma's soft, hot mouth.

Because the idea of being maneuvered by anyone, especially his rival/enemy, pissed him off so thoroughly he could all but taste the metallic tang of his anger on his tongue, Gakushu briefly entertained the fantasy of grabbing the skull he'd just been admiring and slamming Karma's face against the table. But distance and common sense - a commodity he was rapidly running out of - kept him planted in his chair, his pitiful offering of notes so far mocking him.

But he was stuck - he had the key, and so needed to be the last one out the door, responsibility all but cementing him to the chair. Until Karma decided that he'd had enough, Gakushu wasn't going anywhere. So, redoubling his efforts, he managed to hack out some of his easier assignments. Anything to keep his attention away from the curve of Karma's cheekbones or the way he could just make out the definition of Karma's triceps through his shirt. Maybe this was just some sort of brain fever, the ring of desperation sounding through his brain. Maybe Gakushu just needed to sweat this out, and then everything would go back to normal.

Finally, finally, Karma seemed to have had his fill. Standing, he stood and stretched, his shirt nearly coming untucked and Gakushu nearly moaning in response. Savagely clamping his teeth closed, Gakushu schooled himself, exceptionally aware of Karma strolling past him, books in hand. Casually, he closed his notebook, his pathetic attempt at notes the last thing he wanted Karma's fox eyes latching onto.

Standing and packing his bag, Gakushu glanced over in time to see Karma leap down from the top of the short book ladder, his feline grace and careless calm the sexiest thing Gakushu had ever seen. As he strolled back over to the table, their eyes met, and held. He imagined it felt similar to staring down the barrel of a gun, but Gakushu found that he… liked it. Electricity practically crackled, and Karma just smirked. He kept still, challenging and impervious; Karma's smirk deepened enough to show the white of teeth, and then he was past, rounding the table to grab his bag and jacket. Gakushu mentally condemned him a prick, but he was surprised by the note of affection lurking in his brain. Seriously? Where had that come from?

With his jacket slung over his shoulder, Karma made his leisurely way to the door, Gakushu not far behind. Even though the room still held a silence that would make any librarian beam, his mind raced, each thought tripping over the tail of another. Karma reached out for the doorknob, and before he'd decided whether or not he could live with this choice, Gakushu's left hand shot out, his palm slamming against the door over Karma's left shoulder with enough force to make the wood rattle and groan slightly.

Karma turned his head slowly, an eyebrow lifted in question, but his face otherwise arranged in amused lines. When the urge to break that amusement down into desire ricocheted through his brain, Gakushu finally relaxed against an oncoming tide he was tired of fighting against. About time he was goddamn honest with himself that this was a long time coming, and wasn't going anywhere any time soon. If he was going to be dragged kicking and screaming onto this roller coaster, then he might as well enjoy the ride.
Still planting his weight against the door, Gakushu reached out and traced a fingertip, light as breath, over the knife blade of Karma's jaw, gently tilting his sharp chin upwards. Even as satisfaction flooded Karma's eyes, they dilated, black engulfing pirate gold.

Well then. Decision made.

Oh, fuck.

Chapter End Notes

Oh, fuck, indeed, my friend. Here's a sweet little cliffhanger, a loving gift from me to all my darling readers. I've set a goal for myself to get a chapter out every month, alternating between Phoenix and Crimson. Which means, ideally, you'll see a new chap here every other month. Although, damn, where's the freakin' time? I've gotten a little overwhelmed by IRL stuff as of late, and a little fiction keeps me from jumping off the deep end, so here.

I didn't really intend it this way, but I decided that for this confrontation, when big decisions are made, they don't actually talk to each other yet. For two guys whose main weapons are words, Karma and Gakushu don't say a single thing to each other this chapter. That's not what I originally planned, but I could never get either of them to say anything that sounded right, so they didn't say anything at all. Don't worry, they'll have plenty to say next chapter.

Remember kiddos, I rated this story a certain way for a reason.

Hope you like it!

Love, Tango
"Finally made up your mind?" Karma murmured, a little surprised at how husky he sounded, how excitement and arousal and a shocking shiver of nerves thickened in his throat like cream.

"Finally realized there was never really any choice," Gakushu returned, tilting his head with an expression of consideration that had every muscle in Karma's body tightening like steel cables. The breath left his lungs in a rush when Gakushu crashed into him, caged him against the wall beside the door with his arms, pressed close and hot. Because now that he'd stopped faffing around and jumped into the deep end of the pool, he swore that Karma wasn't going anywhere.

"So what the hell are we going to do about it?"

Gakushu growled, close enough that Karma could make out the weave of fascinating color that made up his irises. The faintest shudder rolled up his spine as Karma passed his hands over Gakushu's ribs, sliding up under his jacket until they splayed over his shoulder blades, palms pressed to the sharp planes of bone. Dipping his head forward, he ran his teeth lightly down a straining tendon in Gakushu's throat. One golden brow lifted as he straightened, and Karma nearly laughed at the quiet way he cleared his throat.

"Interesting, but we're severely lacking."

Karma rocked his hips forward, the rub of fabric and heat ratcheting every nerve into overdrive.

"I don't find you lacking at all," he purred, delighting in the way Gakushu shifted his hands into his hair and pressed his lips to Karma's temple, choking back a strangled moan at the press of hot flesh. He hadn't known eyes could glow, that the flush of skin could engender a hunger in him like a starving man's. He hadn't realized that Karma was more than he'd ever wanted.

"In condoms and lube, you moron," he snarled, the edge to his tone pushing Karma to yank him closer, lungs tight and shallow with the wicked, freefalling joy of foolishness.

"In my bag," Karma panted, gliding his hands around again to push the jacket off Gakushu's beautifully defined shoulders. He was shocked enough by what Karma had said to allow for the scant distance needed to slip the coat off.

"Confident, are we?" Gakushu mused as his gray jacket fell to the ground with a crumpled whump, irony thick as honey in his voice. Finally, fisting his fingers in Gakushu's snowy shirt, Karma tugged him forward, pressing their lips together in a kiss that had the stitches of Karma's defenses sagging. Muscle pressed against muscle in a slow writhe, friction and fire nearly sending Karma's eyes rolling back into his head. Gakushu gradually drew back with a shuddering gasp, lowering his forehead against Karma's shoulder. Kissing Karma was like inhaling fire, the singe too sweet to realize the damage. And allowing himself to be overwhelmed by Karma was tantamount to surrender.

"More optimistic," Karma said with a soft, rusty laugh, dropping his head back until it thunked against the wall. And desperate, he could admit to himself as his eyes drifted closed. The last week had been a nightmare of unfulfilled desires, of resisting to take what he so desperately wanted. After a few moments of heavy breathing, they both straightened, eyes exactly level with each other.
locked like magnets.

"So we're doing this, then."

Karma lowered his chin, calculating the scenarios and risks. How this could play out – how it should play out. Decision made, he tipped his chin up.

"If you're up for it. Give me your best shot."

Gakushu's brows jerked up, soothing the tension that had started to twist Karma's stomach as soon as he'd made the offer. It… wasn't what he'd expected. Perhaps exactly what Karma had needed, although he'd never admit it.

"You… you don't have to. Not if you don't want to."

It was the first time Karma had ever heard that sort of uncertainty and vulnerability flicker in Gakushu's voice. It was somehow simultaneously reassuring and disconcerting.

"Aw, come on," Karma cajoled, knowing that the sing-song tone made Gakushu's temper tick without fail. "Don't punk out on me now." Sure enough, his words lit Asano's eyes like a potassium flame. Gakushu spun them, shoving Karma in a tumble of limbs onto the study table, planting his palms by Karma's shoulders on the wood as he loomed, crystalline eyes burning and muscles ever so faintly quivering. Yes, Karma looked amazing, his hair a bloody crown and his eyes laughing up with wild temptation. Gakushu wanted to sear himself onto Karma's bones, to take him apart to hold the desperate beat of his heart in his hand.

"Your choice," Gakushu reminded him, before swooping down and slamming their mouths together. Always. He would always be Karma's choice. He groaned at the hot, wet press of tongue and teeth, clamping his arms around Gakushu like jungle vines as he arched into the strength and burn of the one person on this planet who could keep him here, who could demand every part of him, and Karma was more than willing to give whatever he had.

Ever efficient and determined, Gakushu's fingers went to the buttons of Karma's shirt, swiftly and fastidiously doing away with each one. Part of Karma yearned for him to just tear it to shreds, but somehow the adamantly neat process cranked up the anticipation. It was a small measure of payback, to leave Karma trembling with the waiting. Until he panted like he'd just sprinted miles, struggling to coordinate his fingers enough to return the favor.

Gakushu finished first, peeling the shirt from him like the last fragile layer of a shield, revealing white skin and slender, sculpted muscle. The first touch of skin against skin nearly had Karma jumping in helpless shock, the sizzle of contact somehow electric against his bared flesh. Gakushu traced his thumbs in small circles as he smoothed his hands over Karma's flushed chest, down sharp ribs to his narrow hips, breaking the kiss to nibble the length of his collarbone as he seemed to map the shape of Karma's body with his hands. Gakushu had always known that Karma was strong, but it was something else altogether to feel the physical manifestation of it flex under his hands, muscle, rich with scorching, frenzied blood, gliding over bone.

Karma yanked on the tie still looped around Gakushu's neck like a noose, desperate to touch in turn. When it finally gave and he could shove the shirt off, Karma levered up onto an elbow to press his lips to the perfect curve of Gakushu's deltoid. Even in this, he was a little more golden, the softest tint of bronze touching his skin under the blush of arousal. Hooking one arm around Gakushu's neck, Karma snagged his belt with the other, tugging him closer until they could feel the beat of each other's blood. Gakushu tasted copper as he fought his way clear of the lightning strike of arousal, kissing his way up to Karma's jaw, tilting his head until they stared at each other,
crimson strands turning dark at Karma's sweaty temples, Gakushu's usually neat hair messily falling into his glazed eyes.

"I can't believe we're about to bang in the library," Gakushu murmured, the somewhat wondering and bemused words sending a smile tilting across Karma's face.

"Won't be able to come in here without thinking of us sweaty and naked," he whispered loudly, and the student council president's mouth twisted, like he'd was trying to kill a grin.

"Probably not," Gakushu admitted. Karma leaned in and licked a hot stripe up his neck, latching his teeth onto Gakushu's earlobe.

"Mission accomplished."

He shuddered at Karma's hiss, but turned his head, pinning him with a look of arrogance laced lightly with humor, that quirked brow unfurling something in Karma's gut.

"Especially after I fuck you till you can't see straight." Oh, Gakushu wanted it – wanted to peel Karma apart, until he pulsed with instinctive, crushing need.

"Sinner," Karma snickered. This time when Karma kissed him, he could feel the smile lingering on Gakushu's lips. Long, dexterous fingers traced down his sternum, tracing the ridges and crevices of his flexing abdominals with a breathless thoroughness. Karma gleefully wondered if his brain would just melt out of his ears, leaving behind a blissful silence.

"Don't go anywhere," Gakushu commanded, the deep rasp to his voice skating down Karma's spine. Abruptly, though, he disappeared, the cool air brushing against his heated skin clearing Karma's head enough to have him up on his elbow. Tearing away from Karma had been like attempting to tear off his own skin, but there were other matters to tend to. Promptly, Gakushu returned, the strap of Karma's bag clenched in his fist. He dumped it next to Karma's head, sliding into the gap between his long, invitingly splayed legs like Gakushu was meant to be there.

"Prove just how optimistic you are," Gakushu murmured against his chest before closing his teeth over Karma's nipple. Karma unconsciously mirrored the movement, sinking his teeth into his bottom lip to bite down on the yelp boiling in the back of his throat, breath hitching at the swirl of Gakushu's tongue. Karma's hands went disobediently to the gilded locks of his hair, threading and tugging as he did everything he could to swallow back the mewing that threatened to burst from his throat. Gakushu's hands locked around his wrists, the vise of pressure against narrow bone and pounding blood sending a burst of heat exploding from the base of Karma's spine.

"Bag. Lube. Condom. Now," Gakushu managed to grind out, nearly nose-to-nose with Karma, his pupils engulfing all but the thinnest ring of violet. Because the payoff promised to be better than toying with Gakushu further, Karma twisted, scrambling for his bag when his hands were released, books and notebooks and pencils scattering across the table in a rattling flurry.

Meanwhile, his belt was done away with, Karma helpfully lifting his hips as Gakushu tugged down his slacks. The tender way he slipped off his shoes had Karma's muscles trembling – he refused to admit that if he'd been on his feet, he might not have been able to stand. Finally, though, the entire, intoxicating reality of Karma was bared to the overhead lights, and Gakushu sucked in a breath.

Good God. He was beautiful. All that unreal elegance was staggering; need strangled the few coherent thoughts that managed to float through Gakushu's head. Pale, perfected strength, the hint of his pelvic wings a strange delicacy couched in rippling muscle fully capable of inflicting damage. His desire was evident, the eager, predatory eyes gazing up at him completely devoid of
embarrassment. Gakushu wanted to ravage, to devour Karma, until there was only sweat and singed synapses left. And he knew Karma would match him, beat for every breaking beat – he was likely expecting it.

Karma felt fingers at the back of his knees; not just to grip, to push and angle, but to toy, to tease. They slowly traced along the stark tendons, stroked the fragile skin that had Karma shivering, his hands faltering in their grip around his targets. He looked up at Gakushu, the intensity in his eyes hot enough to burn down cities, to call comets from the sky at his whim. It took a long moment for his blurred brain to parse out Gakushu's intent.

"Going the long way round, hmmm?" Karma taunted as he flopped onto his back, his breathy tone falling a little short of flippant. Especially when he stuttered on "round," his eyes fluttering shut at the light, protracted drag of short fingernails over the outside of his thighs, a shiver twisting out from his solar plexus.

"Taking my time. You seemed to expect me to rush," Gakushu said with silky menace, hooking one of Karma's legs over his shoulder, turning his head and pressing a kiss to the inside of his knee. It was all Karma could do to swallow the gasp, Gakushu leaning forward and plucking the lube from his limp fingers. Rattled and reveling in his body's response, electricity engulfed his nerve endings when Karma felt the slick press of fingers against soft, parting skin, then the slow surge of them inside him.

Even this sort of tentative exploration, when carried out by Gakushu, was devastatingly meticulous, searching out every shiver of reaction and twitch of shocked pleasure. The bob of Karma's throat in a desperate swallow nearly had Gakushu snarling, nearly had him forgetting his determined mission to scrape back the layers of Karma's insouciance, to demand something genuine from him. He plied in lies just as often as Gakushu did; if he'd been forced to acknowledge this aspect of aching humanity, so too did Karma.

His chest, mouth-wateringly defined, heaved, the repeated flash of his ribs drawing the attention of Gakushu's seeking mouth. Karma nearly growled when Gakushu took his heated flesh in hand, the slow, seeking strokes making the muscles in his thighs quiver. Gakushu was scraping him down to his base elements – the sheer impossibility of it had Karma's canines flashing in a razor-sharp smile.

Of course the bastard had to push entirely too far; he kept nudging and sliding, rubbing and pressing, until Karma was a panting mess, his fingers digging into Gakushu's biceps, choking on the groans that he was gently and inexorably ripping out of him.

"Now, you fucker, now!" Karma growled, driven beyond distraction, limp and roiling when Gakushu withdrew, plucking the condom from where Karma had abandoned it on the table. He had barely any time to even consider catching his breath before the blunt, hot press of him had Karma shuddering. Gakushu braced his palms by Karma's ribs, sweat pearling his furrowed brow as his invasion stretched Karma down to his DNA. He stared down at Karma, dark eyes picking him apart, hot breath coming in controlled pants through his parted lips. To be the absolute, focused center of that far-flung, ever-seeking brain was almost drugging; it felt like winning.

Karma almost managed a smirk before his mouth dropped open in shocked, mute reaction, the continued demand at his core threatening to tear him apart in the sweetest way, pain and pleasure tangling in a hot ball of greed and feeling. Every muscle seized like a fist, and Gakushu's jaw clenched.

"Jesus, Karma," he gasped. He dropped down to his elbows, brushing his lips against Karma's. "Let me in. Let me in, you son of a bitch." That whispered demand, followed by a kiss that devoured
him, his tongue stroking along the roof of Karma's mouth, had him helplessly obeying. When Gakushu slid home, they both froze in shock as the enormity of what they'd just done sank in.

Unsurprisingly, Karma recovered first, smoothing his lips over Gakushu's cheekbone before tracing his teeth over the shell of his ear.

"Don't tell me that's all you've got," he taunted softly. Gakushu lightly bit his chin, dropping his hands to hook onto Karma's hips.

"Not even close," he mumbled, carefully spacing out his words. He waited another torturous moment before beginning to move. Karma had expected nothing less than polished skill when it came to Gakushu and sex. What surprised him was the primal thrill of watching Gakushu lay down the most ancient and animal claim known to man. The smell of sex and sweat competed with the ingrained scent of books, the rhythmic slap of flesh and the occasional grunts punctuating the scholarly quiet.

The way Gakushu rolled his hips almost rendered Karma blind, the fervent roaming of his hands threatening the veil of constraint Gakushu kept trying to draw over his heated, frantic brain. Watching Karma fall apart along the fault lines was quite possibly the most intoxicating thing he'd ever witnessed, and no matter how his ingrained control demanded it, Gakushu was entirely present and invested, unable to tear himself away from the hot grip of Karma's body. He stroked his thumbs over Karma's hip bones, a note of gentility in direct juxtaposition to the punishing slam of his pelvis. The flush crawled over Karma's chest, creeping up his neck, spilling over his jaw until it kissed his cheekbones. His eyes glittered like a tiger's, half-lidded and the personification of temptation.

To combat the well of emotion emerging from the depth of his gut, Gakushu snagged Karma's hand, tightly lacing their fingers, anchoring them in a sense of reality as pleasure stripped every urge down to its barest bones, a grind that hammered in time with their heartbeats.

Karma had never sought his own destruction so eagerly before – had never so completely relished the feeling of someone tearing him apart, burning his defenses down to the ground with a hot stare and the push of hips. Every thrust was annihilating another piece of him, bursting sparks behind his eyelids and dragging claws over sensitized, quivering nerves. When Gakushu leaned forward, kissing him like he was dying and roughly burying his free fingers in his hair, covering him with his heat and going another scant, impossible inch deeper, Karma's breath sobbed out.

It whipped back in as he loosed a choked, "Ah, God!" into the air. Control cracked like branches in winter, and Karma threw himself into the explosion, white searing behind his eyes as he convulsed with the shock roaring across his brain and body. He clamped onto any part of Gakushu he could find; fingers crunching down on Gakushu's, legs clamping around his waist, his free hand going to the back of his neck and hanging on for dear life as he arched like a bow drawn tight, trembling on that invisible line of tension.

His climax burst between them, painting his stomach in lines hot as blood as he howled. Gakushu shuddered, completely entranced by the sight of Karma throwing himself into his release with the same wild disregard that he lived by. It was the powerful peak of a force of nature, a kind of destruction that satisfied a deep, primitive impulse inside. Karma gasped for breath, now pliant as melted wax under Gakushu's hands, his eyes helplessly drifting closed, lashes fanning the fragile, blushing skin.

Even as his hand slid from the back of his neck to fall limp to the table, Karma maintained his grasp on Gakushu's hand, legs remaining wrapped with impressive strength around him. The impulse still thrumming through his blood, Gakushu couldn't stop the instinctive movements of his
hips, his discipline fraying under the pressure of Karma's slitted eyes, the incredible burning clamp of his body. And yet, he remained twined and twisted, tangled up in something too dense and barbed to identify. His heart slammed against his ribs like an anvil, every muscle curling and tingling, and yet release proved elusive.

Karma roused himself, reaching around and trailing his fingertips down the elegant, rolling arc of Gakushu's spine. Slowly, deliberately, Karma lifted his head and sank his teeth into the curve of his trapezius, only releasing when something that sounded like a whimper wrenched itself from Gakushu's throat. Parts of him still twitched and rippled, flayed down to the marrow – Karma loved every shaky second. As the fingers on Gakushu's back began their slow slide up, Karma murmured in his ear.

"Let go, Gakushu. Just let go." Karma pressed his lips to the spot just below his ear, and Gakushu felt the last straining thread holding him together snap. His hips jerked and bucked, his breathing harsh as he dropped his forehead to the table beside Karma's. The shifts of his straining muscles felt tectonic, the spaces between atoms blowing apart with nuclear force. In the last fleeting seconds before his system shut down, Gakushu had a moment to reflect that, of course, having sex with Karma Akabane was beyond anything he'd ever experienced.

He should have known, he thought wryly before his brain was swept under.

They came back like survivors of a bomb blast, wobbly and a little deaf, struggling to fill their lungs on air that seemed somewhat thin. Fingers still woven together like the threads of expensive fabric, Karma could only manage to keep one leg hooked over Gakushu's flank, the other falling loose with a lazy swing. He couldn't say he minded the majority of Gakushu's weight draped over him. Normally he was adept at squirming loose of the post-coital cuddle, but at the moment, he hadn't the means, nor the compulsion. So satisfied, in fact, Karma risked raising his free hand, still a little numb and pulsing at the fingertips, and resting it on the back of Gakushu's skull, slowly carding through his silky hair, praise for a fuck well done.

"OK, I'll admit it," Karma finally said, letting his eyes drift closed in contented lassitude, a smile already creeping over his mouth. "I can't see very straight, Pres." Gakushu snorted, turning his head just enough so that he was speaking into the curve of Karma's neck, not the table.

"Trust me, you returned the favor, Akabane." The smirk deepened at Gakushu's hoarse compliment. Surprised at how comfortable he was – after all, the only thing somewhat between him and the hard table surface was his crumpled shirt – Karma sighed, continuing his idle strokes over Gakushu's glinting hair.

"What if we just stayed like this? The librarian would get an eyeful tomorrow morning."

That got Gakushu's attention. He finally lifted his head, looking down at Karma with a stern set to his mouth and a lift to his brow that made Karma want to kiss him again.

"Not in a million years."

Karma just bounced his brows as Gakushu began to disengage, a small breath huffing through his nose as they finally slipped apart. He was still bonelessly relaxed, closing his eyes to the soundtrack of Gakushu setting himself to rights. When something cold and wet descended on his stomach, however, Karma jerked up, staring down in surprise at the wet wipe splayed across his belly like a white flag. Smirking at Gakushu's sculpted back as he turned to retrieve his shirt, Karma cleaned himself up.
"Are you always so prepared for a late-night school liaison?"

Gakushu whipped on his shirt, sliding his arms into the sleeves as he turned to face Karma, still lounging naked on the table. They'd just had sex, and yet the sight of Gakushu's trousers pulled up over that shapely ass but not yet buttoned, his unbuckled belt a gleaming banner of debauchery, and the way his open shirt framed his taut, beautiful chest and stomach all perked Karma's interest.

"Those are perfectly innocuous. I'm not the one carrying around lube and condoms in my school bag."

Finally, Karma slid to his feet, leisurely beginning the search for his scattered clothing.

"Which, you're welcome, by the way," he said with a knowing smile, taking his time in his reassembly. Gakushu was looking more presentable by the second, tying his tie with an expert flick of his wrist – for some reason, Karma resented it. Letting the corner of his mouth curl as he leaned back against the scene of the crime to slip on his shoes, he lobbed the next barb, absolutely positive that he was in no way nervous about how Gakushu would react.

"So, you up for more?"

Gakushu froze, glancing over at where Karma stood, still looking exactly like what he was – a guy who'd just been thoroughly and feverishly seen to.

"Right now?" His throat suddenly went dry, clicking a little as he swallowed. Because even as ridiculous as such a suggestion was, Gakushu was taken aback by just how delectable that sounded. Karma chuckled, but it wasn't his usual brand of sniggering. It was warm, loose, and just wry enough to be self-aware. After all, they were young, not invincible.

"God, no. Just thinking ahead."

Fair enough, Gakushu conceded with a dip of his head as he put on his jacket, just as atrociously wrinkled as his shirt and trousers. He appreciated thinking ahead. Allowing himself a moment, as Karma idly went about the bare minimum of reconstructing his appearance, Gakushu considered.

"I… could be amenable," he said coolly, wiping down the table and gathering up the garbage bag from the small can next to the table, the physical evidence of their entanglement now knotted safely inside. He glanced over his shoulder in time to see Karma pause in the act of reaching down for his jacket, staring at Gakushu with wide eyes, glinting like coins.

"Well then," he whispered, his voice a mere suggestion of itself. Then Karma grinned, big and bright and bold, and Gakushu had to remind himself to keep walking to follow him to the library door, where Karma paused and glanced over at him. They stood close enough that Gakushu could smell himself on Karma's skin. "Although it might be nice to switch things up a little next time."

With that last parting shot, Karma opened the door, strolling out into the night like he'd just finished studying, not recovering from a wild romp of a fuck. Gakushu stared after him, his guts twisting hotly at the idea. Of… receiving Karma's attentions. When the shiver of arousal rode weakly over his skin, Gakushu realized that he had something else to consider, in addition to this circus he'd just gladly signed up for. Moving by rote, juggling his book bag, the garbage bag, and the key, Gakushu managed to switch off the lights, close the door behind him, and lock it. Before he stepped away, though, he lowered his forehead to the cool wood, desperately trying to deal with the sensation of being hopelessly, deliciously off balance.

Nothing would ever be normal again.
Meanwhile, a floor below, Karma just managed to clear the last step, turning around a corner blindly and flopping back against a wall, his throat bared to the moonlight seeping through one of the windows as he tried to recover. He wasn't used to being so wrong, for his assumptions to fall so incredibly short of the mark. For a threat to come not from something being bad, but so astonishingly good. Karma's eyes drifted open as he relived the incident he was already carefully coating in amber in his memories.

Because some things were just too luscious to be lost to time.

Chapter End Notes

*Holy hell. My first published smut. Gakushu’s not the only sinner. This was amazing, and so much fun to write, but damn. It’s super intense – I’m squeezing every second for all it’s worth, so it feels like I’ve poured out half a dozen pages when I’ve barely managed two. I hope the effort shows; this was quite the experience. Although, jeez, keeping track of the pronouns in a sex scene between two boys in third person omniscient is like wrangling cats. And for those of you thirsty for some toppy Karma action, I only have one thing to say: give it time. They’re equals first and last, so nobody plays permanent pitcher or catcher.*

*Don’t get used to this little burst of posting – this took a lot out of me, and Phoenix needs my attention. Hope this sweaty bit of goodness can tide you over. It was a damn good learning experience.*

*Hope you like it!*

*Love, Tango*
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

In the days following the "Incident," as Gakushu labeled it in his mind, he waited for Karma to do something outrageous. He couldn't realistically guess what, but surely the psychopath wouldn't – couldn't – restrain himself. He fed on scenes the way fire fed on fuel; greedily, and gleefully. But as the days crept by, and they did nothing but exchange heated glances as they passed in the hallway, Gakushu began to question the "Incident," and what exactly it meant.

Which is precisely what the bastard wanted, he would realize with hindsight. Karma had already discovered the devastating effects of keeping Gakushu at a tantalizing distance, and how sweet it was when the president finally lowered his titanic guard.

A week had passed since they'd tangled in the library, and he and Karma hadn't even spoken to each other. It grated on his ego, and his temper. Karma had no idea just how high-stakes of a game it was to play with Gakushu Asano. He vowed darkly that he would take great joy in bringing Akabane to heel. It seemed the delinquent needed reminding just how dangerous it was to trifle with the student council president.

Even as he silently seethed in third period math, part of his brain was effortlessly focused on the lesson. The Euler-MacLaurin formula and Stokes’ theorem – Gakushu sighed at the pedestrian topic, still invisibly fuming over Karma's bullshit shenanigans. Inflicting pain would be pointless; thorough research, subtle interviews, and now personal experience revealed Akabane displayed a pain tolerance that bordered on inhuman, and the capacity to either ignore it or use it. Something else, then; Gakushu would have to find some other way to soundly thrash Karma, some other way to establish a new equilibrium between them, now that they had this unwieldy new dimension to deal with. The shriek of the fire alarm cut through the scholarly quiet, swiftly slicing apart Gakushu's thoughts, abruptly silenced before an announcement pinged across the school.

"All students and staff, please calmly evacuate the building. Meet out by the track field and check in with your home room teacher."

They'd all heard it a handful of times before, although occasionally they met out on the soccer field instead. But Gakushu frowned. The next drill wasn't supposed to happen for another six weeks – a meager third of his credentials alone warranted a look at the zealously guarded schedule. Which narrowed the list of likely causes down to...

Interesting, Gakushu mused as he stood. He was a safety captain, and promptly slipped into his role of directing the students to begin their evacuation in earnest, instead of grumbling and meandering. Briefly, he conferred with the math teacher, who was as confused as he was, before striding down the hall at the rear of the herd, checking for any wayward students. The last thing he wanted was for the school, and himself by extension, to incur any bad publicity because some nimrod decided to ignore the drill and was burned alive because they were too busy playing games on their phone.

Satisfied the floor was clear, Gakushu was about to trot down the rapidly clearing stairs when a hand closed over his wrist, a strong yank pulling him off balance and sending him stumbling backwards. Before he could right himself, he was smacked against a wall, the report of a slammed door echoing in his ears. Working to regain his forcefully expelled breath, one glance told Gakushu all he needed to know.
Karma.

The son of a bitch smirked at him, close enough that Gakushu could make out the individual lashes in the ridiculously decadent fringe around his sparkling eyes, one hand braced against the wall next to Asano's ear. They were in what basically amounted to a broom closet, the only light coming from a window set high on the far wall. It smelled of floor cleaner and dust. And Karma. Even as sense memory yanked him back to when that scent had been banked in sweat and sex, Gakushu's eyes narrowed as comprehension dawned.

"Really? You pulled the fire alarm?"

Karma snorted that signature, short chuckle, his brows dancing as his eyes sparked and flamed, mischief and madness dancing around him like dust motes caught in the light.

"Oh, I did a little more than that. Besides," he murmured huskily, leaning it to trace his lips along Gakushu's jaw up to his ear, "how else was I supposed to get you alone?" Gakushu unsuccessfully tried to suppress the shudder that rippled through him as Karma lazily licked along the edge of his ear.

"Sane people text," he managed, his voice choked under the clamp of lust squeezing his throat, gripping Karma's hips in self-preservation. It had been a flailing, half-hearted attempt at control, but, oh, it was good to have Karma under his hands again, the texture of muscle and bone heady, and now a little familiar. He pulled back just enough to meet Gakushu's eyes, one wine-red brow lifted.

"If you wanted sane, you would already have it."

And then Karma was kissing him hard and sweet enough to send his bones vibrating, and Gakushu was going under like a happily drowning man. Still, he could acknowledge that the bastard was undeniably right. He'd had so many choices, and he had chosen insanity incarnate. As Karma's tongue twined with his, Gakushu found that, at the moment, he didn't mind in the slightest. What Karma couldn't beat or brain into submission, he devastated with guile - Gakushu appreciated that kind of arsenal, even as it was being aimed at him. Fingers slipping under the collar of that blatantly incorrect black blazer, Gakushu stroked the edges of his vertebrae, accepting that he may have been dragged here, but it didn't mean he couldn't enjoy it.

Few as Karma's virtues were, patience was absolutely not one of them. Sometimes, however, when he had the correct motivation, he could be bothered to take his time. This was one of those instances.

With deceptive ease, Karma's hand rode the edge of Gakushu's belt around his waist, settling in the dip of his spine, his palm centered over the place where the ancients said pleasure pulsed, where passion built before exploding outwards. Gradually, Karma applied pressure, enormously pleased when Gakushu's body responded to his silent request, his hips shifting forwards until Karma felt the welcomed weight against him. He was rendered breathless and distracted until the president growled, nipping at his lower lip and bringing him resoundingly back to attention. He had a plan, after all, and Karma took his strategy very seriously.

Gakushu hadn't been sure what he'd been expecting, but Karma dropping to his knees was absolutely not it. The clink of his belt being unbuckled finally cracked the shock that had filled his throat like cement.

“What –” was all the more he could manage, flabbergasted by Karma's actions. Those feline eyes angled up to meet his, twisted and mocking and smoldering. His fingers plucked and tugged at
fabric, nearly making Gakushu’s eyes cross when his hand, hot as a coal and devastatingly clever, closed around him, a slow, lazy stroke rendering him speechless.

“Shut the fuck up, Gakushu,” Karma murmured, almost tenderly, before dipping his head and engulfing Asano’s cock with his mouth. It was more a matter of utter vocal shut down than obedience that had Gakushu remaining silent, his head thunking back against the wall, his eyes screwed shut and bottom lip trapped savagely between his teeth as sensation seethed through him. Unthinkingly, his right hand went to Karma’s head, his fingers sinking into the silky crimson strands, his left blindly braced against the wall behind him, rough concrete against his palm.

It was hot and wet and filthy, and felt so good that Gakushu feared permanent brain damage. The fact that Karma was sucking his cock in a broom closet made him shiver at the brazen, illicit nonsense of it all. Never had he indulged in, or been maneuvered into, such a thing before - no one had ever dared. What the hell was Karma doing to him, Gakushu thought with vague irritation as an unwilling groan tumbled free. What the hell was he allowing him to do? Then a particularly clever lick swamped his brain again, actual thought sinking into silence like a ship with a hole blown into the hull.

The redhead was no stranger to blowjobs; he’d both given and received in the past. However, he would be hard-pressed to recall an encounter that was so… satisfying. It wasn’t just a matter of Gakushu reacting pleasingly – it was intoxicating, watching him come unraveled practically in Karma’s hands. Color bloomed across his cheekbones, the expression secreted in the lines between his brows and the dents dug into his plush lip by gleaming teeth betraying the sort of effect this had on the president. It was far more intense than either of them were ready to admit. Karma glared in power, but this was proving to be a whole new breed of cat with Gakushu.

Every shudder and jerk translated itself to Karma’s tongue and the hand planted on Gakushu’s hip, muscles flexing savagely under his fingers as the president struggled against the urge to writhe and buck into Karma’s mouth. The appreciative, laughing hum Karma loosed at the notion of Gakushu attempting to be diplomatic, even in this situation, had a moan tearing loose from Asano’s throat. Surprisingly, he didn’t try to take control – the hand cradling Karma’s skull was gentle, seemingly there more for connection than dominance or direction. It was… nice, Karma decided, as he stroked his tongue wickedly over the tip of Gakushu’s cock, the smell and taste rich and powerful, like sun-warmed earth and freshly spilled blood. But he wasn’t looking for nice. Karma wanted Asano nonsensical and shattered. That goal kept him from being overwhelmed by how furiously turned on he was. Only a massive torrent of willpower funneled the vicious storm of lust inside Karma down into focus.

Tightening the fingers that were wrapped around the root of the president’s cock, Karma twisted a little, his cheeks hollowing until he heard Asano grind out several surprisingly colorful curses under his breath. He couldn’t imagine where the president had heard them, but it sent a bolt of arousal scorching along Karma’s muscles, nearly toppling him.

With what little brain cells were still firing, Gakushu was ninety-three percent certain that this had to be some form of torture. The slick, sweet friction of Karma’s lips and tongue was borderline agonizing, and torment certainly wasn’t out-of-character for the crazy bastard - more like his signature. A thorough bout of suction nearly had Gakushu begging, God forbid babbling – for what, he wasn’t quite sure, but he refused to be so far gone that he lowered himself to asking Karma “please,” for anything.

He managed to glance down just in time to see Karma’s lashes flutter as he looked up, their eyes meeting and Gakushu’s blood roaring in his ears like a hellish winter wind as his bones threatened
to turn to ash. It was in keeping with Karma’s inherent contradiction of terms – the situation should have painted him submissively, but instead, he wielded total control. Impressed even as the heat in his veins burned white-hot, Gakushu was surprised at himself as his vision began to narrow and ripple.

It was too much – his pride refused to stand for it, but there was only so much his body could tolerate. As Gakushu felt his nerves pulse and throb, he realized faintly that Karma had succeeded. He’d gotten the student council president to shut the hell up for a few minutes.

“Wait, I’m – Jesus, Karma!” Gakushu tried to pull away, his orgasm tearing through him with ferocious totality. But Karma had clamped his hands on his waist, pulling him devastatingly deep, refusing to allow him even a centimeter of retreat. Unbidden, his fingers fisted in Karma’s hair, the other hand going to his shoulder and gripping with enough strength to bruise, fighting to stay upright at the kindling his brain had been reduced to went up in flames.

A gasping groan was torn from his core, Gakushu’s legs trembling in the aftershocks as he struggled to stay on his feet. He glanced down, his hand sliding weakly from Karma’s shoulder, managing to loosen his other fingers enough to turn his grip into a caress, watching as the redhead’s brow furrowed, his face almost… reverent.

Slowly letting Asano’s cock slip from his mouth, Karma rested his forehead on Gakushu’s hip, eyes clenched shut as his fingers fumbled for his zipper, still clutching the leg of Gakushu’s trousers. Furiously jerking himself off, already teetering on the edge after watching, tasting, Gakushu lose control, Karma’s breath heaved, every muscle rolling tight with tension as his spine curved, his fingers digging into Asano’s thigh as he came with enough force to temporarily wipe out his vision, rendering him all but deaf.

Recovering enough to notice Karma’s climax, the smell of sex heavy in the air and their concerted panting the only sound, Gakushu slowly reached down, his fingers sliding over Karma’s jaw and tipping his face up. The sight of him, it was… almost more than he could stand.

Karma’s eyes glittered, wet from pushing himself probably a little too hard - always pushing the limits, always going a little too far. If it hadn't felt so outrageously good, Gakushu might have minded. Karma's skin was flushed, almost luminescent, and his mouth was plump and bruised and glossy, practically obscene. He looked wrecked, and yet the smirk, the dance of his eyes made it clear he considered himself the victor.

Contradictory little fuck, Gakushu thought with repressed affection, applying enough pressure to bring Karma to his feet, steadying him a little as his knees finally held. As soon as their eyes were level, Gakushu leaned forward, pulling him into a deep, indolent kiss, catching the flicker of surprise in Karma’s eyes just before their lips and tongues touched. He could taste his own release in Karma’s mouth, the fact of it sending sleepy desire curling through him. Damp, sated flesh pressed together, satisfied shivers skittering along their frames.

The kiss was languid, an understated challenge. Gakushu could take anything Karma had to offer, and could return it in kind. Any dominance would be short-lived at best. Finally, they drew apart, eyeing each other, each pleased with the debauched appearance of the other. Parting enough to set their clothing to rights, Gakushu frowned as he remembered what Karma had said earlier.

“How did you set off the fire alarm?”

Glancing over, his eye teeth glinting wickedly, Karma chuckled.

“It’s amazing what you can do with potassium nitrate and table sugar. I made it purple, to match
your eyes,” Karma added huskily as he leaned in temptingly close to straighten Gakushu’s tie. In retaliation, Asano closed his teeth over Karma’s earlobe, and tugged. The sizzle of near pain had Karma’s blood up, sending him diving back in for another kiss, taken by surprise when Gakushu fisted his fingers in the back of his jacket, flipping them around and pressing Karma firmly up against the wall. Clever, Karma conceded; distracting him to reverse the high ground and gain the upper hand. Still replete from their earlier bout, Karma found he didn’t much mind.

Reaching inside Karma’s unbuttoned jacket, Gakushu traced the tensing flesh, plotting out the flex of muscle and the jut of bone with his fingertips. He drew a wet line over Karma’s pulse with his tongue, nudging his head back with his nose and tracing his Adam’s apple with his teeth – Gakushu could taste it when he hummed.

“You’re lucky I find your bad behavior attractive,” Gakushu growled against his collarbone. Karma lightly scraped his fingernails over his scalp, bringing Gakushu back to his mouth, the president’s tongue deep and almost punishing. When they parted long enough for Karma to almost get his breath back, he snickered.

“You’re awfully easy to seduce into bad behavior, for a well-trained pup.”

Gakushu’s hands went to his ass, yanking Karma forward as his thigh parted the redhead’s legs, grinding their hips together, his eyes blazing. For once, the words dissolved in Karma’s throat.

“I am no pup.”

Menace, and pride, and challenge. Karma gloried in the power of it, in the strength that matched his, beat for beat. Gakushu hadn’t just picked Karma, out of all his possible liaisons. Karma had chosen Gakushu, the only man alive that drew out the wildest, meanest, best parts of him. Not that he wanted him to know that necessarily. Ceding his dominance was still a foreign, difficult concept.

“If you say so,” Karma almost sang, pecking Gakushu’s lips and wriggling free. His heartbeat still pounded like a war drum, but he sashayed to the door, glancing over his shoulder as he pushed it open.

“We’ll have to do this again sometime,” he said with a saucy wink before slipping away. Gakushu rubbed a hand over his still-burning neck, blowing loose a breath that fluttered his bangs. Everything in him felt loose and sweet and slick - knowing it was Karma’s work made it better, and a little worse. Although, holy shit. Gakushu had known that tongue of his was dangerous, but damn. Then, with a sinister grin, he set his shoulders, heading out to sneak his way to the track field. Gakushu didn’t anticipate any difficulty, which was good, because the taste of Karma – and himself – still lingering in his mouth was mightily distracting.

Chapter End Notes

*This is something I managed to wrap up between bouts of chaos and depression. It hasn’t had that many read throughs, so please be gentle. Just thought I’d put something up to assure you all I’m still alive, my stories are still active, and I’m super guilty about how badly I’ve neglected you all. Next chap is loosely planned to have less sexy time and some actual conversation between these two nutballs. As per usual, no ETA – you’ll get it when I get there. I love you all. Hope you like it!*
Chapter 6

Karma had many hobbies. He accrued them eagerly, always looking to gain more skills, more blades. He'd learned all too well the difference a single talent could make, buttressed by hard work and a clever, seeking mind. To the uneducated eye, his pursuits seemed like wastes of time; to Karma, they kept him out of jail, and focused when life's twists and turns tried to buck him off like a particularly devious bronco. But, most importantly, they gave him space and time to think.

He could wile away hours pursuing what seemed to be the most pointless nonsense – just about anything could entertain him, as long as it gave his gyroscopic mind some manner of fodder. Something to grease the wheels of his perpetually spinning brain.

Hormones and his inherent sadism had sharpened his bloodlust, but Karma was always up for just about any form of entertainment – he'd learned chess when he was seven, and was a regular ghost in the online games and forums. He was also disturbingly good with his hands – carving chess pieces was one of his less unacceptable forms of fun and therapy. It also appealed to his unabiding love of blades.

Over the years, he had also developed a slew of perches and bolt holes throughout the district, sanctuaries when the halls of his home echoed too loudly with silence. Currently, he was secreted away in the branches of an old oak overlooking a fountain in a largely forgotten park southeast of the high school, relaxed by the sigh of the breeze through leaves, the tinkle of water striking water a cheerful backdrop to his thoughts as he began the painstaking work of the black knight's mane. The cardinal rosewood a hard and difficult wood to work – he could relate. He wasn't exactly basswood himself, and God knew Gakushu Asano was worse than ebony.

And there it was – the magnet of his mind, the harbor his circling thoughts always returned to. A puzzle still left undone, a burgeoning storm of promise that was starting to scare him a little, it felt so powerful and promising. Karma was only now beginning to truly understand the strength of all that he'd unleashed. Most of the time, he was thrilled. Other times, he was wary, the sensation of finding himself out of his depth not unfamiliar. Once in a rare while, he was achingly scared. And then, there were times he just ached.

Later, Karma would reflect that something in him was already changing; some pathways of his neurons were already attuning themselves to an outside force. Why else would he glance down, at the perfect moment, and see the focus of his whirling thoughts rounding the fountain to walk below his tree? Further food for thought was that Gakushu looked up at exactly the perfect moment to see him through the branches; Karma himself hadn't so much as twitched.

Asano jerked to a halt like he had abruptly reached the end of his tether. He looked up at Karma, down to scan the surrounding area, then up again, his eyes narrowed – the smirk moved across Karma's face in reaction without him actually calling it to bear. Finally, eyes again averted, Gakushu sighed, hitching his bag farther up his shoulder before grasping the trunk to begin the climb up. It wasn't exactly easy – the trunk itself was smooth for over a meter, and Karma had settled in one of the higher forks of the tree's crown. Idly swinging a leg as he watched, Karma felt a soft heat begin to unfurl in his gut at what he saw.

Gakushu moved like a panther; swift, steady, and unerringly graceful. In no time at all, he was sitting next to Karma on the branch, somehow managing to eye him like a lab specimen without
actually turning his head. Karma was toying with the silky hair by his ear when Gakushu snatched the chess piece from his other hand – it took everything Karma had not to jerk in reaction.

He wasn't expecting a compliment, and Gakushu didn't give one. Instead, he just turned and spun the piece, twirling it between his long, elegant fingers as he mercilessly inspected it. Karma's smirk widened, his leg continuing its lazy sway. He hadn't seen Gakushu yesterday; it was impossible not to notice that the amount of time Karma went without seeing the president was diminishing with every encounter. Even as it aligned with his goals, something in him balked at the sensation of being driven towards an endgame he hadn't necessarily agreed to.

The pleasure of Asano's company, however, couldn't be denied. Not that he tried to be pleasant company; on the contrary, he glared at Karma's playful attention to his hair, tapping the tip of his index finger on the horse's crown in what was patently irritation. That was probably what he liked so much about it – Gakushu was never the politician around him. He was usually too pissed off or thrown off to manage it, and Karma reveled in the unadulterated truth of the president's truly pissy personality. The fact that he smelled like mint and sawdust and had the jawline of a model didn't hurt, either.

"Let me guess," Karma said coyly, still making no move to retrieve his chess piece. "You're a bishop man." Gakushu reared his head back slightly, unintentionally revealing the fragile arches of his throat, his brows raised imperiously.

"I am," he responded with impeccable dignity. Karma straightened, the heady, fresh scent of Gakushu clouding his brain a little. He covered the slip with a wide, knowing grin and careless shrug.

"Figures. Straight lines but indirect path, long reach, close to power while amassing heaps of it yourself."

Warm brows knit together, but Gakushu didn't deny it.

"And I'm assuming your favorite piece is the knight," he returned with a smart clip to his tone. Karma didn't let his smile waver, but he felt something in his chest wobble instead.

"Oh?"

The number of those who read him so clearly were precious few; he hadn't really expected it from Asano, who seemed obsessed with the persona Karma performed, not necessarily the one that pulsed inside. But he just waved Karma's question away, happy as a pig in shit to prove he knew something his rival hadn't expected him to figure out.

"It's obvious – just when you seem to be moving somewhere, you pull a sharp turn, changing the momentum and upsetting the balance. Not to mention, it's the only piece that can leap over others. God forbid you follow the same rules as everyone else."

Karma revealed his teeth in a feline smile, delighted even as sensitive flesh smarted at light and air, exposed by Asao's scalpel-like perception. Too many feelings coursed through him to manage all at once, and there were a few tried and true methods Karma used to mellow himself out.

"Wanna make out?"

Gakushu shifted back, an impressive show of balance considering they were perched on a tree branch barely wide enough for their butts, angling so his knee pressed gently against Karma's. The tilt of his head had his bangs slanting handsomely over one eye, his expression hooded and
calculating.

"Maybe. What then?"

The question threw Karma – sure, it was Asano, but he'd expected some version of a basic yes or no.

"What do you mean?" Delay, stall, gather your forces. Give yourself time to zero in on the target, then strike. Old advice rang in his head, even as his stomach skittered.

"I mean, what exactly is your goal after that? What are you hoping to gain by all this, Karma? Do you have an end-strategy? Or is this just something else to pass the time until you find a more complicated distraction?"

Those penetrating eyes made Karma want to squirm, and he never squirmed, not anymore.

"Is it for you?"

One of the president's brows shot up, forcing a corresponding spike in Karma's heart rate.

"Did you really just answer my question with a question?"

Goddamn, he loved it when Gakushu called him on his shit, even when it was about a thorny question he wasn't really sure he wanted to answer, or even could.

"Listen, I'm just in it for the fun." He had to be wrong, but he could swear he saw disappointment flicker in those glimmering eyes, dragging an unwilling truth out of him. "But if... if that fun has the capacity to last for a while, I wouldn't be opposed. I've been wanting this – you – for a long time, so I'll be damned if I jump ship before it's run its course." Because he had to know, because Karma suddenly realized that it mattered, he added with just enough saucy challenge to deflect the vulnerability that was about to gut him, "What about you? Going to cut and run just when it's about to get good, prez?"

Gakushu met his gaze, and it felt like thunderheads colliding; energy and pressure and massive amounts of potential threatening to be unleashed. "I'm not going anywhere. And... and I suppose I want you, as long as I can have you."

What else could Karma do, but lean forward and catch Asano's lips with his own? He couldn't exactly escalate it, not in so precarious a position. But it was warm and soft, just sensual enough to have Karma's brain fogging over. The gentle friction of Gakushu's lips against his was easing through his head like sweet smoke, a drug spooling through his system with gradual, devastating thoroughness.

Slowly, reluctantly, they parted, and Karma could see Gakushu blinking heavily in reaction, his own lashes dropping and rising in a lethargic attempt at recovery.

"God, I must be out of my mind," Asano murmured, running his thumb over Karma's lower lip, his fingertips tracing his jaw.

"Obviously," Karma growled in return. "I like a man with a little crazy in his eyes." They were kissing again, this time with intent, the aggressive, slick thrust of tongues and confident, roving, nearly bruising hands almost upsetting their equilibrium, not that either of them minded, or couldn't handle it. Karma felt dangerously loose and unfettered – the only thing keeping him grounded was the boy who held him like he wanted to break him and kissed him like he wanted to breathe Karma in. Gripping Gakushu's elbows, Karma fought to regain his breath and his balance, shuddering
when the president ducked his head, kissing below his ear with just a hint of teeth, the electric crackle of sensation sending Karma's eyes fluttering closed, back arching, nearly whimpering.

By the time he managed to open them again, Gakushu was gone, jumping from the lowest branches down to the ground, idly dusting his jacket and readjusting his bag, swiping a hand through his hair as he meticulously set himself to rights. The president's lips were still a little glossy and plump; Karma just couldn't help himself.

"Did you really just kiss me while we were sitting in a tree?" Karma jeered down at him. Asano glanced up, sliding his hands into his trouser pockets with a nonchalance even a purported slacker like Karma could admire.

"It seemed the thing to do. More appropriate than fucking you against the trunk."

And with that image looming in his head and lighting a fire under his skin, Karma watched Gakushu stroll away. His left hand loosened, revealing the half-carved knight the president had returned at some point.

Karma hadn't noticed.

Chapter End Notes

I'm back at college. As well, volunteering, working, and trying to deal. But, I did manage to squeeze in a rewatch of AssClass. Even though I'm mere pages from finishing a new chapter of Phoenix, this little darling popped out without hardly any work.

Karma and Gakushu, sitting in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G.

Playing to be had next chapter.

Hope you like it!
Love, Tango
Chapter 7

Power wasn't just won; it had to be maintained. Gakushu considered himself an attentive student of history, so he knew that one of the most crucial aspects to sustaining an empire was nurturing the will of the people, from the faceless masses to the close circle that solidified his hold and cemented his standing on what he had amassed.

It was to that end that he had arranged a reward for the twenty highest performing students on the midterms – on a separate day, the elite of each grade would be sent on an all-expenses paid trip to whatever excursion was chosen by popular vote. Of course, assuming that the second years would end up going anywhere that Gakushu hadn't already chosen was naïve at best – he didn't need to force votes to get what he wanted. A much subtler approach kept the peace with well-practiced efficiency.

There were a few surprises on the list, people that the president wouldn't have immediately assumed to be top performers. However, in keeping with the practice of fairness and maintaining connections with the best of the best, Gakushu laid down the law hard and fast – whoever made the cut had earned it, and it was in the spirit of camaraderie and celebration that they were going on this outing. Any behavior to the contrary was grounds for an immediate return home. Much more dangerous was the fact that Gakushu would never forget, or forgive, the behavior. Which meant that things should sail along smoothly as the twenty high schoolers departed the bus outside the Xtreme Entertainment complex on a Saturday.

Such expectations would have been nothing less than the gospel truth in any universe, except the one inhabited by Karma. And as he leaped off the bus last, his hair a rich, gem-like glint in the late-fall sunlight, Gakushu was weirdly unsure of the rush of sensation that spiraled through him. Dismay, definitely. Exasperated impatience, obviously.

But… anticipation? That could spell nothing but the most ridiculous of trouble, certainly. Gakushu tried to fix a forbidding frown on his face, but was surprised to find it rather difficult to tack on, the pins slipping as Karma threw his arms around the shoulders of two other random students, the combination of feeling terrified and privileged writ large across their faces in an expression really only Karma could elicit as he snarked and joked. Gakushu sniffed, assured himself he was in no way jealous, and turned to lead the way into the complex. The students followed their shepherd without complaint, but Gakushu was always aware of the wolf slinking along at the rear of the herd.

As high schoolers and the cream of Gakushu's crop, he felt no compunction about cutting them loose. They knew what they stood to lose, and would no doubt behave accordingly. Except, of course, Karma.

Winding lithely through the dispersing pack of students, he slipped to Karma's shoulder, resisting the entirely inappropriate urge to run his fingertips through that head of bright, disheveled hair, cup that skull, and drag Karma in for a sinful, scorching, damning kiss; instead, Gakushu wrapped his fingers around the crook of Karma's arm, invisibly locking them together.

Sly as a fox, Karma angled his head and slid his eyes over to Gakushu, making no attempt to pull against the hold the president had on him. Which was just as well, since his fingers seemed wrapped around muscle and bone with the tensile strength of steel.
"You stay with me," Gakushu commanded under his breath in Karma's ear, and he tried to stifle the shiver that ran down his spine at the low, powerful pitch in the president's forbidding voice. When exactly had he sharpened that particular blade? Because that weapon could be deadly. Smoothing feathers he refused to admit had been ruffled, Karma just turned his head, bringing their faces dangerously close, and blinked slowly with doe-like innocence lighting his eyes.

"Of course, Prez. No place I rather be," he simpered. As Gakushu towed him farther into the complex – and he obediently allowed it – to the flash and clink and squeal of the arcade, Karma shoved down the knowledge that he'd spoken nothing less than the truth with a vicious hand.

The pair wove through the crowds, destroying at the handful of games they tried their hand at, no surprise. Ren narrowed his eyes with a knowing grin as he watched the two pass, Gakushu smiling in that way he had as he was about to bloodlessly eviscerate someone. Karma just snickered and gamboled, and it suddenly dawned on Ren that the pair of them were enjoying themselves. The epiphany was stunning, but one he doubted either of them would pick up on any time soon. Instead, the pair were terrifying everyone as they played skeeball – throwing the balls hard enough to crack bone instead of tossing them up the slide. Gakushu broke the record on file, his time on the baseball team in early middle school giving him the slimmest of edges.

Karma, however, slaughtered when they paired up on a zombie shooter. Ren caught the edges of it, but to Gakushu, it was patently obvious – Karma had been trained. This was different than skill with martial arts or natural physical talent. This was dedicated, honed proficiency. How and why, he remained deeply suspicious of. The curve of Karma's ass hugged lovingly by his jeans as he angled to shoulder his plastic rifle was just distracting enough to keep Gakushu from getting actively pissed that he still didn't know the details of what had gone down nearly three years ago. But it was there, and he'd be a fool to discount it.

Gakushu Asano was nobody's fool.

So he decided to put it to the test. Gathering the group, Gakushu led them up to the second floor. The entire space was dedicated to a laser tag course, and when he suggested a friendly game, there was yips of excitement, not unlike coyotes readying for a hunt. Then there were flashes of fear, interest, and anticipation when he asked Karma if he wanted to lead the other team. No one was looking at Gakushu in the breathless moments that followed his question, so no one saw the muted, full-body shiver that glided over him when Karma slid his hands into his pockets, jutting his hip slightly and smiling with the slow, sticky sweetness of sun-warmed honey. It was terrifying, and knee-weakening.

"Sure. Should be fun."

Picking teams was too childish; Gakushu had the group count off by two's – he took the one's, Karma the two's. Only fair, since Karma had come in second on the midterms by a single point. They suited up, loaded up, and headed out. The course seemed straight out of a video game – lit only by dispersed blue and red neon lights, the terrain was built from cube blocks of varying sizes, padded in foam for the sake of insurance, odd angles and an almost labyrinthine design for the sake of fun.

Gakushu's advantage was instant, and obvious. Karma's role as 'crazy guy of the grade' cost him when it came to knowledge of his peers – meanwhile, Gakushu knew every student, and exactly what they were capable of. Three were out within the first five minutes, Karma's team at an immediate and serious disadvantage. First blood was Gakushu's.

As the groups spread out, though, casualties suddenly dropped, and Gakushu was struck with the realization that, yes, he knew what every student was capable of, where they were best deployed,
and what they could be counted on to achieve.

Except Karma. Nobody knew Karma. He was the ultimate wild card, striking fast and hard, and taking out two of Gakushu's team before he could employ the defense he'd begun building. Rallying his group, Gakushu reassessed his flanks, and decided to move in a spread phalanx. It was no hardship for Gakushu to sacrifice a few minions for the sake of information. Sure enough, he lost two more players, but now knew that the bulk of Karma's forces were centralized on the right side of the course, having chosen the rougher terrain for the benefit of cover. Quick adjustments and unquestioning obedience had Gakushu's team moving in a pincer that snapped closed like the jaws of a trap, plucking three more from Karma's roster.

But then, Karma's advantage of terrain came into play. The remainder of his team dissolved into the forest of cubes, and Gakushu was again, literally and figuratively, hunting in the dark. They caught a pair, though, the offense bringing Ren within sight as they advanced. Here, familiarity and solidarity were the ultimate advantage, and the two of them worked in coordinated, practiced tandem to decimate the rest of Karma's team.

Except the leader himself.

Karma was nowhere to be found. And then, the assassinations started.

One by one, Gakushu's team of six was picked off, and there was a unanimous thread among the fallen – they hadn't seen it coming. Confused and shaking their heads as they abandoned the field, Gakushu couldn't help the sensation of being stalked as he and Ren tried to hunt down the final opposing player. His… fuck buddy? Lover? Opponent that he sometimes had sex with?

So distracted by that sudden, impossible thought, Gakushu barely dodged and rolled in time to avoid the shot that took out Ren. Taking cover behind the edge of a large cube, Gakushu fought to shake off the lust and confusion, and focus on Karma. And, God, wasn't that a dangerous, delicious task.

Karma had been well-aware of his disadvantage from the start. It had tickled him, actually. What had been such a powerful benefit during the Civil War was now turned against him; Gakushu was the one who knew what his troops could do, probably better than they themselves. And he deployed them with the polished skill and tactics of a born general. But Karma had been learning and growing in the time since his and Nagisa's friendship had been at its most fragile, not just resting on his laurels. And because the situation called for it, he adopted his friend's strategies with relative ease.

He'd appointed Shindo as his field commander, since, as a popular student and captain of the baseball team, he knew his classmates and was experienced enough to manage leadership. Funneling his directives through Shindo, Karma had been waiting and watching, taking the ultimate high ground – a massive stack of cubes that he was fairly certain was absolutely not meant to be climbed. And then, when it seemed that there were no more moves for his team to take, their abilities played out and their ranks depleted, he slipped into the fray.

They weren't Nagisa. They weren't Karasuma, or even Chiba or Hayami or Itona. They were just… normal.

Except Gakushu – part of his attraction to the president was that the guy was perpetually exceptional. Even caught by surprise by someone who had spent an entire year training in the art of combat and assassination, Asano still managed to dodge a kill shot. But now, it was just the two of them.
Exactly the way Karma had wanted it.

Abandoning his comm, Karma completely focused on the task at hand, shadowing Gakushu's moves through the cubes. The guy was fast, calculating as he ran, circling around as he tried to catch the edge of Karma's vulnerable flank. Karma hadn't been the only one who'd learned from the many encounters between their classes that last year in middle school; it was only a recoil more instinct than intent that had him dodging Gakushu's assault. The reason it got so close is that it came from up high – the president had gone off-road, clambering over the uneven terrain to get a better, unexpected vantage point. That bout of pole toppling, it seemed, had stayed with him.

But, in the end, with skills so closely matched, it came down to the benefit of experience. And sex. Irina would be the first to confirm that sex was always an advantage, if you played it right.

Karma analyzed as he sprinted, and he was quite pleased with just how close he'd been – just as Gakushu dashed down a corridor, Karma barreled in from the left. Crashing into Asano like a freight train, he sent them bouncing against the padded wall in a deeply shadowed corner, and suddenly it was all hot breath and coiled muscle. So Karma, true to his nature, did what he wanted; he kissed Gakushu with a determination and urgency that had them both going blind.

Lips and tongues and teeth madly clashed, Gakushu's vision going brilliantly white before sinking again into the thick, velvety dark. Adrenaline still coursed through him like acid, spearing into his muscles and scorching arousal along his skin. He was still a little stunned from the collision, and the way Karma was kissing him was less about attraction – Gakushu couldn't quite believe it, but he was being conquered. So he kissed back, savage and certain and seeking, hungry for more, stunned by the feast he suddenly found himself hip-deep in.

Hands were occupied or pinned, so it came down to the press of mouths and bodies, legs tangled, hips shifting restlessly. Gakushu's throat went thick, drowning in the scent of strawberries and sandalwood and the sting of sweat. Astonishingly, he forgot – where he was, what he'd been doing, why this was dangerous and careless and a show of vulnerability he couldn't afford. The only thing that stayed strong and bright in Gakushu's mind was who he was with, and why it felt so damn good. And the two were intertwined, tangled in his brain like a bundle of bright, brassy strings.

So focused, he didn't cue into the light tap against the chest plate of his vest, nor did he hear the sharp snap of plastic. What Gakushu did finally hear, though, was the trilling in his ear from his comm – it was the sad, descending notes that announced he'd been tagged. Karma's lips, body, and presence were suddenly gone, and Gakushu's eyes flashed open to see the redhead strolling away, idly wagging his pistol in the air, leaving Gakushu sagging against the wall. Karma paused, and glanced over his shoulder with a Cheshire grin.

"Looks like the win goes to me, Chief." And then he lazily ambled away.

Gakushu told himself it was because he was thinking, but a major reason he didn't straighten and follow right away was because he was still waiting for feeling to return to his rubbery legs. However, his mind was indeed racing. The son of a bitch, Gakushu thought wonderingly. Karma had smashed into him like a rhino, pinned him against the wall, kissed his brains out, shot him point blank in the chest to snag the win, and strolled away. The balls it took. The sheer nerve. He'd be pissed, Gakushu could admit to himself, if he wasn't so fucking impressed and turned on by it.

No one would say Karma was still waters. A restless river, maybe. Vicious rapids, peppered with hidden rocks that could gut the bottom of your boat like claws. As shallow as he liked to play it, though? No, Gakushu admitted as he finally straightened and headed back to the rest of his class. There were depths there, practically untouched and impossibly lethal to reach. But Gakushu was starting to hone in on the fact that he potentially wanted to go there – wanted to plumb those
depths, to peel back the layers of bravado and brazen nonsense that guarded something… more. He'd probably die in the process. But, he thought with a wicked grin curling over his face, it would probably be worth it.

The midterm reward trip marked the beginning of a strange period for the second years at Kunugigaoka High School. A predator was suddenly brought into the fold, and the only reason it didn't cause rebellion was because it had been sanctioned by their fearless leader.

Karma Akabane became a fixture at Gakushu Asano's side. Those who had attended middle school with the pair were reminded of how Gakushu had arrayed the satellites of his Virtuosos around him. And while Ren still reigned from his standard place to the president's left, the most unlikely – and yet, ironicaly, likely – of faces now stood at his right. It wasn't anything official, and Karma still shirked responsibility the way water ran off a greased duck. But when there was free time to be had, instead of lurking around the school's dark corners causing chaos, Karma inevitably drifted to the president's side, where they bickered and snarked.

Karma set fires; Gakushu put them out. Karma started fights; Gakushu ended them. Karma still wore his mantle of bully hunter with ghoulish delight; Gakushu now brought an official hammer as the finishing blow against those who targeted the vulnerable. Not a single student would dare claim that the redheaded psycho was tamed, or that their president was tainted. But there was a strange new level of leadership and madness that settled over the school. And, by and large, the student body didn't think it was that bad.

A week after the bout of laser tag, Gakushu and Karma were in the deserted biology lab, grinding through hydrocarbon equations – well, Gakushu was. Karma was doing… stuff with chemicals, and Gakushu was doing everything in his power not to nag and flutter like a worried mother hen. But the latest flash and bang was the straw against Gakushu's back; he stood with a screech from the lab stool, hands planted on the counter as he glared at Karma, who grinned back with a disgustingly innocent expression, even as fumes that smelled like burning metal cleared.

"You're trying to blow us up, aren't you?"

Karma chuckled, rolling his eyes as he measured something into a volumetric flask already containing a blue liquid, swirling it and watching it change to inky black.

"What makes you think that? I know what I'm doing."

Gakushu growled low in his throat as he rounded the edge of the table and advanced, watching with a swirling mix of dismay and appreciation as Karma tapped in flakes of something shiny, and the liquid in the flask sparked on contact, then began to bubble.

"Do you? Because if you end up toasting the school in an explosion, I'll wring your neck. Assuming, of course, we manage to survive the blast."

Karma smirked as Gakushu got closer, raising the flask to watch the reaction closely even as he idly snorted and continued.

"Please. I wouldn't be so stupid as to blow up my boyfriend."

Gakushu froze, staring at Karma. What?

"Did… you just call me your boyfriend?"

Now it was Karma who fell still, paralyzed as his gold eyes went wide. Stunned, Gakushu watched
as color spread across Karma's cheekbones, the first time he'd ever seen Akabane affected by the curse of the fair-skinned. He couldn't bring himself to move until he saw Karma's throat bob, his mouth opening, curved cruelly, about to shatter this moment in a move of desperate defense.

"No." He lunged forward, plucking the flask from Karma's hand and setting it down with a clink on the countertop. "Don't."

Gakushu yanked at Karma's shoulder, spinning him around before shoving him back, Akabane's hips colliding with the edge of the counter. Still, though, those wide, glittering eyes didn't so much as flicker from the inevitable pain, stunned and vulnerable as they gazed into Gakushu's. That magnificent brain had ground to a halt – and it was because of Gakushu. He didn't know if he was pleased or horrified. But he had to see this through, had to know.

"Don't make a stupid joke. Don't run, not from me. Did you just call me your boyfriend?"

Frantically, Karma's eyes searched his, looking for something Gakushu couldn't begin to guess at. There were glimmers of fear and uncertainty, thrill and calculation. Slowly, apparently seeing whatever it was he needed to, a crooked smile bloomed over Karma's face.

"Yes?" His voice pitched high, wincing a little in a play at self-deprecation and humor that could sap the answer of its power if that's how this ended up shaking out. It was all the vulnerability Karma could choke down packed into that dumb, forbidden joke. Gakushu's mind was racing, processing subterranean layers of possibility, refusing to settle for whatever it was Karma allowed to blip along the surface. When he continued, Karma had mellowed just the slightest at the absence of immediate, negative response, the tiniest edge of hope and question and fragility audible in his voice, likely because Gakushu was desperately listening for it.

"Is that what you want?"

It was more than he could bear; feelings too vast to fit within his skin. So Gakushu answered before he thought through every angle, every outcome. It felt… freeing.

"Yes. Just you and me."

Holy shit. Silently, they could do nothing but stare at each other.

Holy shit! Karma finally broke the stunned stalemate, reaching up to gently thread his fingers into the hair at Gakushu's temple.

"Just you and me." The confirmation was quiet, and spoken with absolute certainty. Then Karma tipped forward ever so slightly, brushing their lips together like feathers – delicate and soft and light.

It was slow, sweet, weird. For a moment, the rage and lust and fire were gone, leaving the most fragile and mild of ash in its wake, the kind that whispered, that stayed warm. They had tilted into each other on an invisible tide, and Gakushu couldn't help but stare when the ebb pulled them away again. He couldn't say for sure what the hell he was doing. It was stupid, and fantastic, and bound to be a hell of a ride. It was… more. And it was beginning to dawn on him that he'd always wanted exactly that.

It was too much, Karma simultaneously feared and anticipated. He'd been careless, and instead of losing it all, everything he hadn't quite known he'd wanted had fallen into his hands. It would be so easy to be terrified, and it was too simple to be elated. Karma didn't know how to be this way. So much at stake, and none of it anything he could secure with strength or smarts. Before he could
undo everything a wandering mind and a hell of a dice roll had done, Gakushu leaned in to whisper in Karma's ear.

"Come over tonight. I'm amenable. To switching things up." A chant of greedy yes's marched through Karma's brain, but it wasn't just that. Gakushu was his boyfriend. Karma didn't know what it was like to have sex with a boyfriend.

Running the palm of his hand from Gakushu's throat to his shoulder, down his arm to his wrist, Karma finally laced their fingers together. He felt the surprise he saw in Gakushu's eyes mirror the whisper he felt within – this was nice. Who the hell would have thought that Karma Akabane could like nice?

Would he, though, if it was anyone except Gakushu? Could he? No, Karma decided. He liked nice with Gakushu because they usually weren't. Because they didn't need to be. Below the burgeoning wave of arousal was something deep and dense, too unwieldy for Karma to get his fingers into. But it was there, pressing against the backs of his eyes, suffusing him with a power that felt almost cosmic.

The grin that moved over Karma's face was pure wickedness, wild and savage and teeming with promise.

"Yes, sir."

Chapter End Notes

Hi, kids! No smex yet, but lots of kissing, so that's something. Yay for kissing! I'm in school, a bad author mom, and feeling a little glum, so I looked to the Crimson Beasts to cheer me up after closing in on an AssClass rewatch I started months ago. Hammered this out, so it's probably hella rough – apologies.

PSA: Practice lab safety! Karma is an idiotic, sadistic genius! Do NOT do what he does, no matter how sexy it is, even if it garners you a defined relationship status!

Hope you like it!

Love, Tango

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