smile for a smile

by chivalrousamour

Summary

Tsumiki Mikan lived to save others. Her heart never faltered in the line of duty, and to be honest, she would feel more comfortable in a hospital room than her own wedding. But unfortunately for her, there’s an exception to everything, and this exception is a baby-faced heir to the biggest Yakuza family in Japan!
Meet The Scared, Stuttering, Super Sugar Sweet, SHSL Nurse!

Tsumiki Mikan was no stranger to fear. Heart-pounding terror pretty much invited itself into her mind one day and never left, filling her days with flinching at mundane things and screeching. It was like a roommate at this point. A very rude, very cruel roommate who loved to fill her bed with spiders and replace her cereal with nausea-inducing anxiety. If it weren't an extended metaphor, Mikan would have kicked Fear out a long time ago.

(Or tried to, anyways. The nurse wasn't known for her courage, and for good reason. Asking favours was far above her capabilities, let alone something as nerve-wracking as the most-definitely-on-the-far-end-of-the-rudeness-and-courage-scale action of demanding someone leave her home- er, mind.)

But in all her years of having Fear as a mental roommate, Mikan never had a time where her heart faltered in the line of duty. She lived for saving others, she trained and studied until she was at the point of needing medical attention herself. She honestly would be happier and more comfortable in a hospital room than her own wedding.

There was a certain rush in saving someone's life, something empowering, something in knowing that she was the one thing keeping her patients alive that gave Mikan a burst of pure energy and joy. They depended on her. They needed her and that alone made Mikan's heart soar and lips quirk into a smile. Mikan thrived on that euphoria, that feeling that, for days and weeks at a time, completely overthrew her fears. Like an angel descending from the heavens to save poor, helpless souls from the brink of death, if she was allowed to think of herself that highly.

('T-that was thinking too much of m-myself, wasn't it?! I'm sorry, I w-went out of line! Please, punish me a-as you wish! F-feed me worms i-if you want! Anything at all!')

Unfortunately for Mikan, there was an exception to everything.

As she continued her march down familiar hallways, her heartbeat completely overwhelmed every other sound. Mikan's hands shook, her grip on the box she had brought slippery from sweat. Her stomach seemed to be tying itself into knots, twisting and turning until Mikan was sure that she might have contacted some sort of flu. Fear must have been feeling extra sadistic today.

But still, Mikan kept moving forward, her body on autopilot until she reached her destination.

A wooden door, identical to nearly every other door in the hallway. The only particularly outstanding feature was the nameplate, stating the room's number and the occupant's name in simple black text.

'Kazuryuu Fuyuhiko'

Mikan gulped.

Her legs chose the absolute worst time to turn into useless lumps of jello, Mikan stumbling over her own feet and crashing into the door. She could hear the patient inside startling, screaming a loud 'WHO THE FUCK'S THERE?!' at the door. The contents of her box split all over the floor, forcing Mikan to gather them all up before entering.

A tense silence weighed down on her every second she wasted picking up the cargo of the box, the heart-pounding intensity of the situation not helped by the fact that she knew that he was listening, he could hear her every move, he knew she was there, there was no running now-
Mikan placed the lid on top of the box, taking a moment to gather her thoughts before opening the door.

‘Oh god I'm going to die get me out of here this is bad this is bad’

Alright, no to gathering her thoughts, forever and always. No more worrying from now until some very very faraway point in the foreseeable future.

If she hesitated any longer, she was going to panic and flee the scene. Mikan wasn't going to run, she had to be confident! She had to be strong! She had to search, deep inside her soul, look in the farthest depths and lowest lows, and find whatever courage she could scrounge up, and open that door-

"How long are you going to stand out there with your eyes closed like a dumbass?"

The box fell to the ground for the second time in fifteen minutes.

Mikan was also fairly certain that she yelped, but there was some room for doubt. Probably.

Okay, there wasn’t, but who could blame her?

The short, baby-cheeked, one-eyed boy with a broken arm staring at her from the doorway? He could ruin her life in a moment or even kill her if she did anything to displease him.

Because Kuzuryuu Fuyuhiko was the heir to the biggest Yakuza family in all of Japan.

Naturally, Mikan did not react well to one of the most dangerous people she had ever met suddenly slamming the door open and actually speaking to her. There was no way she could form coherent sentences around someone so intimidating, so she settled for picking up the contents of the box before saying anything.

Mikan dropped to her knees, the task of picking things up off the ground and placing them in a box made so much harder by her fingers deciding to go rigid at random times and making her drop whatever was in her hands at the time.

The Yakuza heir watched her fumble around, unsure what to do. He honestly didn’t expect that reaction.

Finally, finally, Mikan managed to get the contents of the box back in order. Jumping up as quick as a bunny on caffeine, Mikan stood ramrod straight, posture stiff and awkward as she avoided meeting her patient's eyes.

"I-I'm sorry f-f-for disturbing y-you, I-I'll ju-just l-l-leave this h-here, o-okay?" Mikan shoved the box into the young Yakuza heir’s arms, running off.

"Wait, what the fuck are you...?" Kuzuryuu trailed off upon realizing that the nurse was already out of sight and most likely out of earshot.

Shutting the door, Fuyuhiko opened the box, setting the lid down on his bed as he went through the contents of the package.

It was a bunch of Yakuza films, blank DVDs with names written on them in permanent marker. A folded note had descriptions of each film’s plot written down in small, narrow letters.

"What the hell...?"
"S-so, how d-did you like the m-movies, K-Kuzuryuu-san...?"

... 

"T-that's great! I-I'll d-do m-my best... so, u-um, please d-don't worry...?"

The wall didn't answer (though it would be creepy if it did), leaving the room in an uncomfortable silence.

Mikan sighed. While storage rooms were excellent places to hide and calm down if you were panicking, they were awful practice conversation partners.

"T-though, I'm the o-one trying to practice a-a normal conversation with a wall..." Mikan muttered to herself.

"What if this isn't even close to enough? What if he hates me now? I should have refused to be his nurse! He could have me killed for boring him! Ah, Nanami-san could probably handle this better than me, she doesn't need to talk to walls to talk to actual people-.'"

Mikan's thoughts/self-loathing were interrupted by knocking on the door.

"Hey, Mikan, it's me, Hajime. Mind if I come in?"

Mikan relaxed, just a little bit, from the familiar voice. With a stride slightly more confident than it would have been a few seconds earlier, she opened the door.

Hajime stood in the doorway, grin on his face and trademark antenna hair sticking straight up, almost spikier than usual, if that were possible. He was still wearing his uniform from the pet shop, a green apron draped over jeans and a coffee-brown t-shirt. The words 'Tanaka Empire' just below the store's logo of a lighting bolt inside a circle took up most of the apron's chest, like Hajime was a walking billboard for the establishment. Hajime must have left for the hospital immediately after ending his shift, forgetting to even change his clothes. Mikan wondered if he would get yelled at for taking the apron with him, before pushing the thought out of her head. Better to not jinx it.

"Ah! Hello, Hajime-kun," Mikan smiled up at the taller man, who returned her grin.

"Nice to see you again, Mikan."

"Are you here to visit Komaeda-san again? Or is it Nanami-san's turn today?" Mikan suggested jokingly, before worrying that her words might have been taken the wrong way. "Er... that was a joke, I didn't mean to imply anything r-rude!"

"It's fine, you didn't do anything wrong," Hajime reassured her, still smiling. The smile was good, the smile meant that he was still entertained and happy. Mikan calmed down a bit, sighing in relief. "To answer your question, it's Komaeda, but I was planning on talking to you and the other nurses after lunch."

"O-oh!" Like a flash grenade going off in her head, an idea entered her brain and left her mouth in less than a second, the desire to contribute to the conversation overriding all of Mikan's normal reservation about things like speaking to other living human beings.
"Mioda-san recently took it upon herself to take care of a recovering child abuse victim..." Mikan grinned, remembering the series of events she had been witness to the other day after retreating from Kuzuryuu's room. "She ran around with that wheelchair so fast that I thought they were going to crash into a wall...!"

"Well, that's Ibuki, alright," Hajime said with a snicker, not having to struggle at all to imagine Ibuki doing such a thing. Actually, it was almost frightening how easily that image came to mind. "So what else happened yesterday that I didn't hear about?"

"A-ah..." The nurse faltered a bit, the first thing coming to mind being her horrendous first impression.

Of course, Hajime noticed.

"What's wrong?" He asked, concern replacing his easy-going smile from earlier.

"I-it's fine! You d-don't need to w-worry a-about me!"

It should be noted that Mikan was awful at lying. Any attempt at deception was accompanied with a shaky smile to try (and fail) at hiding her panic, along with her waving her arms back and forth like a windshield wiper. It was almost comical how bad she was, if you didn't find it pitiable.

"Mikan, if it were fine, you wouldn't be hiding in a storage closet an hour before your shift talking to a wall."

"W-well, t-t-that's, uh... I-I mean..."

"We're friends, remember? You can tell me about it," Hajime smiled at Mikan once again, hoping to send the message that he was ready to listen, and that he would do his best to help.

It worked.

Mikan took a deep, trembling breath, and began to pour her heart out. Her fear of Kuzuryuu hating her and ruining her life, the ways she feared he could torture her, her clumsiness, Hajime listened to it all. He was silent the entire time.

Another comment about how pathetic she must have looked was interrupted by a gentle hand on her shoulder, Hajime smiling reassuringly at the nurse.

"I'm sure he doesn't hate you, Mikan."

"H-how can you s-s-say that?!"

"Hey, calm down," Hajime spoke calmly and softly, trying to placate Mikan. "Why don't we visit him again, and talk this out?"

"He'll h-hate me! H-he p-probably does already!"

"Mikan, breathe."

"And if I-I mess u-up again, he'll-"

"Mikan," Hajime's voice cut through her words, forcing Mikan to stop and listen. "Demonstrate pursed-lip breathing for me, would you?"

"O-okay..." Mikan complied, sucking air in through pursed lips, exhaling through her nose. It went
on like that for a few minutes, until Hajime motioned for her to stop.

"Feeling better?"

Mikan nodded her head.

"Now, I'm going to visit Kuzuryuu. You're welcome to come with me if you want."

"W-what?! Y-you're going to-?!” Mikan paled, images of Hajime being shipped off to some other country or being beaten bloody coming to mind. She couldn't let that happen.

"Y-you can't! I-I won't a-allow it!"

"Well, it's a good thing I don't answer to your rules then," Hajime replied cheekily, heading for the door.

"W-wait! It's n-not going to e-end w-well at a-a-all!" The nurse protested, chasing after her friend as he stepped outside into the hallway.

"His room should be near Komaeda's, right? Since the rooms are organized alphabetically."

"Hajime-kun! D-don't shorten y-your life span like t-this! I can't h-help if it's caused b-by you a-annoying a Yakuza heir!"

"Well, we can only hope that I don't annoy him then," Hajime grinned even wider once he found the 'K' hallway, approaching Kuzuryuu's room despite Mikan's warnings.

"P-please! Don't! D-d-do! This!" Mikan pleaded, latching onto Hajime's arm in an attempt to slow him down.

It didn't work, resulting only in Hajime dragging her along as they got closer and closer to the Yakuza heir's room.

"Oh, we're here!" Hajime announced cheerfully, stopping right in front of Kuzuryuu's door.

"Hajime-kun! D-don't!"

There was only one option left.

Mikan threw herself in front of the door, blocking it off with her body.

"I don't think you're allowed to do that..." Hajime muttered to himself.

"T-that doesn't m-matter! Y-you're going to die i-if you keep going!"

"Well, you leave me no choice," And with that, Hajime lifted Mikan off the ground, tossing her over his shoulder.

"W-w-what?!" Mikan was completely disoriented, not expecting to suddenly be staring at Hajime's back and the floor. On the bright side, it let her notice the beautiful details on the tile she wasn't aware of before, like that crack shaped like a heart near the wall.

On the dark side, it meant that her last resort failed completely, and she and Hajime were doomed.

With a heart full of despair, Mikan gave up, slumping against Hajime's back as he opened the door. Goodbye to everyone. She and Hajime were goners.
"Hey, Fuyuhiko!" Hajime waved, greeting Kuzuryuu much too familiarly for someone he's never met. It would be understandable if it was Mioda, but this was Hajime we were talking about! He only tried to be friendly, not go 'OMG WE R TOTES GONNA BE BFFS FROM NOW ON' like Mioda!

"Hajime- What the fuck are you doing?! Is she dead?!

If Mikan's line of vision included the direction Kuzuryuu was in, she would have spotted the brief moment of surprised joy on Kuzuryuu's face. But her line of vision did not include the direction Kuzuryuu was in, so she was even more confused by the sudden switch from 'friendly greeting' to 'what the heck' on Kuzuryuu's part.

"I-I'm not dead!" Mikan announced, before regretting it. Now she couldn't just pretend to be dead if Kuzuryuu paid attention to her.

"So, why are you in the hospital?" Hajime asked, trying to make pleasant conversation despite the nurse draped over his shoulder getting dizzier and dizzier from blood rushing to her head.

'Oh god Hajime-kun why did you ask that he's going to kill you just get out of here-

"...A fistfight turned into a gunfight," Kuzuryuu muttered, almost ashamed.

"Oh. Did you at least shoot them?"

Wait wait wait when did Hajime say something like that as casually as he would say something like 'did we run out of orange juice?'

"Of course I did!" The Yakuza heir retorted, sounding deeply offended by Hajime's question.

"Waaah... d-don't k-kill him f-for asking that!" Mikan pleaded, hoping that maybe, just maybe, if she asked politely, Kuzuryuu would grant them just a bit of mercy...

"Oh, right!" Hajime put Mikan down, gesturing to the disoriented nurse. "Fuyuhiko, meet Mikan. Mikan, Fuyuhiko."

"Tch. How the hell do you know someone everywhere we go?" Fuyuhiko wondered, sounding both annoyed and amazed by Hajime's social prolificacy.

"W-wait, y-you know K-Kuzuryuu-san...?" Mikan was stating the obvious, she knew that, but honestly, it was so shocking that she needed to ask for clarification.

"We're brothers," Hajime said simply.

"In arms, dumbass!" Kuzuryuu added.

What.

Mikan gaped, her entire body shaking as she tried to comprehend what she just heard.

Hajime. Yakuza.

Her mind struggled to connect the two words, only to fail horribly. Somehow, her brain failed a task as simple as establishing an imaginary line between two words, like she was working in a crappy, lagging Photoshop. Seriously, her brain was pulling out all the stops, making her lines invisible or go in completely different directions, or crashing in the middle of drawing the line, or even cutting the computer in half to keep her from making the connection. The process was
stressful and annoying, and Mikan reacted exactly how most computers would react to overheating.

*Mikan.exe has crashed...*

"Shit! Did you actually kill her this time?"

"Of course not! She just... she just fainted. For no discernible reason."

"Oh goddammit."
"So. Let me get this straight," Ibuki started off, checking Mikan's breathing as she addressed Hajime and Fuyuhiko.

"You told Mikan-chan that you were part of Fuyu-chan's Yakuza family and she just fainted?"

"That's exactly what happened, Ibuki," Hajime confirmed.

"Do you seriously know everyone in this fucking hospital?!" Fuyuhiko demanded, crossing his intact arm over his chest and glaring at Hajime exasperatedly.

"Well, obviously Hajime-chan got familiar with this place, since his boyfriend is a long-time resident!" Ibuki winked, a huge grin on her face as she deemed Mikan alright.

"Wha-?! Me and Komaeda aren't-!" The brunette protested, turning hot pink faster than a rocket ship launching itself into space, which, coincidentally, was exactly what Hajime felt like doing in that moment. He heard space was nice this time of year, probably nice enough to spend an eternity up there to avoid Ibuki's teasing.

"Every single day~! Without fail~! Hajime-chan will be here to visit~!" Ibuki sang, clasping her hands around an imaginary microphone.

"Wow, you're more dedicated to this 'Komaeda' guy than you are to the family," Fuyuhiko remarked with a teasing grin.

Good god. Being set on fire would be less excruciating than whatever horrible hell the terrible tag-team of Ibuki and Fuyuhiko could unleash on him.

Fortunately for Hajime, Mikan chose that exact moment to wake up.

"Uwaaaaaaaaah..." Mikan groaned as she pushed herself off the floor, Mioda wrapping an arm around her waist to support her.

"Morning, sleepyhead!" Mioda cheered, wide grin plastered onto her face.

Mikan stared at her blankly, barely recognizing her co-worker, before glancing around the plain room.

Blue walls, blue bedsheets, blue curtains... the room was so monochromatic that Mikan was convinced she was in the ocean. The only things that broke the mold of blue, blue, blue were the small TV that was older than Mikan's mom on a white drawer and a stack of DVDs on the bedside table.

Sitting on the bed with a scowl on his face was the tiny Yakuza heir, along with Hajime, who was blushing, for some reason.

"W-wait! H-he-!" Mikan couldn't get any more words out of her throat, her tongue freezing in place when she remembered what happened.

And then she started screaming.
"W-waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

"Why the hell is she screaming?" Kuzuryuu demanded.

"Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!" Mioda shrieked, before adding, "I'm totally winning this screaming contest!"

"Both of you stop," Hajime ordered. Mioda fell silent, pout on her face, and Mikan soon followed suit.

"She's afraid of you," Hajime explained to Kuzuryuu, pointing at the trembling Mikan. "While she," He pointed at Ibuki, "is just being weird,"

"Don't call me weird! You'll hurt my feelings!" Mioda protested.

"No one gives a damn!" Kuzuryuu retorted.

"U-uh... I t-think I'll just g-go now..." Mikan muttered, making a move to leave the room.

"No can do, Mikan-roo!" Mioda blocked the door, almost exactly like Mikan did a chapter ago. Copycat.

"What?! W-why?!" Mikan wailed, staring at Mioda in horror.

"Because this," Mioda made a vague hand movement that consisted mostly of shaking her hands at Mikan and Kuzuryuu," is gonna be a problem!"

"What the fuck are you talking about?!" The Yakuza heir demanded.

"She's trying to say that Mikan can't be your nurse if she's fainting every time you say something," Hajime translated. Maybe he should quit all his jobs and take up a position in the translation business. Hajime already mastered the art of deciphering the complex language of Mioda-being-a-weirdo.

"T-that was o-one time!"

"So that's why!" Mioda struck a pose, one hand on her hips as she pointed at Mikan dramatically. "Operation Super Friendship Fun Time Suplex Hold, go!"

"What kind of name is that?" Hajime stared at Mioda, exasperated.

His question went ignored as Mioda grabbed Mikan and Kuzuryuu by the wrists, dragging them outside.

"At least she didn't grab Fuyuhiko's broken arm..." Hajime sighed, before following them out the room.

"Mioda-san..." Mikan whimpered, trying to stand up from her seat. "T-t-this is really dangerous...

Mioda pushed her back down, excited grin on her face.

"Don't worry! Just sit down, relax, and let the wheelchair race begin! That's an order!"

"There's no fucking way you guys are allowed to do this shit!" Kuzuryuu glared, refusing to have anything to do with any of this 'bonding' business. He moved to go back to his room, before Hajime
whistled to get everyone's attention.

"We could just ask Chiaki to play Mario Kart or something," Hajime offered.

"...that's an awful idea."

The quiet whisper startled both Mikan and Kuzuryuu, the pair shocked as the pink-haired nurse just appeared out of nowhere. Neither Hajime nor Mioda reacted much. Hajime too used to Nanami's sudden appearances to be shocked by them anymore and Mioda too busy pouting about her wheelchair race idea being vetoed.

"Mario Kart is an infamous friendship destroyer. Using it to base a friendship on is a horrible idea," Nanami clarified. "It would be better to play Smash or-"

"If we can't race with wheelchairs, we're going to race with virtual chair wheels!" Mioda declared, instantly brightening as a new opportunity to race presented itself. Her colourful demon horn hair bounced along with her, bobbing up and down eagerly.

"U-uh, i-it's not really necessary..." Mikan attempted to intervene, she really did, she did her goshdarn best okay? But either Mioda didn't hear her (impossible given that they were standing next to each other and that Mioda had hearing better than a bat) or just didn't want to respond to such negativity.

(W-wah! I'm s-sorry, I'm sorry! I'll t-try to be m-more positive! Please f-forgive me!)

"Don't say I didn't warn you," Nanami sighed. "Meet me in the break room at three."

"WHO THREW THAT FUCKING SHELL AT ME?!" Kuzuryuu demanded, nearly red with rage. Mikan scooted over on the couch, not wanting to be anywhere near in case he blew up. It didn't work much, Mikan only adding a few more millimeters of space between her and the boy on her left.

"Sorry, Fuyu-chan~!" Mioda sang, huge grin stretching across her face. Unsurprisingly, this made the volatile Yakuza boss on her right side even angrier. "All's fair in kart-racing, right?"

"SHELLS ARE NOT FUCKING FAIR YOU IMMORAL BITCH!"

"...you guys need to focus on the race," Nanami muttered impassively from her spot in first place. Mikan wished she could switch places with her, not just in the race. Nanami was the only one not directly beside Kuzuryuu, and thus had the highest survival rate once the volcano finally erupted.

"SHUT THE HELL UP BEFORE I SELL YOUR FUCKING ASS TO THE HIGHEST BIDDER!"

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"SHUT THE HELL UP BEFORE I SELL YOUR FUCKING ASS TO THE HIGHEST BIDDER!"

Kuzuryuu seethed.

Mikan whimpered from her position in dead last. This wasn't very friendly, was it? Death threats weren't usually common in Mario Kart, right? It was supposed to be a calm, fun game to play with your friends. Obviously there wouldn't be death threats in such a benign game.

"You all need to calm down," Hajime noted, watching the quartet race against each other from his spot on the armchair. Mikan tried to give him her controller, saying it was fine and he could play in her place, but he refused, reminding her that the entire race was for her and Kuzuryuu's sake. She couldn't refuse his refusal after that.
"I warned you," Nanami reminded them all, finishing the race a full minute before the others.

Somewhere on Mikan's left, there was ear-splitting swearing so loud that she was sure that her ear would ring louder than church bells for a week. Even Mioda, who blasted music deafeningly loud directly into her eardrums every second of the day she could get away with, winced at the screeching. Mikan didn't need to look to know that it wasn't Mioda or Nanami who caused the ringing in her ears.

Mioda crossed the finish line next, her brunette avatar letting out a cheer of joy as her orange kart finished the race. Despite being the second in their group to finish, Mioda ranked third overall, just behind the red-capped plumber himself and Chiaki's spotted mushroom character.

One kart, and then another crossed the finish line next, before Kuzuryuu's reptilian racer finished the race, the injured Yakuza heir himself grumbling about his poor performance.

Two minutes full of whimpering and crashing into walls later, Mikan's little green dinosaur finally crossed the finish line. As you'd expect, she was in last place.

"Somehow, I feel like it didn't work at all," Hajime muttered.

"Maybe it's because Fuyu-chan gets so angry and swear-y so easily?" Mioda suggested teasingly with a grin.

O-oh dear. Mikan instinctively shifted away from Kuzuryuu, covering her ears in advance. She didn't know how Nanami could ignore his yelling. Or how Mioda thought it was a wise idea to try to provoke the Yakuza heir like that.

"Why the fuck are you blaming me?!" Kuzuryuu's voice was so loud it made Mikan jump a bit, even though she took precautionary measures. A glance to her left revealed that Kuzuryuu had turned to glare at Mioda. Unsurprisingly, Nanami had somehow managed to sleep despite the noise. Somehow.

"Hey, hey, aren't you proving my point right now?"

"Just shut up already!"

Mikan thought she heard Hajime try to intervene in the pair's squabbling, before all sounds fell silent at the door opening wide.

A freckled redhead marched inside the room, high heels clacking against the floor as she strode towards the couch. She rose a pointed finger, looking like a teacher ready to scold her student. Mioda and Kuzuryuu stared at her, Kuzuryuu tensing like he expected a fight, while Mioda deflated, all energy draining out of her body in expectation of a scolding.

"Nanami Chiaki, your break ended an hour ago."

Nanami didn't react, still asleep. Mioda gasped dramatically, though Kuzuryuu still looked suspicious as the redhead continued chewing out the napping nurse.

A name tag clipped to the freckled woman's white blouse identified her as 'Koizumi Mahiru' and an employee at the hospital, even though Mikan didn't recognize her at all. She tried to match the name and face to one in her memories, only to come up short. Maybe Koizumi was a new employee? Oh, but then she would know her from a welcoming party of some sort...
Tanaka Gundham was not lost. He had simply... forgotten how mortals tended towards the complex and inane.

Curse those mayflies, for creating such a chaotic labyrinth! For a being so powerful, lowering himself to such a low astral plane was an ordeal, in and of itself. And though he could easily crush the building in the palm of his accursed hand, he had no particular desire to. No wish of his went unfulfilled, not with his unimaginable prowess, but it so happened to be that in this one case, there was an angel from above that he needed to visit...

Slowly, his scarred eye spotted what must have surely been a beam of light, sent by his mother-angel to guide him to her dwelling. A wooden door, a simple facade to hide the strings of fate drawing him to it. In plain text were the words 'Break Room' imprinted on the wood, but Tanaka Gundham was no fool! He could discern the true meaning in an instant with his Bloodred Eye of the Behemoth! Behind that false veneer, the gate led to the few beings that held the long-lost knowledge of the composition of the labyrinth he had found himself in.

After a few seconds of... mentally preparing to face regular creatures, he opened the door.

"It is I, the Dark Emperor!"

Mikan's confusion was replaced by horror as a familiar face barged into the room, almost knocking Koizumi over as mad laughter filled the room. He looked nearly identical to the man she sometimes saw in her nightmares. The heterochromatic eyes, the scar over the man's grey eye, the purple scarf, and even the bandage wrapped around his left forearm remained the same. His striped hair still curved in that strange, nearly impossible way, further cementing the fact that this was the same man.

("That... may have not been the best way to introduce myself,' Gundham thought to himself, watching as one of the four women in the room nearly fainted at his arrival. Another one was already unconscious, which... probably wasn't the best way to start off.)

The clothes were new, though. A grey overcoat and black pants covered most of his body, befitting such a suspicious person.

Fear took over Mikan's body for the nth time in her life, muscles freezing in place, lips quivering in an attempt to cry or scream or both, tears pricking at the corners of her eyes, heart pounding in her chest like it was trying to get the hell out of there, the entire package. She couldn't even speak, her voice dying in her throat like her hopes of escaping unscathed.

Fortunately, Mioda screamed it for her.

"IT'S THE CRAZY STREAKER GUY!"

"Fool! Do not address the future conqueror of this realm with such irreverence!" The crazy streaker guy bellowed back, pointing a crooked finger at Mioda.

"How did you get past security?!" Koizumi demanded. Mikan would be surprised by the fact that such a calm and composed woman would be shocked by the crazy streaker guy's entrance, if it weren't for the horror freezing her in place.

"What the fuck are you fucking doing," Hajime asked flatly, staring at the crazy streaker guy blankly.

(Tanaka Gundham was not going to ask for Hajime's help. He was not going to say that he freaked
out and slipped back into his 'evil overlord' persona again because Tanaka Gundham was fine and he could totally ask for directions and be an evil overlord at the same time.)

(No he couldn't.)

"No mere mortals can stand against me! The immeasurable powers of my Infinity Unlimited Flame can vanquish such meager opposition in the beat of a Rhopalocera's wings!" The crazy streaker guy cackled once again, at least until he was hit in the face with a pillow, knocking him to the ground. Mikan was ready to bet the entire hospital's budget that Kuzuryuu was the culprit, and Mikan Tsumiki was not a betting woman. But her guess was probably right, after all, who else would be able to throw a pillow so hard that it made a grown man faint?

(Mikan would have been drowning in debt if she actually bet on that. Never underestimate the power of an angry redhead.)

"A braggart who can't put his money where his mouth is, huh?" Kuzuryuu muttered, kicking the crazy streaker guy's prone body to see if he was conscious.

"I'm so sorry," Hajime said, standing from his seat to lift up the crazy streaker guy's body. "I'll get him back into his house."

"Wait, you know him too?" Kuzuryuu questioned, narrowing his eyes at Hajime.

"He owns the pet shop I work at during the day."

"W-w-w-wha...?" Mioda was completely dazed, jaw hanging open in a perfect oval as she watched Hajime toss the crazy streaker guy's body over his shoulder and leave the room.

Mikan was in even worse condition, almost ready to faint for the second time in two chapters. It may or may not be becoming a recurring thing.

Koizumi sighed in relief, though if you asked her, she would have definitely said it was out of exasperation. "Now that that's done, Chiaki-chan, will you please go back to work?" She glanced at Mioda as well, thoughtful. "Oh, Ibuki-chan, your break ended too."

Mioda jumped to her feet, even paler than she was when the crazy streaker guy burst into the room. "Okay, okay I'll go! Please not the ice!"

"Then get going already! Jeez!" The redhead rolled her eyes, only to smile slightly as Mioda rushed out of the room.

"T-the ice?" Mikan didn't mean to actually say that out loud. She immediately cast her gaze towards the floor, trying to make herself as small and inconspicuous as possible.

Mikan thought that the redhead was a stern, but gentle type! But to invoke so much fear in Mioda, who seemed determined to smile no matter what...

The thought of Mioda and Nanami huddling together for warmth in a meat locker appeared in Mikan's mind.

She froze as Koizumi turned towards her (pun not intended), before gulping and gathering her courage.

And she grew determined.
After all, if there was something awfully horrible happening to her co-workers, wouldn't it be her responsibility to uncover it?

But before Mikan could say a word, Koizumi smiled.

"You won't have to worry about getting ice dumped down your shirt if you continue being punctual, Mikan-chan." The smile remained on Koizumi's face as she patted Mikan's shoulder for reassurance.

'M-Mikan-chan?!' Mikan's face became a brilliant shade of red, her eyes focused on Koizumi, even as the freckled woman went to lift Nanami off the couch and leave.

"I'll see you later, Mikan-chan!" Koizumi called out, carrying Nanami out of the room.

"B-bye, M-Mahiru-c-chan!" Mikan replied. She wasn't sure if Koizumi heard her or not.

'I need to be extra friendly to her to make up for not knowing her!' Mikan vowed to herself.

"You guys get ice dumped down your shirts if you goof off for too long?" Kuzuryuu asked. Mikan had forgotten he was in the room for a moment, too ecstatic from Koizumi's friendliness to notice the Yakuza heir.

"U-um, it's never happened to me, but Mioda-san and Nanami-san seem to have gone through that already..." Unless Mioda-san was talking about something else involving ice. Mikan left that part out, unwilling to voice anything that might reveal her previous suspicions about M-Koizumi. Mikan had just met her and just started trusting her, so it would be a really bad idea to destroy that, right?

(And besides, Mikan was so giddy from the prospect of meeting someone so friendly, she immediately started mentally erasing all the negative aspects about Koizumi, writing them off as her being silly and paranoid.)

"Tch, are you the only responsible nurse around here?" Kuzuryuu scoffed, rolling his eyes.

"No, not at all!" Mikan exclaimed. "Nanami-san is our most efficient nurse, and she's so cool and calm and confident! And Mioda-san can always lift a patient's spirit!"

"Are you suddenly their fangirl or something?"

"N-no! I just admire them a lot!"

"...why?" Kuzuryuu stared at her, increasingly baffled by the fact that Mikan admired a sleepyhead and an irritating loudmouth.

"They're really cool!" Mikan confessed, smiling brightly. "Mioda-san and Nanami-san are always on top of things! And they're so reliable!"

"We are talking about the narcoleptic and the annoying chatterbox, right? Not some other people with the same names?" Kuzuryuu questioned, wondering if this entire conversation was some sort of prank or misunderstanding.

"Huh? Who else would I be talking about?" Mikan was the perfect picture of innocent confusion, placing her index finger on her chin as she tried to remember if she knew any other people named Mioda and Nanami.
"Uh, never mind," Kuzuryuu desperately needed to change the subject. He couldn't stand to hear anything else about the idiot pair's supposed good traits.

"Actually, I've been curious for a while," The Yakuza heir mumbled under his breath, before raising his voice so the nurse could hear him. "How do you know Hajime anyways?"

"Hajime-kun? Oh..." Mikan trailed off, already blushing from the memory. "It's... it's a long story," Mikan flinched and began stammering, "O-oh, but I can tell you if you want but-

"I want to hear the story," Kuzuryuu stated simply, ending Mikan's future run-on sentence right then and there. "Sides, it can't be that long."

"Oh, o-okay!

---

M-me and Hajime-kun were in the same literature class in high school. We even sat next to each other! We didn't talk much... o-or at all... but sometimes I saw him read some sort of book in the courtyard at lunch.

But a-anyways, we never talked to each other until the teacher found a book in the classroom and asked whose it was. Hajime-kun turned bright red, and right when I was about to ask if he had a fever, he just passed me a note that said 'Say it's yours. Please.'

I couldn't deny a request from a classmate in need, so I stood up and said it was mine. The teacher gave me a really s-scary glare and said that I shouldn't bring my manga to class.

Then, out of nowhere, Hajime-kun just burst in and said, 'No, it's mine! I asked her to get it for me since I was too embarrassed to say it, but if you're going to punish someone, punish me!'

...um, it gets a bit complicated here, s-so if you want me to stop-

-Okay, okay, I'll keep going!

And then Nevermind-san (a really pretty foreign exchange student) raised her hand to say, 'Sorry to interrupt this moment, but I think that's actually my copy of Shoujo monthly. Again, I apologize for the confusion.'

T-then... there was a lot of mumbling. And some screaming (though I'm pretty sure it was just some people at the back arguing.) Something about protecting someone and wondering if that was their magazine.

The teacher yelled at us for that... some- no, a lot of our class liked shoujo manga and people kept saying it was theirs and in the end the teacher brought it home and never brought it back? And then he said that anyone who could show him where to buy the magazine would get a boost to their grades...

Oh, but you d-don't want to hear about our teacher right? I-I almost forgot about Hajime-kun, I'm sorry-

Alright, um... after that... Hajime-kun apologized for getting me caught up in the situation because of him, so he offered to buy me lunch to make up for it. But I couldn't just let someone buy my food for me, so I bought him lunch too... And then everyone sort of wanted me to buy them lunch? So Hajime-kun picked me up and carried me to the ice cream parlor.
"And we've been friends ever since!" Mikan concluded with a bright smile.

Kuzuryuu... was just staring at her, looking like he had just witnessed the most ridiculous event in his entire life.

(A-actually, he hadn't said much during the story other than telling me to go on and asking who the heck Nevermind-san was s-s-so maybe he's regretting ever asking me in the first place? What d-do I do?! What if-)

"Wow. Fucking unbelievable," Kuzuryuu said, slicing through Mikan's negativity with only those three words. Mikan felt like she just got slapped with a wet newspaper, all previous thoughts erased by the cold shock.

Kuzuryuu was smiling.

True, it was tiny, almost invisible, but that wasn't important! What was important was that he was capable of smiling. She made him smile. The explosive Yakuza heir! Sir-Swears-a-Lot! Mr. Yells-at-everyone-every-single-day! He was capable of something other than irritation and rage!

Something about the thought of Kuzuryuu smiling brings a smile to Mikan's lips as well, and for once, she decides not to worry too much about it.

It was... nice, talking to him without fear of his temper.

'Maybe I can survive being his nurse after all.'

Chapter End Notes

komahina is a diversion b/c i don't want to write komaeda. komaeda would probably set everything on fire and laugh so hes not invited to the romcom shenanigans
He was supposed to be out of the hospital a day ago.

Instead, he was sitting in a cramped box of a room, completely bored out of his mind as the nurse sifted through papers slower than a snail dropped into a vat of molasses, impatiently waiting for this whole 'release form' business to be done and over with already. His fingers twirled the pen in his hold mindlessly, his working eye scanning the interior of the office to see if something interesting would pop up if he checked over and over again.

A picture of the 'Nurse of the Month' hung behind the desk, showing none other than the sleepy mug of that one video gaming nurse. Fuyuhiko wondered how in the world that narcoleptic, game-obsessed, ditz of a nurse could possibly be better than Tsumiki, who, clumsy as she might be, actually tried to treat patients, before pushing the thought away. It wouldn't help him at all to think about that.

Tucked away in the corner of a room was a bookshelf, most likely full of medical books. Fuyuhiko didn't exactly feel like standing up to go examine it, so he stayed seated.

His personal phone, wallet, and watch sat in a tray, sitting on the desk, ready for him to grab them and fuck the hell out of there. But the least he could do was have some common courtesy and leave legally, just to keep the hospital staff (+ Hajime and Peko) off his back. He had to keep himself from reaching out and grabbing his things, despite his qualms about leaving his belongings out in the open where anyone could go through them. Well, at least it was his personal phone, not his work phone, and thus, no incriminating evidence would be found if one were to go through that.

"U-um, one I-last thing..." Tsumiki slid another piece of paper over the desk, and out of habit, he almost signed his name on it, before stopping.

It obviously wasn't a form that needed his signature. It wasn't much of a form at all, just a sticky note that fit in the palm of Tsumiki's hand, numbers scribbled down in small, narrow script. He needed to focus to read it, and unlike the pages full of worthless shit he barely glanced at before signing, he was actually interested in finding out what it said.

"What is this?" Fuyuhiko asked, not sure whether to believe his eye, because it looked an awful lot like a-

"M-m-my phone number!" Tsumiki squeaked out.

Fuyuhiko didn't respond to that, prompting Tsumiki to elaborate.

"U-uh, not f-for any weird reasons, I swear! It's j-just for if, um, you n-need help w-with things b-because of your eye o-or arm, or something like that...?"

Fuyuhiko stopped listening after that, already fuming. Good fucking grief people. He only lost half his sight! He wasn't a fucking cripple, he could get by without your help, thank you very fucking much.

"Oh... y-you seem a b-bit... frustrated?" Tsumiki observed, before immediately shooting out suggestions. "Y-you can t-throw darts a-at me to calm down! I w-won't move a-at all! O-or, you can h-have my money!"

"Wha- No! Why the fuck would I want to do that?!" Fuyuhiko shouted, caught off guard.
"E-eeep!" Tsumiki dropped her paper, the sticky note landing by Fuyuhiko's foot. Rolling his eye, Fuyuhiko bent over and snatched it off the floor before Tsumiki could try to spend another ten minutes failing at picking something up off the ground.

He thought of rejecting it. He seriously considered tossing it back at her and leaving before she could say a word.

And then a voice in his head (which sounded suspiciously like his sister) reminded him that his social circle consisted entirely of family members, both blood and otherwise.

'That's fine by me. I don't need friends,' He shot back.

'That's called being PATHETIC, dumbass!' His sister's voice retorted, bringing her annoying-ass smirk to the forefront of his mind. Goddammit.

'Just take it, idiot.'

"U-uh, Kuzuryuu-san...?"

Tsumiki's voice brought him out of his mental argument, reminding him that yes, he was staring at a piece of paper like it held the secrets to the universe or some shit like that for at least a minute, and he probably looked stupid while doing it.

('When have you not, dumbass big brother?)

'Oh, what the hell,' Fuyuhiko thought, before grabbing his phone out of the tray. Thankfully, it turned itself on quickly, sparing him from the embarrassment of fumbling around with a dead phone and making himself look stupid.

('Stupider, you idiot.)

Three sharp beeps emitted from the nurse's side of the desk, before Fuyuhko pressed his thumb down on the disconnect button, cutting off the shrill ringtone in the middle of a fourth beep.

"There, I just called you. You should have my number now," Fuyuhiko told Tsumiki, before grabbing his things and leaving, no longer giving a damn about common courtesy. Judging from how she didn't stop him, he guessed he was clear to go anyways.

Fuyuhiko honestly didn't know how he got home from that point on. All he remembered was a blur, so exhausted by the stay in the hospital that he didn't notice he fell asleep until he woke up on his bed, fully dressed, and still worn out.

Pawing around for his alarm clock (or any way to tell the time, he wasn't picky), he grabbed his phone off the bedside table, checking the screen with a tired eye.

Instead, he was shocked awake, no longer caring about the time.

He had fifteen 'New Text' notifications on his phone.

What the goddamn fuck.
Kuzuryuu Fuyuhiko liked to think he was good at a lot of things. He would like to think he was a good chef, that he could beat his sister in Go, and that he was a calm enough person to not scream and swear at people when driving.

Now, note the words 'would like to' in the second sentence, because that entire sentence is a load of shit.

One of Fuyuhiko's actual strengths was his sensibility. He knew when shit was shit and when something was actually good, and he wasn't afraid of telling the truth to anyone, not even himself. Which is precisely the reason why he didn't even try to fool himself into thinking that he an above-average cook (he was only relatively decent, and only just barely), that he had any semblance of an idea what he was doing when it came to Go (he didn't), and that he wasn't yelling his head off at that slow-ass bitch who kept slowing him down a month ago. (He was totally ready to kill her.)

Some more of Fuyuhiko's strengths included; accuracy with a gun, pretty damn strong left hook, being great at blackmail, and knowing how to judge someone's character from a single glance.

Well, sometimes. While Fuyuhiko's skill with a gun and proficiency in both fights and blackmail were reliable, the last one was a bit...tricky.

He knew how body language worked, he could tell friend from foe, and who was carrying a gun, but actual personalities? Learning about people's nature from a single glance was difficult at best, and downright unreliable at worst.

It seemed to be the latter, he mused, sitting up in his bed staring at his phone.

Fuyuhiko might not have been great at the 'personality' part of body language, but he wagered he was good enough to know that Tsumiki was such a nervous wreck that she might have fainted at the thought of actually trying to talk to someone. Which made the idea of her sending him a text first, let alone fifteen, a bit unbelievable.

With a 'let's get this shit over with', he checked the texts.

[HEEEEEEEEEE EEEEEE FUYU-CHAAAAAAAAN! (≧∇≦)/❤]

What the fuck.

[DID YOU KNOW? MELONS ARE PART OF A HEALTHY DIET! /(^O^)/]

Apparently everything he thought he knew about Tsumiki was wrong.

[SO THATS WHY YOUABGHOAISDKALNPAL]
I'm sorry! Mioda-san stole my phone!

I didn't mean to bother you!

[uOOOOOOOOOIASHFLKAN STAGBOIH IAUHTKQBAWV GB]

I WAS GOING TO SAY THAT YOU SHOULD EAASNCXCMKRVWBK

...  

Wow.

Fuyuhiko skipped the next seven texts full of gibberish, presumably from whatever struggle the two were having for Tsumiki's phone. The very last and most recent one read:

[Sorry! I'll do my best to keep Mioda-san from bothering you again!]

Just ten minutes ago, Fuyuhiko noted, before sighing. If he didn't reply, Tsumiki would probably have a heart attack. But then again, she was at the hospital. If she did have a heart attack, Tsumiki would be surrounded by nurses and medical supplies.

Fuyuhiko didn't know when he started caring enough about the nurse to actually bother, before dismissing it. It was just so that she wouldn't flood his phone with texts demanding to know if he hated her or something like that.

Somehow, Fuyuhiko didn't believe himself as he typed.

[It's fine.]

The reply was immediate.

[Kuzuryuu-kun? Are you at home right now?]

[Yeah. Shouldn't you be working?]

[Well, me and Mioda-san are actually at home right now.]

[Together?]

[Me, Mioda-san, and Nanami-san are roommates. Nanami-san's shift is a bit later than me and Mioda-san's, so she's not home now.]

[Roommates, huh? Sounds annoying as hell. How do you put up with the two of them?]

[They're not bad people!]

[The more pressing question is how the two of them put up with me...]

[Don't say that. You're the most bearable out of the three for sure.]

[I wouldn't be able to tolerate the loudmouth or the narcoleptic for a minute, so the fact that I can bear with you is a miracle.]

It dawned on Fuyuhiko as suddenly as someone dropping an entire carton of eggs on his head. The horrifying revelation, the unwanted truth crept up on him so quickly he would think that it
materialized out of thin air just to surprise him.

He imagined it would happen like one of the godawful movies Tsumiki gave him. Fuyuhiko would be lounging in a swivel chair, legs propped up on the tacky wood desk like he had nothing better to do. Then, out of nowhere, it would creep in.

Fuyuhiko would smile, greet it inside while reaching for his gun, even pulling out a chair for whatever the fuck just walked into his old detective movie-style office.

“Well, well, if it isn't my old friend, the sudden realization that I have no idea what I'm doing.”

[I'm sure that you would become more tolerant of them if you got to know them better...]

[Not interested.]

Tsumiki seemed more willing to talk to him, Fuyuhiko realized. Her responses were much more than the screaming and flailing about he saw before. Just like when she was talking about Hajime.

He dwelt on this a second longer, before the chime of a new message brought his mind back to the conversation.

Fuyuhiko could get used to friendly conversations between him and Tsumiki. He had seen some of her good traits, like how she defended her friends automatically, no matter the situation, and how dedicated she was to her work. She was practically a bundle of nervous energy and stuttering, but she was still someone he would want to get to know better. Maybe.

[FUYU-CHAAAAAAAAAN HOW COULD YOUUUUUUUUUUUU ;A;]

Fucking hell.

[WOULD YOU GIVE TSUMIKI HER PHONE BACK ALREADY?!!]
Dear Dazzling Dashing Duo, You Down For A Dinner Date?

Believe it or not, Tsumiki Mikan does have a backbone. It's just that this backbone tends to disappear whenever Tsumiki is in a situation that requires it.

Unless the situation involves nursing. In that case, no one would be able to truly defeat her in a battle of determination. Yes, Tsumiki's nursing abilities extended not only to medical knowledge and skills, but also to how to approach patients. Some patients needed gentle kindness and constant reassurance. Some patients needed cold professionalism, while some particularly stubborn patients needed you to just out-stubborn them.

Tsumiki's veteran intuition informed her that Kuzuryuu Fuyuhiko fit right into the very last category.

Which is how Tsumiki managed to get into an argument with the same Yakuza heir that she had trouble speaking coherently around a few days before. A polite argument, of course.

"Will you fuck off already?!" Fuyuhiko yelled so loud that Tsumiki had to hold the phone away from her ear for a moment. "I don't need you to fucking cook for me!"

"You have a broken arm! You can't get anything made with a broken arm!" Tsumiki stated, before bringing her hands together to plead the Yakuza heir. "Please, just let me cook for you!"

"It's called a drive-thru, bitch!"

"But fast food isn't even remotely healthy!" Tsumiki's veteran intuition also told her that Fuyuhiko wouldn't appreciate a long rant/explanation on how bad fast food was, so she held her tongue. (No matter how much she wanted to make that speech.)

"Why do you even care!? I can take care of myself, so fuck off, asshole!"

Well, this wasn't working.

"Alright, fine," Tsumiki resorted to the second strategy against stubborn patients: bargaining. "Let me buy you dinner."

"...what?"

Unfortunately, Tsumiki did not have the social skills needed to realize that her proposition sounded a lot like a date.

"What the fuck are you trying to do?" Fuyuhiko asked, all anger in his voice replaced by cautious confusion. Unlike Tsumiki, he actually realized what Tsumiki's words implied.

"Trying to buy you dinner," Tsumiki replied simply. "Since you won't let me cook for you, buying you dinner would be the next best thing."

The best way for Fuyuhiko to sum up his feelings at the moment would be to type a bunch of question marks and hit send, but since it was a verbal conversation, the poor guy had to try to put that confusion into words.

"What- No- I," He sputtered out a few words, sentences that formed in his head that he wouldn't say out loud, before finally getting a workable question out in the open. "How did you even come
remotely close to that conclusion?"

Okay, it sounded a lot more like sarcasm than he meant, but can you really blame the guy? Tsumiki's subpar social skills threw him off like a wild horse tossing inexperienced riders to the ground.

"Er, well, if I bought you food, then I could ensure it's a healthy and balanced meal, right?"

'Is she playing dumb?!' "You could also just let me get my own food," Fuyuhiko 'suggested helpfully.'

"But how would I ensure that you're eating healthily?" Tsumiki paused for a moment. Fuyuhiko could hear another voice from her side of the call, though he couldn't identify who is was or what they said.

"Mioda-san says 'Hey Fuyu-chan, if you don't feel up to going on a date with a super smoking hot nurse, then Ibuki could totally come with!'" Tsumiki even tried her best to mimic Mioda's voice. It sounded more like a squeaky parrot trying to sing, but hey, she tried.

Then Fuyuhiko realized what she was actually saying. He might have to put up with the annoying multicoloured bitch even more.

The obvious solution would be to ask to talk to Mioda and speak politely. Maybe add that you would rather spend time with only Tsumiki. Unfortunately, Fuyuhiko Kuzuryuu didn't do 'polite'.

"Hell no! Tell that goddamn chatterbox that if she even looks in our direction, I'm going to hack her up and sell her organs!"

"U-Uh, I'll just leave it on speaker..." Tsumiki mumbled.

"Don't you dare leave me to talk to her!" Fuyuhiko snapped. "Just tell me where we're going and leave that demon-horned annoying ass bitch out of this!"

"Okay, okay! The park with all the bear statues! I'll show you to the diner!"

"Be there in the next fifteen minutes, or I'm out."

"See you there!" Tsumiki said cheerfully, before hanging up.

It was then that Kuzuryuu Fuyuhiko realized that he fucked up.

(On the other side of the phone line, Mioda was silently congratulating herself along with mental pats on the back. Mikan was confused, but Mioda was always weird, so she didn't question it.)

"Tsumiki, you're la- what the hell are you wearing?"

"Mioda-san picked out my clothes so I'm not sure if it's okay or not!" Tsumiki rambled far too fast to be coherent, pulling at the edge of her skirt like she was trying to stretch it out.

Fuyuhiko honestly wasn't sure what to say. He associated Tsumiki with her nurse outfit, just a blue t-shirt with blue pants, so seeing her in a (way too big) pastel pink sweater and purple pleated skirt was certainly... different than what he was used to. The sweater nearly swallowed her up, barely hanging on to her shoulders, and it covered at least half of the skirt, making Tsumiki look like she was wearing a lot less than she actually was.
"You look... nice," Fuyuhiko said, for lack of a better word.

"You h-hesitated," Tsumiki noted, fiddling with the sweater's sleeves anxiously.

"I wasn't prepared to see you like that, okay?!" Fuyuhiko averted his eyes, staring at one of the bear statues instead. Those fuckers were everywhere in the damn park.

It seemed to be smiling at him mockingly. Little bitch.

"I-I think you look nice in your suit t-too, Kuzuryuu-san," Tsumiki stammered.

"Thanks."

He was not turning pink. Not at all. Just a trick of the light.

The bear didn't seem to agree, instead continuing to smile knowingly. Almost teasingly. Fucker.

"So where are we going?" He asked after an intense stare-off with the stone bear.

"Oh right! Please, follow me!"

Turning away from that infuriatingly smug bear, Fuyuhiko walked beside Tsumiki. She kept sending him nervous glances, but he brushed it off. Tsumiki was always nervous.

"U-um, I'm sorry if this seems rude..." The brunette started off, staring at the sidewalk under her feet as she guided him out of the park. "But why are you wearing a suit? That seems a b-bit formal for dinner..."

(Mikan actually thought he looked a bit like a pirate. He had replaced his medical eye patch with a black one, decorated with a spiraling dragon. Even though his jacket and dress shirt covered up most of the sling, that did nothing to stop the pirate comparisons, especially when paired with the eye patch. He was officially the pirate. Mikan couldn't stop imagining him with a hook and a parrot after that.)

"So what? I just like wearing suits," Fuyuhiko replied, uncaring and not at all defensive. "You have a problem with my suit or something?"

"N-no! I think you look great!" Tsumiki replied far too quickly. "I j-just... kind of feel like maybe I didn't dress up enough for this..."

"You look fine," Fuyuhiko repeated. The only thing that stopped them from lapsing into awkward silence was the sound of their shoes clacking against pavement as Tsumiki guided them towards a parking lot.

"T-the food is really really good, so you'll like it, and I'm friends with the owner, so he usually gives me a discount and maybe he'll give you one too? But if he doesn't, just let me pay for it."

"No, you are not paying for me," Fuyuhiko retorted, rolling his eyes. "Just split the damn bill."

"T-the solution was that obvious?!" Tsumiki gasped, raising a hand to cover her gaping mouth. The sweater was so huge that the sleeve completely covered her hands, flopping over like bunny ears.

"Of course it was! Or it would be if you would stop trying to pay for me and actually thought about it," Fuyuhiko joked, a small smile on his lips.
"Or we could have just mutually agreed that I would pay," Tsumiki mumbled, even though she was grinning too.

The relaxing, calm, peaceful moment was shattered beyond the point of repair by a glass door swinging open suddenly and smacking Tsumiki in the face.

"Tsumiki, are you-" Fuyuhiko cut himself off, as a short, chubby guy in a chef's outfit rushing out of the doorway to help Tsumiki to her feet.

"I'm so sorry, Miss Tsumiki! I was so excited at the thought of seeing you, I rushed right over without looking where I was going!" He said before pulling the disoriented Tsumiki into a one-sided hug.

Fuyuhiko had two immediate reactions to the chef.

First, a triumphant 'He's even shorter than I am!'

Then; 'Is he groping her ass?!

"Uh... nice... to see you too, H-Hanamura-san..." Tsumiki mumbled, squirming away from the perverted fuckface clinging to her and-

-was he burying his face between her boobs?!

"Oi, what the goddamn fuck are you fucking doing, bastard!?" Fuyuhiko demanded, getting ready to punch that damn fucker hard enough to send him to Brazil.

"Oh hello, I didn't see you there!" The bastard separated himself from Tsumiki a bit to smile at Fuyuhiko. "I'm Teruteru Hanamura, owner of this establishment, and I'm so very glad to meet you!"

Fuyuhiko wasn't sure whether to beat him within an inch of his life or salvage his organs and then play target practice. He was also pretty sure his disgust with the way the shitty pervert refused to act like a human being showed, since Tsumiki looked like she was about to faint. Again. And maybe cry.

But that might have just been the fact that she was just manhandled by a little bastard fuckmunch, which only fueled the desire to fill the asshole son of a bitch with various bladed instruments.

"U-um, this-this is Kuzuryuu Fuyuhiko! I wanted to s-show him a good p-place to eat and, e-er, your diner was a good place to eat so I... figured 'why not?'" Tsumiki put herself between the two, trying to calm Fuyuhiko down. Her panicked rambling had an unexpected side effect, though. Doing absolutely jack shit.

Fuyuhiko was still livid, Hanamura didn't even seem to notice the blonde's murderous intent, and Tsumiki just felt awkward. This was going wonderfully.

"I'm flattered that you recommended our restaurant! Please, come in! I'll create my most delicious meals in honour of your visit!" Hanamura's smile widened as he held the door open for the pair.

Tsumiki had to stop Fuyuhiko from either storming off or rushing forward to punch Hanamura.

Fuyuhiko still sent the human pig a glare that pretty much just screamed, 'Keep your filthy hands to yourself or [The following dialogue has been removed in order to comply with Fanfiction .net's rules and regulations prohibiting the following: explicit violence, desecration of a dead
Mikan was beginning to regret everything. *Everything.*

There was noise all around them, so many conversations at the same time that only a few words and phrases stuck out from the buzz in the diner. Someone's aunt's cat was about to give birth soon. A sister comforted her brother over a loss at a track tournament. A family of seventeen hogged several tables and chairs to celebrate their fifth-eldest son's birthday and something about a business. She wasn't sure if that pair at the back were flirting or arguing, but they were certainly doing something.

All of which helped accentuate the *complete and utter lack* of conversation at her table.

Kuzuryuu was too busy glaring at the kitchen like it (or someone in it) had offended him. The cashier kept sending him nervous glances from over the counter, ready to either run or call the police. Behind the counter, Hanamura's mother tried and failed to hide herself behind the shelf. She also tried and failed to keep the fact that she was staring at them a secret. A high school boy kept pushing the saloon doors to the kitchen open a little, only to retreat back into the kitchen when he saw that Kuzuryuu was still glaring.

Gathering up all her courage, Mikan forced her words out, trying to *hopefully* start a conversation.

"U-um, Kuzuryuu-kun... you're scaring the e-employees..." *And me.*

"Good," He replied simply, not even looking at her. He didn't seem to notice that Hanamura was not in a position to notice his terrifying glares.

So much for that.

Mikan was wondering why she hadn't just let Kuzuryuu eat take-out food, before scolding herself. She was a professional, darn it. No slacking in order to accommodate your aversion to social interaction.

But wait a second, wasn't her goal to get Kuzuryuu to eat healthy food? Were conversations even necessary? It really didn't matter if they talked at all, as long as Kuzuryuu got some decent food in him (and besides he was sort of scary so she didn't know if she could talk to him at all)-

Mikan nearly bumped her knees on the bottom of the table from jumping. *She almost forgot about the food.* She almost forgot her entire reason for being there! What sort of nurse was she to somehow forget her work!? Oh, this was horrible-

"Hi!" A cheery brunette smiled at the two, startling Mikan out of her thoughts. Mikan actually jumped this time and quite possibly bruised her knees.

"S-sorry for scaring you! Are you alright?" The brunette exclaimed.

"Yes...! Please don't w-worry about me!" Mikan answered, despite the throbbing in her legs.

"Er, anyways, I'm Komaru, and I'll be your server today. Is there anything you want to drink to start off?"

"J-just water w-would be great," Mikan mumbled.

"I'm sorry, I can't hear you. Could you please say that again?" Komaru was trying to be nice,
Mikan could tell, but she did not need her to lean even closer because then she wasn't sure whether
she wanted to scream or flee. She was trying, but it was nerve-wracking. Mikan could feel the
judgemental eyes on her, even though she knew Komaru was looking at her with kind and caring
eyes. Mikan felt more sick than reassured. The pressure made her voice do the exact opposite of
what she was asked, her words barely even a whisper as Mikan felt like she was about to burst into
flames.

"Water for the both of us," And with those six words, Kuzuryuu officially became Mikan's saviour.
The pressure on her shoulders evaporated, she could breathe, the tears in her eyes faded away, the
sweat seemed to disappear, the tension in her stomach relaxed, her hands stopped trembling, she
was fine.

Kuzuryuu had managed to solve the problem without seeming to realize that there was a problem
to be solved.

Mikan didn't even notice Komaru disappear, instead working on trying to thank Kuzuryuu.

But, as you should probably know by now, Tsumiki Mikan has zero social skills whatsoever. Most
of what she knew about socialization came from her small circle of acquaintances and her even
smaller circle of friends.

Given that both circles involved people like Hanamura Teruteru and Mioda Ibuki, Mikan's
perceptions of what was socially acceptable and what wasn't was bound to get warped one way or
another. Really, this story should be in the 'A Series of Unfortunate Events' category.

"T-to thank you... um..." Mikan stammered and murmured and hesitated, before shutting her eyes
and forcing herself to say the words. Unfortunately, this meant screaming them as loud as she
could.

"I'LL DO ANYTHING YOU WANT ME TO! I'LL BECOME YOUR PERSONAL NURSE,
WEAR ANY OUTFIT YOU THROW AT ME, ANYTHING!"

Had it arrived by then, Kuzuryuu would have choked on his water.

Faintly, in the silence that fell over the entire diner, Mikan could hear someone whistle from the
kitchen.
"What in the goddamn motherfucking hell shitty ass bitch's gun are you talking about?!

"I-I'm sorry! I j-j-just wanted to thank you, body, heart, and soul!"

"That is not how you fucking thank someone!"

"Huh!? M-Mioda-san was lying this w-whole time?!

"Of fucking course she was! Who would want you to say stuff like that in public!?!"

"Hanamura-san?"

"Barring him, and barring that fucking ass damn horned weirdo!"

"...I can't... think of anyone..." Tsumiki admitted.

"That's because you save shit like that for when you're in private," Fuyuhiko clarified, completely exasperated with the entire situation.

'Palm, meet forehead. Fingers, meet hair. You better get used to it, since if she keeps this up, you'll be like that for a while.'

"I'm sorry..." Tsumiki muttered, barely audible over the whispering of the rest of the diner's patrons. Probably gossiping their heads off, the dumbasses. Fuyuhiko ignored that. He ignored the staff blatantly eavesdropping from behind the counter too.

"Just... don't do that ever again, please."

Kuzuryuu Fuyuhiko was a prideful man. He bowed down for no one, and you'd have to kill him and pose his body to even make it look like that had been the case. But Tsumiki Mikan was a weirdo in a timid shell, and he was desperate not to go through that embarrassment again. Desperate enough to say 'please'.


Just when he thought the oh-so familiar awkward silence would come in again, Tsumiki surprised him by speaking up first.

"Oh right! D-do you want to look at the menu!? I c-can order f-for you in case you're feeling nervous!"

...what?

Fuyuhiko's face was probably the perfect picture of incredulity. The world flipped upside down, despair was hope, hope was despair, fish flew through the deepest depths of space, yadda yadda yadda. Obviously that was what happened, since in what universe was Tsumiki the one who ordered for someone else because of nerves? If the world had taken its normal course, he would be the one extending that offer of kindness to Tsumiki, not the other way around!

"Um, Kuzuryuu-san, are you a-alright?" Tsumiki asked, fiddling with her sleeves in a display of timidity that perfectly proved his point.
"Just fucking peachy," Fuyuhiko answered, unable to hide his amused smile.

('U-Uwaaah! Is he l-laughing at me?! Did I do something wrong?!!')

"Actually, you can leave the ordering to me," Fuyuhiko offered, still grinning slightly as he set the lopsided world back in its proper place.

He didn't really realize the impact his words had on Tsumiki, but that was fine. What he didn't know wouldn't hurt him. For now anyways.

Mikan ignored the ominous bit of narration and tried to keep the conversation going. Thankfully, her words did not involve undressing, imitation of animals, getting hired as a nurse or a dartboard, consumption of strange insects, irregular hair cuts, smashing of crystal balls, painting on the wall with the blood of your enemies, bears, robot cosplay, cosplay in general, poison, soldiers, divas, hammers, bluffing, skewers, baseball, masks, disease, dancers, pop stars, animals in general, robotics, Russian roulette, bunnies, giant needles, space, love, hope, despair, or milk.

"This m-might not be the time to mention it, seeing how long it's been, but...um, did you like the Yakuza m-movies I picked out?"

Kuzuryuu's face fell, and Mikan had already began berating herself for bringing it up, before Kuzuryuu swore.

"Fuck! I forgot to return those!" Kuzuryuu slammed his fist down on the table, making the menus (and Mikan) jump slightly. "Ugh, look, I'll get them back to you next time."

"U-um, it's fine... those were rentals anyways, and I can pay off the fine."

"You're telling me I've been racking up debt for you this entire time?! Fuck, I, sorry, I'll pay it off for you!"

"No, it's fine! One hundred percent! Absolutely! It's okay!"

"No it's not! There's no way I'm letting you deal with-"

"I'm sorry for keeping you waiting," Komaru appeared out of nowhere, making both Fuyuhiko and Mikan jump. The waitress held two glasses of water, a dozen ice cubes and a twirly straw in both.

"But your water is here. Tell me when you're ready for the food, okay?"

"Thank you very very much!" Mikan called out after the waitress. Komaru gave her a smile and a wave before returning to the kitchen. The employees were all doing their work again. The cashier was no longer terrified and accepted a pony-tailed girl's money, Hanamura and his mother were chopping vegetables together, and that high school boy was accepting another table's order. Or... rather, he was accepting the orders of the seventeen-person family big enough to span several tables, and was clearly overwhelmed doing it. Poor guy. Mikan gave him an A+ for effort and an R for survival rate.

(Mikan did not notice Kuzuryuu mumbling 'thanks' under his breath, nor did she notice that most of the employees began spying on them again once she looked away. Everyone except the poor waiter being assaulted with multiple orders from every direction.)

"Does it usually take that long for water to arrive?" Kuzuryuu asked, flipping through the menu with one hand.

"Um, no, but maybe they wanted to delay it since you scared the cashier," Mikan suggested, along
with a healthy dose of implied 'so maybe you shouldn't glare at the cashier anymore?'. She already knew what she wanted to order, after so long of trying out the chef's recommendations, she finally found a favourite.

"Tsumiki, what do you want?"

"Tempura soba please!" Mikan exclaimed with a smile, before realizing that Kuzuryuu was looking at her weird. Or maybe it only looked that way because he was wearing an eyepatch. Either way, better safe than sorry. "S-sorry if I was too loud..."

"No, it's fine," Kuzuryuu reassured her before waving Komaru over.

"Ready for your food?" Komaru asked, grinning brightly.

"Tempura soba, kusamochi, castella, fried dough cookies, and anmitsu," Kuzuryuu listed off. 'Except for my order, those are all desserts! What happened to getting him to eat healthy food?!'

Komaru didn't seem to notice, and if she did, she didn't care about a nearly all-dessert meal. She just jotted it down and left with a "Your food will be coming soon!"

Before Mikan could even think about accusing Kuzuryuu of betrayal, he shot her a despair-inducing glare that could tear down buildings and wither plants, saying nothing but, "Don't. Say. Anything. Or your body won't ever be found." The efficacy of the glare and threat was not at all hindered by the Yakuza heir blushing while doing so.

Mikan immediately covered her mouth with both hands. Not even a whimper escaped her mouth. A few seconds of silence was all it took to convince Kuzuryuu to rescind that order. But he still said, "Just don't ask about my food."

"Um... h-have you ever killed anyone?"

"Yeah."

"Oh, okay."

"Wha- that isn't something a normal person would just say 'oh, okay' to! Why did you even ask that?!"

"I mean, you're Yakuza. It would be more surprising if you hadn't killed anyone," Mikan reasoned.

"But why would you ask that in the first place!?" Kuzuryuu demanded.

"I-I panicked and couldn't t-think of anything!"

"What, couldn't you have asked something like 'what's your favourite colour?', 'what kind of shows do you like?', 'what's your favourite season'?!!"

"You would just get a-annoyed if I tried to make s-small talk like that!" Mikan pointed out, fiddling with her sweater sleeves again. She left out the 'plus, would you even put that much thought into what kind of colours and seasons you liked?'

Kuzuryuu couldn't refute that.

"Ugh, fine. Tell me... about your family and stuff..." The blonde suggested lamely.
"You w-wouldn't want to hear a-a-about it! T-trust me!" Mikan flailed about, seemingly panicking about the mere idea of mentioning her family.

"Okay, then don't tell me about your family," Kuzuryuu pretended not to notice the sigh of relief Mikan let out. If she didn't want to talk about it, she wasn't going to.

"U-um, actually, I've been wondering about something!" Mikan hesitated a bit before voicing her question, hoping that it wouldn't offend Kuzuryuu. "Do gangsters really name their guns?"

"Some losers do, but the most don't," Kuzuryuu sighed. "You're never allowed to use those shitty movies as a conversation topic ever again."

"But I thought y-you liked them! You brought them home and forgot to give them back!"

"I just forgot to return them! That doesn't mean that I liked them or even watched them!"

"Wouldn't you have to watch them to know that they're bad?" Mikan pointed out.

"Yeah, I watched them and I didn't like them. End of story," Kuzuryuu concluded, crossing his right arm over his sling.

"What kind of movies do you like, Kuzuryuu-san?" Mikan had to be very very careful. She was on the verge of succeeding in getting Kuzuryuu to engage in an activity known as 'small talk'. However, given how her companion probably hated the idea of it, Mikan had to tread cautiously, in order to avoid setting him off and getting him to shut up entirely.

"You're not going to use this to get me a fuckton of weird movies, right?" At Mikan's nod, Kuzuryuu continued, cheeks turning red as he spoke. "I-I know it's weird, so don't you say anything about it! But... I like those buddy cop movies."

'He's so embarrassed about his taste in movies he starts stammering and blushing?!

"Everyone likes what they like!" Mikan reassured the Yakuza heir with a grin. "You probably wouldn't expect this either, coming from a nurse, but I love horror movies!"

"You don't get off on those weird snuff films, right?" Kuzuryuu asked, eyeing her suspiciously.

Mikan was about to answer that, only for Komaru to (finally) show up with their food.

"Tempura soba, kusamochi, castella, fried dough cookies, and anmitsu," Komaru listed off, placing each dish on the table as she said their names. "And as an apology for keeping you waiting for so long, Hanamura Diner is only charging you half price, on top of the lovely lady discount. You can pay when you're ready."

"T-t-thank you!" Mikan stammered at the exact same time Kuzuryuu asked, "Lovely lady discount?"

"It's clearly stated on the first page of the menu that all women with a cup size of B+ get a 15% discount," Komaru answered automatically, like she was used to answering that question.

Mikan had to stop Kuzuryuu from rushing over to the kitchen to punch Hanamura. Again.

She grabbed the fork that came with the castella and sliced out a small chunk of the sponge cake.

"Kuzuryuu-san!" Mikan called out, grabbing Kuzuryuu's attention and distracting him from his anger.
"Wha-" And then Mikan jabbed the piece of cake into his mouth. Thankfully, she didn't stab his tongue or anything vital. It would be really bad if she missed and stabbed his other eye.

The yakuza heir chewed, eye twitching as he swallowed it.

"What the hell?! It's too delicious!" Kuzuryuu exclaimed, snatching the fork out of Mikan's hand and beginning to devour the rest of the castella cake.

"U-um, thank you for the meal..." Mikan muttered sheepishly as she grabbed her chopsticks.

As usual, one bite of the tempura shrimp topping sent all her self control away.

"Uwaaaaaaaaah!" Mikan moaned, slurping up some noodles as fast as she could. The perfectly warm broth, the delicious noodles, the crispy tempura, all of it combined to make a super amazing flavour heaven! The tempura was first to disappear, Mikan snatching them up, one by one, admiring the way the flavour of the soup saturated the breadcrumb-coated shrimp, before gulping them down. Noodles were vacuumed up like debris near a black hole, only five times as fast.

('What is this, [CENSORED] no Soma?' Mr. Harassed Waiter wondered as he glanced at their table. 'They're not going to get the area wet, right?! I lost that bet with Komaru-senpai so I would have to be the one who cleans it up!')

Mikan and Kuzuryuu knew nothing of the poor sap's misfortune, continuing to scarf down their food. Kuzuryuu had finished his castella, pushing aside the cake plate to attack the fried dough cookies. Mikan annihilated the rest of the toppings, a deed that would get her monikers that told of her furious appetite and complete lack of mercy some time in the future. Maybe something like 'Maker of Widows', 'Master of Munching', 'Soul Reaper', 'Shrimp Slayer', or 'The Angel of Death'! Something like that.

'Too good! It's too good!' That was Mikan's last thought before grabbing the bowl and lifting it up towards her face, tilting it back to lap up every last drop of the broth.

("They... really like your food, Boss," Komaru muttered, uneasy smile on her face. "They're going to destroy the dishes at this rate."

"That's just a sign of my success as a chef!' Hanamura exclaimed, wearing a huge delighted grin. "I've created something that they both love, from the bottom of their hearts!"

"That's surprisingly normal and sweet."

"And I hope they're sincerely loving the feeling of losing their composure, completely dominated by the pleasure I'm pounding into them! They better love it so much that they beg for me to give them more!"

"-Never mind then.")

'I'm still amazed by Hanamura-san's delicious cooking!' Mikan marveled, basking in the food-induced euphoria. Everything felt warm and happy and safe, like Mikan was inside one of those little pillow fortresses she made when she was young, where she had fun and all the bad people who hurt her were outside. She would be surrounded by people who loved her and talk about whatever they wanted to talk about. No one would cut her hair or beat her up or ask her to be a dartboard and she wouldn't have to eat bugs or imitate animals or agree with something she didn't want to agree with or do bad things again. There were no bullies or Enoshima Junkos or Saionjis in her fortress. Mikan was warm and happy and safe.
'This is the power of Hanamura's cooking. The power of his dedication to bring comfort and happiness to all his patrons!' Mikan concluded, slightly teary-eyed with genuinely joyful grin on her face. Let's hope that for the sake of her innocence, she never discovers the truth.

"Dammit! The food's good, but the owner's personality is fucked up!" Kuzuryuu roared in frustration, pushing aside the empty container for the fried dough cookies. He grabbed the bowl of black syrup and roughly poured it over the anmitsu jelly it was paired with. "I would rather choke than give money to that bastard, but then I can't eat this stuff anymore!"

"Maybe you could kidnap him so you can get him to cook for you and you don't have to pay him," Mikan suggested, eyeing his anmitsu as the jelly and the slices of tangerine and peach absorbed the syrup.

"But then I would have to tolerate him," Kuzuryuu grumbled, stabbing at his food with his spoon. "And that's even worse."

Mikan would have responded, if she hadn't noticed something just then.

"If I ate it, would it be cannibalism?" Mikan asked abruptly.

"What?" Kuzuryuu paused, spoon full of jelly hovering between his mouth and the bowl as he stared at Mikan incredulously.

"W-well, I'm named after a tangerine, so i-if I ate one of those slices, would i-it be cannibalism?!
" Mikan explained, flustered from the combination of Kuzuryuu's stare and the fact that her food-induced euphoria was beginning to wear off.

"Is this your weird way of asking if you can try some?" Kuzuryuu asked, before taking his first bite of the jelly.

"You d-don't have to if y-you don't-!
" Mikan was interrupted by Kuzuryuu stabbing a piece of tangerine with his fork and jabbing it into Mikan's mouth. Copycat.

Either Kuzuryuu didn't like fruits or he enjoyed tempting Mikan onto the path of cannibalism, because after that, it became a small routine. A scoop of jelly for himself, a slice of fruit for Mikan, repeat ad nauseam. Or at least until Kuzuryuu ran out of anmitsu. Which was sort of inevitable, considering that there was no way of creating infinitely respawning jelly outside of One [CENSORED] Man and video games.

"Damn, it's all finished," Kuzuryuu muttered.

Mikan, who had opened her mouth expectantly for the next slice of fruit, pouted petulantly. Then, she abruptly stood and dashed over to the cashier, already pulling out her wallet.

"Wha- hey!" Kuzuryuu tried his goshdarn best to catch up with Mikan, but Mikan had already reached the cashier and was in the middle of slamming bills down on the counter. The wonders a headstart and long legs will do for your dash speed.

"What happened to agreeing to split the bill?!" Kuzuryuu demanded.

"What happened to eating healthy food?"

"Sorry for interrupting." Komaru said with a smile, not looking sorry at all to break up the potential argument. She held a small take-out container in a plastic bag. "You forgot your kusamochi."
"Thanks," Kuzuryuu muttered as he accepted the container, giving Mikan the chance she needed to finish the transaction.

"You're not going to eat it?" Mikan asked, both because she was curious and because if Kuzuryuu was distracted, he wouldn't notice that she paid behind his back.

"It's for Hajime," Kuzuryuu clarified, beginning to walk towards the door. Mikan followed him happily, grateful that her plan worked.

"Thank you for eating at Hanamura Diner!" Komaru called out after them, waving.

Both Mikan and Kuzuryuu turned to wave back, behind heading out the door.

"Wasn't the downpour... supposed to start at 11 pm?" Mikan stared at the harsh rain in shock, while Kuzuryuu immediately looked like he smelt rotten oranges.

"How long were we in that diner?!"

"T-there's no choice," Mikan muttered to herself, before turning to Kuzuryuu. "Wait here! I'll be back soon!"

"Wait, what are you-" Kuzuryuu didn't even manage to finish his sentence before Mikan took off running again, dashing through the rain while shielding her face with her arms. He was only stunned for a moment before giving chase. "TSUMIKI WHAT THE FUCKING HELL ARE YOU DOING?!!"

It didn't take long for him to catch up. Maybe it was the rain, or maybe it was the fact that Mikan tripped over her own feet soon after he began running. Just barely behind her, the two could be mistaken for overly-devoted joggers going for a run in front of the strip mall.

"WHY DID YOU FOLLOW ME?!" Mikan yelled back, though more so Kuzuryuu could hear her over the constant sound of rain hitting the concrete than the irritation behind Kuzuryuu's yelling. "I WAS GOING SO YOU DIDN'T HAVE TO GET WET!"

"WELL THAT'S POINTLESS NOW, ISN'T IT?!" Kuzuryuu retorted. A small part of him wondered why she would run through a downpour so someone she met a few days ago wouldn't have to get wet, before wondering why he ran through a downpour for her too. Kuzuryuu chalked the entire thing up to honour on both sides.

Mikan didn't answer that, grabbing at Kuzuryuu's right arm and tugging him into a small convenience store.

The convenience store wasn't anything special. Aisles full of random products, tile flooring, absurdly cold air-conditioning, and cash registers were things all convenience stores had, so there was absolutely nothing remarkable about the layout or items in the store. It was so forgettable that Mikan wouldn't be able to describe it later, despite visiting numerous times for shopping purposes. She would probably forget it existed if she stopped visiting for a week. The store was so unremarkable that if it were a video game, the developers could get away with not describing the place at all and using a stock image for the background instead.

The tiny woman at the cash register didn't even seem to notice the door opening and closing. Actually, the cashier actually looked like she was asleep, head resting on the counter, her arms acting as her pillow.

Good. Saionji was mean when she was awake.
"W-we have to look for an u-umbrella," Mikan stated, voice low so the sleeping dragon wouldn't wake up and set them all on fire, though admittedly, that would be a good way to dry off. It would also be a bad way to die, so it's not recommended to even attempt that.

"Got it," Kuzuryuu said at a normal volume, apparently not realizing how close they both came to death by doing that. He walked off towards the back of the store, leaving Mikan to search the aisles closest to Saionji's counter. Thankfully, Saionji was a heavy sleeper.

'Wait a second, Kuzuryuu-san is a Yakuza guy,' Mikan reminded herself as she wandered between aisles of gardening supplies and writing utensils. 'Saionji-san probably can't kill him.'

Unfortunately, Mikan was so lost in her thoughts that she tripped over a plastic wrapper on the tile floor, accidentally knocking over a rake as she fell. The back of her skull and her upper back slammed down onto the ground, her limbs following suit. The rake nearly stabbed her in the face. Mikan was very grateful that the rake only grazed her cheek.

"Tsumiki, what the hell was that?!" Kuzuryuu demanded, rushing towards her aisle.

"I'm fine! I'm not bleeding!" Mikan replied, sitting up. For some reason, it was hard to lift her head, like there was something pulling her down...

Oh, the rake was stuck in her hair. Okay.

"How the hell did you nearly die looking for an umbrella?!" Kuzuryuu burst onto the scene, carrying a bag of sweets along with the kusamochi. Water droplets flew everywhere as he ran to Mikan's side.

"I t-tripped!" Mikan replied, defensive as she continued trying to tug the rake out of her hair.

"Just hold still," Kuzuryuu ordered, dropping the food to kneel on the floor and take out a switchblade from the inside of his suit.

"You h-had a knife the entire time?!" Mikan shrieked, doing the exact opposite of what she was told to do in favour of getting away from the guy with the knife.

"You have two options," Kuzuryuu stated. "You either live with a rake stuck there for the rest of your life or you stay still for five seconds and get that rake out."

Mikan opted to hold still, shutting her eyes as she waited for either freedom or death.

The tugging at her hair stopped so suddenly she almost suffered from whiplash, but at least she didn't get stabbed!

"It's not like I was planning to murder someone! I need a weapon in case someone wants to try anything funny!" Kuzuryuu explained, putting the switchblade back. Mikan thought she saw a pistol when he opened his jacket.

"Like the i-incident with your eye?" Mikan asked, standing up and returning the rake to its proper place on the shelf.

"Yeah," Kuzuryuu answered simply, getting up and dusting himself off, though it didn't do much, since they were both soaking wet. Water wasn't brushed off as easily as dirt. Mikan hoped that Saionji only woke up after the water had dried, or else she would get yelled at the next time Mioda and Nanami asked her to buy snacks. Yelled at and humiliated.
The two walked side-by-side through the convenience store, talking and looking for their umbrella/ticket out of there at the same time.

"How are you adjusting to having one eye, Kuzuryuu-san?" Mikan inquired, feeling a bit guilty that she didn't think to ask the question until now. A good nurse was supposed to put her patient's well-being above anything else, including friendship.

"Huh?"

"Is it hard to see? Are you having trouble perceiving distances?" Mikan clarified, turning away from Kuzuryuu in favour of checking the contents of the shelves in the aisle. Children's toys and party decorations didn't look very useful for protection from rain, so she turned back to Kuzuryuu.

"Not really. I've been blind in my right eye for a while, so I had time to get used to it."

"Oh..." Mikan mumbled, avoiding eye contact by staring at the floor. "I'm sorry."

"What the hell are you apologizing for?" Kuzuryuu rolled his eye. "It's not like you had anything to do with it."

"N-no, I just didn't w-want to ask about something t-that might make you uncomfortable!"

"You're the one who's uncomfortable here," Kuzuryuu retorted.

"I'm sorry," Mikan accidentally cut herself off with a sneeze, before freezing. Almost literally. "K-K-Kuzuryuu-san! Are you o-okay?! I forgot but you were wearing w-wet clothes for a w-while and if y-you g-get sick-!"

"You're wearing wet clothes too," Kuzuryuu pointed out.

"It's fine if I get sick," Mikan retorted. "There are people to take over my shift if I get sick."

"Do you not care about yourself at all?" The Yakuza heir asked, looking through a bin to see if it contained umbrellas. It held posters instead, which was kind of disappointing.

When he looked up, Mikan wasn't there at all.

"GET THE HELL BACK HERE YOU-!"

"I found the umbrella!" Mikan announced with a smile. The parasol was a retractable version, small enough to be carried with one hand. A loop hung from the bottom so you could also hold it with zero hands. "The pink one was the only one left... u-unless you want... the really weird ones..."

Kuzuryuu wasn't sure how she managed to find the umbrella just in time to avoid answering the question, but he checked the umbrella bin anyways. Sure enough, the pink one was the only one he would be willing to use in public. It was much, much better than the minion one, or the one with the famous idol's face plastered all over it, like the world's creepiest collage.

"I'm paying this time," Kuzuryuu declared. Mikan was about to speak up, before he cut her off. "You paid for the food, so now I'm returning the favour."

"B-but-"

"No arguing! Just grab the food!"

Mikan hung her head low in defeat as the Yakuza heir marched up to the counter and left the
money on top of Saionji's hand. The cashier's snoring had stopped, but she still gave no indication that she was awake. She was probably ignoring them so she didn't have to deal with them.

"I'll walk you home," Kuzuryuu stated, holding the door open for Mikan as she opened the umbrella. He grabbed the bag of snacks and the kusamochi as she held the umbrella.

"H-huh?! Shouldn't it be the other way around?" Mikan stammered. "I mean, don't you w-want to be home as soon as possible?"

"It's almost midnight, you would be alone walking home with nothing but an umbrella," Kuzuryuu reasoned. "You would be a sure target for any murderers or muggers, so this is just the right thing to do."

'That's really nice and all but what about him? What if he gets mugged and gets his other eye-' Mikan had to remind herself that she was walking next to a Yakuza heir with a gun and a knife hidden in his suit. Part of her wondered how she kept forgetting, given that it was the first thing she knew about him.

"That's very k-kind! T-thank you for showing kindness to me, Kuzuryuu-san!" Mikan exclaimed with a smile.

"It's not that big of a deal," Kuzuryuu muttered, face a bit red.

"O-oh no, are you getting sick already?! Do you feel dizzy?!"

"No, that's not it!"

"Let me check your temperature!"

"I SAID THAT'S NOT IT!"

The walk to Mikan's home was very lively. Like the rain wasn't just watering the plants, but their friendship too.

"Uh, why do you live in a robotics building?" Fuyuhiko asked, staring at the giant logo above the door. Next to the name 'Fujisaki & Souda Robotics and Programming' was a stylized lightning bolt in a hexagon, both a bright pink on a vivid yellow background. It was the sort of colour-clashing combination that should have never been made, but since it existed, Fuyuhiko couldn't tear his eye away.

"Oh, Nanami-san is the daughter of the CEO, so she lives here, and she offered to let me and Mioda-san stay with her," Tsumiki explained.

There was a brief moment of stiff silence as Fuyuhiko hesitated.

The night wasn't that bad, he supposed. But as weird and confusing as it was, it still took him a moment to process the fact that it was ending. Or that fact that it had happened in the first place.

"Well, this is bye, huh?" Fuyuhiko mumbled awkwardly, averting his eye to stare down at his feet.

"Good night, Kuzuryuu-san!" Tsumiki smiled, passing him the umbrella.

"Night," Fuyuhiko grinned in return, waving goodbye as he turned to leave.

Fuyuhiko spent the entire walk back to his home wondering if the night had actually happened, if
he actually, genuinely managed to make a friend with a normal person for what may have been the first time in his life. He concluded that everything was moving too fast for him, and that he would figure it out in the morning.

"Why the hell are you soaking wet?!" Natsumi demanded the moment Fuyuhiko got home.

"Hi to you too, sis."

"I'll fetch you a towel and prepare the bath, Young Master," Peko stated, already leaving the room.

"And you brought comfort food? How bad did your date go?!" Natsumi gaped, pointing at the snacks and the takeout food bag.

"Well excuse me for fucking bringing you a goddamn gift!" Fuyuhiko snapped, tossing the bag of snacks directly at her face.

"WHAT THE FUCK WAS THAT FOR YOU LITTLE GODDAMN BASTARD?!"

"LITTLE?!"

Peko sighed as she heard the siblings squabble, half exasperated, half fond. The Kuzuryuu siblings might have been troublesome sometimes, but she still wouldn't choose to serve anyone else.

"Chiaki-chan! Holy shit, Mikan-chan just, she just, argh, just get over here!" Ibuki cried out, unable to describe the situation at all.

"I was in the middle of playing NASU. You know that game doesn't have a pause screen," Chiaki grumbled.

"Don't you care about Mikan-chan at all?!"

"You forced her to change and dry off before swaddling her in blankets. I think she's fine," Chiaki stated, gesturing to the couch Mikan was resting on. She was practically hidden in a cocoon of every blanket in the building. Chiaki wondered if Mikan was going to evolve into a beautiful poisonous butterfly, before dismissing the idea. Why would a nurse end up as anything but a Chansey?

"What about her mental state?! She's been staring at the ceiling like she's lost her soul for fifteen minutes now!" Ibuki wailed.

"This is playing out like Corpse Party... soon she'll try to hang you, Ibuki."

"Not helping! You're not helping at all!"

Mikan didn't interrupt, instead lost in her own thoughts.

'There was a Lovely Lady discount the entire time? How did I not notice? If I knew, I would have brought Nanami-san so we could pay less for our meal...’ Mikan thought, a rueful smile on her face as she stared off into space.
[You liked the fried dough cookies, right?]

[Yeah, why?]

[I'm shopping and the cookies you like are on sale. Tell me if you want some.]

[Hand them over.]

Ibuki glanced over Mikan's shoulder, carrying a basket full of fruits. She only managed to get a
glimpse the last message from Mikan's conversation before Mikan put her phone away and
continued to push the cart.

'Is she in the middle of a drug deal?! Mikan-chan hasn't been tempted onto the path of illicit
narcotics, right?!' Ibuki gaped. There was only one way to make sure!

"Mikan-chan! You're good and pure and clean, right!?"

"W-w-what does that e-even mean?" Mikan shrieked, gaping at Ibuki.

"Remember to get extra food, we have a guest with us," Chiaki stated, focusing on her game as she
sat in the shopping cart, Mikan carting her around along with the groceries.

"Sorry to t-trouble you, Mioda-san... but can you t-take care of the cart for a few seconds?" Mikan
muttered.

'Suspicious!' "Sure, Mikan-chan!" Ibuki saluted, waiting until Mikan walked out of sight before
abandoning Chiaki to follow after her timid roommate.

'She's shy and easily manipulated! If there's anything going on, I must put a stop to it!' Ibuki hid
behind the corner of the aisle shelf. watching as Mikan grabbed a box of cookie mix and hid it
under her shirt.

'I misunderstood!' Ibuki realized as she rushed over to Chiaki's cart to sulk. She did a great job of
sulking. 'I had zero faith in Mikan-chan and it turns out that she was too shy to say that she wanted
to bake something and it's probably because I refuse to believe in her like this!'

When Mikan returned, Ibuki grabbed her by the shoulders to stare into Mikan's eyes intensely as
she declared with 100% of her heart, "Mikan-chan, no matter what, Ibuki will believe in you and
support you! I swear, I'll die before I stop trusting you!"

"T-thank you... thank you s-so much Mioda-san!" Mikan sobbed as Ibuki hugged her tightly.

"The meat won't be able to stay cold without a freezer much longer, so we should probably hurry
up," Chiaki stated, just as she finished her game with a new high score.

"C-can we head home now?" Mikan asked, still trying to hide the box even though Ibuki could tell
it was there just by looking at her. Having a box-shaped figure underneath your shirt wasn't very
stealthy. Especially when the box kept falling out and Mikan had to attempt to both hide and hold
it by crossing her arms over her stomach in a way that only really made it look like she had a
stomachache.
But Ibuki pretended not to see it for Mikan's sake and Chiaki was too absorbed in her game to notice. Instead, the focus of the conversation shifted to their soon-to-be guest as they paid and left the store.

"Ibuki, what's your little brother like?" Chiaki asked, looping her arms through the handles of their shopping bags so she could contribute to the shopping trip and continue to play her game at the same time.

"Are you sure you wanna get me started on that? 'Cuz I'm the sort of big sister who starts talking about her little siblings non-stop once she gets started!" Translation: 'If you don't want to hear me gush about my little brother, now is your time to back out.'

"I-I want to h-hear about him! If he's your little brother, he m-must be as great as you, Mioda-san!" Mikan exclaimed.

"Awwwwwww, you're so sweet, Mikan-chan! Forget sugar, I'm addicted to you!"

"Ibuki, you're going to make Mikan faint if you keep flirting with her like this," Chiaki stated simply as Mikan blushed bright red and let out incomprehensible whimpers.

"Wouldn't that mean she was struck in the heart by a smooth criminal?" Ibuki giggled.

"You don't have a criminal record," Chiaki pointed out, almost walking off the sidewalk and having to be pulled back by Mikan to avoid being hit by a car.

"Not yet! My one and only crime will be stealing your hearts!" Ibuki declared, immensely proud of herself for setting up that joke.

"That's m-murder!" Mikan stammered, crossing her arms over her chest as if to protect her heart from wannabe phantom thieves.

"Too cute!" Ibuki shrieked. "I just want to bring you home and spoil you for the rest of your natural life!"

"B-but we live in the same building!"

"In the name of the goddess Claire, I command thee to stop," Chiaki declared, even pausing her game and posing to get Ibuki to quit making Mikan feel so flustered and confused. With the hand holding her game system stationed on her hip, and her other hand pointing at Ibuki, the entire thing was straight out of a video game.

"But Chi-chan, Ibuki whined, tossing her arms around Mikan's shoulders, pulling the nurse into a hug. "Do you not want Mikan to be happy?"

"That's not what I said. Of course I want Mikan to be happy, but it's probably time to stop flirting with her."

"Why?"

"Because your brother is watching."

Ibuki immediately released the Mikan, trying to find her beloved younger brother. Chiaki just grabbed Mikan and ran.

'Living in this household... well, it's... interesting,' Mikan decided as the two of them fled from
"Just a fair warning!" Mioda declared just after they got inside their home, the three of them already moving to put their groceries away. "My little brother is the absolute cutest! Once you see him, you're gonna go 'AWWWW!' and when he starts talking, you'll go 'I wanna take him home with me!' and the moment he starts to like you, you'll want to scoop him up and never let him go!"

"When is he getting here?" Mikan asked, completely failing to covertly hide her cookie mix in a cupboard without being caught.

"Sometime around seven!" Mioda announced with a grin.

"It's six o'clock," Nanami stated, checking her 4DS for the time.

"Shouldn't we start cooking then?" Mikan asked. And then she realized that she was the only person in the household who was reliable in the kitchen. Nanami... well... um... maybe it's best not to bring up any of times she set the stove on fire. And Mioda, well she could cook fine, but she usually added something weird to the recipe or did something to 'improve' it that kinda made everything she cooked near-lethal. "I-I guess I'll start cooking then..."

"We'll help," Nanami offered, prompting Mikan to hurriedly kick them out of the kitchen. It was done politely of course, with lots of 'I can do it alone!' and 'I'm fine, I won't need your help!' thrown in.

"He's not vegetarian or allergic to anything!" Mioda called out, which was helpful, but not as helpful as not attempting to cook would be. It would count as a bad night if the building was set on fire, and Mikan very much wanted a good night.

Something simple. Like salad.

But salad wouldn't take an entire hour to make...

Mikan found herself glancing at the cupboard, and suddenly, she had an idea.

"I am Shingetsu Nagisa," The extremely tall high school student sitting at their dining table introduced himself formally. The effect was sort of ruined by his bright blue hair sticking up into cat-ear-like spikes, and by the fact that his older sister was clinging to him and cooing over how cute he was.

"Thank you for taking care of my stepsister."

"You've grown so tall Nagi-chan!" Ibuki exclaimed, though it was a bit muffled from pressing her face against his shoulder in what may very well be the world's tightest hug. Nagisa managed to talk and breathe just fine, so he might have been used to this.

"I-I didn't expect Mioda-san's brother to be so m-mature!" Mikan gaped.

"Someone had to make up for my elder sister's complete lack of maturity."

"How cooooooooooooold! Nagi-chan, is that any way to talk to your sister after so long of missing me?" Ibuki asked, before she grinned mischievously. "The Nagi-chan who sent all those letters and texts would never say such a thing to his older sister!"
"W-w-what?! That's c-completely unrelated!" Nagisa flinched away from his sister, arms coming up to hide his blushing face.

"Oh my, could it be? Are you trying to look good in front of your big sister's friends?" Ibuki grinned, taking great joy in teasing her little brother.

"Thank you for the food," Chiaki muttered, playing Tetris and eating fruit salad at the same time.

Both Chiaki and Mikan ate while watching the display of sibling affection. Ibuki would tease and joke around, while Nagisa kept trying to preserve his 'mature young man' facade, despite his blushing and stammering.

"Ibuki-onee-chan, stop messing with me already!" Nagisa whined, squirming away from Ibuki's touch.

"But you're so adorable! Just let me feed you and dress you up and spoil you for the rest of forever!"

"I'm not a rabbit!"

The conversation was interrupted by the oven timer ringing, then Mikan standing suddenly and rushing towards the kitchen.

"Woah, Mikan-chan, did you secretly make dessert for everyone?!" Ibuki gasped.

"N-no! I didn't, t-that was just... that was just t-the oven b-b-being weird! Ha ha, go b-back to eating, I'll take care of this!" It should be noted once again that Tsumiki Mikan could not lie. At all.

"Yay for Mikan making dessert for everyone," Chiaki cheered, though her voice still sounded like a sleepy monotone. She lifted a fist in the air, before quickly returning it so she didn't get a game over.

Mikan hated to disappoint other people, though no matter how much she looked at it, someone would end up disappointed. She either gave the cookies to the trio at the dining table and disappointed Kuzuyuu or she gave the cookies to Kuzuryuu and disappointed her roommates and one sibling.

'Just split the damn bill, we're not going through that conversation again.'

'T-the solution was that obvious?!'

A fragment of a conversation between her and Kuzuryuu resurfaced in Mikan's brain, and once again, she admired Kuzuryuu's cleverness.

One half of the cookies for Kuzuryuu and one half for the dinner party! Win-win for everyone!

---

[I'm sorry.]

[Mioda-san's brother managed to find your cookies...]

[IS EVERYONE IN THAT FAMILY ANNOYING AS HELL?!]

[Don't answer that.]
[You'll probably defend those damn cookie thieves.]

[It's probably just because I didn't hide them well enough! Please don't get mad!]

[I'm not mad at you, I'm just going to rip their fucking teeth out!]

[That's still getting mad!]
"It's amazing. They're all so helpless," Mikan said, smiling joyously as the girl on the screen psychically mutilated all of her bullies. "I just wish I had that sort of power!"

"Just challenge them to a duel then," Fuyuhiko replied casually, watching the main antagonist get her legs ripped off without flinching. "You don't need psychic powers to beat the crap out of someone."

The two were nestled on the couch, sharing a bowl of popcorn and watching Mikan's huge collection of movies on the prototype television. Every few minutes, Fuyuhiko would glance at the door like he expected someone to bust the door down, but no one came. The time between glances at the door would grow larger and larger, until Fuyuhiko forgot about it entirely, relaxing and talking with Mikan normally.

There was an explanation for how Fuyuhiko managed to become part of Mikan's horror movie marathon. It started with Mioda and ended with confused party guests.

The day before

"Hajime-chan! You didn't let me do anything at all!" Ibuki pouted. "Am I not important enough to be allowed to help out?!

"No, it's just that most of the preparations were already done by family members," Hajime explained simply.

"I wanna do something! Like, like... the escort!" Ibuki grinned, tossing her arms over her head as she explained her idea. "You know how there's a serious chance of something getting messed up if the birthday boy comes too early and messes up the surprise? And there's always a person to delay them until the party's ready? Let me be that person!"

"Why do you want to help out so much, anyways?" Hajime asked, staring at Ibuki suspiciously. "You aren't thinking of setting up a prank, right? You would actually get shot for that."

"Well... It's mostly because Fuyu-chan seems like the type of person to not have many friends," Ibuki admitted honestly. "He might not admit it, but his attitude scares people off!"

"Did you come here just to insult him!?"

"So that's why, I, Mioda Ibuki, will help ensure his greatest birthday yet!"

Hajime sighed, shaking his head, "Fine. You can be the escort, but make sure not to tell him anything you just said. He'll think you're looking down on him... and that won't end well."

"But he can't look down on me, I'm taller than him!"

'She's going to die, isn't she...?' Hajime wondered if he should revoke Ibuki's status as the designated party escort, but she had already left the building. Goddammit.
Ibuki found him inside a bakery, ordering some of Hansel and Gretel's famous sweet buns. She waited until Fuyuhiko had received his order before picking him up and running, since Ibuki was polite like that.

"WHAT THE FUCKING GODDAMN HELL ARE YOU DOING YOU FUCKMONGER PUT ME THE HELL DOWN BEFORE I-" Fuyuhiko's words quickly became incoherent screaming, so Ibuki ignored everything he said after that point. She couldn't ignore the fact that he was hitting and kicking her like a protesting child though.

"Fuyu-chan, be more grateful! Stop hitting me! I'm trying to help Hajime-chan right now!" Ibuki whined, carrying him down the street.

"LIKE HELL I'M BELIEVING THAT WHY THE FUCKING SHIT WOULD HAJIME GET YOUR HELP-"

"You've got to look presentable for your big day~!" Ibuki was having way too much fun as she dragged Fuyuhiko to the beauty parlor.

"There's no fucking way I'm doing this!"

"Hey, don't you want your cake after this?!"

"...it's lactose-free, right?"

---

"I've been meaning to ask this, Fuyuhiko-kun," Mikan spoke up over the credits of their third movie. "But what kind of movie would you like to watch? I couldn't find any police movies in my collection and I don't want to make you watch more horror movies if you don't want to..."

"I'm fine with horror movies," Fuyuhiko stated simply, reaching for another bite of popcorn.

"D-did you... did you p-paint your nails?!" Mikan gasped in disbelief.

"I was bribed, okay! There's no way I would do something like this willingly! Don't you dare laugh!"

"I'm n-not laughing! The pattern is just so s-s-shocking that I made sounds similar to laughter!"

"You're laughing, no matter how you cut it!"

"I-I'm soooooooorry! It's just... it's just... kehehehehe!" Mikan couldn't stop her giggles, a huge smile on her face. Her face was completely free of any worries or anxiety. Wasn't it ironic that horror movies and an intimidating Yakuza heir were the components needed to erase Mikan's fear and bring out her biggest, brightest smile?

Fuyuhiko had to grin too after seeing that smile, though Fuyuhiko wasn't sure whether to curse or thank Mioda for helping him see it.

Oh who was he kidding. He would rot in hell eating butterscotch toadstools before he thanked Mioda for anything. Especially if he was going to thank her for being annoying.
"You were just messing with me, weren't you, you asshole motherfucking bitch?" Fuyuhiko demanded, pulling Mioda down by the shirt collar like he was about to pull a knife on her. Fortunately, he had the foresight to drag the annoying loudmouth into an alley first, so there would be no witnesses.

"What?! You're accusing me of tricking you when I didn't even have the time to buy the cake yet?! That's no fair! You're not letting me pay you and accusing me of withholding your prize! Jerk!"

"You're the one who fucking deceived me into getting this shit splattered all over my goddamn nails!"

"Oh, it's almost noon," Mioda noted, checking her phone nonchalantly despite the Yakuza heir yelling in her face. "Almost time, but not yet..."

"Almost fucking time for what?!"

"No-thing~!" Mioda smiled infuriatingly, even flashing a peace sign as she suddenly twisted her way out of his grip and fled.

"GET BACK HERE YOU SHITSTAINED BASTARD!" Fuyuhiko roared, giving chase immediately.

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2:54 pm

"I b-brought extra popcorn!" Mikan announced as she re-entered the living room. She flopped down on the couch, pouring the bag of popcorn into the near-empty bowl.

"I paused the movie right before the kill," Kuzuryuu replied. He sighed before leaning back on the couch, pressing the play button. Almost immediately, screams emerged from the speaker and blood splattered the screen.

"U-um, Kuzuryuu-san..." Mikan hesitated, unconsciously making weird shapes with her fingers in her nervousness. "Did you...did you really mean what you said? A-about seeing me l-like that?"

"Of course. Is it not mutual then?"

"N-no!" Mikan replied immediately, waving her hands about as if to wave away Kuzuryuu's concerns about the matter. "I just t-t-thought that i-if you thought t-that, then...then maybe t-the best thing I could d-do is ask to u-use your first name, b-but if it's not okay with-"

"You can call me Fuyuhiko, but only if I get to call you Mikan in return," Fuyuhiko offered. "Is that a good deal?"

"Yes! T-thank you, Ku- Fuyuhiko-kun!" Mikan smiled even brighter than when she started laughing at a blonde cheerleader getting her organs ripped out earlier.

"No problem, Mikan," Fuyuhiko paused, before voicing a question that's been on his mind for a while. "You're friends with Mioda and Nanami, right? How come you don't call them by their given names?"

"They're my respected upperclassmen," Mikan answered simply, eyes focused on the screen as the protagonist got his heart ripped to pieces.
"Aren't you guys the same age?!

"That doesn't matter!" Mikan exclaimed, embarrassed that Fuyuhiko had caught the flaw in her logic. "T-the concept still stands! It w-would be disrespectful to r-refer to them so casually w-when I look up to them so much!"

"You do realize that they think of you as friends, right?" Fuyuhiko asked, raising an eyebrow. Though it was sort of weird, considering that he had a medical patch over his empty eye socket that nearly covered his eyebrow too, making it hard to see if he had changed his facial expression at all.

"They d-do!?!" Mikan squawked, so shocked she almost dropped the popcorn again. Fortunately, she managed to catch it before another bowl crashed onto the floor.

"How did you not notice this?" Fuyuhiko left out the 'You're kidding me, right? It's so damn obvious!', no matter how much he was itching to say it. He had endured (and caused) enough of Mikan's crying and screaming fits to know why he shouldn't raise his voice around her. Or include phrases that sounded like insults, since Mikan would just apologize non-stop.

"N-nooooo! I-I've...I've been trampling over their feelings f-f-for so many years?! I-I need to remedy this i-immediately!"

"Just do it after the movie!"

12:46 pm

Fuyuhiko found her in a cafe, sitting quietly at one of the tables with an entire cake on her plate. The other chair at the table was empty.

"Fuyu-chan, you're here!" Mioda grinned at him, though she only got a glare in return. She pushed the cake slice towards him as he approached. "I got you your cake."

"What flavour is it?" Fuyuhiko asked cautiously, taking a seat at the other chair.

"Orange cake," Mioda replied simply. It was suspicious. Why wasn't she rambling or screaming? But then again, Fuyuhiko wasn't one to look a gifthorse in the mouth. If Mioda had decided to be quiet for once, he would just enjoy the peace and quiet.

At least, it was sort of peaceful and quiet, if you ignored the din of the cafe in general and an obnoxious clack clack clack sound.

Fuyuhiko looked up from his cake and sighed. Mioda was typing something out on her cellphone, her nails creating the annoying noise as they tapped against the screen. Of course he couldn't even get a few minutes of tranquility.

At least he had cake.

[the plan is working! hope to report more good things later!]

2:36 pm

"Why don't they ever just shoot the serial killer?" Kuzuryuu asked, almost bored as the protagonist (dubbed Screamy the Coward in his mind) ran from the hockey-mask-wearing murderer. "That
would make everything so much easier."

"Maybe because of gun control laws? It's almost impossible for a normal person to get a gun," Mikan replied, grabbing another handful of popcorn.

"Seriously?"

"...d-did you not know?"

"I guess I took having a gun for granted," Kuzuryuu muttered to himself.

"Hm... but right now, do I still count as a normal person?" Mikan wondered, though her attention immediately turned back to the television when Screamy the Coward got his ribs broken.

"What are you even talking about?" Kuzuryuu demanded incredulously.

"I mean, do I count as someone who has ties to the Yakuza if I'm with you?" Mikan clarified, eyes glued to the screen as Screamy the Coward did what he did best: scream and cry like a baby. Losing a finger wasn't that bad, you wimp.

"Yeah, probably," Kuzuryuu admitted. "I mean, you're friends with the next-in-line and his right-hand man."

The bowl of popcorn fell to the floor, the movie forgotten as Mikan stared up at Fuyuhiko with wide eyes.

"Y-you think of me as a f-f-friend?!" Mikan gasped, immediately teary-eyed.

"Is the feeling mutual?" Kuzuryuu asked warily, eye watching Mikan carefully for any sign of refusal.

"Yes! Yes, thank you for this, Kuzuryuu-san, you're too kiiiiiiind!" Mikan sobbed, tears flowing down her cheeks.

"Calm down," Kuzuryuu ordered, patting Mikan on the head in what he hoped was a soothing way. It probably wasn't, considering that Mikan fled the room afterwards, but he was trying.

(She returned a few seconds after to clean up the popcorn, but Kuzuryuu had already cleaned up most of the mess, causing her to run off wailing something about 'Kuzuryuu-san's overwhelming kindness!')

1:00 pm

Ear-splitting shrieking rang through the cafe, almost making Fuyuhiko drop his fork.

"What was that for?!" Fuyuhiko demanded, glaring at Mioda.

"It's one in the afternoon!" Mioda gasped, as if the time had done something so awful its name had to be spoken with fear. She was so shocked she almost dropped her gemstone-studded phone, horror seeping into every pore of her face.

"So what?!" Fuyuhiko stabbed at his cake again, aggressively gobbling down more and more of the dessert in case Mioda tried anything weird. Like pushing it off the table. Or stealing it away.

"SO IT MEANS WE'RE LATE FUYU-CHAN YOU DUMMY!" And with that outburst, Mioda
stood and grabbed at Fuyuhiko's arm, trying to drag him to... where in the heck she was going.

"LET ME FINISH MY FUCKING CAKE FIRST YOU INCONSIDERATE MOTHERFUCKER!" Fuyuhiko retorted, resisting Mioda's pull with all his might.

"But you have to hurry after! No complaining!"


Mioda sighed dramatically, throwing her hands up in the air and flopping down on her chair, crossing her arms over her chest as she glared at Fuyuhiko. Fuyuhiko ignored her in favour of cake.

He decided to eat the rest of it slowly, just for the sake of revenge.

1:15 pm

"Quit pulling already!" Fuyuhiko snapped, wrenching his arm from Mioda's grip. That didn't help Mioda's anxiousness at all. She was practically bouncing on her feet, too much energy in her to keep still even as Fuyuhiko forced her to stop. She kept checking her phone for the time, like she was the new white rabbit or something. "Where are we even going?!"

"Home! Come on!" Mioda yelled as she rushed ahead, before spinning around to wave Fuyuhiko over.

He sighed as he followed her. Why did Fuyuhiko have to put up with this?

Fuyuhiko's confusion only grew as Mioda ushered him into her apartment. There were no party guests for a secret party, no decorations or anything. The kitchen to his right was decently cleaned and organized, no sign of cake baking at all. There were only four chairs at the bistro table that seemed to substitute a proper dining table. Around him, the only noises were Mioda's muttering and some sort of TV show further inside the apartment, so it must have been mostly empty.

Which was weird, considering that Fuyuhiko had assumed the reason why Mioda had carted him around all day was to get him to a surprise birthday party or something along those lines.

Out of nowhere, the intro to that one song by the idol that got convicted of manslaughter cut through the near-silence, causing Fuyuhiko to jump and almost pull out a weapon and a shriek from the area where the television noises were coming from. Mioda just looked sheepish as she pulled her cellphone out of her pocket.

"M-Mioda-san?!!" Tsumiki rushed into the room, wearing a simple green nightgown. "W-w-why are you h-here?! Don't y-you have work today?!"

'Was she spending the day at home watching TV?' Fuyuhiko wondered, staring at Mikan blankly.

Mioda didn't respond, holding up her index finger as she listened to the figure on the phone.

"Alright-Fuyu-chan-I-can't-stay-here-so-just-stay-with-Mikan-chan-I-gotta-pick-up-Nagi-chan-have-fun!" Mioda spoke incomprehensibly fast, turning her phone off. . Her smile looked a bit panicked as she shoved her phone back in her pocket hastily.

Without any warning, she shoved Fuyuhiko further into the room, letting out a hurried goodbye before slamming the door.
"WHAT THE FUCKING HELL YOU GODDAMN MOTHERFUCKER ASSHOLE BITCH?!
Fuyuhiko roared at the door. "YOU CAN'T JUST LEAD ME ON A WILD GOOSE CHASE AND THEN JUST FUCKING LEAVE ME HANGING YOU SHITTY ASS BUMBLEBEE FUCKER! I HOPE YOU GO FUCK YOURSELF WITH A RUSTY-

He cut himself off as Tsumiki tapped on his shoulder.

"U-um... do you w-want to join me?" Tsumiki offered, toying with the hem of her nightgown timidly. "I was in the m-middle of watching 'The Ring of Liars'..."

"Isn't that the one about a gambling ghost?"

"I mean, it's more complicated than t-that but s-sure! You can p-put it like that!" Tsumiki grinned, excitedly sharing various facts about the film before concluding with, "And then it t-turns out she was a Yakuza princess! I-I have popcorn if you want!"

Fuyuhiko wasn't sure if it was the promise of popcorn or the way that Tsumiki got so enthusiastic about her movies that made him say yes. He wasn't even sure if he agreed because he was forced to put up with Mioda all day and he wanted a break. Hell, Fuyuhiko might have agreed just to spite Mioda.

But either way, Mioda nearly cheered as she eavesdropped from the other side of the door. The only thing that stopped her was the fact that she would blow her own cover if she did so. She eagerly pulled out her phone, sending a few texts to Nagisa.

[thank you so much for helping nagi-chan!)](・д・)]

[it totally worked out! o( ≃ ▽ ≃ o)]

[you're the absolute bestest! i owe you a few ice cream sundaes for this! ]( ＾_＾)ノ]

The reply was almost immediate.

[First of all; 'bestest' is not a word.]

[Secondly, you better repay me later]

[don't worry your cute widdle face off, nagi-chan! you're getting those sundaes! (*'≥▽≤')]

[Why did you even want me to call you, anyways?]

[bc, it's all part of big sis ibuki-chan's super awesome plan! (*'・ᴗ・*)გ ]

[What does this plan entail exactly?]

[awwww, it's so cute when you try to use big words to seem so ~mature~! ~(°д°)- ]

[I always talk like this!]

[so you're always cute ゜°・°)ノ ]

[Just answer the question!]

Mioda smiled, covering up her amused grin with a hand as she typed out her answer. She felt her smile drop a bit, no less joyful but a bit more serious, like the smile of an old wise woman who had
seen and lost much in her life, but still found happiness in all she did. Or something like that.

[i want fuyu-chan and mikan-chan to become friends]

[since they're both people that have trouble making them, and they go good together!]

[so please please please help your big sister work on her latest mission?]

[Idiot.]

Just as Mioda was about to type some sort of shocked answer, something like 'omg nagi-chan how could you hurt me like this i loved you and pretty much raised you and you betray me like this?', another one of Nagisa's texts sent, one that nearly brought tears to her eyes.

[You're acting like it's possible for me to say no.]

[omg nagi-chan i wuv wuv wuv you so much you are totes getting another sundae for that i love love love you!]

[i knew you couldn't say no to your amazing beautiful big sister!]

[I was talking about the ice cream!]

[if you say so ( )]

6:12 pm

"Hey, Mikan."

"Uh-huh?"

"Thanks."

"F-f-for what? I should r-really be the one t-thanking you! For w-watching movies with-"

"Thanks for making this a great birthday for me," Fuyuhiko smiled, before adding, "Thanks for letting me watch with you. I had fun."

Mikan paused for a few seconds, staring at Fuyuhiko in disbelief. Then, she almost screamed.

"IT'S YOUR BIRTHDAY TODAY?!!"

6:12 pm, in the Kuzuryuu home

"Mioda Ibuki, when the hell are you bringing Fuyuhiko over?!" Hajime yelled into his phone. His eyebrows twitched in annoyance as Ibuki replied, her voice far too nonchalant for the words she was saying. "What do you mean 'you lost him'?! He wears a suit everywhere! How hard can it be to spot him?!"

"Hajime-san, should I hunt down this 'Mioda Ibuki' and convince her to divulge the Young Master's location?" Peko asked, a hand already on her sword handle.

"No, I know she didn't try to kidnap him or anything," Hajime answered, before returning his attention to his phone conversation. He had to stop Peko from disobeying and trying to ambush
Ibuki anyways, struggling with her as he spoke with Ibuki. "Do you realize how much danger you've put yourself in?! Peko is ready to tear your head off if it means she finds Fuyuhiko and I can barely stop her!"

"Big bro Hajime, is something wrong?" A pink-haired girl peered into the room, her hair loose from its usual pigtails and pooling down to her back. She pulled a bright pink gun out of nowhere as she noticed Hajime struggling with Peko. "Do you need this bitch put down?"

"No, Kotoko, don't-" Hajime cut himself off as Peko managed to remove her blade from the sheath, already moving to intercept her. "Wait, Ibuki, what the hell do you mean he's not coming back tonight?! He literally has his-"

"She has already restrained him! Let me go and rescue him!" Peko exclaimed, squaring off like she would fight Hajime if she had to. Actually, she *would* fight him, no 'if's or 'but's about it.

"Move, big bro Hajime!" Kotoko tried to shove the brunette out of the way with one shoulder, already aiming her gun with her other arm. "If she's out of control, she's out of control! Let me handle this, since you're too soft!"

'Why me...' Hajime sighed.
Mikan and Minors' Morbid, Miserable Memories

The first time Mikan screamed in their little horror movie marathon had nothing to do with blood or death or anything like that. The scene that had inspired her first real moment of fear was rather innocuous, just a close up on the face of one of the supporting heroines as she spouted off some lines about hope growing stronger in the face of danger.

Unfortunately, both Fuyuhiko and Mikan recognized that face. Fuyuhiko would have a hard time forgetting the woman who took his eye, after all.

And Mikan?

It would be even harder for her to forget the horror that was Enoshima Junko.

"I love you."

"I need you."

"I'll die if you leave."

Those were all things Mikan heard on a regular basis. Those were normal things to hear from her girlfriend, right?

Enoshima Junko was a kind, loving girlfriend. She made lunches for Mikan nearly everyday, she showered the nurse with kisses and affection, she made Mikan feel loved and happy.

Mikan wondered why Junko said that she needed Mikan, when it was obvious that Mikan was the one who needed her.

"I'm the only one who loves you like this, right?"

"I'm more precious to you than anyone else in the world, right?"

"You would do anything for me, right?"

It was normal for Mikan to hear that. The answer to every single question was 'yes, absolutely.'

Because Mikan needed Junko, Junko was the most precious person in her life. Because Mikan needed Junko to love her like no one else in the world did, she would do anything for her beloved.

But there were things that love and denial couldn't hide, no matter what. Even if Mikan tried to deny it to her dying day, she could never hide the truth from herself, let alone from anyone else.

After all, Tsumiki Mikan could not lie. At all.

"Hajime, what the hell?!" Fuyuhiko demanded, pointing at the crying child. "You can't just adopt a kid! How the hell are you going to take care of her!?"

"I can't just let her be sold off!" Hajime retorted, pulling the pink-haired girl closer to him, as if to protect her from Fuyuhiko.

Fuyuhiko sighed, and wished his brother good luck.
Hajime knelt down to look Utsugi in the eyes, hoping to calm her down.

"I swear that no one will treat you gently from now on," Hajime spoke softly, like he was coaxing a timid cat from an alleyway. "And you can stay with me. I won't hurt you, and I won't let anyone else hurt you."

"S-swear! Swear it with all your heart, and if you break your promise, you drop dead!"

"I swear."

"Promise you're not lying?" Utsugi asked, warily looking Hajime in the eye.

"I promise."
never do such a thing...
...right?

Kotoko got away with it easily.

An abandoned warehouse used by Yakuza members to house a human trafficking ring... there's no way that there wouldn't be someone who didn't resent the place or the people who used it.

The family of someone who had been sold off. A vigilante who needed to bring justice to those above the law. An escaped sex slave who bore a grudge.

Any one of those people would have a good reason to burn down the building with everyone inside. At the very least, they would have a much better reason than Utsugi Kotoko, the famous child actress and beloved star of the nation. No one would even think to suspect her, especially when they had no idea that her parents sold her off.

Kotoko would have laughed at her parents' reaction to seeing her alive and well and not shipped off to some far corner of the globe, if it weren't for the fact that she already set fire to their home too. An unfortunate accident that caused Kotoko's leave from stardom, or at least that's the way the media put it.

Nagisa had a much harder time, mostly fueled by the fact that he didn't really want to do it.

Murder? Even if his parents hurt him and forced him to push himself beyond his limits and made him cry, he still couldn't bring himself to kill them.

At least until his worst fears came true.

A knock on the door interrupted his Pogimon game with Ibuki, the two pausing before Ibuki stood to answer the door. Nagisa almost screamed as he saw the two in the doorway, before trying to hide. He crouched behind the couch, covering his ears and squeezing his eyes shut like ignoring what was happening would make all the bad things go away.

And then an ear-splitting screech rang through the house, forcing Nagisa out of his shell-shocked state.

"It is your duty as the defenders of the world to protect yourself and those you love."

With those words in mind, Nagisa devised his plan.

"I surrender!" He exclaimed, rushing towards his parents. "Take me home."

"Delightful!" His mother released Ibuki's hair, smiling as she clasped her hands together. She pinched Ibuki's cheek affectionately, and it made Nagisa feel sick to see the girl who had tried so hard to protect him look so crestfallen.

"Nagisa-chan?"

"Now come, Nagisa," His father ushered him out the door, before waving to Ibuki. "Thank you for helping us find our Nagisa."

"Oh, Nagisa, how could you worry us so much?" His mother asked, before switching her smile to a stern expression. "Your workload has doubled in the time you've gone. You'll have to increase your
effort to level 10 to finish it all."

"We might have to stock up on vulneraries," His father suggested.

His parents never got to live to carry out their plans.

Nagisa showed up on Ibuki's doorstep the next day, asking if he could stay forever.

"You did excellently!" Junko smiled, congratulating Kotoko and Nagisa. "You protected yourselves and humanity as a whole. You have carried out your duties well."

"Thank you, Junko-onee-chan," Nagisa said, bowing his head. "It was only thanks to you that we could have done this."

"Yeah! Three cheers to Big Sis Junko!" Kotoko grinned.

Mikan was scared, she was worried, she was doubting herself and Junko. She wanted to trust in Junko, she really did, but after what she heard...

She had to make sure.

But when she hid in Junko's closet, Mikan wasn't sure what she would hear. She knew what she wanted to hear, of course. Mikan wanted to learn that it was all a joke, that they could go back to the routine of being loving girlfriends. She didn't want to face the fact that she might not know Junko as well as she thought. She didn't want to face the fact that the woman she loved might have been a false mask, the twisted truth hidden underneath sweet words and loving actions.

Mikan wasn't sure how long she hid inside that closet, huddled against the door as she listened and trying to muffle her sobs to remain uncaught. She wasn't sure how long she was in there before Junko ushered the kids out and opened the door, making Mikan collapse on the floor.

"Mikan deary," Junko said tenderly, lovingly as she knelt down, bringing herself to face Mikan. "What are you doing in there? If you were trying to borrow my clothes, you could have just asked."

Mikan wasn't sure if she was being paranoid or if she was right, but something about Junko's voice sounded...off. Fake. Like an actress putting on a role she hated with all her heart and soul. Mikan wondered how she didn't notice before.

"How... h-how did I not notice...?" Mikan muttered to herself, pulling herself up and wiping at her eyes.

"Notice what, silly?" Junko reached up to caress Mikan's face gently. Mikan froze, staring at Junko with fearful eyes. "So you heard..."

"Do you hate me now?" The blonde asked softly, pulling the nurse into a one-sided hug. "Are you going to abandon me even though I loved you so much?"

Mikan stayed silent, sobbing as she stayed still in Junko's arms. She didn't want to hear this. She didn't want any of this. What happened to the woman she loved?

"That's right..." Junko smiled as she pulled away, patting Mikan's face affectionately. "Show me more of your despair."

"W-what?"
"The despair of someone so beloved to you turning out to have been lying all along!" Junko laughed excitedly, her smile no longer loving and gentle as much as it was manic and terrifying. A line of drool dripped down from the corner of her mouth as she watched Mikan's face like a beggar drinking up every last drop of an oasis.

"This is amazing! You totally feel betrayed, don't you?!" Junko 'hm'ed thoughtfully, her hand coming down from Mikan's cheek to grasp at her throat. "I wonder, I wonder! Which one do you think would be better, a despair of dying at the hands of a loved one or the despair of living with the knowledge that your beloved, she spat out the word mockingly,"was stringing you along, all so she could have a taste of despair?"

"I w-w-w-won't tell anyone! P-please," Mikan gasped for breath, Junko's long painted nails digging into her skin as Junko tightened her grip. "Please d-don't kill me..."

"I never loved you, you know?" Junko mentioned it offhandedly, like she didn't even care about Mikan at all.

Junko didn't care, Mikan realized with horror. She never cared at all.

"I've decided. Prolonged despair is much, much better than one big burst! So no matter how much I want to kill you, I'll refrain for now, so you better keep despairing over me in the years to come!" Junko exclaimed excitedly.

No matter how much she wanted to, Mikan couldn't hide the truth from herself.

The woman she loved didn't even care about her. She never did. The woman she loved valued despair over all else. The woman she loved would kill her if she thought it would bring her despair.

"I'm going to kill her," Fuyuhiko stated simply after Mikan told him the tale.

"B-but she would probably j-just like the despair of being killed!" Mikan protested, wiping her tearful face with the tissues Fuyuhiko had brought her.

"So what?" Fuyuhiko retorted, before pointing a finger at his eyepatch. "An eye for an eye is how it works. She did this to me, and she did even worse to you. You can't say she doesn't deserve it."

Mikan looked crestfallen as she realized that he was right.

"She won't be able to hurt anyone else that way," Fuyuhiko added.

"Um, if y-you're going to kill her..." Mikan hesitated, before gathering all her courage to say her words out loud. "At least... At least bring me w-with you!" Mikan immediately quieted down after her outburst, muttering apologies for raising her voice.

Fuyuhiko simply smiled at the nurse, saying, "Sure. You probably have a shitload of things you want to tell her." He left out the 'like how much you hate her guts'.

"Thank y-you!" Mikan stammered, almost shocked that he had accepted. "I swear I-I'll make it up to you! I'll b-bring you ice s-skating or buy you food or movies or anything you want!"

"That should be my line," Fuyuhiko replied, adding the rest as Mikan stared at him in confusion. "An eye can be replaced eventually. But if it's emotional pain, you've been through a lot more than I have. So when this is all over, you'll probably need something to cheer you up."
"And... 'sides, it would be fun to do stuff like that with you," Fuyuhiko admitted after a pause, cheeks bright red from saying the words out loud.

Mikan didn't notice though.

"Thank you, Fuyuhiko-kun," Mikan smiled slightly, some tears still in her eyes.

"Yeah, yeah," Fuyuhiko grinned back.

'Fuyuhiko-kun is the only person I've told about this,' Mikan realized, before wondering why that was. 'Maybe... maybe it's because he understands.'

'The pain of being hurt by Enoshima Junko.'
"Hajime, how much does it cost to hire the programmer guy you know?"

"You've been missing for an entire day, leaving me to stop Peko from going on a murderous rampage, and that's the first thing you say?" Hajime demanded in disbelief, pressing a hand to his forehead. He was definitely getting a headache later.

"I found the person who took my eye," Fuyuhiko sort of forgot to explain that part, didn't he? "I just need a way into her house."

"Why do you need a programmer then?" Hajime asked warily.

"She's got one hell of a security system," Fuyuhiko replied.

"How do you know that?!"

"I'm in front of it right now," Fuyuhiko stated, staring at the machine guns stationed around the gate. And the almost twenty-meter tall wall circling around the premises, lined with ominous-looking spikes. And the bear statues on top of the wall, smiling down mockingly at him.

"WHERE THE FUCK ARE YOU?!"

"W-w-what happened to t-the safety of the public?! What would happen i-if those guns went o-off because of the mailman?!" Mikan wailed, running as fast as she could from the black-haired warrior. Her confusion was only exacerbated by the various weapons flying at them, just barely missing various important organs and body parts.

"Just run!" Fuyuhiko ordered, pulling the nurse along as a spear lodged itself in the stone wall around the veritable mansion, just a few centimeters from where his head had been.

"Come on, Mukuro-chan!" A voice from the speaker in the wall cheered. Judging from how Mikan flinched at the voice, Fuyuhiko guessed that it was Enoshima. "Go get 'em! Give them the old, one, two, beheading!"

"Understood," The soldier nodded, grabbing another pack of throwing knives from fuck knows where. Apparently, the most dangerous part of the Enoshima household's security system was not the gigantic machine guns or the spikes on the walls. That title belonged to Enoshima's fucking sister, who could throw a knife faster than any gun and with that-really-should-be-impossible levels of accuracy. And that was when she was toying with them.

"But make sure to save Mikan-chan for me!" Enoshima giggled as Mikan whimpered, apparently terrified from the idea of being alone with Enoshima.

"WHAT THE GODDAMN FUCK KEEP YOUR FUCKING BLOODY BITCH HANDS AWAY FROM HER YOU-" Fuyuhiko was cut off, almost literally, by a spear aimed at his feet. Mikan yelped, though Fuyuhiko was pretty sure Enoshima's sister wouldn't kill them just yet. No, the sisters would mess with them until Enoshima got bored, ordering Mukuro to kill them off. Fuyuhiko was 100% certain that the human security system would kill them the moment Enoshima gave the order.

"If we d-die, I'm glad to have met you!" Mikan screamed, tears running down her face as the two
of them ran.

"WAIT, WHAT?!" A loud crash came from the speaker, like Enoshima had slammed her hands down on the table. "HOLD THE FUCKING PHONE, WHAT'S GOING ON BETWEEN YOU TWO?!"

"Um, am I supposed to stop now?" Mukuro asked, freezing right before throwing another knife.

"Of course you are, you idiot! I need to hear all about this new development!" Enoshima exclaimed. "Imagine how despair-inducing it will be if we kill one of the new lovers in front of the other! Do you think she'll be like 'wah wah sobbing' or will she descend into revenge-driven madness!?"

"What the hell is she doing?" Fuyuhiko and Mikan came to a stop, Fuyuhiko looking at Mikan incredulously for an answer. Mikan had no idea, increasingly bewildered as she stared at the speaker.

The gate opened automatically, fanfare and confetti included. Even Mukuro seemed to be shocked. No one moved an inch, looking more confused than one would be after reading all of Housetrapped.

"What are you guys waiting for, a red carpet?!", Enoshima demanded. "Go in already! I'll get the tea ready!"

"You can't just offer that right after trying to kill someone!" Both Mikan and Fuyuhiko exclaimed the same general sentence at the same time, but with unique additions. For convenience, the stammering and profanity were excluded in order to give the basic idea of what they were trying to say.

"Junko, what are you do-" Mukuro was cut off by a scabbard to the back of her skull. Evidently, she was so surprised by the complete 180 degree flip in attitude Enoshima had that she didn't notice a serious, stoic, silver-haired samurai sporting a suit subtly sneaking behind her. Either that, or Peko was becoming a ninja.

"So this is where you have run off to, Young Master," Peko glared at the pair dangerously, pointing her sheathed sword at them. Mikan wondered when her life became so perilous, before realizing that all of the perils she had face were because of her choice to follow the baby-faced Yakuza heir in front of her.

"Wooooooooooah!" Enoshima gasped, before munching sounds came in from the speaker. It sounded... popcorn-ish...? "A girlfriend appearing out of nowhere?! Just when Mikan-chan was picking herself up with the help of the shortie! Will this end in a despair-inducing murderfest like that one love triangle!?"

"That's my sister," Fuyuhiko said simply, Peko nodding to his words as she tied the unconscious human security system up.

"Sister in a-a Yakuza way o-or actual sister?" Mikan inquired, still sort of hiding behind Fuyuhiko. Just in case Mukuro and/or Peko tried anything.

"Yes."

As Mikan puzzled over the confusing answer, Peko approached her, putting on her best intimidating face.
"We should leave and regroup," Peko stated. "It would be dangerous to stay here when the enemy's piece might wake up at any time. Do you know anywhere we can rest for the time being?"

"T-there's a cafe two blocks over!" Mikan offered, even pointing in the direction of the cafe.

"Do they have good snacks?" Fuyuhiko asked.

"Hey, are you guys just going to forget about me?!" Junko demanded as the trio walked away. She pouted as she received only silence in return. "This can't even be the despair of being ignored... it's just fucking frustrating!"

The cafe was just as relaxing as Mikan remembered it. Long, billowing curtains covered up tall windows, the white of the drapes contrasting with the black carpeting. The wallpaper seemed to be made out of thin silk layered upon silk, with subtle floral patterns sown onto the surface. An alabaster surface held up by spiraling wires made up the tables and the chairs. The air was filled with the smell of herbal tea and the various baked goods behind the counter.

The familiarity of the building and the general tranquility of the atmosphere did absolutely nothing to relax Mikan as she was being stared down by a seriously scary silver-haired samurai.

"Pekoyama Peko," The swordswoman said suddenly, nearly making Mikan jump.

"That's... not really a proper introduction, Peko," Fuyuhiko interjected, munching on a cookie.

"What do I need to add in order to make it a proper introduction?" Pekoyama inquired.

Mikan couldn't look away from the table, examining every square centimeter for stains or cracks. She was... she was just doing a service to the world, right?! If she was looking for defects or faults or messes, she could help clean it up or report it and then the table would be okay and it was so very much not an excuse not to look at either of them okay!

"Mikan, you okay there?" Fuyuhiko asked, leaning over the table so he could look Mikan in the eye.

"Y-y-y-y-yes! Most d-definitely! Of course I a-am!" Mikan stammered, flinching from the unexpected movement. Peko looked a little bit lost as she watched Fuyuhiko offer Mikan a cookie, the timid woman chewing it in silence.

'How... how are they so calm?!' Mikan wondered, sneaking glances at the brother-sister duo. 'We just tried and failed to kill Enoshima Junko! How are they so casual-'

Mikan almost dropped the cookie as she realized it. Yakuza. Right.

"Um... I'll g-go first I guess," Mikan held the cookie away from her mouth,taking a deep breath before speaking. "M-my name is Tsumiki Mikan. I hope we can get along! I'm a nurse at the Towa Prefecture Hospital! Nice to m-meet you!"

"Ah, my name and profession," Pekoyama's blood red eyes seemed to drill a hole in Mikan as the silver-haired samurai spoke. "I am Pekoyama Peko. I am a hitman for the Kuzuryuu family. I am pleased to make your acquaintance."

"Hitman?!" Fuyuhiko looked horrified and even a bit offended by the word. "You're my right-hand woman!"
"That position belongs to your sister," Pekoyama responded.

"...aren't you his sister?" Mikan asked.

Fuyuhiko grinned, almost too cheerful for the grumpy-pants Mikan met and certainly too cheerful for someone who just failed an assassination attempt.

"See? You're definitely my right-hand woman!"

"The Young Mistress!" Pekoyama retorted, a blush creeping onto her cheeks. "I m-meant the Young Mistress!"

"She's the second right-hand woman," Mikan let out a loud snort at Fuyuhiko's words, thinking of a Fuyuhiko with four hands. Or maybe a hundred hands! She tried to hide her giggles behind her left hand. Then she looked away, embarrassed that she would laugh at such a thing.

Mikan didn't notice Fuyuhiko smiling at her, since she was looking at other things. Like... at the logo. Mikan wasn't sure how the cafe managed to fit their mouthful of a name on their logo without making it clear that they were struggling for space. The name was so long that most people just called the cafe 'The Celeshina Tea Shop' for short.

'We used to come here all the time...' Mikan reminisced, before barely containing her scream.

"She w-won't find us here, right?!" Mikan had to struggle very much with keeping her voice at an acceptable volume. She decided to reward herself by drinking the cup of tea she ordered, only to frown as she realized it was cold. How disappointing.

"I'm pretty sure she's not the type to chase after us anyways," Fuyuhiko said dismissively.

"You've known her for five minutes and that was went she was trying to get her sister to kill-!"

"Young Master, may I ask why you want that woman killed?" Pekoyama inquired, interrupting Mikan's panicked screaming. "You can trust me to carry out your orders."

"It won't have any meaning if you do it," Fuyuhiko replied, a hand ghosting over his eyepatch. Peko seemed to understand immediately, before shifting her stare towards Mikan. Mikan let out a startled 'eep!'!

"Then why did you bring her?"

"I a-asked to come!" Mikan exclaimed, feeling a bit defensive from Peko's piercing eyes. "Because... because... um, Enoshima Junko is someone who will keep hurting others until the day she d-dies!"

"I see," Pekoyama stated. "Then allow me to protect you as I protect my Young Master."

"I don't need your protection," Fuyuhiko said at the same time Mikan exclaimed, "T-thank you!"

Pekoyama simply smiled and nodded at the two. Mikan found herself relaxing at the sight, like the cafe's tranquility was suddenly multiplied.

'Junko wouldn't follow us, since she knows why we were there. She wants the despair of being killed, so there's no way she would report us to the police,' Mikan reasoned, a small grin coming on her face. 'And Pekoyama-san and Fuyuhiko-kun are strong. They could probably find a way to inject Ikusaba-san with the sleeping drugs I prepared...'
"Fuyuhiko-kun, how come you didn't tell me you had any sisters?" Mikan pouted, asking the question as soon as it came to mind.

"You never asked," Fuyuhiko replied simply.

"Can I ask now then?" Mikan continued at the sight of Fuyuhiko's nod. "Tell me about your sisters please! Both of them!"

"They're both amazing," Fuyuhiko continued over Pekoyama's flustered protests. "Peko is fucking incredible with a sword and a gun and she isn't all that good at Go."

'Why is that second bit considered a good trait?' Mikan wondered.

"B-but the Young Mistress is very skilled a-at shooting! And negotiating with leaders!" Pekoyama shot back, cheeks red.

"Yeah, she's cute, self-centered, manipulative, and a genius," Fuyuhiko continued, smiling as Mikan wondered why he was praising and badmouthing his other sister at the same time. "Peko-

"I will not have this conversation with you!" Pekoyama interrupted, bright pink. She pointed a finger at Mikan as a diversion. "Tell me about your relationship with her! I need to know if she's trustworthy!"

"We're friends," Fuyuhiko said simply, making a smile appear on Mikan's face as she nodded.

"So how did you two meet?"

Mikan and Fuyuhiko exchanged a glance, before Mikan giggled a bit.

"Yakuza movies and a hospital."

"Ugh, are they coming back yet?" Junko demanded, tapping her foot on the floor impatiently, watching the security cameras for any sign of the trio of would-be murderers.

"I don't think they are," Mukuro replied, cutting through the last rope that bound her with her throwing knife.

"I can't believe this! The first real despair-inducing situation I've been through in a year, and they leave before they kill me?! Those cowards! Those monsters, those cruel cruel cruel cruel cruel cruel cruel cruel cruel fuckasses!"

"Um... excuse me," A brunette in a suit similar to the shortie and the silver-haired samurai showed up. "I'm looking for a blonde guy about this tall," he gestured to his shoulder," wearing a suit, and a red-eyed woman with silver hair carrying a sword."

"They brought the crying brunette with uneven hair to a cafe over there," Mukuro pointed in the direction of the cafe with one hand as she used the other to pull a spear out of the wall.

"Crying- they have Mikan too?!" The suited brunette paused, taking in the damage done to the walls of the home. He wasn't sure if he should offer to pay for it or not, since he wasn't sure if this was the home of the person who took Fuyuhiko's eye. If it was an innocent person's home, he would have to pay as an apology. But if it really was the eye thief, then they probably deserved it.

He decided to compromise.
"I have the number for the Oowada Carpentry Company if you need it."

"No, I'll be fine," Mukuro replied, removing her knives from the wall one by one.

"Alright, thank you for your help," He waved and walked away.

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**Bonus:**

"Celes! Celes!" Aoi hissed, pointing at one of the tables as she prepared another cup of tea. "Look!"

"I see where you're pointing, but not why I should care," Celestia replied, absentmindedly counting the money in the cash register.

"It's the pair from Hanamura's Diner! The one I told you about! And there's another person!"

"The... the pair with the woman who screamed lewd things in a crowded restaurant?" Celestia asked for confirmation, watching the table's occupants carefully in case one of them tried anything.

"I mean yeah, but I thought it was because that guy was totally a Yakuza!" Aoi exclaimed. "And it was like, 'mua ha ha ha! You're in so much debt now!' and the woman was so desperate that she was like 'noooooo! Please, let me do anything! Anything but my organs!'"

"Why would they have that conversation in a restaurant?" Celestia inquired.

"Who knows!" Aoi seemed excited just from thinking up possibilities, before looking concerned. "But the number of Yakuza seems to have multiplied! Do you think she's in any danger?"

"They seem to be on good terms," Celestia pointed out, gesturing to the trio smiling at each other.

"Was she Yakuza all along?!" Aoi gasped.

"Perhaps they're just office workers," Celestia suggested.

"That woman has a sword on her back!"

"Cosplayers then," Celestia concluded. "But I don't see why it matters as long as they pay."

Aoi sulked from Celestia's complete lack of morals and refusal to give a damn. She was so busy sulking that she didn't notice that she accidentally made five cups of tea, four more than she actually needed. Dang.

At least they were delicious.
"Look, I'm sorry-"

"Sorry doesn't excuse the fact that you almost got killed and the fact that you almost got Mikan killed too!" Hajime placed his hands on his hips as he reprimanded the Yakuza heir. Fuyuhiko might sort of been his boss, but Hajime was not letting Fuyuhiko leave the room without knowing how damn stupid he was.

"It was supposed to be a reconnaissance mission!" Fuyuhiko exclaimed defensively, almost as if he heard Hajime thinking about how stupid he was. "But we got caught, end of fucking story!"

Meanwhile, Mikan was facing her own interrogation...sort of.

As the pink-haired girl (Kotone? Something like that) played with her hair, Mikan gulped nervously. Because apparently, everyone in the Kuzuryuu family was very very intimidating (with the exception of Hajime, and maybe sort of Fuyuhiko).

"How in the world did someone like you get involved in all this? Make sure you tell me every single detail," The blonde leaned in, far too close for Mikan to be comfortable. She stared the nurse right in the eyes, smirking. Even her voice sounded dangerous, carrying so many undertones of threats that Mikan wasn't sure what the overtone was.

'Save meeeeeeeeee!' Mikan almost shrieked the words out loud, but her voice was frozen in her throat.

Thankfully, just then, Hajime and Fuyuhiko came in from the other room, still bickering.

"Try again!" Hajime ordered, using his height to his advantage to tower over Fuyuhiko. "But this time, use your fucking family! We're here to support you and make sure you don't get killed, so depend on us every once in a while!"

Kotone and the really really really intimidating Kuzuryuu girl looked up at the duo, grinning excitedly.

Mikan gulped. She could tell that this would either end horribly or end perfectly.

Sneaking into the Enoshima home was much easier when you had a computer virus that could delete camera footage as the camera was filming.

The sleeping drugs Mikan had brought were converted into sleeping darts. It was almost anti-climatic how easily Ikusaba and Enoshima were drugged. But then again, they were kind of sort of cheating by using sleeping darts anyways.

"If you have any goodbyes, now's the time to say them," Fuyuhiko stated, pointing a gun at Enoshima's unconscious body. The sleeping dart was still sticking out of her side. Mikan was tempted to pluck it out, but resisted.

It wasn't until then that Mikan realized what it meant to take a life.

She really should have realized it sooner.
But no matter how many times she repeated the words in her head, Mikan couldn't convince herself, and if she said it out loud, she couldn't convince others either.

Because... because... Mikan loved to save lives. She lived to help others. So why was she here, going against everything she stood for? Even if it was Enoshima, Mikan couldn't convince herself to think that Enoshima deserved to die.

"Fuyuhiko-kun... Please wait," Mikan did her best to keep her voice level and calm. She really did, so why did her voice sound desperate?

"For the medicine to wear off?" Fuyuhiko asked.

"No, I..." Mikan hesitated, her voice even quieter as she finished her sentence. "I don't want to k-kill her."

"You're backing out now?" Fuyuhiko looked disbelieving, almost annoyed.

Mikan was pretty weak, wasn't she? She couldn't kill someone who had hurt her like that. She couldn't live by the same 'eye for an eye' philosophy Fuyuhiko did. Her voice faltered whenever she talked, she got tongue-tied and nervous easily, she was clumsy, she had many, many faults.

But even so, there were still people that loved her. There were people that enjoyed being around her and talking to her and she could call those people friends, right? And if she had friends, then she would be okay. Mikan wanted to be okay. She wanted to be okay and safe and happy, and she had no doubt in her mind that her friends would help her accomplish that.

Tears began to flow, but Mikan didn't stop. She needed to say the words that had been on her mind.

"Even i-if it's normal for you... if she d-dies, I... I wouldn't ever be able to stop thinking about her, I wouldn't ever be able to move on!" Mikan was rushing to say those words out loud. She stumbled over a few, but that was fine. Mikan wiped her face with one arm as she continued.

"A-all I want... I just want a-a normal l-life! A normal, h-happy life with my f-friends... with you and Chii-chan a-and Ibuki-chan and Haji-kun and P-Pekoyama-san! I don't w-want to keep b-being haunted by... haunted by her memory a-anymore! Please understand! I'm so-" Mikan paused as she felt a hand on top of her head.

Fuyuhiko was reaching up to pat her on head comfortingly.

"I get it," Fuyuhiko said simply, before sighing. "But what do you want to do with her then? We can't just let Enoshima go free."

Mikan smiled slightly, before 'hm'ing thoughtfully.

"If s-she wants despair a-above all else..."Mikan stopped herself as she hiccuped, before continuing. "Then t-the best punishment would be to see people b-be hopeful around her, and she can't do anything to change that."

"And how do we do that?"

"Well..." Mikan's grin returned as she whispered her plan into Fuyuhiko's ear.

With lots of effort, Enoshima's security room was converted into her living quarters, bed and bath
included. The cameras and microphones were already there, but the output was disabled, so Enoshima couldn't talk to anyone over the speakers. The cameras and mics in the bedrooms and bathrooms were also disabled. Soundproof walls were also added to the room, to the point that you could set off a flash grenade in there and people on the other side of the wall couldn't hear it. The trapdoor leading to the security room in Enoshima's bedroom was replaced with flooring after she was put in. A small dog door, barely big enough to fit a bowl, was installed so Enoshima could have her meals. It blended in with the walls and couldn't be opened from the inside, so no one could find it unless they knew where to look.

A lot of effort was also put into convincing Mukuro to agree to her new living conditions and to feed her sister every now and then. Sort of. Maybe.

Actually, Hajime just took her into a room to talk for an hour, before Mukuro was on-board with the idea.

("All you want is to give your sister the despair she wants, right?" Hajime asked, continuing at Mukuro's nod. "Look at it this way. She gets the despair of not being able to inflict despair on others. She'll love you for it.")

However, the first person to feed Enoshima wasn't Mukuro.

With a smile on her face, Mikan hummed to herself as she slid the bowl of cereal through the dog door. She knelt to hold it open so she could talk to Enoshima as the other woman ate.

"I really loved you, you know? But that was a mistake," Mikan kept her smile on her face as she peered through the door. She knew it was unnecessary, since Enoshima could watch her through the cameras, but she wanted to see Enoshima's face as she spoke. "I'll do my best to find better love in the future!"

Even without response, Mikan continued, her voice as cheery as possible to aggravate the despair-loving maniac.

"Thank you, actually. It's thanks to you that I could meet Fuyuhiko-kun!" Mikan considered gushing about Fuyuhiko's good traits just to annoy Enoshima, but decided not to. That would just take up a lot of time.

"I've decided. I'm going to forget you," Mikan declared, her voice calm and clear as she went on. "I'm going to live a life free from your despair. I'm going to move on. So goodbye forever, Enoshima."

It felt... really weird, yet calming to say these words. Like she was leaving behind all the pain that came with knowing Enoshima, loving Enoshima. Mikan was letting go of the past that hurt her and looking forward to the future.

Mikan's smile grew brighter as she stood, dusting herself off. She couldn't be late for movie night, after all.

"Thank you so much!" Makoto had already said those words over and over, but Hajime couldn't help but smile as he led the younger brunette to the house. "It's really kind of you to help me find a place to live, Hajime!"

"Isn't that what family is for?" Hajime gestured to the gate, grinning. "Welcome to your new home, Makoto."
"What happened to the wall?" Makoto asked, staring at the spear holes in the wall.

"Yakuza attacks," Hajime stated truthfully. "Don't worry, they've already stopped."

Makoto nodded, a little bit less certain now.

A black-haired woman walked up to the gate, staring at the pair.

"Oh, there's your roommate," Hajime noted. "I should get going then. Have fun!"

"Bye!" Makoto waved to his cousin as he left, before taking a deep breath and walking up to the gate. "Excuse me, are you Ikusaba-san?"

"Yes," Ikusaba said simply, staring at Makoto like she was dissecting him for any weaknesses.

"And you are Naegi-kun?"

"Yes! I'm glad to meet you!" Makoto smiled as Ikusaba opened the gate for him, dragging his (admittedly small) luggage with him. "Thank you very much for letting me stay with you, Ikusaba-san!"

"I-it's nothing," Ikusaba mumbled, her cheeks slightly pink as she guided Makoto towards their new home.

In her room, Enoshima rammed her head against her desk, screaming.

Mukuro silently sneaked up the steps, taking great care not to jostle the tray in her hands. It would be troublesome to clean up the orange juice later, especially if it spilled on the stairs.

However, her plan was quickly foiled when she saw Naegi, slumped down on the floor in the fetal position, right in front of the dog door.

She was tempted to drop the tray to the floor, only to be reminded of how much of a mess that would make. Instead, Mukuro gently placed the tray by the wall, kneeling down to check if Naegi was hurt.

Mukuro leaned over him, placing her ear right by his mouth to check if he was breathing, only to flinch away at how much his breath tickled. At least he was breathing. Mukuro rolled him onto his back, placing her hands on his skull to check for injuries.

Instead, the soldier got distracted by how soft his hair was, and his tiny, almost inaudible snores. She decided to pull him up so he could rest his head on her lap. Naegi deserved a pillow after sleeping on the floor.

It only took a few minutes for Naegi to wake up, staring up at her sleepily.

There were probably a million smooth things Mukuro could have said to break the silence. Instead of saying one of those, she let out a stiff, "Good morning."

Naegi yelped, springing up so fast that only Mukuro's soldier instincts stopped her from getting whacked in the head.

"W-what time is it?!" Naegi gasped, flustered and bright red as he turned to face Mukuro.

"About zero five hundred hours," Mukuro answered, basing her guess off of her internal clock, rather than checking a watch.
"Is that... five am?" Naegi asked for confirmation. Mukuro nodded.

"I'm sorry for falling asleep in such a weird place," Naegi said bashfully, rubbing the back of his neck. "I-I've always had this habit of sleepwalking, so, heh, maybe it would be best if you tied me up so I don't wander around at night."

"I wouldn't do that. Now get back to bed."

"Yes ma'am!" Naegi saluted playfully, bringing a smile to Mukuro's face, before he noticed the tray. "Is that your breakfast?"

"Er, no," Mukuro mentally apologized to Junko. It was a necessary lie. "I was actually bringing you breakfast."

If anything in her voice indicated that she was lying, Naegi didn't notice it. Instead, he inspected the tray, smiling.

"Oh wow! The pancakes are shaped like the bear statues on the wall!" Naegi exclaimed. "That's really cute."

Mukuro did her best to hide her blush, but the only reason she succeeded was because the hallway was dark.

"Thank you for your kindness, Ikusaba-san!" Makoto said, before cutting up the pancake.

A few hours later, Junko scowled at the bowl of cereal hastily shoved through the dog door. A fork was floating in the milk, a true testimony to Mukuro's absentmindedness anywhere that wasn't a battlefield.
Chiaki poked her head into the room just as the two police officers on screen got over their differences and fought crime together, eliciting a cheer from both Mikan and Fuyuhiko.

"Mikan, I need you for a moment."

Mikan sent a glance at Fuyuhiko, almost like she was asking for permission. Fuyuhiko wordlessly waved her away, munching on the popcorn.

Chiaki silently guided Mikan to her room, sitting the brunette down at her desk and passing her a game console connected to Chiaki's computer. Chiaki's computer was running, showing two empty squares and a scrolling block of text to the right.

"Hold on," Chiaki leaned over the PC. The computer made ominous rumbling sounds, before Mikan's face and the display of the game console appeared in the squares on the computer screen.

"You can see yourself, right?" The gamer asked, still messing around with the computer's hard drive.

"Yeah! I-Is this a new camera, N- er, Chiaki-san?" Mikan mentally slapped herself. She was Chiaki's friend! That meant first name-basis!

"Yup, it's for my channel," Chiaki confirmed. "I'm going to broadcast a stream later."

"Oh really?" Mikan didn't know much about 'let's plays' and 'streams' and stuff like that, but Mikan did know that Chiaki's aptitude at it was a big boost to their income.

"Do you want to try it out?"

"W-what?"

"Do you want to play the game?" Chiaki reiterated, lifting her head for a moment to gesture at the game console in Mikan's hands.

"Er, Fuyuhiko-kun is waiting for me, so I'm n-not sure if I should..." Mikan mumbled.

"He won't mind waiting for just one game," Chiaki stated, standing up so she could lean over Mikan's shoulder as the Tetris theme began playing.

Mikan watched the block fall from the top of the screen, pressing random buttons experimentally, causing the piece to spin randomly as she moved it left and right. Eventually, she got the hang of it, getting her first straight line.

She almost dropped the game system when the line exploded.

"C-Chiaki-san! Is it s-s-supposed to do that?!" Mikan shrieked. Chiaki nodded behind her, eyes not on Mikan or on the game, but the computer screen.

Mikan was too preoccupied with the game to notice that the scrolling wall of text was actually comprised of comments. She also didn't know enough about video-sharing sites to notice that Chiaki's computer was on a streaming site while she was playing.

"The blocks are falling faster!" Mikan paused, noticing... drool?
With horror, Mikan realized that Chiaki had fallen asleep on her shoulder, abandoning the game to wake Chiaki up.

"Chiaki-san! Now is n-not the time!" Mikan's panic was only multiplied when Chiaki's head fell clean off her shoulders. Chiaki's body fell to the ground, surprisingly bloodless, but that wasn't Mikan's main concern at the moment!

"Mikan, the popcorn's getting cold," Fuyuhiko complained, poking his head into the room. He found Mikan panicking over a headless Chiaki.

The game system let out a small, defeated trumpet riff as the game over screen showed.

"What the fuck?" Fuyuhiko asked as the pink-haired mechanic screwed Chiaki's head back on.

"-she's a beauty, probably my best creation yet!" The mechanic continued, brandishing his screwdriver like a knife. "A sophisticated work of art made of high-grade metal wouldn't just fall apart like that!"

"I-I'm sorry, Souda-san!" Mikan yelped. "I-I didn't know and-"

"It's fine, it's fine!" Souda grumbled, almost annoyed as he cut Mikan off. "I'll just build her back up even better! It's about time my little girl got an upgrade!"

"'My little girl?'" Fuyuhiko was in total shock, staring at the mechanic in disbelief.

"Hey!" Sharkteeth rounded on him, pointing his finger at the Yakuza heir. "Wouldn't you be proud of a 160 centimeter tall beauty you made from scratch?!"

"You're taking it to extremely creepy levels though!" Fuyuhiko retorted.

"That's not it! You just don't understand! Shut up before I make you shut up!" Souda wailed, the tears in his eyes completely shattering his attempt to look cool and intimidating.

"I can t-try to help fix her!" Mikan offered, though she tripped over Souda's toolbox the moment she got within arms reach of Chiaki's body. Tools flew through the air, a hammer smacking Souda in the face.

"Yeah, no thanks! I got it, don't worry about it!" Souda grumbled, rubbing his sore cheek.

"I'M SO SORRY!" Mikan shrieked as she pulled herself up. "I-I...I'll get ice!"

Mikan fled the room, mind reeling.

The Nanami Chiaki she knew since high school, the same one who offered her home to Mikan and Ibuki, the one who was so kind and wise... was a robot. Seriously, since when was Mikan's life a science-fiction novel?

'W-w-w-wait! I've never seen Chiaki-san go to the washroom, and e-every time I see her at work, she's always on break!' Mikan realized as she opened the fridge. 'Does... does she actually work as a nurse?'

Images of stressful university days filled Mikan's mind. Chiaki was always helping Mikan study, offering tips and snacks and support. Mikan had always assumed it was because Chiaki could and had aced the exams effortlessly, but looking back on it, was that a sign that she was a robot?!
Mikan grabbed the ice pack she always kept in the freezer in case of emergencies, only to recoil at how cold it was. She quickly grabbed a paper towel to wrap it in and made a note to herself to never leave an ice pack in the freezer for two months ever again.

When she made her way back to Chiaki's room, Fuyuhiko and Souda were bickering. Mikan wasn't sure what she expected. The bowl of popcorn Fuyuhiko had brought with him had spilled all over the floor, the bowl rolling around Chiaki's bed.

"What if a piece accidentally got sucked up by one of her important respiration devices, huh?!" Souda demanded, angrily pointing his finger at Fuyuhiko. "Keep that junk away from my sweet angel!"

"Will you quit being so damn creepy about her?! And besides, can't you just fix whatever breaks?!!" Fuyuhiko didn't have the advantage in height, but he did have the advantage in sheer intimidation. His glare could probably terrify lions, and Mikan was surprised that Souda managed to hide his trembling as well as he did. You almost wouldn't notice it if you looked at him from the corner of your eye. Almost.

"I-I got the ice..." Mikan mumbled, trying to get their attention in a way that wouldn't attract their ire.

"Gimme that!" Souda snatched the ice pack out of her hands, eliciting a yelp from Mikan. The mechanic stormed off, grumbling.

"Um... Fuyuhiko-kun..." Mikan hesitated, both to avoid setting Fuyuhiko off and to process what in the world was going on. "What just happened?"

"He got all bitchy since I brought popcorn near her," Fuyuhiko stated, jerking a thumb in Chiaki's direction.

'Popcorn...' The thought brought a question to mind, one that compelled Mikan to approach Chiaki's body, reaching a hand up to Chiaki's face.

"How does she eat?" Mikan inquired, investigating Chiaki's head for any signs of damage and/or signs of a digestive system. "I know she can, but how?"

"Beats me, ask Sharkteeth."

"Did someone say something about wanting to learn about my magnificent daughter?!" Souda leaped into the room, smiling joyfully. He was already gushing something about an engine by the time he landed, though Mikan and Fuyuhiko couldn't understand a word of it. They nodded and added little sounds that made it seem like they were paying attention even though they were completely, totally lost.

"Aren't you so glad you get to spend time around a technological wonder?!" Souda asked when he was done, obviously looking for praise. Mikan wasn't sure if he wanted them to praise him or Chiaki, but in retrospect, the two options might have been one and the same. Praising Souda directly was praising Souda directly, but if you praised Chiaki, he would say something like, 'Yeah, isn't she so cool?! I built her from scratch!'

But Mikan wasn't thinking of any of that, stepping away from Chiaki's body to bow to Souda.

"What the hell are you doing?! Mikan!"

"Thank you so very much, Souda-san!" Mikan declared, standing upright, revealing a bright smile
as she clasped her hands together. "It's thanks to you that I got to meet Chiaki-san! I'm very glad you made her!"

"E-er... yeah! Yeah that's right! You should be glad!" Souda got over his embarrassment surprisingly quick, accepting the praise with a blush on his face. "It wasn't easy making all her movements lifelike, y'know!"

"Mikan... didn't you basically just walk up to your friend's dad and say 'thanks for having sex that night, I'm glad to have met your kid'?" Fuyuhiko asked, completely ruining whatever good mood there was in the room.

"Huh?" Mikan looked like the perfect picture of curious innocence, resting her index finger on her chin as she pondered what he could mean. "Was I... not supposed to say that?"

"OBVIOUSLY!" Souda exclaimed, before storming off to sulk again. Fuyuhiko and Mikan exchanged a glance, before simultaneously deciding to ignore it. Souda was weird, and that was that.

"Goodbye Fuyuhiko-kun!" Mikan waved the Yakuza heir off as he left, smiling as she shut the door. She didn't make it more than ten steps away from the door without being interrupted. A tap on the shoulder turned her around, bringing her face-to-face with the rueful face of Nanami Chiaki.

"Huh? Chiaki-san?"

Chiaki didn't say a word, lowering herself to her knees and bowing to the ground.

"I apologize for my deception," Chiaki said, her forehead almost touching the floor. "Please accept my deepest apologies."

"Chiaki-san? Are you alright?" Mikan inquired warily, staring down at Chiaki.

"I have performed a grave sin, deceiving you, and as such, you may take my hand as punishment," Chiaki offered, still talking in the weirdly formal way that crept Mikan out and still bowing.

"W-w-what?! Don't say weird things like that! I don't want to take your hand or anything!" It should be noted that, despite spouting off millions of apologies per day, Mikan was very unused to the idea of someone apologizing to her instead.

"Would you like my head instead?" Chiaki's hands inched towards her neck, like she was about to unscrew it.

"No! No no no! We're friends! You don't have to a-apologize or give me your head or anything like that!" Mikan exclaimed frantically. Chiaki froze at her words, sitting up so she could face Mikan.

"Friends...? You... still think of me as a friend?"

"Of course!" Mikan declared passionately. Her passion about friendship was enough to erase her awkwardness and hesitation for a few precious minutes. "You're still the Chiaki-san who helped me all these years! I won't stop being your friend until I pay you back for every single time you've helped me!"

"How would you keep track of such a thing?" Chiaki asked, tilting her head in confusion. Mikan wondered if she learned that from the anime she knew Souda watched when he was on break.
"That's the point!" Mikan giggled, clasped her hands together. "Since I don't know and I probably won't ever know, I'll forever be trying to repay you. So I can pay you back, a smile for a smile, and we can be friends forever!"

"...that's surprisingly beautiful," Chiaki smiled at the nurse, a hand over her heart. "Thank you, Mikan. I'll do my best to repay you for this kindness."

And then the door slammed open, Ibuki nearly collapsing before she made a single step into the apartment.

"Ibuki-chan is exhausted... remind her never... ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever do that again!" Ibuki announced, making her way over to the pair.

"Er, do what exactly?" Mikan asked, still a bit frazzled from the happy atmosphere suddenly being shattered like that.

"Oh right, I forgot to tell you," Ibuki said casually. "My side job is being the super awesome love love rocker extraordinaire, 'Love Screamer'!" Ibuki even made rock horns with both her hands and stuck out her tongue to her announcement.

"...who...? What...?" Mikan was completely, totally, utterly shocked, for the second time that day alone.

Apparently, it was 'Learn New Things About Your Roommates' day.

A few days later, Mikan learned three very important things about the Let's Play community.

1.) Chiaki was a very controversial member of the community. Reasons for that included: being a 'fake gamer girl' (what did that even mean?), no one being able to figure out whether or not she used cheats or if she was just really really good, something about the fact that she never picked the right options while playing dating sims, and how she seemed to have a bland personality. Or maybe that was just the internet being weird.

2.) Mikan, on the other hand, was very much loved after her brief stint with the Tetris game was accidentally posted online. Apparently, the internet loved her for being shy, enthusiastic, and endearingly cute. However, her appearance on Chiaki's channel inspired even more controversy about the pink-haired gamer, since people didn't like the idea of someone as sweet as Mikan being tricked into appearing. Mikan wanted to tell everyone that she would have done it if she was asked properly and held no hard feelings towards Chiaki for the incident, only to falter as Chiaki actually brought out the microphone and camera to do so.

3.) Mikan had no idea what 'shipping' meant, but people apparently did that with her and Fuyuhiko, even though he only appeared for a few seconds.

"B-but I don't mind helping Chiaki-san make even more v-videos!" Mikan declared, though her voice was shaky from the idea of her words being sent to hundreds of millions of viewers. "So p-please support her! She's my very precious f-friend!"

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" Ibuki whispered into Chiaki's ear from behind the camera. "Using Mikan-chan to promote your channel... feels a bit immoral, don't you think?"

"She wanted to do this," Chiaki replied simply, before raising her voice to address Mikan. "Mikan, the viewers want to know if you can bring 'Fuyuhiko-kun' to a video sometime."
"U-um... that's really his choice... I can't really convince him to do it if he doesn't want to!"
Mikan stammered, before nearly jumping at the sound of the doorbell.

Chiaki considered turning off the camera and ending the footage there, but something in her gut
told her to keep filming as Mikan went to answer the door. Chiaki followed her of course. Ibuki
decided not to watch the inevitable train wreck, opting to drown out the chaos with music. Very,
very, very loud music.

"I brought some of my movies today," Fuyuhiko said, taking off his shoes as he entered the room,
a plastic bag dangling from his wrist. It was then that he noticed Chiaki and the video camera.
"Hey, what the fuck do you think you're doing?!

Chiaki ignored him, turning to Mikan as she held the handheld camera steady. "Mikan, don't you
think that this is the perfect time to ask him?"

"Ask me what?!!"

"Er, Fuyuhiko-kun! Would you... would you like to play video g-games with m-me?!!" At Mikan's
words, Fuyuhiko immediately glared at Chiaki and the camera.

"You're not pressuring her to do anything weird, right?!" Fuyuhiko demanded. Mikan had to stop
him from breaking the camera and also Chiaki's spine. Again.

"C-calm down! Fuyuhiko-kun!"

"I just wanted to know if you would want to appear in some of my gaming videos," Chiaki stated
simply, completely calm despite the Yakuza heir trying to beat her into mush.

"Like hell I'm going to do that! Why the fuck would you even want me to?!" Fuyuhiko struggled
away from Mikan, trying to at least punch Chiaki. Mikan apparently decided that keeping him
restrained like that was too much trouble, since she wrapped her arms around him and lifted him up
off the floor like an angry kitten.

"Mikan also decided to participate," Chiaki stated.

"Is this true?" Fuyuhiko turned his glare on Mikan, making the nurse whimper.

But she still had to answer honestly! She couldn't let another person think that Chiaki was a cruel,
conniving person who tricked her into appearing!

"Yeah! It is true! I decided to make videos of my own free will!" Mikan declared.

Fuyuhiko sighed.

"Someone has to keep you from doing something you didn't sign up for," Fuyuhiko said, rolling his
eye. Mikan decided to let him down, since he was being so nice.

"So Mikan can lift you without trying, huh, Fuyuhiko-kun?" Chiaki paused for a moment, thinking.
"I wonder if the same can be said vice-versa..."

"Hold the fuck up, since when did I say you could use my first name?!"

"Then, Ryuu-kun, can you lift Mikan?" Chiaki reiterated.

"Of course!" Fuyuhiko declared, too offended by Chiaki's (perceived) doubt to notice that she got
his name wrong. He lifted Mikan off the ground easily. Though, Chiaki wasn't sure if that was
because he was *that* strong or if it was because he pretty much just flung Mikan over his shoulder.

"Fuyuhiko-kun... I'm getting dizzy," Mikan mumbled. "Can you try another carry?"

"Oh shit, sorry," Fuyuhiko immediately shifted so he could carry Mikan in his arms like a bride. "Is this any better?"

"Yup! This is really comfy!" Mikan smiled, looking up at Fuyuhiko.

"That's probably all the time we have for today," Chiaki stated, more to her future audience than Fuyuhiko and Mikan. "The battery's about to run out. Please like and subscribe. You're welcome in advance for the service."

Fuyuhiko and Mikan were just confused as Chiaki turned off the camera. Eventually, Fuyuhiko decided to let Mikan down on the couch as he prepared the popcorn.

(Ibuki wasn't sure whether to laugh or cringe at the uploaded video. She just knew that Chiaki would probably wind up broken, bloody, and bruised in an alleyway if Fuyuhiko and/or Mikan ever found out what 'shipping' meant.)
"Your dad asked me to make profiles of eligible marriage candidates for your birthday party," Hajime mentioned casually, shifting through newspapers of the mysterious disappearance of a famous model.

"Party, more like a gala," Fuyuhiko scoffed. "Did you actually do it?"

"Of course not. That would be way too troublesome," Hajime sighed. "The old man wouldn't stop lecturing me after that."

"Don't shave years off your life like that!" Fuyuhiko ordered, glaring even though Hajime knew he was worried. "You know that he would actually kill you for defying him! I can't help if you go around pissing off a Yakuza boss!"

"I've actually figured out a trick to avoid his orders without punishment," Hajime would have smiled at Fuyuhiko's confusion, but kept a serious expression on his face just to fit the words coming out of his mouth. "I just say, 'Your orders aren't important. I serve the next-in-line, not you.'"

"What the hell?! Are you trying to fucking die?!"

"Hey, it works!"

The lighthearted atmosphere died down, a frown on Fuyuhiko's face.

"It's coming soon..." Fuyuhiko mumbled, looking solemn. Now that wouldn't do.

"Don't talk like a bystander in a Dogzilla film."

"What the goddamn fuck?! That's obviously not it!" Fuyuhiko yelled, back to his normal self. 'Good. Fuyuhiko needs the support,' Hajime smiled, even as Fuyuhiko was reprimanding him.

"A birthday party?" Mikan asked, staring up at the brunette in the doorway. "Wasn't his birthday... two weeks ago?"

"You're forgetting how long it took to set up the house, plus how long it took to set up the party," Hajime stated, deliberately being vague since Ibuki and Chiaki were listening too.

"How come Mikan-chan's the only one invited?" Ibuki demanded, pulling at her hair as she sniffled dramatically. "She'll be all alone in a crowd of suspicious people! She'll be gobbled up!"

"First of all, I'll be there and Fuyuhiko will definitely be there, so she won't be alone," Hajime glared at Ibuki as he added his second point. "And the reason you're not invited is because you made Fuyuhiko miss his first birthday party. And also because Peko might try to kill you."

"But what about Chi-chan?!" Ibuki even pointed at her with both hands, though Chiaki was too busy playing Persona to care. "How come she's not invited?!

"I can't let a party interfere with my streaming schedule," Chiaki replied simply. "I have a duty to my subscribers to be punctual, so I refused in advance."
As Mikan fawned over Chiaki's dedication and Ibuki screamed in frustration, Hajime wondered if he could get away with shoving the invitation into Mikan's hands and leaving.

He decided to do exactly that, calling out, "Remember to dress for the occasion! See you later!" as he shut the door behind him.

"Hey! You didn't even wait to see if she accepted yet!" Ibuki screamed at the door as Mikan opened the envelope and pulling out the letter inside.

'Please accept our invitation to our precious Fuyuhiko's birthday party. As this is a joyous occasion, weapons are strictly prohibited, and any violence will get your hands cut off."

"It really is a Yakuza party," Chiaki muttered, leaning over Mikan's arm to read the letter.

"It is," Ibuki echoed, practically mirroring Chiaki's position on Mikan's other arm.

"It... really is..." Mikan's voice could barely be called a whisper as she realized just what the heck she was getting herself into.

A super sophisticated party at a banquet. With dancing and performers and oh good gosh.

Mikan nearly fainted at just the idea of being in such a stressful situation.

'But...but it's Fuyuhiko-kun's birthday! I need to be there t-to support him!'

And with that, Mikan closed the envelope and turned to her roommates for advice.

"Mahiru-chan, I thought we were going shopping together! How come a nasty pig is here?" Saionji's voice sounded sweet and innocent, even as she was badmouthing Mikan.

"Oh, I meant we were going shopping to help Mikan-chan prepare for a party," Koizumi replied, awkward as she pushed Saionji's wheelchair around. "Did I forget to tell you?"

"You must have forgotten since this bitch is so meek that she never says a word and isn't ever noticed by anyone!" Saionji smiled brightly, clapping her hands together.

"I-I'm so-sorry for being m-m-meek and un-unnoticeable!" Mikan shrieked, unable to take anymore of Saionji's insults.

"There, there Mikan-chan," Koizumi lifted a hand from Saionji's wheelchair to pat Mikan on the arm comfortingly. "Hiyoko-chan, this is supposed to be a friendly girls' day out, so why don't we be a little bit more friendly?"

Saionji 'hm'ed like she was considering it.

"Nope, don't feel like it," Saionji's reply nearly brought tears to Mikan's eyes.

'What happened to going shopping with Chiaki-san and Ibuki-san?!' Mikan wondered.

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A Brief Flashback to Explain the Current Situation

"Craaaaaaaaap!" Ibuki nearly screamed. "I accidentally double-booked again! And the shows are barely an hour apart!"
"Just cancel one concert," Chiaki suggested, her focus mostly on her weird cookie game. "There's no need to do both."

"But I'll feel guilty! My fans were so excited and there's no way I can disappoint them the day before both big concerts! Argh, what do I do?!"

"Then do both."

"But I'll die!"

"You survived every other time you did this," Chiaki retorted.

"If I die, will you take Mikan-chan shopping for her party for me?" Ibuki asked, half joking, half serious.

"Nope," Chiaki said bluntly.

"WHY!?"

"My sense of fashion is whatever has video games in it," Chiaki gestured to her Mario pyjamas to prove her point. "That's not going to end well for a formal party."

"You're right!" Ibuki gasped, before crossing an arm over her chest and placing her hand at her chin, trying to mimic a good detective pose. "But who do we know who has a good fashion sense, nice enough to do this for Mikan-chan, and won't ask questions about where she's going?"

They came to the same conclusion at the same time, the apartment nearly shaking from Ibuki's loud declaration of "MAHIRU-CHAN!". Chiaki just quietly said, "Koizumi-san."

"Hey, hey, these clothes should look good on you!" Mikan flinched away from the baby clothes Saionji shoved in her face. She almost dropped the bag in her arms from the shock. "Fitting for a crybaby, right?"

"There's no way those clothes would fit," Koizumi replied, trying to get Saionji to stop while at the same time avoiding outright reprimanding the blonde. It was a hard task. Mikan didn't blame her for failing. Koizumi had to literally cart Saionji away from Mikan to get her to stop.

Saionji would probably actively hamper the shopping trip, so Mikan decided in advance not to listen to her. Koizumi might be better, but the redhead would probably have her hands full with keeping Saionji in line. And thus, Mikan left to rely on herself.

Which would be easier if she knew what kinds of things one would wear to a formal event.

'Um... formal means... a dress, right?' Mikan reasoned, walking away from the scene of Koizumi trying placate Saionji to wander around. 'If Fuyuhiko-kun is going to be there...then maybe think of something that would match what he's going to wear. Maybe that would help.'

Mikan froze, both hands grabbing at her hair as she realized something important.

'Fuyuhiko-kun wears a suit everywhere! I'll have no idea if I'm under or overdressed! He's totally inadequate as an example!'

"Hey, it doesn't matter what I think about babies!" Koizumi raised her hands defensively, desperately looking for a way to reassure Saionji. "Isn't that right, Mikan-chan?"
Only... she wasn't...there.

"Mikan-chan?!" Koizumi tried to look around for the nurse, but was paused by a tug on her sleeve. Oh no. Saionji looked like she was on the verge of tears.

"D-Do you care more about that super tall idiot than me?!" Saionji demanded, sniffing. "Is-is it because you can't think of me as anything b-but a baby?"

Koizumi's heart shattered at the sight, her mouth immediately saying things like, 'No, that's not it!' and 'I care about you, I really do!'

'I'm so sorry, Mikan-chan, but Hiyoko-chan needs my support right now!'

'Hm, is this formal enough?' Mikan wondered, grabbing the hanger to look at the dress hanging down from it. 'I need a long dress, right?'

The dress on the hanger was cute, sure, but since it fell to her knees, it probably wasn't formal enough. She put it back, sort of disappointed that she couldn't wear the cat dress.

'That's it!' Mikan had to pause for a moment, marveling in her genius. 'The longer it is, the more formal! I just need to find the longest dress here!'

Needless to say, Mikan was wrong, but she didn't realize that at the moment. Instead, she was happily humming to herself, dismissing any dress that didn't at least reach the floor.

"Tsumiki, what the hell are you doing in the wedding store?! You literally couldn't stay still for a moment?!!" Saionji demanded as Koizumi pushed her towards her. "Don't tell me someone actually proposed to you!"

"Now now, Hiyoko-chan, we're supposed to be here to support Mikan-chan! Now let's try and find a good dress for Mikan-chan's big day!" Koizumi looked excited, smiling as she went over to the rack of dresses.

"But I don't want to support this bitch!" Saionji whined.

Mikan finally found the nerve to speak up, though her voice was still a bit nervous.

"Um... what are you t-talking about, Koizumi-san?"

"Don't worry, don't worry, I get it! You didn't want to spoil the surprise. But we still need to make sure you look good for your wedding!"

"But she looks awful in everything."

"I'm... I'm not getting...

"Oh look!" The excited redhead pulled out a white gown, simple yet elegant. The dress looked to be strapless at first, but the section from one shoulder to the other was actually made of sheer fabric! A golden band wrapped around the waist and the dress nearly reached the floor.

"T-that's perfect!" Mikan announced, clasping her hands together in joy.

'Look at how long it is! It's beyond formal! It's super formal!'

"...you're serious?" Saionji asked warily, staring at Mikan in disgusted disbelief.
"I'll go try it on!" Mikan exclaimed enthusiastically. Koizumi handed her the dress and gave her directions to the change room. Mikan rushed off, her smile so bright Saionji could see sparkles.

"She's... serious..." Saionji mumbled, staring in the direction Mikan had left in shock.

"Hm? Hiyoko-chan, are you alright?" Koizumi turned to Saionji, only to pause.

"S-shut up! I don't care about her! It doesn't matter, it doesn't matter even if she is getting married!" Saionji denied words Koizumi hasn't even said yet. She vehemently tried to defend her pride, but Koizumi wasn't sure what she was defending herself from.

"Do you... do you want to talk?" Koizumi asked.

Saionji nodded tearfully, barely containing herself as Koizumi wheeled her away.

"H-Help..." Mikan whimpered from inside the change room. It really, really wasn't her fault this time, okay?! It's just... somehow, when she was getting changed, the zipper at the back sorta kinda got stuck on the hook used to hang your clothes and...

She was stuck. Mikan couldn't reach the zipper so she had the brilliant idea of using the hook to zip it up but it wasn't a brilliant idea and she was stuck and it was all her fault!

Mikan felt like crying when a knock on the door came. She sighed in relief when Koizumi's voice called out for her on the other side of the door, reaching over to unlock it.

"Ugh, of course something like this happened," Saionji mumbled. "Mahiru, help her down, she's too useless to get down by herself."

"Is that really how you talk to someone you..." Koizumi hesitated, though Mikan didn't notice it as she finally and literally got off the hook. Mikan was sort of busy thanking the pair. "Never mind..."

"Shut up, shut up, shut up!" Saionji wailed, cheeks bright red, presumably from anger. "Don't make me regret trusting you!"

'What happened while I was changing?' Mikan wondered, smoothing down the wrinkles of the dress. The Saionji of five minutes ago would never say such a rude thing around her beloved Koizumi.

'Beloved...' Mikan shook away the memories the word brought. Now wasn't the time for that!

"W-woah..." Saionji gasped at the sight, before quickly returning to her normal self. "Those dressmakers must really be something if they can make a pig like you look good!"

"You don't have to force yourself, Hiyoko-chan," Koizumi tried to pacify the blonde, before turning to Mikan. "You look amazing! Like a princess out of a storybook!"

"Really!?!" Mikan only looked shocked for a moment before smiling brightly. Saionji flinched at the sight, probably thinking about how disgusting the nurse was. Mikan paid that no mind, focusing on Koizumi's praise. "Thank you very much, Koizumi-san! You're a great help!"

"Call me Mahiru-chan, Mikan-chan!"

"You w-" Mikan cut herself off, trying not to ruin the mood with her negativity. She couldn't refuse Mahiru's offer of friendship! "Er, no, thank you, Mahiru-chan!"
“Don't you think you two are getting a little bit too chummy?” Saionji glared at the both of them, making Mikan yelp. Saionji rolled her eyes, putting on her sweet, innocent voice. "Mikan-chan, you're probably a great person if Mahiru-chan trusts you! Call me Hiyoko-chan, okay?” The blonde even winked up at the nurse.

"I-is this a t-trick...?” Mikan asked hesitantly, almost shuddering. "Are you going to insult me f-for thinking I c-could be worthy of calling you by y-your first name and-"

"Of course not you-!” Saionji's outburst was interrupted by Mahiru delivering a sharp jab to Saionji's ribs. Saionji immediately smiled innocuously. "Of course not, you joker-. Now hurry up and get changed! That dress looks marvelous on you, by the way."

"Um... thanks...?” Mikan mumbled as Koizumi wheeled Saionji away from the change room. They kept hissing at each other under their breath. "That was... weird."

Mikan shut the door, beginning to change, starting with unzipping her dress...

Oh right.

"Mahiru-chan...? If you're still there... I can't r-reach the zipper..."

"Don't worry, Mikan-chan, I'll be right there!"

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"So... who's the fiancee?” Saionji asked as they took a break at an outdoor cafe. "Is it that Enoshima girl?"

"No... we actually broke up a few years ago,” Mikan muttered, trying to keep the sadness (and possible mental and emotional trauma) off her face. She failed, looking depressingly solemn as she took a sip of her water.

"Seriously?!” Saionji demanded. Mikan would have bet that she would have jumped out of her seat if it weren't for her legs. She got a quick jab to the arm as Mahiru glared at her. Saionji drank some of her soda to hide the fact that she was pouting.

"Y-yeah."

"I'll go get some more fries,” Mahiru said, standing up suddenly.

Mikan glanced at the completely full container of french fries on their tray, confused.

"Ah, Mahiru-chan...!” Mikan sighed as she realized that Mahiru was out of hearing range already. "I forgot to tell her I wasn't getting married."

Saionji spat out her drink.

"If you weren't getting married, say so sooner, you da-” Saionji cut herself off, looking frustrated.

"It's okay, Saionji-san. You don't have to hold yourself back because Mahiru-chan told you to. If you're mad at me, you can yell at me all you want."

"You've always been like this...” Saionji muttered dejectedly. "Just because I yell and scream a lot doesn't mean I hate you."

"Y-you tell me all the time though! 'I don't care about that pig barf’... 'I hate that ugly bitch!’” Mikan's voice immediately died out when she realized who she was talking to. "I'm s-sorry..."
"No, that's not it!" Saionji exclaimed. "I just-I just..."

Mikan looked confused as Saionji continued, lips trembling.

"How come when I try to be nice, you always act weirded out, huh?! But when Mahiru-chan and that damn, damn Enoshima do it, you're pretty much head over heels for them!"

"Because! Because, wasn't that exactly what happened?! You w-were nice to me for so many y- years, and then you t-tell me that you hate me?!!" Mikan stammered, the scene coming immediately coming to mind even after so many years.

'I hate you, I hate you, I hate you! Stay away from me, you pig barf idiot!'

'H-Hiyoko-san...?'

'How many times do I need to say it?! Get away from me! I don't need you!'

"Put yourself in my shoes, you idiot!" Saionji pointed in Mikan's face, scowling even though they were both crying. "I was planning to confess my love to my childhood friend after the biggest dance recital in my life, then the roof falls on me, my legs are fucked up to the point that I can't dance ever again, most of my relatives are happy about that and then my beautiful, stupid childhood friend gets snatched up by an airhead model! Wouldn't you get mad in that situation?!

"Beautiful... stupid... childhood friend?" Mikan mumbled, trying to think. "Did Saionji-san have another close friend during those years...?"

"You fucking bitch! I'm obviously talking about you!" Saionji gritted her teeth together, cheeks bright red. Mikan wasn't sure if it was from embarrassment or her tears. "I don't know what the hell I want from you!" Saionji slammed her fist down on the table in her rage. "I want you to feel horrible and hurt like I did! I want to make you cry and beg for forgiveness! But at the same damn time, I want to protect you, like I always did, and I want to be your friend again!"

Saionji screamed in frustration. "Why the fuck does this have to be so complicated?!"

"I'm... I'm sorry," Mikan was already lowering her head, before being stopped by Saionji's hand.

"Who said you had to apologize, huh?! This is obviously just me ranting about the shit's that's been on my plate these past couple years!" Saionji said, trying to say 'it isn't your fault' in that weird way of hers.

But it was her fault.

"I-I have to a-a-apologize!" Mikan sobbed. "Because... it's because of me that Hiyoko-san became like that. You were- you were distracted, right? You were looking a-at me when the roof fell and that's why you g-got hit!"

"That's obviously not your fault, dumbass!" Hiyoko glared at the nurse. "You didn't make me look at you or anything! If you're going to blame yourself, blame yourself for being so beautiful and distracting!"

"I'm s-s-sorry for being beautiful and distracting!"

"I DIDN'T MEAN THAT LITERALLY!"

Mahiru was getting weird looks, peering around the corner to watch the pair work out their
differences. At least, she got weird looks from the people who weren't too distracted by the pair in question to notice her. She sighed, deciding that the best thing to do would be wait for them to finish.

"If you want my damn forgiveness, promise me one thing!" Hiyoko declared, before looking thoughtful. "Actually, two things."

"Yes! Yes, I'll do a-anything! Please just forgive me!" Mikan pleaded.

"One! Never date an annoying airhead bitch like that again! All lovers must be screened and approved by yours truly! And two!" Hiyoko gulped before continuing, a detail so small Mikan almost didn't notice it. "I'm going to be your friend from now on, whether you like it or not!"

"I agree to those terms!" Mikan exclaimed.

"Good! Now let's get you some more clothes, Mikan-chan!" Hiyoko smiled genuinely, wiping her face with her arm.

"Huh? But I already have everything I need for the birthday party," Mikan stated bluntly, ruining the good mood in less than a second.

"...so. You went... to a wedding parlour... for clothes for a birthday party?!" Hiyoko asked, jaw dropping with shock.

"I-it's a really formal birthday p-party! Like, super high class b-businessmen party!"

"Bullshit! You're probably getting married behind my back, aren't you?!"

"No! N-no, I swear, I swear with all my heart and love and... um, your favourite candy...?"

"You hesitated! Did you break your terms and conditions so soon?!"

"That's not it! I j-just can't think of anything to say!"

Mahiru decided now was the best time to step in.

"I got the fries!"

"Geez, what took you so long, Mahiru-chan?" Hiyoko asked, immediately putting on her innocent voice out of reflex.

"Oh, nothing much," Mahiru smiled, taking her seat.

It's not like she would admit to being an eavesdropper after all.

"Mikan-chan, can I cut your hair?" Ibuki asked, at a loss as to how to best prepare Mikan for the party. While the dress and makeup had been easy to prepare, Mikan's choppy, uneven haircut would be another matter entirely. It would be easier just to try to even it all out and work from there.

"Yes!" Mikan replied immediately. "If it will help, I'll do it! I've been cutting my own hair since I was in grade school!"

'Is...is that why it's so bad?!'
"But..." Mikan trailed off, thinking back to earlier years as she played with a strand of her hair. "I've also let other people cut my hair too. They did most of the work, so I'm probably not very good with cutting hair..."

"Alright then, I'll do my best to make you look super sugar sweet!" Ibuki declared, pushing aside her worry for Mikan's sake. She worked quickly with her scissors, letting no bit of hair fall further than Mikan's shoulders. The length was enough to hide the previous choppiness of her haircut, but Ibuki didn't have much to work with in the styling department. She decided to help Mikan get her hair into a messy bun at the top of her head, curling the strands that fell out so it seemed like the effect was intentional.

When Ibuki's work was finished, she had Mikan stand up and do a little twirl. With the pure white gown falling to her ankles, a new haircut that showed off her cute face, white gloves that went all the way to her elbows, and a bit of sparkles, Mikan looked like she had just stepped out of a storybook. But even if she looked the part, was she truly ready for the party?

"Key!" Ibuki called out, intent on working out the checklist.

"In my bra so no one can find it!" Mikan answered automatically, the proper answers having already been drilled into her head by Ibuki.

"How are you getting home?"

"Hiyoko-san offered to drive me home!"

"Should you expect anyone home?"

"No! You're at a concert and Chiaki-san is doing experiments with her fathers!"

"Alcohol?"

"No thank you!" Mikan even made a big X with her arms.

"You're ready for the party!" Ibuki announced, giving Mikan a thumbs up.
Mikan was completely, absolutely, totally not ready for the huge party. That's why the fifteen minutes she had been there were spent cowering by the entrance, unwilling to go any further.

"Huh? Mikan, what are you doing around here?" Mikan turned, grateful to whoever called out to her. She was saved!

Hiyoko was there, in all her glory! She wore a beautiful kimono, black flowers outlined in blood red striking out against a pure white background. Even her obi was floral, gradient violet flowers blossoming across the sash. Various kitten pins were stuck into her ponytails. Somehow, even Hiyoko's wheelchair felt different, cleaner maybe? But overall, Hiyoko was very cute and elegant.

Or maybe Mikan was exaggerating out of pure relief. Who knows?

"H-hello, Hiyoko-san!" Mikan smiled, already moving to wheel the blonde inside. Hiyoko, surprisingly, didn't stop her or say anything about not wanting the brunette's pity, so Mikan assumed she was allowed to do so.

The two marveled at the huge banquet hall together, Mikan pushing Hiyoko to a spot in the corner closest to the entrance. Circular tables covered in cloth and decked out with silverware and candles infested the room. The area was covered in soft, warm lights, this, combined with the upbeat jazz playing from the speakers made the outing seem more like a trip to a bistro than the formal occasion the party was advertised as. People in suits and lovely long dresses chatted with one another, some standing, some sitting at their tables, and the atmosphere was friendly and carefree. A curtained stage sat at the far end of the room, the tables away from the area directly in front of the stage to make a dance floor, though no one was dancing at the moment.

"What are you doing here?" Hiyoko spoke up as they settled into their spot, surprisingly gentle.

'It must be because we're friends now!' Mikan reasoned.

"I'm here to support Fuyuhiko-kun. Why are you here, Hiyoko-san?"

"I'm not here because I want to be. But as the daughter of a high-class Big Three family like mine, I have to go," Hiyoko answered automatically, before gaping at Mikan. "Hold on a sec! 'Fuyuhiko-kun?!'"

"'Big Three'? What's that, Hiyoko-san?" Mikan wondered, pulling off the innocently confused look so well that Hiyoko bet all her old fans would have flocked to Mikan in seconds if they saw how cute she was.

"The three richest, most influential families in Japan," Hiyoko once again answered automatically, counting the families' names off on her fingers as she went. "The Togami family is rich as fuck and controls a ton of the international trade, the Kuzuryuu family is the biggest Yakuza family in Japan," Hiyoko sighed. "Aaaaand the Saionji family is a bunch of rich pricks who place too much value on family ties and shit like that."

"You're badmouthing your own family..." Mikan murmured.

"You think I wouldn't know that? I wouldn't say it if it wasn't true," Before Mikan could respond, Hiyoko glared at her. "And before you say anything, pig barf and idiot and ugly bitch and everything else I've called you don't count."
"O-okay..." Mikan hesitated a bit, unsure what to say. Oh, asking questions was always good, right? Unless Hiyoko would just respond with 'Don't ask me so many useless questions! It's annoying!', but that was a worse case scenario and oh dear Mikan was losing her confidence.

"Does that m-mean you're here to support Fuyuhiko-kun?"

"Wait, hold on!" Hiyoko actually forced Mikan to stop pushing her forward, turning the wheelchair around to face the nurse. "Explain something! How in the world did you manage to get on first-name basis with the heir to the number one Yakuza family?! Unless you mean some other 'Fuyuhiko' I don't know about!"

"Um... er, we're... sort of... friends," Mikan's voice dropped in volume the longer she talked, completely inaudible by the time she finished the sentence.

"I can't hear you!" Hiyoko raised her voice, as if to compensate for her childhood friend's timidness. She leaned forward to stare into Mikan's eyes intensely. "Say it again, one more time!"

"Hey, what the hell are you doing?! Quit harassing Mikan!"

Oh no.

Oh no oh no oh no oh no.

Fuyuhiko... well, he looked exactly the same as usual, wearing a suit and being angry. The only real difference Mikan could notice was that his arm had healed completely, no longer needing a sling or plaster.

"E-er, Fuyuhiko-kun!" Mikan plastered an obviously fake and awkward smile on her face, waving towards the rapidly approaching and increasingly angry Yakuza heir. "It's...it's g-g-g-great to see you!"

"You look really nice, Mikan. It's nice to see you too," Fuyuhiko switched from 'surprisingly polite' to 'terrifying!' frighteningly quick, rounding on Hiyoko. "What do you think you're doing?!. Show a little respect to a guest of honour, unless it's far above your capabilities."

"What, are you using big, long words to compensate for something, midget?" Hiyoko sneered. Oh good jackal of mercy no.

"Midget?!! You trying to pick a fight here, bitch?!"

"F-Fuyuhiko-kun! Hiyoko-san! P-Please... people are staring...!" Mikan yelled, squeezing her eyes shut to stop tears from flowing. She was not mentally equipped for this.

"IT'S HIS/HER DAMN FAULT!" The two blondes exclaimed in unison, glaring at Mikan. The only discrepancy was the pronoun used to refer to the other.

"Eep!"

"Shit, sorry Mikan!" They both apologized at the same time, before turning on each other.

"Will you quit copying me, you damn bastard?" Fuyuhiko tried to tower over Hiyoko, he really did. It's just that the one person he could actually tower over wasn't intimidated by something like height.

"Oh my, losing your temper so fast?" Hiyoko grinned mockingly, halfheartedly tried to hide it with
her hand. "If I didn't know any better, I would think that the heir to the throne was nothing more
than a big brat who throws temper tantrums when things don't go his way!"

Fuyuhiko gritted his teeth, scowling at Hiyoko. But he still remained silent.

"Um, Fuyuhiko-kun! M-meet Hiyoko-san!" Mikan tried to interject, tried to lighten up the tense
atmosphere. But she failed. The two were practically spitting fire at each other. "Hiyoko-san... meet
F-Fuyuhiko-kun...?"

"How the hell do you know such a bitch?" Fuyuhiko asked, turning to Mikan.

Hiyoko grinned impishly, grabbing a hold of Mikan's hand, intertwining their fingers. "You didn't
know? We're childhood friends."

"Y-yes!" Mikan agreed, nodding fervently. She was so excited to have finally made up with
Hiyoko that she didn't notice how Hiyoko's words sounded like bragging.

"Did you get blackmailed into becoming this asshole's date?!" Fuyuhiko demanded, completely
serious. "Or were you bribed?!"

"What, can't believe the truth? I don't need such petty tactics to get a date, unlike you!"

"Are you trying to die?!" Fuyuhiko's fingers were twitching, like he was barely restraining himself
from punching Hiyoko. Hiyoko took note of this, her condescending smirk growing even wider.

"Man, what a hypocrite, am I right?" Hiyoko turned to Mikan, giggling. "Those letters say 'No
weapons, no violence,' but the heir's pretty much itching for a fight!"

"Please don't fight...!" Mikan pleaded.

"It's not like he's going to get punished anyways," Hiyoko continued. "He thinks he's above
consequences!"

"I'll... I'll dance around l-like a drunkard if you p-promise to stop!" Mikan cried out, completely
and utterly desperate.

At least... it sort of worked? Both Fuyuhiko and Hiyoko looked shocked. Fuyuhiko looked away,
turning red as Hiyoko began laughing hysterically.

"W-what, are you going to strip n-naked and paint yourself blue next!?" Hiyoko gasped between
breathless giggles.

"If... if you want me to," Mikan mumbled, just as Fuyuhiko jumped in to yell, "Don't encourage
her!"

"Alright everybody! Eyes on me please!" The lights shut off, a spotlight from above focusing on
the rising curtain of the stage. "Love Screamer Mio-chan is here~! Who's ready to rock?!"

A cheer from Hiyoko and maybe someone in the back was the only response Ibuki got, though
Ibuki didn't look discouraged at all.

Fuyuhiko would have groaned in disappointment, if he didn't notice something just then. Or rather,
a certain silver-haired someone climbing onto the stage.

Oh fucking hell.
"Get off the stage," Peko ordered, completely unfazed by the audience's watching eyes.

"What, already?" Mioda whined. "I didn't even get to play a single song yet!"

"I apologize, but I need to take you away now," The swordswoman said, though she didn't sound sorry at all.

"Take me where? 'Cuz if it's with you, babe, I'll go anywhere!" Mioda even winked. Some members of the audience whistled and cheered, though most stayed silent.

"The chopping block," Peko replied coldly, eliciting laughter from the audience. They seemed to think it was a comedy routine.

But Saionji would probably laugh regardless of whether it was real or not. Fuyuhiko had averted his eyes and tried to ignore it. He knew that Peko could and would behead Mioda if she thought it was necessary. Mikan, on the other hand, was watching the stage, not in horror or amusement... but in complete inability to process what just happened.

"Sorry to disappoint!" Mioda called out as Peko restrained her arms behind her back. She continued as the silver-haired samurai began harshly shoving her across the stage. "But it's a good thing Mio-chan isn't the main event!"

Almost as if on cue, a blue-haired idol in a bright pink dress skipped on stage, her entourage following behind her.

"Alright everyone! I'm Maizono Sayaka! Let's all have lots of fun tonight!"

Nearly everyone cheered as the popular pop idol began to sing. Fuyuhiko groaned. Who the hell let his absolute least favourite artist in the entire world perform at his birthday party?!

---

A Brief Switch to Behind the Curtains to Show How the Current Situation Came About

"Hey, Peko!" Hajime called out, both hands behind his back. "I have something to show you. Come over here."

"I am busy. Please show me again at another time," Peko replied simply, guiding Ibuki to hell-knows-where.

"Hi Hajime-chan!" Ibuki would have waved, if not for the serious swordswoman restraining her arms.

"Too busy for a cat?" Hajime asked, revealing the tiny, tiny, tiny orange cat behind his back.

Peko immediately forgot about Ibuki, almost teleporting to be next to the cat. Hajime let the cat down to wander, and Peko hesitantly knelt down to reach out for the cute cat. Ibuki watched in confusion. Hajime had to gesture very expressively over Peko's head to get her to use the chance to flee. Ibuki was so lucky she had a friend like Hajime.

"Incredible..." Peko muttered as she stroked the cat's soft, soft fur. "So small..."

"Like Fuyuhiko."

Peko giggled a bit, before playfully reprimanding Hajime. "Don't let the Young Master hear that."

"Yeah, it took a long time to find him," Hajime smiled wistfully as he sat down on the floor to pet
the cat with Peko. "Surprisingly enough, they don't put 'not scared of professional swordswomen' on their profiles."

"Wait," Peko immediately switched to business mode, though her hand kept stroking the cat. "You were in charge of the party arrangements. When did you have time to find this cat?"

"Fuyuhiko's mom insisted on taking care of the party, so I looked for your new pet since I wasn't busy," Hajime said casually.

"Hajime!" Peko exclaimed, scandalized. "You know the Mistress' tastes are completely opposite to what the Young Master likes! She probably ordered everything the Young Master hates!"

"Yeah... you guys have fun now," Fuyuhiko mumbled, mostly to Mikan. She almost couldn't hear it over the cheery song. He walked off, almost sulking.

"Don't come back!" Hiyoko called out after him, grinning.

"Please... please don't say that..." Mikan pleaded, glancing in the direction Fuyuhiko had gone.

"Mikan, if you want to go, just go already!" Hiyoko ordered. "You don't have to ask my permission to go to the bathroom!"

"W-what, right! Thank you, Hiyoko-san!" Mikan was glad for the opportunity to follow after Fuyuhiko, even if it meant lying. She had promised to support Fuyuhiko on his birthday after all.

"Idiot," Hiyoko muttered to herself under her breath as Mikan ran off. The nurse still couldn't lie at all. "You better make this up to me later."

Fuyuhiko was outside, sitting on the steps to the building and staring up at the skyline, tracing the rooftops' shapes with his eye. Without a word, Mikan sat next to him. The world moved around them, muffled music from the inside and the pedestrians completely separate from them as they waited in silence for the other to make the first move.

Mikan was the first to crack.

"F-Fuyuhiko-kun, are you okay?" She asked, stammering from the pressure of breaking the precarious silence.

"Big parties like that aren't my thing," Fuyuhiko answered. While he seemed to be truthful, that wasn't the full story.

"Even so... it's your birthday party. You don't want to try to have fun?"

"I should be saying that to you. Go inside and enjoy the party with that brat or whatever. You don't have to stay with me."

"But... but I promised Hajime-kun that I would support you today!" Mikan exclaimed.

"You don't even know what's going on," Fuyuhiko replied seriously.

"Then tell me! Even if it's something I don't understand at all, I'll do my best to make your worries go away!" Mikan declared, before realizing how flustered she was getting.

She didn't like this atmosphere very much. Mikan liked the Fuyuhiko she could relax around much
better. Right now, Fuyuhiko was saying little, lacking in energy, and Mikan's attempts to compensate for that were less than adequate.

"Do you think I'm fit to be the leader?" Fuyuhiko rested an elbow on his knee, propping his face up with his hand. He stared at Mikan intensely, like he couldn't wait for the answer to come out of her mouth.

"Yes, why?" Mikan answered immediately.

Fuyuhiko's eye widened as he gaped at Mikan, but only for a second before he returned to being depressingly solemn.

"You heard your friend. I'm a brat who's been spoiled into thinking I'm above consequences. I'm impulsive and hotheaded and I almost got you killed," Fuyuhiko said, voice devoid of emotion. Like he said those words so many times that they lost all meaning to him.

He was really serious about doubting himself, but Mikan had no idea why.

"Hiyoko-san likes to insult people she likes. She doesn't mean any of it."

"But she's right. Is someone like me really suited to lead an entire family?"

"Yes," Mikan answered immediately once again. She could tell that Fuyuhiko wasn't going to be convinced by just one word, so she continued. "You're strong, you're really really brave, you're honest, you're kind, you do things without hesitation, and... what I'm basically trying to say is that you're really amazing, Fuyuhiko-kun!"

Fuyuhiko still didn't look convinced.

"They follow you already because they know you're going to be a great leader," Mikan said suddenly. She had no idea what convinced her to say it, but she had a feeling that it was the right thing to say. "Pekoyama-san and Hajime-kun and everyone else in your family."

Fuyuhiko stared at the nurse, shocked for a moment, before smiling. It was small, and it still looked a bit wary, but it was a smile nonetheless.

"Thanks."

Mikan smiled, glad that Fuyuhiko was finally understanding it. She knew he was worthy of being the leader. He didn't, though.

But...apparently, Fuyuhiko wasn't understanding as well as she thought, crossing his arms over his chest and sighing at the stairs, making no attempts to start a conversation. Alright then, force Mikan to pull out her trump card!

Mikan stood up, gathering all her courage and volume. The mantra of 'Think Ibuki-san, scream like Ibuki-san!' repeated in her mind as she prepared to yell it out to the entire world!

"I KNOW THAT FUYUHIKO-KUN WILL BE THE BEST LEADER IN THE HISTORY OF THE WORLD!" Mikan shrieked, startling Fuyuhiko and every person who had been going about their lives around them. No one responded though, most likely because silence was probably the best way to respond to people being weird.

"What the fuck are you doing?!!"
"I-if anyone doubts that you can do it... I'll scream that as loud as I can," Mikan huffed, a bit out of breath from how loud and fast she screamed. "And since you doubted yourself, I needed to yell it."

"There's no need to do that!" Fuyuhiko declared, unable to decipher when the timid Tsumiki he knew became someone who could scream without caring what other people think.

(The answer was pretty simple actually. Mikan never changed into someone else. She still cared a lot about what other people thought, but she cared about her friends more.)

"Then... then don't doubt yourself anymore, okay Fuyuhiko-kun?" Mikan hoped that her request wasn't too much to ask. Fuyuhiko was full of doubt and worry, even if she didn't understand why Fuyuhiko would need to doubt himself in the first place. But since Hajime asked her to support the Yakuza heir, then she had to try her absolute best to do that, for both Fuyuhiko and Hajime's sake!

"How do you know I won't just say yes just to shut you up?" Fuyuhiko asked warily.

"Because I trust you."

Mikan wasn't sure if Fuyuhiko accepted that answer or not. The silence was so suffocating that she could die, and she really would rather humiliate herself than go through more of that oppressive silence.

"I-I'm... I'm sorry for bothering you. I'll go back now," Mikan stood and turned to walk away, only to fall flat on her face. She could have sworn she felt a tug on her dress before she went down, but that might have just been an attempt to excuse her clumsiness.

"Crap, I'm sorry about that, Mikan!" Fuyuhiko immediately jumped up to help her. "I grabbed your dress without thinking!"

"Why...?"

"Because you didn't let me respond, bastard!" Fuyuhiko answered, before softening his voice. "Thank you."

Mikan felt like she just got slapped in the face with a slimy fish. A 'thank you' from the blonde she could barely speak coherent sentences around when they first met, a smile that looked like it could rival the sun and stars in brightness, it all felt like a dream. How in the world did Mikan manage to get into this situation? How in the world did a stumbling, stuttering, shy nurse manage to befriend a man who could smile bright enough to light up the night, who had no idea who great he was?

"Thank y-you..." Mikan mumbled as she stood and dusted herself off.

"What the hell? I'm trying to say that to you. You're the one who followed me out here, stayed with me, and did your best to cheer me up," Fuyuhiko's smile was a bit more amused, but Mikan knew he probably wasn't laughing at her. Probably.

"Now come on," Fuyuhiko gestured for Mikan to follow him as he turned towards the entrance.

"Huh?" Mikan was confused, though her feet followed Fuyuhiko as he walked inside anyways.

"You shouldn't miss out on the good food just because of me," Fuyuhiko apparently wasn't satisfied with how slow she was walking, and grabbed her hand to lead her inside at a much faster pace.

The silence returned, this time a little bit more relaxed. The kind of silence you didn't have to fill in with words, since you were spending time with someone you liked so much that even silence was
enjoyable with them. Despite that, Mikan broke the silence barely five seconds after it started.

"O-oh! I almost forgot!" Mikan reached for her purse... only to realize she didn't have a purse. "I... I forgot it at home..." Mikan muttered dejectedly.

"We can just drop by later to get it."

"R-really?"

"Yeah! We can bring some food from the banquet and watch a movie," Fuyuhiko paused, before looking thoughtful. "But we're always watching movies together, so maybe tonight, we can do something special."

"Okay!" Mikan smiled, too delighted with Fuyuhiko's recovery to notice how most people in the entrance hall were staring at them as they made their way back to the party.

It's not every day that you see the heir to the biggest Yakuza family in all of Japan holding hands with a woman no one had ever seen before, after all.

By the time Fuyuhiko and Mikan made it back, the cheery music had stopped in favour of people making speeches about how they swore to support the Kuzuryuu family. Thankfully, there was so much focus on the speakers on stage that the birthday boy himself (+ friend) could make their way to their assigned table without rousing too much suspicion.

Hajime and Pekoyama sat at the same table, unfazed by Mikan sliding into the spot between the silver-haired samurai and Fuyuhiko. Mikan was sure that if she was at the wrong seat, Pekoyama wouldn't hesitate to escort her to the correct one, even if it meant carrying her to the table. Mikan checked the tag on the plate before her, squinting to make out letters and words in the slight darkness. She was glad that the spotlights were on, even if it meant that most of the other lights were off, since the spotlights were just bright enough to let Mikan make out a 'Tsumiki'.

"Glad you could make it, Mikan," Hajime whispered as an old man made his speech, something about school and honour. "You look so different I almost didn't recognize you."

"Ibuki-san cut my hair for this occasion, so maybe that's why?"

"I meant you looked so beautiful in that dress I thought you were an angel, but that's close enough," Hajime shrugged causally, almost as if he was completely unaware of how flirty his words sounded. Judging from how Mikan wasn't blushing or stuttering in response, Mikan probably wasn't aware of it either. Fuyuhiko had to look away out of second-hand embarrassment. Pekoyama kept staring at the two, wide-eyed and pink as she tried to process Hajime's words.

"Then how did you recognize me?" Mikan paused for a moment, eyebrows scrunching together as she turned towards Fuyuhiko. "You were on the other side of the room. How did you recognize me?"

"You think I wouldn't recognize you even if you're all dolled up? It was really easy," Fuyuhiko answered, completely ignoring the speeches. "You always pinch and tug at your sleeves whenever you're nervous. You pinch your fingers if you have short sleeves. Whenever it gets really bad, you start rubbing your knees together and put your arms up like this." Fuyuhiko threw his arms up, looking like he was about to yell, 'I surrender!', before he started fumbling his hands around. His fingers were constantly moving in imitation of Mikan's nervous energy.

Fuyuhiko's right-hand pair stared at him in... well, it was best described as 'how the fuck' faces.
Mikan didn't notice, too amazed by Fuyuhiko's observant eye.

The old man on the stage finally finished his speech, as Fuyuhiko's sister walked up to him.

"Thank you everyone for all your love and support!" The cheery, polite girl addressing the audience must have been a body double. There was no way that she was the intimidating woman Mikan knew briefly and yet feared with every fiber of her being. "The food is ready to be served, so eat up!"

Peko stood, a deathly serious glare on her face as she brought her plate over to the serving table. She seemed to know exactly where her target was in the cluster of dishes and soups, and she struck without hesitation.

The three left at the table stared in shock as Peko returned, a plate full of desserts and a bottle of champagne in her hands.

"What the fuck was that?!" Fuyuhiko was the first to recover, staring at Peko in shock as the swordswoman placed put her battle trophies on their table.

"If I didn't do this, you would spend the entire night debating whether or not you could grab a bunch of sweets from the table without being spotted," Peko retorted, already moving to fill everyone's wine glass.

Before Fuyuhiko could respond, Hajime stood up, his voice booming throughout the room as he raised his glass. He had to move before Fuyuhiko could recover if Peko wanted to escape without being reprimanded. Peko was so lucky she had a friend like Hajime.

"A toast to the next-in-line!" Immediately, Mikan and Peko raised their glasses as well, the sound they made as they collided being echoed by the numerous toasts Hajime inspired.

Fuyuhiko didn't raise his glass, but he wasn't supposed to anyways. Instead, the Yakuza heir took sips of his drink, blushing bright pink.

"...thanks," Fuyuhiko mumbled, almost too quiet to hear.

"For a toast?" Peko inquired, refraining from drinking at all in case she got too intoxicated to protect Fuyuhiko. Her glass went to Mikan instead.

"No, for... for a great birthday," Fuyuhiko's volume dropped even lower, sneaking glances at the nurse. "And... thanks again, Mikan."

Immediately, Hajime and Peko gasped, scandalized. They turned to each other, sharing the details of their shared revelation so fast their words blurred together.

"So when Mioda Ibuki said that the Young Master wasn't coming back-"

"-it's because Fuyuhiko was with Mikan the entire day-"

"-I mistakenly blamed her-"

"-I already told you Ibuki didn't kidnap him-"

"What the fuck are you two blabbing about?" Fuyuhiko asked, staring at his underlings judgmentally.

"What the fuck were you doing with Mikan all day?" Hajime shot back.
"We were watching movies together!" Fuyuhiko retorted, face red from either anger or embarrassment. Or both. Both was good.

"Right. Then allow me to question-" Peko was cut off by a loud hiccup.

"Ehehehehehehehehehehehaha!" Mikan giggled, already drunk off her ass. Peko's glass was already empty and Mikan's glass was rolling around the table as she took sloppy gulps of Hajime's share.

"How the fuck?!" Fuyuhiko demanded.

"I forgot how low her alcohol tolerance was..." Hajime muttered to himself.

"Three glasses isn't enough to excuse her from her interrogation," Peko moved to approach Mikan, only stopping because of Fuyuhiko hastily yelling, "She's completely drunk! Do it tomorrow!"

---

"Hajime. Is this normal behaviour for her?" Peko inquired as Mikan clung to her, stroking her hair.

"When she gets drunk, yeah," Hajime paused, thinking of any advice he could give Peko. "Try to keep an eye on her. She can switch..."

He trailed off as Mikan fled, still laughing hysterically.

"GET BACK HERE!" Fuyuhiko chased after her, taking some of his cookies with him.

"On the other hand, maybe we should let Fuyuhiko handle it..." Hajime mumbled.

"Hiyo-chan! Yoko-chan!" Mikan called out, waving to her friend. Only that was a man she had never met before, who stared at her in confusion.

"What the hell are you doing?! That's not the bitch you're looking for!" Fuyuhiko shoved Mikan away from the man, yelling apologies for his friend's drunken behaviour.

"Hiko-kun," Mikan stretched out the last syllable as long as she could, before giggling. "You're super cool! So..." She hesitated, unable to find the right word. "So cute!"

"Quit the flattery!" Fuyuhiko retorted instantly, dragging Mikan back to their table. "And I'm not cute."


"Sure, if you say so," Fuyuhiko sighed, agreeing just to avoid arguing with a drunk person.

"Ah, look!" Mikan pointed ahead, her hand trembling. "It's the traitor! Hiyo-chan! Over here!"

"What?" Fuyuhiko was too taken aback to stop Mikan from waving the ex-dancer over.

"YOU LET MIKAN GET DRUNK?!" Hiyoko shrieked, wheeling her way towards them as fast as she could.

"Hiyo-chan! Yoko-hands!" Mikan giggled as she skipped over to Hiyoko. "Fluffy birdie!"

Fuyuhiko would have laughed at the sight of Mikan patting Hiyoko's head as the pigtailed blonde blushed and stammered, if Hiyoko didn't start screaming at him right after.

It was going to be a long night.
"How are we going to get her home?" Hajime asked, pointing at the unconscious nurse in Fuyuhiko's arms. "It's not like we can just walk across the city and back and expect to be back before morning."

"Maybe we should call for a car," Peko offered.

"...ngh..." Mikan groaned, her eyes barely open enough to stare up at the trio still trying to figure out how to get her home. The three didn't notice, continuing to discuss their options.

"None of us have keys to her apartment and she doesn't have pockets," Fuyuhiko replied. "The problem isn't getting her to her apartment, it's getting her inside."

"Ibuki... where did Ibuki go?" Hajime pulled out his phone, already dialing Ibuki's number.

The phone offered absolutely no response, Hajime sighing as he hung up. A call to Chiaki got the exact same outcome, though it was probably because she was so busy playing that she would ignore a dying person right in front of her if it meant a new high score.

Now, Mikan wasn't all that conscious at that point. She barely had enough in her to comprehend the words 'key' and 'home'. But no matter how much alcohol was in her system, Mikan's desire to help people would never be taken away from her.

"Bra..." Mikan stated, elaborating when the trio all gave her a weird look. "To... to get me h-home, you have to get my bra..."

"Understood," Peko stepped toward Mikan and was only stopped by a kick to the shin from Fuyuhiko.

"She's drunk!" Fuyuhiko exclaimed, glaring at the silver-haired samurai. "She's just spouting nonsense. Don't even think of feeling her up."

Hajime sighed. "Just bring her to your house, Fuyuhiko."

"Why?!" Fuyuhiko demanded, nearly waking up the drunken nurse who had just drifted off.

"Because I am not letting a drunk, defenseless Mikan around Kotoko," Hajime answered simply, already knowing the inevitable result of letting that happen.

"I can let her stay in my quarters if you are not comfortable with allowing her into your chamber," Peko offered.

Fuyuhiko hesitated, staring down at the sleeping woman in his arms. Mikan's snoring face must have been really persuasive, since after a few seconds, he muttered, "Fine."

Mikan giggled a bit, still sleeping. She mumbled about Fuyuhiko being a great potential something, a near-mirror of what she had said before the trio decided she had to go home.

"Say that before groping someone next time," Fuyuhiko grumbled, rolling his eye at the drunken nurse.

"And to the right person," Hajime added.

"It would also be best if you were not intoxicated when you try saying that," Peko concluded.

"Actually, never get drunk again," The trio said the same general sentence, in various degrees of
Mikan woke up in a room full of swords and umeboshi. She was grateful for the latter, since her hangover would have been unbearable otherwise.
Don't Blame Mikan for Almost Dying

Mikan's record for longest time in the Kuzuryuu household was about ten hours, give or take.

The record for longest time when she was actually awake was about fifteen minutes.

The fact that Mikan woke up clinging to a silver-haired samurai did not seem to help her chances of survival one bit. Mikan would have screamed the moment she realized it. But samurai had super speedy reflexes, right? So, if Mikan made a single sound, or even nudged Pekoyama too hard, Mikan would be in need of some serious medical aid!

Or at least, that was the excuse the sleepy Mikan gave herself when she decided to stay in the swordsman's embrace a little longer, letting those long, muscled arms wrap around her and hold her tight... the smell of wood and fruit sifting through the room... the warmth of the woman holding her... it was all too relaxing, so Mikan fell back asleep in moments.

"Should we leave them be?" Hajime whispered to Fuyuhiko as the latter opened the door.

"Just let me drop off some more umeboshi and we'll let them be," Fuyuhiko answered, holding another batch of the fruit in a paper towel.

"But at this rate, Peko's room will be swamped in the stuff..." Hajime sent not-so-subtle glances at the umeboshi tower resting on a bunch of paper towels on Peko's floor. Honestly, he had no idea how the hell it hadn't collapsed yet.

"Shut up! Do you want them to wake up?!" Fuyuhiko hissed in the way you did when you wanted to yell but had to stay quiet.

No one was sure whether it was his volume or the fact that he had taken a single step into Peko's room that roused the swordswoman into action. But either way, still half asleep and carrying Mikan with one arm, Peko chased after Fuyuhiko and Hajime. The hangover cure was forgotten as they ran for their life.

To be honest. when Mikan first woke up, she thought she was suddenly warped to ancient Japan.

Everything from the tatami flooring to the walls to the fact that everyone around her was wearing casual yukata practically screamed the traditionalism in her face. Like Hiyoko's room. Her clothes were the only indication that she wasn't suddenly intruding upon ancient history. The dress was dirty and a bit scuffed up, but at least it told her that she didn't suddenly switch minds with an ancient noblewoman or something. Mikan sort of felt out of place, being the only one to have modern clothes in a room that even smelled of traditional ways.

"I apologize profusely," Peko frowned, bowing so low her head was resting on the tatami mats as Mikan sat next to her, nibbling on the umeboshi. While she had been attempting to eat all of the fruit, Mikan hadn't even made a dent in the tower since she woke up. Hajime was very kindly helping her out though.

"It's fine," Fuyuhiko rolled his eye, standing over the two. "If you're not in any shape to practice today, I'll just ask Natsumi."

"Practice what?" Mikan inquired, lifting her head to stare up at Fuyuhiko.
"Target practice," Fuyuhiko was deliberately being vague, trying not to worry the nurse.

It failed completely. The umeboshi fell out of her hands as Mikan stood, exclaiming, "I...I have to go! If someone gets hurt...!"

"Then follow me," Fuyuhiko motioned to the door, already moving to leave. Mikan followed him without hesitation, asking questions about the various aspects of the Japanese house.

"Do you have any spare clothes? I want to change..."

"Yeah, we can get something for you before getting Natsumi."

Peko stayed still, not a single muscle moving as Hajime continued snacking on the apricots.

"If you wanted some, you could just ask," Hajime offered.

"No. I will not move until I have your forgiveness."

"Then take the fruit as a sign of my forgiveness," Hajime declared, sighing. Peko really should have noticed that he didn't blame her at all. Accidents happened, especially when you were half asleep.

Gratefully, Peko sat next to Hajime, grabbing at the fruit. The two of them chewed in silence for a while, ignoring the screeching, whimpering, and arguing from down the hall. Peko nearly bolted into action the moment she heard a cat screech, only to be stopped by Hajime. They continued eating more of the tower, only for their pace to drop until they were barely making any progress at all. They were completely full. And maybe sick of the stuff.

"Oh. I just realized. We could have just given these to the gunmen," Hajime stated, staring at the half-eaten fruit in his hand ruefully. "They probably need it too, considering how worked up some of them got last night."

"Reserve some for the Master and Mistress," Peko stood, already gathering up as much umeboshi as she could. Hajime joined her, helping the swordswoman carry the fruit out of the goodness of his heart.

"Got it."

A large chunk of the umeboshi was dropped off in front of the Kuzuryuu parents' door. A phone call later and most of the members had arrived, gratefully accepting handfuls of the stuff.

Hajime and Peko cleaned up the bit of juice and paper towels on Peko's bedroom floor, before Hajime started snickering to himself. His laughter grew until he was depending on Peko to hold him upright, the swordswoman staring at him in concern.

"Should I fetch Tsumiki-san?" Peko inquired.

"N-no! I'm fine!" Hajime waved off Peko's worry, wiping tears from his eyes. "It's just... how in the world did this happen?"

"Huh?"

"I was a normal guy working at a pet store. You were a weird person who visited every day to pet the animals. Who would have known that just a few years later, we would be working together under a Yakuza heir we can both tower over?" Hajime's laughter returned, softer and more wistful.
than before. Peko couldn’t respond, at least not before Hajime straightened out and grinned at her.
"But I'm still glad it happened."

Peko stared at him, shocked for a few seconds, before returning his smile.

"I agree. I'm glad I met you, Hajime," Peko replied, voice full of warmth. Her words were nowhere near as formal as before, relaxed because she was with a friend.

"Oh, do you remember this?" Hajime pulled the sleeve of his yukata back a bit, showing off the scars there. Most of them were from claws and teeth, but... there were some from bullets and knives too. Hajime wouldn't be able to tell you the stories behind any of the scars but the animal-related ones, since he honestly didn't remember. Like how a person wouldn't be able to describe what their fiftieth loaf of bread tasted like after a lifetime of eating bread.

"You got attacked by several dogs, cats, snakes, birds, rabbits, gerbils, hamsters, and lizards in trying to find a suitable pet for me," Peko stared down at the scars, smiling wistfully as she traced each one lightly with her fingertips. "Even though you failed every single day, you wouldn't give up until I finally found a pet."

"Then one day you show up with a fucking army!" Both Hajime and Peko giggled a bit, already knowing what came next. "I seriously thought someone was going to die, but then the shortest guy in the bunch walks over and asks for about thirty thousand cats! We didn't even have thirty thousand animals in the building, let alone cats!"

"I still can't believe you said, 'Sorry, you might have to try at a pet store big enough to handle the Spanish Armada'!"

"What else was I supposed to say? 'Sorry, I might be working in retail, but I'm not equipped to handle this'?!"

"Anything would be better than what you said to Fuyuhiko-kun back then!" Peko shot back, laughing. Her giggles were still more restrained than Hajime's, the brunette doubling over as a result of the humorous trip down memory lane.

"I thought he was going to shoot me for that!"

"He really was! But then, the Young Mistress saved your life!"

"Onii-chan, don't you dare kill him! That guy's my lifelong companion, you know!" Hajime imitated Natsumi's voice at the time. "He was even angrier after that!"

"Who would have guessed that Natsumi-san's friend from middle school would be the same as the kind part timer who let me play with the animals?" Peko asked rhetorically, since they both knew that the answer would be a huge, "NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOBODY!"

"Yeah..." Hajime's laughter faded away, staring off into space like he really could see the past versions of them meeting if he drifted off enough. "It's been a while since then."

"But is there a reason why you're suddenly laughing over our first meeting?" Peko inquired, her concern resurfacing.

"No reason, really. I'm just realizing how lucky I am."

"Hm?"
"I got to meet you, Kotoko, and Fuyuhiko," Hajime answered simply. "You guys changed my life forever."

Peko hesitated, unsure how to respond to that. Her slowly reddening cheeks were probably enough of a response.

"Thank you for that," Hajime paused, thinking. "Did you ever name the cat I gave you last night?"

"Yes," Peko replied, grateful for words she could actually reply to. "His name is Tangerine, to suit his fur."

Hajime nearly fell over laughing again, though he refused to say why. He didn't tell Peko the real reason he suddenly started thinking of their first meeting either, instead persuading Peko to go with him to check on Fuyuhiko's training session.

'That one event changed my life, introduced me to so many new people, and helped me experience things I never would be able to do in my normal life,' Hajime thought as he walked alongside Peko. 'But now... I have the feeling that it's going to happen again. Maybe it's different this time. Maybe it's not happening to me, or maybe it already happened, but... things are definitely going to change.'

"Natsumi! Get up!"

"It's too fucking early to! Go to hell!"

"It's eleven! In the morning!"

Mikan watched the exchange with concern, not daring to take a step into the room or make a single sound. She hid behind the open door and stared inside warily. Fuyuhiko on the other hand, had marched up to his irritable sister and started screaming in her face.

And then a cat stepped up to her, unfazed by the siblings' bickering. Mikan immediately knelt down and started petting the cat, already feeling calmer by stroking soft, soft orange fur.

'So cute!' Mikan gushed over the tiny orange cat, the argument just a few feet away forgotten. Unfortunately, the moment of peace lasted for about five seconds, when Fuyuhiko stomped on the floor so hard that the noise made both Mikan and the cat jump. The cat screeched at all of them as he fled, abandoning Mikan to escape.

"Um... hi...?" Mikan waved at the siblings that were now staring directly at her.

"Wait a second..." Natsumi paused, looking thoughtful. "Who the fuck is she?! Why the fuck is she in our house?!!" Natsumi pointed at the nurse, who flinched.

"She got drunk at the party last night, we couldn't get her home, so we let her stay here," Fuyuhiko answered, deliberately being as vague as possible.

"Why the fuck was she at your birthday party?!!" Natsumi demanded, before stomping over to Mikan. She grabbed a fistful of Mikan's yukata, pulling the nurse to her to glare directly into her eyes.

"E-EEP!"

"Listen here, bitch! If you're after money or power, you won't get it here! Schmooze up to the
Togamis, or the Saionjis, or whomever. I don't give a damn. Just leave my fucking brother out of this!"

"That's enough, Natsumi!" Fuyuhiko pulled his sister back, though she didn't let go of Mikan. "What the fuck do you think you're doing?!"

"Screening," Natsumi replied casually, before turning her attention back to the trembling nurse. "Tell me how you know my brother in five words or less, unless you want a-"

"Natsumi!"

"W-w-w-we're friends!" Mikan yelped, tears rolling down her cheeks. "Please...please don't kill me!"

"That wasn't five words!" Natsumi exclaimed, grinning sadistically. Her hand immediately reached out for Mikan's throat, only to be smacked away by Fuyuhiko.

"Stop," Fuyuhiko ordered, glaring at his sister. His voice was full of barely restrained anger, something Mikan found even more intimidating than when he was yelling and shouting.

The two glared at each other for a few seconds, before seeming to come to a silent understanding. Natsumi released Mikan, practically dropping her on the floor. She left first, stepping over the sobbing nurse as Fuyuhiko helped Mikan up.

"Mikan, can you get a first aid kit and meet us outside?" Fuyuhiko asked, surprisingly soft.

Mikan nodded, before wiping her face with her sleeve and leaving the room. Fuyuhiko smiled a bit at the sight, before leaving to meet up with Natsumi.

In the Kuzuryuu garden... wait. Hold on. We need to stop right here to clear one thing up.

It's true that the Kuzuryuu household had a backyard that was meant to be a garden. There was even some evidence that it was used as a garden at one point. Flowerpots, dirt, gardening tools, some plants...

It's just that for every bit of evidence that it was a garden, there was at least ten pieces of contradictory evidence. The flowerpots were shattered a lot time ago, the dirt was kicked and smeared in every direction, every single one of the gardening tools had been stained with blood, the bullet holes in the walls around them, the fact that most of the plants in the area were barely surviving, growing through the cracks of the chaos... The only thing in the supposed garden that was untouched was an old tree, just as tall as the Kuzuryuu house. A circle of stones surrounded it, green grass thriving in that circle, unlike the withering slivers of grass outside.

There was also the fact that Fuyuhiko and Natsumi were brawling right in front of the door, Natsumi stabbing at her brother with twin hand shovels, who fended them off with a rake. Mikan watched with wide eyes, trembling in her new yukata. Despite that, her grip on the first aid kit in her hands was firm.

"Good morning!" Hajime called out, taking a seat next to Mikan's trembling legs. Peko followed suit, sitting on Hajime's other side.

"W-what?! You're not concerned at all?!" Mikan pointed at the fighting siblings, hoping that Hajime and/or Peko would do something. "They just s-s-started arguing and... and then they came here and they're trying to kill each other!"
"Nah, this is their morning exercise," Hajime replied casually, almost bored as he watched the battle.

"The Young Mistress's form has improved substantially," Peko noted. She got a quick 'thanks' from the younger blonde as she dodged a swing of the rake.

"So... they're not in any danger?" Mikan asked, sighing in relief.

"Oh, they're definitely in danger. They really are trying to kill each other," Hajime stated, staring more at the sky than the fight.

"Hajime, h-how are you not concerned about this?!" Mikan shrieked.

"They love each other too much to actually kill each other," Peko answered. "But that does not mean they are unwilling to injure the other. Be ready, Tsumiki-san."

"Okay!" Mikan did her best to stop trembling, watching the siblings for any sign of injury or bleeding. It didn't work, but thinking of her task as an order helped her calm down, if only a little bit.

Hajime stared up at her, before noticing how her knees were pinched together, rubbing against each other whenever Mikan shifted.

"Peko, look," Hajime whispered to the swordswoman to his side. He directed her attention towards Mikan, the nurse too busy looking out for the Kuzuryuu siblings to notice the whispering.

"Fuyuhiko was right."

"He must be improving his observation skills," Peko replied.

"You don't find it weird at all that he's staring so much at Mikan's legs?" Hajime asked, an amused grin on his face.

Peko bit back the retort she knew Hajime or Natsumi would say if the positions were reversed. She knew Fuyuhiko would hear them and start going after them instead.

Since there was no way Peko would say, 'If he looked any higher, he would be looking up her skirt,' out loud, she simply shook her head.

"What were they arguing about?" Peko inquired, addressing Mikan though her gaze remained fixed on the fight. Fuyuhiko knocked a hand shovel out of Natsumi's hand, only for his little sister to strike at his face with the other one. Mikan nearly sprung into action at the sight of blood, but was held in place by Hajime grabbing at her yukata. He also wanted to hear the answer.

"S-something about... ice cream. And dates...?" Mikan answered uncertainly, anxiously waiting until she could treat Fuyuhiko and Natsumi. It should be noted that she still couldn't lie at all. "But they w-wouldn't kill each other over ice cream toppings... right?"

Peko nearly confronted the nurse over her dishonesty, only to be stopped by Hajime whispering, "Play along," to her. Despite the swordswoman's confusion, she did just that.

"Again?" Hajime sighed, slapping his hand to his forehead. Mikan stared at him, her eyes nearly popping out of their sockets from how wide they were.

"That would be the third time this week," Peko added. Mikan nearly dropped the first aid kit at her words.
"Se-seriously?!"

"Quit telling her weird things!" Fuyuhiko snapped, turning away from his sister to glare at Hajime and Peko.

"Don't look away from me!" Natsumi snarled, kicking at her brother. "Do you want to die?!"

"It's not like you can actually kill me, you fucker!"

"What did you say, you asshole midget?!"

Hajime had to cover Mikan's eyes as the fight went on, even more intense than before. It was a good thing Peko was around to stop any flying gardening implements from hitting them.

"Hold still..." Mikan cleaned up the blood dripping down Fuyuhiko's face.

"You guys look so lovey-dovey that I'm about to puke," Natsumi kept picking at the bandage on her hand, only to be kicked by her brother.

"Didn't Mikan just say to hold still?!" Fuyuhiko hissed as Mikan dabbed at the cut with rubbing alcohol, the sting even seeping into his words. He honestly didn't mean to sound as harsh as he did, but pain did that to you.

"She was talking to you, dumbass," Natsumi retorted. "Where were you staring, huh? Too busy looking somewhere indecent to notice where she was looking?"

"Fuck no! I'm not a perverted asshole like you! It's just common sense to know that you shouldn't mess with those bandages!"

"So what happened to doing things because 'Mikan' said so?! Why the hell are you changing your story all of a sudden?!"

Mikan whimpered as she reached for the bandages, unwittingly stuck in the crossfire. Why did this have to happen? She really, really didn't want to be here! Not if Fuyuhiko and his really scary sister were going to fight again!

Fuyuhiko clamped his mouth shut when he noticed how Mikan's hands were trembling as she bandaged him up. He glared at his sister to do the same, something she did only begrudgingly. The awkward, tense atmosphere was almost just as bad for Mikan's nerves. She couldn't have been more obvious about her relief when she finished if she tried.

"I'm all done! Please don't fight or do anything to remove the bandages, okay so bye!" Mikan exclaimed, her words escaping so fast that they all jumbled together. She stood and fled the room, only to trip over her own feet in her haste.

"...seriously, how the fuck are you friends with someone like her?" Natsumi asked, raising her eyebrow at the collapsed heap of a nurse.

"Don't badmouth the woman who treated your wounds," Fuyuhiko ordered.

The moment Mikan recovered enough to actually leave the room, Natsumi grinned.

"I can't believe it! I seriously can't believe it!" Natsumi nearly fell over from laughing.

"What the hell are you talking about?"
"Shutting up just so you won't scare your girlfriend... how much of a sickly sweet couple are you?! I'm gonna hurl! I'm going to be sick!"

"Don't say stuff like that when you're laughing your ass off," Fuyuhiko retorted, before the rest of Natsumi's words registered in his brain. He didn't look embarrassed at all, just confused. "I don't have a girlfriend."

"Friends with benefits then?" Natsumi offered.

Fuyuhiko stared at his sister in disbelief, before shaking his head. "No. I don't know why you're thinking of weird things but you need to stop."

"Don't play innocent! There's no way that the first woman you invited to the house since preschool isn't something along those lines! There's no school to give out group projects anymore, so you don't have any excuses!"

"What the fuck are you talking about?!" Fuyuhiko demanded.

"That damn Mikan chick!" Natsumi sighed, irritated that it took about five minutes for Fuyuhiko to understand what she was trying to say. Jeez, trying to tease someone as dense as her brother was hard, but she tried. Key word: 'tried', past tense, since she was too annoyed to keep teasing him at the moment. "What the hell is she to you?!"

"She's a friend I can watch old movies with," Fuyuhiko answered honestly.

"That sounds like a lie. I'm calling bullshit."

"Does it matter what you call it?!!"

"We're back," Hajime announced, interrupting the potential argument as he opened the door. He was carrying Mikan over his shoulder with one arm, the other holding Tangerine the tiny tiny cat. Peko followed him as he entered, carrying sweets.

"Snacks for the two of you," Peko stated, dropping off the sweets next to the siblings. She immediately went to Hajime to pet Tangerine.

"Don't let the cat over here! What if he eats the chips and dies?!" Fuyuhiko pointed at Tangerine, the cat hissing at him in response.

"Snacks for the two of you," Peko stated, dropping off the sweets next to the siblings. She immediately went to Hajime to pet Tangerine.

"More importantly, Hajime, what are you doing!?!" Natsumi demanded. "Get your hands off Fuyuhiko's woman!"

"I...I'm fine..." Mikan protested weakly, trying to ignore the blood rushing to her head. Hajime gently let her down, but even though he made sure to help her land on her feet, Mikan still stumbled and almost fell over.

"What are you talking about?!" Fuyuhiko stared at his sister, still bewildered by her words. He grabbed a bag of chips, only to pause as he realized that Natsumi had already grabbed the same bag.

"P-please, for the love of t-the entire earth and all the s-stars in the sky, don't f-fight again!" Mikan pleaded desperately as the siblings glared at each other. Fuyuhiko immediately released the bag, grumbling as he went for some marshmallows instead.

"They didn't actually fight over it?" Hajime looked like he had just witnessed the world turn into a
whirlwind of unicorns and water balloons. That... was really something that should have never happened. All prior evidence pointed to a fight being the logical conclusion to that situation. Hell, a fight was the conclusion to numerous similar situations, so what was different about now?

"She must be a good influence," Peko replied, stroking the cat in Hajime's arms. Tangerine looked very happy and cute. Peko loved Tangerine being very happy and cute. "I approve."

"What are you, his mom?"

"Look at that!" Natsumi laughed, pointing at Peko. "You got mom's approval! You're one step closer to getting married!"

"No one is getting married!" Fuyuhiko retorted.

"Oh... that reminds me," Hajime sighed. "I forgot to do your dad's marriage profile things again..."

"Marriage profile things?" Mikan wondered, watching the family converse from the sidelines.

"Again?!" Fuyuhiko, Natsumi, and even Peko gaped at Hajime, shocked. They all screamed at the same time.

"You know that the old man's going to kill you one day!" -Natsumi

"You forgot to carry out one of the Master's orders?!" -Isn't it obvious?

"Hajime, you fucking dumbass! Get to it already!" -Fuyuhiko

"It's not like you wanted to get married anyways," Hajime replied casually, grabbing a bag of gummies from the snack pile.

"Can I have some?" Mikan smiled as Hajime passed her the bag, chewing on the gummies together.

"So what if I don't want to get married just yet?!" Fuyuhiko demanded. "It's your head on the line here! Just fucking follow your damn orders!"

"Isn't this entirely your fault?!" Natsumi glared at her brother. "Just pick someone, get married, and set up a little 'accident'! There, problem solved!"

"I'm not going to marry someone just to kill them! Can you imagine how troublesome it would be if it was another Yakuza boss?! We'll have to spend months to clean up the mess!"

"Then forge a damn marriage certificate!"

"The entire purpose of the marriage is to strengthen the alliances between our family and various other Yakuza families," Peko stated, crossing her arms over her chest. "It is a matter that will not simply be solved by claiming the Young Master is already married."

"Argh! Just get a harem or something! Marry all of them!" Natsumi exclaimed, pulling at her hair in frustration.

"You're missing the entire point," Hajime sighed. "Since it's more of a political marriage than anything, we need to think carefully about who we can trust, who will be most beneficial to us, stuff like that."

'It's playing out like a soap opera...' Mikan noted, chomping on candy like popcorn as she watched
"Do we even need to strengthen our alliances or some shit like that!? We're the strongest Yakuza family in Japan! We don't need any other families!" Natsumi gritted her teeth.

"Even if the Kuzuryuu family is the biggest Yakuza family in Japan, every other Yakuza family combined would be enough to take us down," Peko's gaze wandered over to Fuyuhiko, before she sighed. "And as much as I would hate to force the Young Master into a decision, this marriage would be necessary in order to avoid conflict."

"Why don't you unite all the other families against someone else?" Mikan asked, thinking of one really weird drama she watched on TV. But hopefully there wouldn't be any flaming cows.

The four stared at the nurse, unsure what to make of her comment. A bit nervous now that everyone's eyes were on her, Mikan explained her idea.

"Um... if you're worried about all the other families going against you... t-then it would be better if everyone was united against someone else, right? Like another family that poses a serious threat to you. or one that's corrupt or something like that..."

"That sounds like a soap opera," Natsumi was the first to reply, but before Mikan could reply that, yes, her idea was based off a soap opera, Natsumi pulled out a great detective pose, thinking. She turned to her brother. "You think it can work?"

"Depends on who we choose as our victim. We need a decently large family, one who that doesn't have a sterling reputation, and isn't on particularly good terms with anyone," Fuyuhiko answered, thinking.

Hajime kept petting Tangerine as he thought, the four silently pondering their options.

"The Vongola family," Peko offered.

"No, they're all the way across the globe," Natsumi retorted. "The Simon family."

"Why not both?" Hajime smiled devilishly, sending a chill down Mikan's spine.

'...why am I here? Mikan wondered to herself, paying more attention to her food and the cat in Hajime's arms than the actual conversation. I'm basically listening to a business meeting I have no part of. Maybe I should just go."

"It's a good idea," Fuyuhiko admitted, before smiling at Mikan. "Thanks."

"You're a surprisingly good strategist..." Natsumi grumbled begrudgingly. "But don't think I'm just going to let my brother go after someone like you!"

"W-what did I do?!"

"You're against Fuyuhiko dating a nurse?" Hajime asked.

"Or maybe it is the fact that Fuyuhiko is dating at all that you cannot stand," Peko offered as an alternative. She grinned teasingly along with Hajime, teaming up to tease Fuyuhiko's sister.

"That's not it! Just shut up!" Natsumi yelled back, flustered.

Mikan couldn't stop herself from laughing a bit.
What an energetic family.

"Thank you for everything," Mikan grinned. "But... I should probably be getting home now. Bye."

"I'll walk you home," Fuyuhiko stated, before being greeted by wolf whistles from his sister. He glared at her. "Shut up!"

What an energetic family indeed.
Walking to Mikan's apartment was always a surreal experience. It had nothing to do with the walk to the actual building, but rather because of the building itself.

Because, for whatever reason, Mikan's apartment was in the middle of the experimental testing floor.

Fuyuhiko tried his best not to think about the implications of that.

Whenever Fuyuhiko visited, he had to walk past robots doing strange things behind clear glass walls and people screaming and banging their heads on computer keyboards. Mikan seemed completely oblivious to the agony of the workers, already used to it.

Fuyuhiko tried his best not to think about the implications of that either.

"Shouldn't you be treating them or something?" Fuyuhiko asked, watching as a tester accidentally got clubbed with a robot holding a tennis racket.

"There's already a medical team assigned to this floor," Mikan answered casually, walking past wails of despair from what Fuyuhiko dubbed the 'Programmer's Torture Chamber'. "I trust them to do their jobs."

"Maybe you shouldn't," Fuyuhiko replied, staring as the tester simply went to a fridge, grabbing an ice pack despite the bleeding.

"W-wait! No, just call the medical team!" Mikan had already run off to the tester, despite the tester fervently shaking her head. Fuyuhiko followed after her in concern and also confusion.

"I-i-if I do...!" The tester shuddered, unwilling to go any further. "They... They'll...!"

"There should be a first aid kit in that room. Can you get it for me?" Mikan spoke softly, trying to calm the panicking patient down. Though... the patient's anxiousness seemed more related to whatever the medical team did than her actual injury.

"Um, Mikan..." Fuyuhiko tugged at Mikan's arm, pointing at the line of injured workers gathering by her to receive actual medical treatment.

"I'm sorry Fuyuhiko-kun..." Mikan mumbled, already accepting the first aid kit from the bleeding tester.

"It's fine, just do your thing. I'll help if you need it."

Most of them just needed bandages or ice packs from the nearest fridge, but some were... um. In... not very good shape. Like 'may or may not result in permanent scarring' kind of bad shape.

'What the hell goes on in this building?!' Fuyuhiko wondered in horror as the third burn victim got his hand bandaged.

It took three hours to treat everyone.

As weird as the trip to Mikan's home was, standing in front of the door was even weirder. It was just a simple wooden door, a nameplate next to the doorbell. A completely normal door you would
find in an actual apartment building surrounded by disturbingly human robots injuring testers and programmers slamming their heads on their desks in frustration. The walls near the door were the only ones in the entire floor that weren't made of glass, just some tacky wallpaper. It made the area seem... well, suspicious, when compared to the openness you saw everywhere else. Sure, everything you saw was probably suspicious and maybe illegal, but at least they were transparent about it. But Fuyuhiko knew that it wasn't because the area was home to illegal documents or anything like that. It was because two women and a robot lived inside, and they wanted their privacy.

Huh. Two women and a robot sounded like a sitcom.

"Do you want to come inside?" Mikan asked, already moving to open the door. "I'll give you your birthday present."

Mikan was interrupted by the door suddenly swinging inward, Chiaki standing in the doorway with her cheeks puffed out. They could hear loud music and screeching from inside.

"A chipmunk?" Fuyuhiko wondered, staring at the robot.

"Get in here," Chiaki grabbed at Mikan, pulling her inside. Fuyuhiko followed, trying to make sure Mikan wasn't being forced to do something weird.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Fuyuhiko demanded, taking off his shoes. Chiaki was so intent on dragging Mikan to wherever that she didn't even bother waiting for the nurse to do so as well. "Okay then, fine, ignore me."

The weird music got louder and louder as they approached Chiaki's room. Of course it was Ibuki, playing a song, but why was she playing at all? And why in Chiaki's room?

"Alright! That was my signature song, 'Hope You Don't Mind My Bulging Muscles!' Now then, requests are open!" Ibuki smiled, relaxing her grip on her guitar a bit.

"Okay, that should be enough," Chiaki said to Ibuki. "I got the main event here. You can stop playing now."

"What's going on?!" Fuyuhiko demanded as Chiaki forced Mikan in front of her computer, the gamer grabbing a box off the table.

"Mikan agreed to help me with my question and answer stream," Chiaki answered, opening the box. It was completely full of strips of paper.

"But since she was really late, I had to supply the audience with love music!" Ibuki added with a grin as she removed her guitar.

"T-t-that was today?!" Mikan yelped, her hands shaking in air near her face. "I-I'm so sorry! I was late-

"Because people were hurt just outside your door and Mikan treated them," Fuyuhiko completed the sentence, placing a hand on Mikan's shoulder to calm her down. He glared at Ibuki, Chiaki, he even glared at the camera perched on top of Chiaki's computer screen, like he would beat up anyone who said otherwise.

"That's noble," Chiaki said in a monotone voice as she grabbed a strip of paper from the box. "The question is, 'Can we hear everyone's full names?'''
"I'm Mioda Ibuki!" Ibuki answered immediately, flashing a peace sign at the camera. "But you might know me as 'Love Screamer Mio-chan'!"

"What kind of name is that?!" Fuyuhiko demanded.

"A cool one!"

"No it's not!"

"Nanami Chiaki," Chiaki stated over the bickering.

"T-Tsumiki Mikan!" Mikan stammered, unable to get over her stage fright.

The argument stopped when Fuyuhiko realized that everyone was staring at him expectantly.

"What? No, I'm not doing this. I'm out of here," He grumbled, already turning to leave.

'That won't do,' Chiaki reached for the piece of paper she had taped to the inside of the box's lid, just in case something like this happened.

"Next question then. It's for Mikan," Chiaki nearly smirked when Fuyuhiko paused. But her face and voice remained expressionless, to make sure Fuyuhiko didn't notice. "What kind of underwear do you wear?"

Fuyuhiko immediately snatched the paper out of the gamer's hands, ripping it to pieces. He glared at her, before forcefully saying, "She is not answering that. Give me that."

Fuyuhiko took the box out of Chiaki's hands, pulling out another piece of paper.

"Does this mean that Fuyu-chan can't answer any questions?" Ibuki asked.

"Don't call me that!" Fuyuhiko almost threw the box's lid at her, only to be stopped by Mikan begging him not to hurt anyone.

"Wait wait wait," Ibuki whispered something in Mikan's ear.

"E-er, Fuyu-chan!" Mikan called out. Fuyuhiko didn't reply to her, only scowling at Ibuki.

"Don't try to get her to do weird things."

"But it's for science!" Ibuki protested.

"Would y-you be fine with me calling you Fuyu-chan if Ibuki-san didn't ask me to?" Mikan asked.

"It's fine if you want to," Fuyuhiko answered, before Ibuki gasped dramatically. "Shut up! The next question is..."

"Is what?" Chiaki stared in confusion as Fuyuhiko tossed that paper over his shoulder, only to grab another one, before doing the same to that one as well.

"How come so many people want to know if me and Mikan are dating?!" Fuyuhiko demanded on his fifth paper. "Why would you even think that?! Even my sister asked me that!"

"Well..." Ibuki started counting the reasons off on her fingers. "You're on a first name basis, you won't let anyone but Mikan-chan call you by your first name, you're really protective of her, and by really I mean you're pretty much her guard dog," Mikan had to stop Fuyuhiko from actually
throwing the lid at Ibuki, which made Ibuki pause. "See! More proof! Mikan is the only one who can stop you from beating some of us up sometimes!"

"That's just because you're annoying!" Fuyuhiko retorted, grabbing another paper. His stare softened, before looking towards Mikan in concern. "Mikan, are you okay with answering a question about your family?"

"...u-um... if it's for Chiaki-san..." Mikan mumbled. Fuyuhiko remembered how she flailed about and panicked at Fuyuhiko asking about her family, before wondering how far she would go for someone else's sake.

"Never mind," Fuyuhiko ripped the paper to pieces, scattering them on Chiaki's floor.

"You know, we could have answered the question instead," Chiaki stated.

"Anyways," Fuyuhiko grabbed another piece of paper, ignoring Chiaki's words. "Next question, for Mioda and Nanami."

"Call me Ibuki-chan!"

"No. Just answer the question!" Fuyuhiko tossed the paper at her, only for it to land on the floor since it wasn't a paper airplane.

"You didn't say what the question was in the first place," Chiaki said, grabbing the paper off the floor. "Wait. This is a question for all of us."

"W-what are they asking?" Mikan asked tentatively.

"'Have you ever dated anyone before?'" Chiaki read out loud.

"Ooooooh! Is there a reason why little Fuyu-chan over here didn't want to hear Mikan-chan's answer?" Ibuki asked teasingly.

"Ibuki-san! Don't c-call him little! O-or Fuyu-chan! Or tease him!" Mikan screamed, having to restrain Fuyuhiko to keep him from 'knocking out the few brain cells she had left'. (his words)

"I've never dated anyone," Chiaki answered the question, trying to subtly keep everyone on track and also alive.

"I have, I have!" Ibuki exclaimed, smiling. She paused, before frowning. "Hey, isn't anyone going to ask who it was?"

"We wouldn't know and we wouldn't care!" Fuyuhiko snapped.

"That's not true! The audience would care!"

"Hey, Mikan, what about you?" Chiaki turned towards Mikan. Fuyuhiko froze.

"I... s-s-she..." Mikan sniffled, on the verge of tears.

"H-Hey! Don't cry! You don't have to answer it!" Fuyuhiko slipped out of Mikan's arms, already trying to console her.

"Er, let's move on!" Ibuki grabbed another slip of paper, reading it out loud. "'What's your favourite food?'"
"...I like Jingles chips," Chiaki admitted, ashamed of her unhealthy preferences.

"Everyone has their guilty pleasures!" Ibuki turned to Mikan, trying to help Mikan act normally. "What about you, Mikan? I personally love spicy food."

"I... I don't really have a preference," Mikan answered, wiping her face. "But I like warm food."

"Huh? Not even one sort of warm food?" Ibuki stared at Mikan in confusion.

"Well, if it's warm food, that means it was recently made, right?" Mikan asked rhetorically, hoping to segue into her explanation. "I usually had leftovers or premade food, so a warm meal was really rare when I was growing up."

Everyone stared at Mikan, frozen with shock at her answer.

"Did I... say something wrong?" Mikan wondered, uncomfortable with the continued silence.

"Not at all," Chiaki stated calmly. "Let's answer one more question before when end the stream."

"I'll get it," Fuyuhiko grabbed the box, glaring at Ibuki with suspicion in his eye.

"I didn't even do anything!" Ibuki protested. "Stop giving me a Mean Look! I'm not going anywhere!"

"Don't worry! You didn't do anything wrong!" Mikan reassured the musician. "He just doesn't trust you in general!"

"Not helping! Not helping!"

"What a rowdy bunch..." Chiaki said to herself, staring at the trio's antics in exasperation. The question and answering session went on to become Chiaki's most popular stream yet.

After all the streaming business was done and over with, Mikan pulled Fuyuhiko into the hallway, retreating into her room. She emerged hugging a plastic bag to her chest. Her legs were pinched together, rubbing against each other every time she moved. Mikan was hunched slightly, looking anywhere but Fuyuhiko's eye.

"U-u-um, I j-just got this without t-thinking," Mikan rambled, timidly holding the bag out to Fuyuhiko. "I just t-thought of you, b-but if you don't l-l-like it, then p-please tell m-me!"

"Wow," Fuyuhiko turned pink as he accepted the bag, pulling out the hoodie inside. "Thank you."

"H-h-h-h-huh?!"

Fuyuhiko shrugged off his jacket, already moving to put on the sweater. He grinned down at the hoodie, admiring how soft it was, before looking back towards Mikan.

"It's really great!" Fuyuhiko said with his bright smile, making Mikan see stars. "Thank you."

"U-uwah...!" Mikan was on the verge of tears, covering up her relieved smile with one hand. "You really like it?"
"Of course I do!" Fuyuhiko huffed, almost annoyed. With his hands shoved into the hoodie's pockets, he kind of looked like a thug. "How would anyone not like something this comfy?"

"Thank-thank you!" Mikan babbled, tears flowing from her eyes.

"Why the fuck are you thanking me?!" Fuyuhiko demanded, shocked.

"Thank y-you! I'll definitely, definitely, definitely repay you for this!"

"You're the one who gave me the gift!"
Hey, I Think We're Skating Around the Topic

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

[Are you doing anything tomorrow?]

[Mikan? What's with this all of a sudden?]  
[I'm helping to set up a blood donation event, but we don't have enough people.]  
[But you don't have to! You're not obligated to!]

[I didn't have to do anything anyways, so sure, I'll come.]

"We're going skating~!" Mioda declared with a huge grin. She was practically skipping towards the ice rink, unaffected by the cold despite wearing a skirt and a t-shirt.

"Why the hell am I here?!!" Fuyuhiko demanded. Unlike Mioda, he was stuck in a coat three sizes too big for him, a scarf wrapped around the entire lower half of his face muffling his words.

"I'm going to be too busy showing off for all the cute girls to make sure Mikan-chan doesn't fall," Mioda answered.

"YOU BROUGHT ME HERE TO BE MIKAN'S BABYSITTER WHILE YOU FLIRT WITH PEOPLE?!!" Fuyuhiko roared. He really shouldn't have believed that text message.

"U-um, you didn't have to come! You can-you can leave any time you want!" Mikan stammered, trying to calm down the Yakuza heir. She tugged at his arm with gloved hands, trying to make sure he didn't punch anyone.

"It's fine!" Fuyuhiko huffed.

"But flirting isn't the only reason!" Mioda slung an arm over Mikan's shoulder, her grin growing even wider. "Mikan-chan managed to get an off day today after three twelve-hour shifts in a row, so we should have fun!"

Fuyuhiko sighed. How the fuck did Mikan put up with her damn roommates?

"I'm going to the cafe," Nanami stated, lifting a hand from her Digimon game to point at the coffee shop next to the ice rink. "Tell me if you need anything."

"Well then, I'm off!" Mioda waved at them, rushing towards the cafe with Nanami in tow.

"...you know, you can leave whenever you want," Mikan repeated.

"No, Mioda's right. Well, half-right anyways," At Mikan's look of confusion, he continued. "We should have fun. You deserve to relax."

"Okay!" Mikan smiled, following him to the rink.
"I'm so sorry!" Mikan wailed as she fell over once again, nearly knocking Fuyuhiko and a nearby skater couple over.

"Does she even know how to skate?" Mikan whimpered as the couple whispered about her. They had a good reason to doubt whether she could skate or not, since this was the ninth time she fell over, but they could be nicer about it.

"Shut the fuck up!" Fuyuhiko snapped at the pair, helping Mikan up. "She's learning, got it?"

"F-F-Fuyuhiko-kun! Please don't try to-" Mikan cut herself off as Fuyuhiko grabbed her hands, skating backwards so he could help Mikan skate without falling over.

"Woah... you're really amazing, Fuyuhiko-kun!" Mikan gaped at Fuyuhiko's skill. "Are you a champion skater?"

"No, me and Natsumi used to skate on ponds near our house," Fuyuhiko replied, before frowning at the memory. "She didn't listen to check if the ice was thick enough one time, and she fell in..."

"At least she's fine now, right?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

The two became silent, circling around the rink once before Fuyuhiko spoke up.

"Mikan, is something wrong?" Fuyuhiko asked, staring at the nurse in concern. She was frowning, staring at her feet, though that might have been the fact that she had to depend on Fuyuhiko to skate without falling over every ten seconds. "Do you want to take a break?"

Mikan glanced at Mioda and Nanami's table before nodding, staring at her skates as Fuyuhiko guided her over to the entrance. They removed their skates, though Fuyuhiko didn't let go of Mikan's hand as they walked to one of the café's tables.

"I'll get you some hot chocolate-" Fuyuhiko was stopped by Mikan refusing to let of of his hand, pulling him towards her. Without another word, Fuyuhiko sat down in the seat across from her.

Mikan remained silent, tugging at her glove with her other hand as she thought. He waited until Mikan spoke, rubbing small circles on the back of Mikan's hand in hopes of comforting her.

"Fuyuhiko-kun... if my goal was to have a normal life, without E-Eno..." Mikan trailed off, unable to say the rest of the woman's name. "Would being troubled by this mean I failed?"

"Of course not," Fuyuhiko replied. "It's normal to have troubles in your life. You can tell me, you know."

Mikan smiled slightly, before frowning as she went on. "Well... maybe it's a bit silly... but..." She hesitated, before Fuyuhiko squeezed her hand to prompt her to continue.

"I think Hiyoko-san hates me, she turns out to have been in love with me for years. Eno... you already know what happened with her. Hajime-kun turns out to be part of the Yakuza. Chiaki-san is a robot. Ibuki-san is a rock star," Mikan sighed, her frown deepening. "And maybe it's silly, but... I can't help feeling... betrayed. Like... like we've been friends for years, but I'm only finding out now, and they've never trusted me with that before and was I not worthy of knowing that before?!"

Mikan's words became faster and faster as tears began to flow.
"And... and e-everyone else seemed to k-know about each other's secrets... s-so why am I the only one left o-out? Am I just..." Mikan trailed off when she felt warm arms around her. With wide eyes, she stared up at the Yakuza heir who stood to hug her.

"You're not unworthy of being their friend or anything," Fuyuhiko stated, patting Mikan's head comfortably. Despite that, he sounded like he was barely keeping himself from yelling. "And I know for a fact that they didn't know about each other's secrets," Fuyuhiko paused for a moment, remembering screaming and fainting. "Mioda freaked out when she heard that Hajime was a Yakuza, but she calmed down when she realized that you fainted and needed help."

"R-r-really?" Mikan asked uncertainly, rubbing at her eyes.

"Why would I lie to you? I don't have anything to gain from it."

"...you wouldn't," Mikan smiled as she whispered that little tiny refusal. She relaxed against Fuyuhiko's chest, her smile growing wider. "You never lied to me."

"Yeah," Fuyuhiko returned her smile in full.

"You were the only one... You never tried to hide that you were a Yakuza or anything," Mikan realized. "And you were the only one I trusted about... about her."

"Really?" Now it was Fuyuhiko's turn to be surprised and uncertain.

"Yeah. Hajime-kun, Chiaki-san, Ibuki-san... they all thought that she dumped me after graduation," Mikan replied. "You're the only one I trusted with that and right now, you're the only one I'm trusting with this."

Fuyuhiko wasn't sure how to reply to that, staring wide-eyed at the nurse in his arms.

"So... thank you for always being honest with me, Fuyuhiko-kun. Thank you for everything."

All the anger he felt, all the desire to punch Mioda, Nanami, the model from hell, it all disappeared when he heard those words. Instead, he sighed away all the negative emotions and grinned brightly.

"No problem, Mikan."

"What the goddamn fuck is wrong with you guys!?"

"Fuyuhiko-kun! Please, please, please, please, please don't kill my roommates!"

"It's their fault for making you cry!"

"What did I do?! Sing so well that she burst into tears at my skill?!"

"Can you please stop talking for a moment? I'm at the final level of this rhythm game-"

"SHUT UP AND APOLOGIZE!"

"F-Fuyuhiko-kun! Stop!"

"Wow, this is like watching dog training."

"Nintendogs?"
"I'LL KILL YOU!"

"If you stop, I'll give you anything you want! My money, my food, my-"

"Vir-"

"IF YOU FINISH THAT FUCKING THOUGHT, I'LL STICK A SWORD DOWN YOUR FUCKING THROAT MIODA!"

"Mikan, your phone is ringing."

The squabbling was officially on pause as Mikan pulled her phone out of her pocket, cutting off the shrill beeps as she answered the call.

"Hello, Tsumiki Mikan speaking," Mikan nodded to the person on the other end, only to jolt suddenly, her face turning pale. "I understand."

"What is it?" Fuyuhiko asked warily as the nurse put away her phone, grabbing her things.

"I'm needed at the hospital. There's been a huge car accident and there's not enough hands."

"Ah... then I should go too... I think," Nanami replied, putting away her game console.

"Are you guys going to take a bus to the hospital?!" Miota demanded, remembering how the trio got to the ice rink in the first place.

"Uh... yes?" Mikan forced a smile on her face. "Have fun skating with Fuyuhiko-kun, Ibuki-san."

"Come with me," Fuyuhiko ordered, grabbing Mikan's hand. Nanami followed after them. "I'll drive you."

"You don't have to! We can just-"

"Mikan, it's a serious accident. Do you want people to die just because you wouldn't accept a ride?" Fuyuhiko continued in Mikan's silence, feeling a bit guilty about using such a low blow. "You can make it up to me with some sweets."

"Is that your price?" Nanami asked, ruining the moment. She seemed excited as she related the scenario to one of her games. "I can hire you as a chauffeur for some candy?!"

"No! That's not fucking it! This is a one-time deal only! Now get in the damn car!"

"Why the fuck were you two in the hospital?!" Fuyuhiko demanded, glaring at Natsumi and Hajime.

"Fuyuhiko-kun! We're in a hospital! Please don't be so loud!" Mikan hissed at the Yakuza heir.

"Sorry," Fuyuhiko said, before repeating his question at a lower volume.

"Geez, we try to follow your orders and this is the thanks we get?" Natsumi huffed, examining her nails.

"We have insurance, right?" Hajime asked.
"You're not answering the damn question!"

"I-it was a car accident, so it c-couldn't really be their fault, Fuyuhiko-kun!"

"It was those damn Simon guys!" Natsumi sighed dramatically. "They tried to ram us off the road!"

"I can assure you, this time, she didn't start it," Hajime said, completely serious before he got an elbow to the ribs courtesy of Natsumi.

"This time?! You make it sound like I go around, picking fights! You think I'm a delinquent or something, bitch!?"

"You're doing it right now!" Fuyuhiko retorted. "Now tell me about the Simon family. Why were they trying to ram you off the road?"

"Actually... now it's time for them to take their pain medicine..." Mikan mumbled. "I'm sorry, but you kind of... have to leave for this part..."

Fuyuhiko stormed off, but not before ordering Natsumi and Hajime to tell him the full story later.

Mikan giggled as she pulled out a wide assortment of syringes.

"Alright, now it's time for your shots!" Mikan exclaimed, delighted.

The pair's screams were probably audible from space.

Chapter End Notes

can i rename this story 'a tiring het tm snorefest w weird characterization'? i dont know if it would fit but it would be hilarious.
Mikan was visiting the Kuzuryuu household when Natsumi and Hajime were released from the hospital. When the pair saw her, smiling cheerfully and playing with Tangerine and Peko, they both paled in horror.

"Why is she h-here?" Natsumi stammered. Natsumi never stammered.

"I invited her to lunch after her shift ended," Fuyuhiko answered.

"I mean, that's fine and all, but did it have to be here?" Hajime tried his best to disguise the shakiness in his voice. He still failed though.

"Are you two okay?" Fuyuhiko asked, staring at the duo in concern. "You're looking pale. Do you need me to get Mikan or something?"

"N-n-n-n-n-n-no!" Natsumi practically screamed, hiding behind Hajime. "We're just fine! Right Hajime?"

"Yeah! Perfectly fine! We're in perfectly good health!" Hajime exclaimed. "In fact, I'm in such good shape that I could do a hundred push ups!"

"I can do two hundred!" Natsumi declared, trying to puff out her chest to match her bravado. It sort of didn't work, since she was still forcing Hajime in front of her, getting ready to use him as bait as she fled.

"Are you competing with me?!" Hajime demanded.

"Are you two done acting weird?"

The two would have answered, they really really would have, if not for the distracting giggle from the doorway.

"T-the cackling of the devil before Satan s-steals your soul...!" Natsumi shuddered in horror.

"I can feel the needles pricking..." Hajime nearly fell over, weak at the knees.

Fuyuhiko looked over at the door, seeing Mikan laugh joyfully at the sight of Tangerine climbing on top of Peko's head in the hallway. He then stared at the two in incredulity.

"What the fuck?"

Mikan giggled at the sight of Tangerine climbing on Pekoyama's head, the swordswoman eventually joining in.

Pekoyama was a lot kinder than her seriously stoic stone visage showed. Mikan had already learned that Pekoyama loved cats, spending most of her time spoiling Tangerine with treats and playtime.

"Ah," Pekoyama snapped out of her laughter, remembering something. "You said you needed to leave at approximately 1600 hours, correct?"

"That's four pm, right?" Mikan asked for clarification.
"Yes."

"Then I do need to leave. Is it four already?"

"Yes," Pekoyama said a bit sadly. Even Tangerine seemed to mourn Mikan's departure.

"Then I'll see you later!" Mikan smiled brightly as she turned to leave. "I'll be sure to take pictures of all the cats I see for you! Bye!"

"Wait. What do you need to do?" Peko asked, composing herself. "If you require assistance, I can provide it readily."

"No, no! It's nothing like that," Mikan waved away Pekoyama's concerns. "It's just that Ibuki-san set up a blind date for me at Hanamura's Diner, and I don't want to be late."

A loud 'WHAT?!' came from the other room. Mikan ignored it, since it was probably just whatever conversation Fuyuhiko, Hajime, and Natsumi were having.

"Why the hell are we here?!!" Fuyuhiko hissed at the group, barely a table away from Mikan and her redhead date. He couldn't read the menu through the tacky sunglasses his sister made him wear. She also forced him to wear a huge hoodie that was constantly sliding off his shoulders and (for some reason) neon green swim trunks.

Natsumi had no fashion sense whatsoever, which quite frankly, explained the horrible fucking clash of a mess that was their table.

"I'm here because Natsumi pays me," Hajime answered, constantly adjusting his pink heart sunglasses so they didn't slide right off his nose. Fuyuhiko had no idea why Natsumi thought that putting Hajime in a bright yellow jumpsuit was a good idea. Or why Hajime was wearing a scarf indoors. Or a baseball cap for that matter.

"I'm the one who pays you!" Fuyuhiko retorted.

"I just give him a little extra on top of that!" Natsumi smiled, lifting her... actually kind of decent sunglasses to wink at Fuyuhiko. Fuyuhiko would have wondered if she was putting them all in embarrassing outfits on purpose, if she hadn't done the same thing to herself. Seriously. Why would you wear a tank top shaped like a cat on top of her blue yukata from home? Or the crocs? Or the Cario hat?

"Technically speaking, the Master is the one who pays Hajime," Peko stated, wearing sunglasses over her normal glasses. Her outfit must have been an eight-year-old's princess costume at one point, considering how much poofiness and sparkles there were. But why the leather jacket on top of that?

"I can still fire you!" Fuyuhiko snapped at Hajime. "Then who will give you your damn money?"

"I'll just hire him!" Natsumi grinned, giving Hajime a thumb's up.

"Yeah, I have a good backup plan."

"This is technically plotting against the Young Master," Peko said, smiling at Hajime and Natsumi's antics.

"Wait, Peko, why are you here then?" Fuyuhiko asked. "Don't tell me Natsumi is turning you
"Of course not!" Peko replied instantly, offended. "I would never!"

"Then spit it out already! Why did you agree when I asked you, Peko?"

"I offered Tsumiki-san my unconditional protection," Peko crossed her arms over her chest, suddenly genuinely serious. "I will not break my promises in a time like this."

"This still doesn't explain why we're here in the first place!" Fuyuhiko huffed, before turning to Natsumi. "Why would you feel the need to spy on Mikan's date?!"

"She got bored," Hajime offered, before getting a light slap to the shoulder as punishment.

"That is not the reason!" Natsumi exclaimed defensively. "I mean, if my brother's got competition, of course we need to check it out!"

"Competition for wha-" Fuyuhiko was cut off by Hajime shushing him, the occupants of the table suddenly staring intently at Mikan's date.

Long red hair was tucked into a ponytail, tied together with a white ribbon. She wore a white knit sweater over a black tank top, raised areas in the knit creating a pattern of intertwining lines, like strands of DNA. The sweater was loose enough to show off pale shoulders and her collarbone. Her jean shorts came up to the middle of her thigh, leaving lots of space between the bottom of the shorts and the black socks pulled almost to her knees. A pair of flats completed the look, white bows on white shoes. Her outfit was more fashionable than everyone at Fuyuhiko's table combined.

(Actually, it wasn't that hard, since Natsumi was either worse than a bat in a soundproofed room or was deliberately trying to make them all look like rummage sale rejects.)

Mikan on the other hand... Fuyuhiko didn't even have to try to guess what happened with her clothes. She asked Mioda to help with her outfit, only for the rock star to realize there was some task she left undone, rushing out to do it without a second thought. Mioda only managed to throw a single skirt at Mikan before leaving. With few other options, Mikan turned to Nanami for help, resulting in her outfit.

The only things unrelated to gaming were her skirt and the dark grey leggings with a pattern of white flames trailing up the side of her legs. Mikan's purple ruffle skirt was comprised of three layers, star-shaped charms dangling from strings attached to the waist of her skirt like stars on a night sky. She held her bangs back with a headband, the image of a yellow crown with a single blue jewel printed on it. Her light green hoodie had the image of three golden triangles arranged in a pyramid on her left breast. The garment was unzipped enough to show the black t-shirt underneath. Only the words 'Choose your fighter' were visible, the rest of the t-shirt's design hidden by the hoodie.

"Like, what in the world do all these fancy names mean? I don't get it at all," Mikan's date sighed, slumping her head down on the table.

"Oh, that's simple, Otonashi-san!" Mikan smiled, showing the menu off to the redhead. "For example, look at 'Chinese-style Noodles with Generously Spiced Pork'."

"That means absolutely nothing to me," Otonashi replied in a monotone. Mikan giggled in response.
"That's because all the names here are really complicated, but the trick is to just remove all long adjectives," Mikan explained, like a teacher giving her student tips for a test.

"Seriously?" Otonashi stared at the menu with wide eyes, reading the words intently. "So basically, it's just noodles with spices and stuff."

"Basically!" Mikan grinned, before adding, "But I can still order for you, if you want! I'm a regular at this place!"

"She's... completely different..." Hajime mumbled, shocked by Mikan's surprising cheerfulness.

"So, what about these drinks?" Otonashi asked, looking to Mikan for guidance. "They're all confusing as hell!"

"Well, if you like sweet things, then I'd definitely suggest the 'Frozen Nectar Essence de Pomme!'"

"What kind of name is that?!" Otonashi demanded, looking like she was about to slam her head down on the table. Again. Her face was almost as red as her hair. Probably from rage. "I swear, I'm gonna deck the guy who came up such complicated names!"

"It's just cold apple juice," Mikan stated simply, prompting a 'See what I mean?!' from her date.

"...It's frozen cider!" Natsumi whispered to the rest of her table, checking the menu for confirmation. The other three at her table paled.

"She's going to get drunk!"

"Oh fucking hell no!"

"Should I prepare to stop them?"

From the kitchen, the poor, poor, constantly-harassed waiter kept glancing at the rowdy quartet, wondering if he would survive taking the orders of such suspicious individuals. He decided not to test his luck. Not yet, at least.

"She's completely drunk," Fuyuhiko noted, munching on his donut.

"At least it's not Mikan," Hajime replied, chewing on his kusamochi in return.

"Yes, I would dread to see Tsumiki-san get drunk again," Peko stated, bewildered as she stared at the drunken woman.

"Um, I'm beginning to think that this is suddenly becoming something we really shouldn't watch!" Natsumi exclaimed, averting her eyes as her face turned bright red.

"What the fuck?" Fuyuhiko asked, turning his attention to the other table. He almost dropped his donut.

"God, it's so hot in here! Holy shit! Mikan, you're feeling it too, right?" Otonashi asked as she began lifting up her tank top, her knit sweater already discarded on her chair. She wasn't sitting opposite the nurse anymore, instead using Mikan's lap as a chair.

"Not really," Mikan answered, somehow completely unaffected by the attractive redhead stripping on top of her. "We're sort of in public, so can you keep your shirt on please?"
"Oho! So you'd be fine with it if we weren't in public?" Otonashi grinned suggestively, winking at Mikan for good measure.

"Uh..." Mikan stared at the redhead strangely, before shrugging. "Sure?"

"Hehe! Great! Let's find a little place to settle down and get comfortable!" Otonashi apparently had no problem declaring that to the entire damn diner.

"Should we stop them?" Peko asked, concerned as Otonashi pulled Mikan along, off towards a storage closet that Hanamura was helpfully holding open for them.

"Of course we should!" Fuyuhiko slammed his hands on the table as he stood, already stomping off towards the closet. "That Otonashi chick is drunk off her gourd! She can't consent to something like that! And Mikan doesn't seem to be able to fight her off at all!"

"She doesn't seem to want to fight her off," Hajime corrected.

"Who cares!?" Fuyuhiko retorted, almost punching Hanamura as he entered the closet. The door closed behind him.

Before anyone could say a word, Mikan grabbed at Otonashi, shoving the redhead's face against the floor as she pulled a syringe out of her pocket. The nurse practically climbed on top of the redhead's back, using her body weight to pin Otonashi to the ground. Otonashi couldn't move to dislodge the brunette, her legs unable to kick at something on her back and her arms held down by Mikan's weight.

"Mikan, what are you-" Fuyuhiko froze as Mikan filled the syringe with air, pointing it at Otonashi's neck.

"Ikusaba-san," Mikan said simply, her voice cold and detached. "Did you know that if you injected air directly into someone's bloodstream, it'll mimic a heart attack?" She smiled, though it looked more sadistic than anything when paired with her cold tone of voice. "So don't move. Understand?"

"Yes..." The redhead gritted her teeth.

"Mikan, what the fuck? Why do you even have that?!" Fuyuhiko hissed at the nurse, trying to keep his voice down so no one would investigate. He didn't want someone to come in and find them in this situation.

"It's good to be prepared. Especially when a certain lying, conniving, treacherous, cruel monster is trying to take you down," With each insult, Mikan rubbed her victim's face against the floor.

"What are you even talking about?" Fuyuhiko demanded.

"This is Ikusaba-san. The woman who took your eye," Mikan frowned, staring at Ikusaba intensely. "Enoshima may be charismatic, but she's no fighter. She's not a soldier. And I would be a sorry excuse for a girlfriend if I couldn't recognize her sister's face, even if she wore a wig."

"What do you want from me?" Ikusaba didn't seem scared at all by the situation she was in, though she made no attempts to fight Mikan off.

"It's simple. Never approach the Kuzuryuu family again," The syringe gradually got closer and closer to Ikusaba's throat, until the point was touching her skin. "Promise me that, and stay true to your promise, unless you want to die."
"...what?" Fuyuhiko stared at the entire thing, unsure where to start with... well, addressing all of it.

"Is something wrong, Fuyuhiko-kun?" Mikan smiled at the blonde, her voice immediately becoming more cheerful. "Do you want me to speed this up?"

"Why the fuck are you doing this in the first place?" Fuyuhiko asked. "What happened to not believing in killing people?"

"Well... that was when it was someone who wronged me," Mikan sighed, hesitating for a bit before continuing. "If...if it's someone who hurt you... then..."

"So basically, you can kill someone who broke my arm and took my eye for me, but you won't raise a hand against the woman who emotionally manipulated you for years," Fuyuhiko summarized, only half sarcastic.

"H-hey, to be fair, Enoshima would have just enjoyed if you killed her!" Mikan retorted, defensive.

"She's right about that," Ikusaba spoke up, getting a 'thank you' from Mikan.

"Goddammit Mikan," Fuyuhiko sighed, slapping a hand to his forehead. Mikan stared at him in confusion. He used the same speech he did whenever Peko offered to off someone unnecessarily, only a bit softer since it was Mikan. "Thanks for the sentiment and all, but I can take care of myself. There's no need to protect me. If anything, try to protect yourself the same way you tried to protect me just now."

"But! You protect me all the time!" Mikan protested. "This is just my reciprocation!"

"You don't have to, you know?" Fuyuhiko did his best to placate Mikan, trying to get her to drop the syringe. "You don't have to do this for me."

"No! It's unfair to you if I don't do this!" Mikan shot back. "If you... if you're always protecting me..."

"How in the world is it unfair to me?"

'I understand that this is a thing they have to work through. But does this conversation really have to take place when she's sitting on me?' Ikusaba wondered to herself, deciding to stay silent.

(She knew Mikan's goal wasn't to kill, or even to harm. Mikan wanted to intimidate her into agreeing. But even if the soldier wasn't in any immediate danger, staying silent was the best option, so she didn't startle Mikan into accidentally injecting her.)

"Because! If I don't give back just as much, you'll-you'll..." Mikan’s voice dropped. She stared at the ground, unable to look Fuyuhiko in the eye without crying. "You keep defending me and listening to me, and... I-if you're always the one giving so much to me, then you'll just... stop caring. You'll realize how pointless it is to help someone who never helps you in return and you'll-"

"Mikan, shut the fuck up," Fuyuhiko commanded, almost angry as he stepped towards her. She immediately clamped her mouth shut. "Is that seriously what you think is going on here? Do you think I'm helping you so I can get something out of it?"

"N-no! Of course not!"

"Then why would you even think that?! Why would you think for even a fucking second that I'm
going to stop caring if you don't do anything for me?" Fuyuhiko scowled, offended and even a bit (okay a lot) hurt by Mikan's assumptions.

Mikan stayed silent, frowning at the floor.

"And for the record, you have done things for me. You're the one who stops me from punching every annoying person in the face, you've treated my wounds, and you've listened to my problems too," Fuyuhiko stated. "I'm not going to stop caring about you if you don't kill someone for me. Frankly, I'm offended you would even think that."

"I'm sorry..." Mikan mumbled, bringing the syringe away from Ikusaba's throat.

"Tsumiki," Ikusaba spoke up, startling the nurse. Thankfully, Mikan didn't try to inject her with oxygen. "I agree to your terms. After tonight, I will never approach the Kuzuryuu family again."

"Good!" Mikan smiled, letting the soldier up. "But if you break that promise, I will break into your-"

"-Mikan," Fuyuhiko interrupted. Mikan sighed as she put the syringe back in her pocket.

"That won't be necessary," Ikusaba replied simply. "I have no plans on harming anyone in the Kuzuryuu family."

"Okay! Now that that's settled, let's finish our date!" Mikan smiled, practically skipping over to the closet door in glee.

"Wait," Fuyuhiko pointed at Ikusaba. "You go back first. I need to talk to Mikan."

"Alright."

The door closed behind Ikusaba, leaving Mikan and Fuyuhiko alone in the small, dark storage room. Mikan gulped nervously.

"I'm s-s-sorry!" Mikan stammered. "I r-really should have had more f-f-faith in you and-!

"Mikan, calm down," Fuyuhiko reached up, patting Mikan on the head.


"Mikan! What the fuck?!" Fuyuhiko snapped, before wanting to punch himself in the face. That wasn't really the best way to start comforting her. "I care about you because we're friends! How do you not know that?!"

Fuyuhiko was very, very close to actually punching himself there. He sounded like he was blaming her for fuck's sake! The only reason Fuyuhiko didn't inflict bodily harm on himself was because it wasn't the time for that. Even if he did deserve it.

"Why did you w-want to be friends in the first place?!" Mikan shot back.

"Because, I spent time with you, and I realized that I liked spending time with you," Fuyuhiko glared up at the nurse, ready to beat her over the head with love and kindness. "Because you're someone who talked back to a Yakuza heir to keep him from badmouthing your friends. You treated nearly two hundred people, me, and my sister, and that was when you were off-duty! And I usually relax around you, I can watch Yakuza movies with you, but right now, I want you to stop
"F-Fuyuhiko-kun!" Mikan wailed, stretching out the last syllable as she hugged the blonde. He couldn't understand a thing she was saying through her sobs, but he still rubbed her back comforting. "I'm s-sorry, I'm sorry, I'm-I'm sorry!"

"You don't have anything to apologize for!" Fuyuhiko huffed. "And even if you did, I already forgave you!"

"You... you did?" Mikan muttered in shock against Fuyuhiko's shoulder. She had to bend over a bit to rest on his shoulder, but it was still really comfortable.

"I wouldn't make a list of all the amazing things I've seen you do if I had a grudge against you," Fuyuhiko rolled his eye, though his tone was a lot more lighthearted than before.

"...thank you."

"Hey, Mikan?" Fuyuhiko spoke softly, stepping back a bit so he could stare up at the brunette. His hands rested on her shoulders, forcing her to return his stare. "You know I'm not going to stop being your friend because of something stupid like that, right?"

"...um..."

"Mikan."

"I-I was just...just... joking! Y-yeah, that's it!" It should be noted that Mikan still couldn't lie. At all.

"Alright, that's enough," Fuyuhiko sighed. "I'm not going to stop being your friend until you're sick of me. Hell, even then you won't be able to get rid of me," He grinned a little. Actually, it was more of an amused smirk, but hey, close enough.

"I'm not going to get sick of you!" Mikan fervently shook her head. "If anything, I should be saying that!"

"Yeah, yeah, either way, we'll be old and grey before something happens to break us up," Fuyuhiko's smirk became more of a fond smile, before he remembered something. "Right! We should get back to our food! And you have a date to finish!"

"Wait. Why were you here in the first place?" Mikan eyed Fuyuhiko sus... well, it would be suspicious if it were anyone else. She knew that Fuyuhiko had no bad intentions for her (and the sentiment was 100% mutual) but she was still confused. "I thought you were never going to eat from Hanamura's Diner ever again."

"That's not important!" Fuyuhiko practically shoved Mikan out the door, blushing bright red as he marched towards his table. Mikan walked beside him, before pausing at her table.

No one at Fuyuhiko's table was speaking, instead staring at Mikan with varying degrees of pity. Otonashikusaba was nowhere to be found. The only sign that she was ever present the huge mess at the table and a few coins tossed on top of the bill. There was no way a few hundred yen coins would pay for the meal. The waiter was waiting patiently for Mikan's return, frowning sympathetically at her.

"I'm sorry, but your bill..." The waiter trailed off, wary in case Mikan either started crying or screaming. She did neither, moving to pull out her wallet before Fuyuhiko stopped her.
"I'll pay for her."

"Um. Why?" Mikan asked, staring down at Fuyuhiko in confusion.

"Because you just got stood up!" Fuyuhiko wasn't sure if he heard cheering or not at his outburst, but it didn't matter either way.

"Fuyuhiko! Pay for us too!" Natsumi demanded.

"No! It was your damn idea to come here in the first place! You pay!" Fuyuhiko snapped at his sister, already handing the money over to the waiter.

"He's so biased...!" Natsumi gasped overdramatically, nudging Hajime with her elbow until he nodded in agreement. On the other side of the table, Peko was still staring at Mikan, a slight frown on her face.

"Shut up already!"

(When the quartet finally got home, everyone had recovered enough from their pity for Mikan to interrogate Fuyuhiko on what the fuck exactly went on in that storage closet. Fuyuhiko told them to fuck off while blushing, which didn't help his case at all.)
Bang Bang Into My Heart

Whenever Mikan watched movies, she would always curl up, hugging her knees, a pillow, hell, she would even hug the popcorn bowl to her chest. She coiled up like a spring, only bouncing out of control when there was a particularly bloody death onscreen. Fuyuhiko, on the other hand, relaxed completely, practically flopping over the couch. His posture was so open and nonchalant that he probably wouldn't move even if he was being impaled.

Which was sort of ironic, considering that he was the one having trouble opening up and saying the words he needed to say at the moment.

"Mikan... You know, it's always fun to do... stuff like this with you," Fuyuhiko hesitated, blushing. At least he was trying. "You don't usually piss me off."

"Fuyuhiko-kun, are you okay?" Mikan asked, staring at him in concern. The movie became background noise to them as they spoke. "You look troubled over something. Don't force yourself, okay?"

"No! Even if I have to drag the words out of my mouth and fucking spell them out for you, I'm going to say it! You need to hear it!" Fuyuhiko took a deep breath after his outburst, trying to find the right way to put his thoughts into words.

Mikan nodded, ready to listen. He just had to say it.

"You're... pretty much my first friend outside of the family," Fuyuhiko admitted, cheeks turning pinker. He averted his gaze from Mikan, staring at the TV without really processing the events happening onscreen. "So, you're the only one I can do normal things with... and even if it sounds dumb, that's really important to me."

Mikan looked like she was on the verge of tears, holding a hand to her mouth in shock.

"T-t-thank you... thank you so very much Fuyuhiko-kun...!"

"I'm not done yet!" Fuyuhiko snapped, before quieting down. "Sorry for yelling, but I just... you shouldn't try to kill someone for me. You're a normal person who shouldn't get caught up in what my family does."

"So, if I were a part of your family, it would be okay..." Mikan mumbled to herself, unfazed by Fuyuhiko's attempt to bring back the conversation they had a few days ago.

"Don't even think about it."

The two lapsed into silence, neither one feeling the need to speak further.

The relaxed, peaceful atmosphere hadn't returned completely. But they were getting there.

And then Mioda showed up out of nowhere.

"Ooooooh! Is this the one with a bomb inside her?!" Mioda pretty much jumped out from behind the couch, making both Mikan and Fuyuhiko jump.

"Were you there the entire time?!" Fuyuhiko demanded. Mikan had to quickly grab his wrists to keep him from strangling the musician.
"Of course not, silly! Now scoot over, I need to join in!" Mioda practically pushed Fuyuhiko out of the way, stealing his spot on the couch.

Unfortunately, the couch was only big enough for two people to sit comfortably, which wasn't a problem when the three roommates watched together, since Nanami usually sat on the floor. But there was no way Fuyuhiko was about to let some annoying loudmouth force him on the floor, and Mikan wouldn't let him threaten Mioda into leaving, so they were in a bit of a bind.

"Um, how about this?" Mikan gently pulled Fuyuhiko towards her, so he could refuse at any time if he wished. He didn't, allowing Mikan to practically pull him onto the space in front of her, her legs parting around him. She hesitantly hovered her arms around his torso, silently asking for permission.

"Go ahead," Fuyuhiko huffed, leaning back against Mikan's chest. Mikan smiled as she wrapped her arms around him.

The two finally began paying attention to the TV again, allowing Mioda to snap a quick picture of them in that position. She quickly began typing away on her phone, trying her best to be stealthy when she was right next to the pair. Not that she needed to be stealthy, since they were preoccupied with the movie, but Mioda liked trying to be a ninja.

[omg look at this]

The response was near-immediate, despite the fact that Ibuki knew her brother was supposed to be studying. Oh well. Nagisa could spare a few minutes to talk to his gorgeous, lovely, beautiful, and all-around-amazing sister, right? Besides, Ibuki was rushing to type out her words to avoid detection, so she couldn't stay long anyways.

[Ibuki, I thought your goal was to make them become friends with people, not get them to date.]

[nagi-chan, they're not mutually exclusive]

[it's all part of the plan don't worry]

[What plan?]

[shush it's confidential, top secret, stuff like that]

[Do you even HAVE a plan?]

[gtg the movie's about to end]

[good luck for ur test btw love you bye]

On the other side of the line, Nagisa scowled as his sister put away her phone. He had questions, goddammit!

"You okay there, Nagisa?" Kotoko asked, staring at her friend in concern. Her pencil stopped over her paper. "Is chemistry that hard?"

"No, of course not," Nagisa said, composing himself. He erased all of his irritation from his expression, but he couldn't stop a little bit from souring his voice as he explained. "It's just that my sister refuses to explain herself."
"Really? What's going on?" Kotoko smiled excitedly, glad for any reason to abandon her homework.

"What's going on is that she sent me this," Nagisa showed the photo to his pink-haired friend, "Without any explanation. And then she runs off instead of explaining why she disrupted my studies!"

"Wait, isn't that Fuyuhiko?! Kuzuryuu Fuyuhiko?!" Kotoko gasped, her eyes nearly lighting up the moment her brain recognized the blonde. "That's totally him! Big bro Hajime's girlfriend's brother!"

"What?"

"You do realize I'm single, right, Kotoko?" Hajime called out from his kitchen, still making dinner for the two teenagers.

"Shush you!" Kotoko retorted. "You're a wanted man! There are at least four people after your dick!"

"That's no way to talk to your father..." Nagisa muttered to himself.

"Big brother!" Both Kotoko and Hajime corrected at the same time.

"If you say so," Nagisa sighed, before returning his attention to his papers. Interrogating his sister would have to wait. He had equations to do.

"Well, I should probably walk you home now," Mikan noted, staring out the window to see the night sky. Mioda had left to sleep long before, though they never really separated, even after the reason they sat together in the first place left.

"What? No, you are not doing that," Fuyuhiko shot back immediately, standing up and stretching. "You're going to get mugged or something if I let you go back home alone."

"But I'm already at home!" Mikan protested, standing up as well, shutting off the TV as an afterthought.

"So that's why you should stay here. I can take care of myself, so don't worry about me."

"I'm not doing this because I'm worried about you!" Mikan belted out a classic tsundere line, but unlike tsunderes, she meant every word of it. Mikan couldn't lie at all, after all. "I know you can protect yourself just fine. I just wanted to walk with you."

"...why?" Fuyuhiko stared at Mikan, almost suspicious of her. Almost, since he knew that she didn't have any bad intentions, but he still didn't quite fully understand why Mikan would want to do that at all.

"Um... I like spending time with you," Mikan answered simply, fiddling with her thumbs as her cheeks turned bright red.

Fuyuhiko stared at the nurse in disbelief, slowly turning pink.

"Er. Okay."

"Does that mean you'll let me walk you home?" Mikan asked, a hopeful (and tentative) grin on her face.
"No," Fuyuhiko hastily added the rest before Mikan's face fell, not wanting to completely crush her dreams. "You're only coming with me to the halfway point. The park. Understood?"

"Alright!" Mikan smiled brightly, gladly following Fuyuhiko as he went to leave.

"Why are there bear statues in the park anyways?" Mikan wondered aloud as they walked through the streets.

"Maybe someone in charge really liked bears," Fuyuhiko suggested.

"Can arch... er, engineers..." Mikan fumbled over the word to use for a while, before giving up. 
"Can the person who's in charge of designing parks really do that?"

"Who knows? Maybe it was a joke that got blown out of proportion."

"Surely something like that wouldn't happen..." Mikan trailed off, before realizing that she had no idea if that were true or not. She didn't know the architect/engineer/park guy at all, so who could say it wasn't a possibility? Certainly not Mikan.

"Or maybe they're supposed to scare children," Fuyuhiko said, completely seriously. He only explained himself further when he realized Mikan was staring at him weirdly. "Look at it this way. A kid wanders off from his parents. Then he sees this terrifying bear. The kid is so scared, he runs back to his parents and never leaves their side again."

"That seems more traumatizing than anything..." Mikan giggled a bit at the thought.

Fuyuhiko laughed in return, a bright smile on his face.

They seemed to reach the park much too soon, though neither of them would admit this. It was so late that the area was completely empty. After all, who visited the park at midnight?

"Bye then!" Mikan waved to Fuyuhiko.

He didn't even get to say his goodbyes in return before the gunshots.

Mikan might have spent nearly forty hours in the hospital any given week, but that was as a nurse. She didn't expect to be a patient. No one ever expected to be in an accident and be hospitalized.

Er. Well, it was technically an assassination attempt, but still. No one really expected this. Not Mikan, not Fuyuhiko, not Hajime, not Natsumi, and definitely not Mikan's roommates.

Mikan sighed. What a tiring day.

The injured nurse fell asleep, unresponsive to the whispering just outside her door.

"They can't identify the guy that shot her at all," Hajime sighed.

"Really? Even though he was right there?" Natsumi sighed, annoyed. "He wasn't wearing a mask or anything. How can they not identify him?"

"I heard what they said before they rushed him into surgery," Hajime frowned, forced to recall... unpleasant things. "They seriously thought he was hit by a truck."

"In the middle of a park," Natsumi said in disbelief.
"That's how bad his injuries were," Hajime began to count off the injuries on his fingers. "Four broken ribs, bleeding and bruising from almost everywhere, concussion, I'm pretty sure his cheekbone was broken too, and honestly, I'm surprised he's not dead yet."

"How the fuck did that even happen?" Natsumi demanded, though she kept her voice quiet so she didn't disturb the sleepy nurse.

"I'm pretty sure it was the fact that-" Hajime cut himself off, eyes widening at something behind Natsumi. "Fuyuhiko?"

Natsumi immediately whirled around to face her brother, before freezing.

Fuyuhiko looked livid. His face seemed to be locked in a permanent scowl, bandaged hands balled up into fists. He seemed to drain the colour from his surroundings as he stomped towards them. Peko trailed behind him, carrying a small bouquet of colourful flowers.

Now, Natsumi wasn't one to back down from a challenge, okay? Especially one she issued herself. She didn't flee or hide, but this time, she moved out of her brother's way without a word.

Fuyuhiko practically slammed the door open, startling the resting nurse, before making his way over to her bed.

"We... should probably go," Hajime grabbed Natsumi's wrist, pulling her away from the hospital room. Peko gently placed the bouquet in front of the door, before following them.

None of them wanted to be responsible for one of Fuyuhiko's explosions, especially when someone important to him had almost died. He had a right to be angry, but that didn't mean any of them wanted to be around if he started screaming.

Mikan's first instinct whenever Fuyuhiko seemed to be getting violent was to jump in front of him and beg him to stop. That was how she protected others from Fuyuhiko's anger.

It's only natural that she would protect Fuyuhiko from violence using similar methods.

"Mikan," Fuyuhiko stared down at the bedridden nurse.

"It's great to see you Fuyuhiko-kun," Mikan smiled. "I'm glad you weren't hurt."

"Am I supposed to be glad that you were hurt?!" Fuyuhiko demanded, worry and anger seeping into his voice. "A few centimeters to the right and you would be dead!"

Mikan's smile fell, her right hand coming up to trail over the bandages on her left arm.

"...I'm sorry."

"Just..." Fuyuhiko's voice cracked as tears began to flow down his face, despite his attempts to act like it wasn't happening. "Don't do that ever again. Please."

"Fuyuhiko-kun..." Just as Mikan was about to apologize again, he turned on his heel to leave.

He froze at the door, looking down at the bouquet of flowers. Without another word, he grabbed them off the floor and returned to Mikan's side, practically throwing the blossoms at her.

"It's not your duty to die for me," Fuyuhiko said solemnly, frowning down at Mikan.
"Isn't that what friends do?" Mikan asked, removing the 'get well soon' card from the bouquet and flipping it open. She smiled at the words of encouragement before continuing. "Taking bullets for each other?"

"It's not literal!" Fuyuhiko snapped, before his voice took on a more pleading tone. "Don't die for me."

"But I don't want you to die either," Mikan frowned, putting away her card and setting the bouquet aside. "That gunman was aiming for you."

"I know that!"

"You might have died," Mikan frowned, unable to even bring herself to think of what would have happened if she didn't accompany Fuyuhiko last night. Fuyuhiko didn't say anything in response.

Mikan could have died. He could have lost her.

With those thoughts in mind, Fuyuhiko promised something to himself. It was the sort of promise he would carve into precious family mementos to ensure he would never forget.

He was going to protect her. There was no way he was letting anyone important to him die.

Fuyuhiko had no way of knowing this, but Mikan was silently promising the same to herself.

The Tanaka Empire of the present was much bigger than the pet store Hajime first met Peko in. They took advantage of the beauty parlor next to them closing, buying the building and converting it into their storage building. This let the Tanaka Empire have an even larger space to display their pets and products. They even had a designated space to interact and play with the animals, which Peko took full advantage of...

Or, she would have, if she could actually get the animals to stop running from her.

"Good fucking lord. You're going to literally scare the shit out of them," Natsumi sighed as Peko dove through the air to catch a bunny. "Seriously! You already have Tangerine! Is he not enough for you?!"

"No," Peko replied honestly, suddenly whirling around to chase a cat. She didn't seem winded at all by her pursuit of the nearest fluffy animal. "I want to adopt all the cats. And possibly some bunnies."

"No dogs at all?" Natsumi briefly wondered if she was allowed to fight Peko over whether dogs or cats were better. The answer was probably yes.

"I prefer cats."

"Well, I'm going to adopt all the dogs since you are apparently too heartless to give them a home!" Natsumi huffed. "I can't believe this! How can you call yourself a damn animal lover if you don't like dogs!"

"You guys are scaring the children!" Hajime yelled at them from his position behind the register.

"I apologize," Peko said as she doing the exact same thing that was scaring the children away in the first place: chasing the animals at near inhuman speeds.
"It's because this bitch," Natsumi pointed at Peko, "isn't willing to give dogs a chance! Back me up here! Dogs are the shit!"

"I'm actually more of a cat person," Hajime replied casually. He turned back to the paying customer in front of him, giving her back her change. Hajime spouted off the line automatically. "Thank you for shopping at Tanaka Empire, and have a nice day."

Natsumi screamed in anguish. "You traitor! I can't believe this! I trusted you, and you betray me like this?! Is anyone in this family a dog person?"

"The Young Master prefers cats as well," Peko answered, causing Natsumi to scream again, scaring the children in the store even more.

"I like dogs," A little kid piped up, before hiding behind a bag of dog food in case the scary silver-haired lady tried to chase him too.

"Thank you!" Natsumi sighed, annoyed as she made her way to the register, leaning on the counter. "What about that Mikan chick? Does she like dogs?"

"...why?" Hajime stared at Natsumi in suspicion.

"I want to know if someone in this family other than me likes dogs."

"So you want her in the family?" Hajime raised an eyebrow at the blonde. He didn't know that Natsumi was going after her.

"Well... yeah," Natsumi frowned, her tone serious. "I do."

"I mean, you're welcome to try, but I'm not sure if you could get her legally listed as your wife," Hajime replied, fully intent on supporting Natsumi in her romantic pursuits.

"...what," Natsumi's expression could best be summed up as 'what the fuck?'. "No, what? I'm not crushing on her!"

"But you want her in the family," Hajime stated, poking at the holes in Natsumi's testimony with evidence until the truth finally came out.

"I meant, I hope Fuyuhiko makes her his wife!"

"Why?"

"This isn't a conversation we should be having while you're working," Natsumi said suddenly, turning around to leave as another customer approached the register.

As Hajime gave the customer advice on how to clean a bird cage, he made a note to himself to talk to Natsumi later.

"You don't have to stay with me," Mikan spoke up, breaking the silence. "If you want to leave, you can."

"What makes you think I don't want to stay with you?" Fuyuhiko asked.

"You seem really grumpy, and you're not talking much, so..." Mikan trailed off, her eyes widening. She tried to push herself up into a sitting position.
"Hey! You're supposed to be resting!" Fuyuhiko stopped her, hands on her shoulders to keep her from rising anymore.

"You're injured," Mikan replied, staring at his bloodstained, bandaged hands. "When did you get these? You weren't wounded last night!"

"Mikan, don't try to treat me! You're injured too!"

"It's my duty as a nurse!"

"You're a fucking patient!"

"Excuse me," Nanami entered the room unceremoniously, making both Fuyuhiko and Mikan freeze to look at the robot. "I'm supposed to bring you to the surgery room now, Mikan."

"Surgery?" Fuyuhiko turned back to Mikan, worried.

"I'll be fine, Fuyuhiko-kun!" Mikan smiled, trying to reassure the blonde.

"They're just going to remove the bullet before it can do any major damage to her arteries," Nanami stated. "Is it okay if you sit in the waiting room?"

"You better not die on me," Fuyuhiko glared at Mikan, before leaving the room.

"So, why do you want Mikan to marry your brother?" Hajime asked, closing the door to the break room.

It was a small room, just big enough for a dining table with chairs and a workable kitchen. A coffee pot rested on the cupboard, completely empty. Next to the fridge was a water cooler, a stack of paper cups next to the coffee pot. Natsumi sat on one of the chairs, using her crossed arms as a pillow as she rested her head on the table. Hajime sat next to her, waiting for her answer.

"You know how when the boss dies with no eligible children, the position goes to the first lieutenant, right?" Natsumi continued at Hajime's nod. "But if the lieutenant is old and has no children to take their place when they die, the position of boss goes to the next qualified person, but sometimes there's more than one, and that leads to everyone fighting over the position and general chaos and death."

"Where are you going with this?"

"I was almost finished!" Natsumi huffed, raising her head to glare at Hajime. "That would be a worst-case-scenario. But with Fuyuhiko, it's really likely."

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

"Like, Fuyuhiko has never been interested in romance or stuff like that. And I mean never. Which was fine, until I realized that I'm not suited to be a mom, Peko is even less suited to be a mom, and while you might be qualified to be a mom, I'm terrified of what would happen if your kid became boss. She would probably steal from candy stores."

"Actually, Kotoko would probably destroy the idol industry first," Hajime supplied, getting a 'see what I mean?!' from Natsumi.

"So, worst-case-scenario becomes likely, we are all doomed. But then a ray of hope falls from the sky!" Natsumi threw her arms up in the air dramatically, as if she were actually receiving a ray of
hope from the sky. Er, ceiling.

"Mikan?" Hajime asked, just for clarification.

"Yes, Mikan!" Natsumi declared, knocking over her chair as she stood up. "Because she's the first person outside the family he's ever invited to our house! (Aside from you, but you don't count because of the circumstances.) And he barely leaves unless someone forces him to or unless it's for business, but the moment she asks, he's practically out the door! And don't get me started on how protective he is of her!"

"Natsumi, calm down," Hajime placed a hand on Natsumi's shoulder, before bending over to pick up her chair. Natsumi sat back down.

"It's just... I want my brother to be happy," Natsumi confessed, losing all her theatrics and energy. She stared down at the table.

"So what are your orders?"

"Orders?" Natsumi stared at Hajime in confusion. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"I joined this family for you, so I'll follow you," Hajime answered. "If you want them to end up together, I'll help you."

Natsumi looked shocked for a few seconds, before smiling.

"...thanks."

"Oh, by the way, Mikan likes dogs," Hajime added, getting an excited 'FINALLY!' from the blonde.

"I thought the surgery was going to be tomorrow," Mikan mumbled to herself, before directing her question to Chiaki. "Was it sped up?"

"No, I was lying," Chiaki admitted honestly.

"W-w-w-what?! Why?!" Mikan gasped.

"I wanted to talk to you in private," Chiaki said simply.

"Okay..." Mikan frowned. "Did I do something wrong?"

"No," Chiaki answered immediately, before hesitating. "Actually... you might have, I think."

"I'm sorry!"

"Don't apologize for saving someone's life," Chiaki admonished the brunette, before sighing and crossing her arms over her chest. "But... you shouldn't have been there in the first place."

"Huh?"

"Being friends with Kuzuryuu-kun... if it's putting you in danger, you should stop. I don't want you to die."

"Chiaki-san..." Mikan stared up at Chiaki. "I'm sorry, but that's not an option."
"I don't want to split up your friendship. I just want you to be safe," Chiaki stated, frowning.

"I promise I won't die."

"Good," Chiaki smiled.

When Chiaki left the room, it wasn't much of a surprise to find Fuyuhiko sitting outside the door.

"You should go to the waiting room," Chiaki said, staring down at the Yakuza heir. "You might get run over by a stretcher here."

"You don't have to worry about Mikan dying," Fuyuhiko completely ignored Chiaki's well-meaning advice (wow rude) to address the elephant in the room. Er, hallway.

"And why is that?" Chiaki asked, completely unfazed by the fact that Fuyuhiko had been unapologetically eavesdropping on their conversation.

"I'm not going to let her die. I'll protect her."

Chiaki said nothing, staring at Fuyuhiko intensely.

"Good luck, then," And with that, Chiaki turned around to leave, not waiting for Fuyuhiko's response.
October 23 of the previous year, 6:12 pm

"Good evening everyone!" Ibuki screamed into the microphone, her fans cheering in response. "How's your night going?!!"

The audience cheered in response, outcries of 'good!', 'fucking horrible!', and 'meh, how about you?' echoing throughout the stadium.

"Well, I hope this concert is bound to lift your spirits!" Ibuki cheered, before frowning. "But there's actually a super important issue that's been on my mind today!"

Nagisa bit his lip as he watched the concert on TV, wondering what the hell his sister was doing.

(Oh, this better not be like that one time she tried to use an 'Improvisation' gimmick and ad-libbed her own songs...)

Ibuki pulled out two party hats, placing one on each of her hair horns. A gigantic cake was rolled in, sparklers stabbed into the dessert.

"Today is my cute little brother's birthday!" Ibuki announced, grinning. "So can we all wish him the bestest birthday ever?"

The crowd roared, tossing their hands up in the air as they all screamed 'Happy birthday!'.

"'Bestest' isn't a word..." Nagisa grumbled under his breath, turning bright pink.

"I know that if he were watching this (and he probably is), he would just pretend to be annoyed and say that 'bestest' isn't a word," Ibuki stated. "But he's so cute that we have to make up new words just to suit him!"

"A-a-a-ack!" Nagisa flinched, wondering if Ibuki became a psychic when he wasn't looking.

"Heh, but Ibuki didn't come here to talk about her cute little brother all day! (Though I could totally do that if I wanted to) It's time for some rocking tunes!" Ibuki pumped her fists in the air, just before beginning her song.

"Tch, what an idiot!" Nagisa huffed, crossing his arms over his chest. His face was even redder than a tomato, but he would never admit that out loud.

He watched the entire concert, grumbling under his breath the entire time.

"Big Bro Hajime! Did you know that hamsters can eat insects?" Kotoko asked, proud of her knowledge.
"That explains why there aren't any bugs in the hamster cages," Hajime said with a smile.

"And most cats are lactose-intolerant!" Kotoko added, eager to hear Hajime praise her for knowing so much.

Instead Hajime began laughing to to himself, though he tried to hide it with one hand.

'S-so Fuyuhiko's a cat, huh?'

"Why are you acting so weird?" Kotoko pouted, puffing her cheeks out as she rested her hands on her hips. "That totally isn't the expected response!"

"Then what is the expected response?"

"Ugh! You know the routine already!" Kotoko exclaimed, balling her hands into fists. "Compliment me already! It's your duty as my big brother to shower me with love and affection, you know!"

"If you wanted me to praise you, you could have just asked," Hajime grinned at Kotoko fondly, patting her head. "I'm proud of you even if you don't share fun facts with me."

"But I also wanted to share the animal facts I learned today!" Kotoko huffed, though she was comforted a little by the head-patting.

"Was your choice influenced by my job?"

"Which one?" Kotoko wondered cheekily. "You have like three dozen!"

"Three," Hajime corrected. "And I mean the pet store."

"Hm, I wonder!" Kotoko smiled innocently, having absolutely no intention of divulging that information.

"But you didn't spend all your time reading animal facts on the internet instead of doing your homework, right?" Hajime asked, only half-joking.

Kotoko froze, her eyes widening. Her smile stayed on her face, though it was getting more forced by the second.

"Oh god, Kotoko I was joking-"

Kotoko ran out of the room, screaming.

"Maybe I should make her some treats later to make up for this," Hajime muttered to himself.

"YES YOU DEFINITELY SHOULD!" Kotoko yelled from her room.

"Are you ready?" Chihiro asked, quickly making adjustments to the video camera's position, making sure to make everything perfect.

"Of course!" Chiaki nodded, bracing herself.

Kazuichi sniffled to himself as he nodded tearfully. "My little girl is all grown up...!"

"She was born that age," Chihiro retorted teasingly.
"Shut up! Can't a man be proud of his daughter?!” Kazuichi snapped, pointing at Chihiro accusingly.

"I'm not saying that..." Chihiro trailed off, pressing buttons on the camera. "Alright, filming in, one, two... go!"

"Understood!” Chiaki immediately began her task, a cheery pop song playing as she started the dance.

"Look at those fluid movements! That speed, that agility!” Kazuichi exclaimed in awe as Chiaki finished the first half of the Dance Dance Revolution stage perfectly.

"She really is our child," Chihiro admitted with a smile, pride in his eyes as he watched the dance.

"S-she really is!” Kazuichi sniffled, almost crying at the sight. Almost.

Definitely.

"The first test has been completed!” Chiaki reported as the results screen showed, displaying nothing but 'PERFECT?'s in her scoring. "I have successfully perfected a maximum difficulty course!"

"You did amazing!” Kazuichi yelled, running up to hug his robotic daughter. Chihiro turned off the camera to save Kazuichi from embarrassment, before clapping for Chiaki.

"That was wonderful! We're so proud of you!"

"Thank you," Chiaki smiled, before dragging her other father into the hug.

"Now, onto the first-person shooters!” Chihiro declared with a grin.

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August 16, 10:38 pm

"Fucking hell...” Natsumi grumbled as she trudged towards her room. "I can't believe this. We go through all the trouble of planning out a hugeass party for him, and he doesn't even show up?! That bastard...! When I get my hands on him-!

She froze as she opened the door, staring in shock.

"Happy birthday!” Hajime and Peko stood in her room, party poppers in their hands. Confetti was tossed about on her floor, a banner with the words 'Happy Birthday Natsumi!’ hanging from her wall.

"What the fuck...?” Natumi gaped at the sight, absentmindedly noting that the confetti would be a pain to clean up, before dismissing the thought. Who the fuck thinks about cleaning when their family made a surprise party for them?!

"Your parents wouldn't listen when I told them to make the party about you too," Hajime stated, turning around to reveal the cake hidden in Natumi's closet, still in the packaging.

Peko sighed. "I still do not know why they insist on excluding you from the celebrations. You and Fuyuhiko are twins, after all."

Natsumi could only nod in response, touched by the fact that they even bothered to hold a birthday party for her at all.
"Kotoko and Fuyuhiko would be here too, but it's past their bedtime," Hajime added jokingly, earning him a jab to the ribs from Peko.

Natsumi snickered, before her face became serious. Seriously dejected. "Seriously, where is he? You would think he would be here..."

"I am sure he is not absent by choice," Peko stated. "I think he may have been kid-

"Kid, kid-sitting!" Hajime interjected, covering Peko's mouth. "He's looking after Kotoko."

"Try again with a lie people will actually believe," Natsumi huffed, glaring at Hajime.

"Ibuki tried to bring him to the party and somehow lost him," Hajime confessed.

"I'm going to kill her," Peko and Natsumi stated in unison.

"Peko, don't even think about it," Hajime ordered, pointing a finger at the silver-haired samurai. He turned to Natsumi. "And by Ibuki, I mean Mioda Ibuki."

The effect was immediate. Natsumi gasped dramatically, gaping at Hajime in shock, before grabbing his arm. She shot questions at him faster than he could answer them.

"Mioda Ibuki!? Love Screamer Mio-chan?! You're on first-name basis with Mioda Ibuki?! Can you get her autograph for me?!

"I mean, I can introduce you...?" Hajime offered lamely, avoiding the barrage of questions entirely.

"If you do, I will love you forever."

"Even if she kidnapped the Young Master?" Peko asked, suspicion edging into her tone.

"Oh please!" Natsumi scoffed. "There's no way someone that cute could ever do something that horrible!"

"She would be really happy you said that," Hajime noted.

"Don't even think about it!" Natsumi snapped, rounding on Hajime. "If you do, I swear I'll hack you up into a thousand pieces! A million! And then I'll set them on fire!"

"Young Mistress," Peko sighed, placing a hand on Natsumi's shoulder to calm her down.

"It's just- Look, I wouldn't go up to your favourite artist and tell them about how much you admire them!" Natsumi exclaimed with bright red cheeks.

"Got it," Hajime nodded. "I'll introduce you tomorrow then."

"N-no!" Natsumi stammered. "I'll be too embarrassed! What would I even say?! 'I collect all your CDs' sounds too stalker-ish!"

"Then... whenever you're ready?" Hajime offered.

"Yes!"

"Do you want to eat cake while I investigate the Young Master's disappearance?" Peko inquired, gesturing to the cake in Hajime's hands.
"Nah, Fuyuhiko can take care of himself," Natumi shrugged. "But I will take the cake though."

"So... you don't want me to investigate?" Peko asked in confusion.

"It wouldn't be right to have... my birthday party without you," Natumi confessed, unwilling to admit how happy she was from the act. Unfortunately for her, Peko and Hajime were a lot more observant than that.

"You'd think that after years of doing this, she would get used to this," Hajime sighed, turning to Peko.

"I'm more concerned with how she deems my presence necessary, yet ignores the fact that her brother has been kidnapped," Peko retorted.

"Oh shut up, you two!" Natumi glared at the pair, snatching the cake out of Hajime's hands to sit on the ground, grumpily opening the plastic container.

"You're not going to wait for the plates?" Hajime asked.

"Or the cutlery?" Peko added.

"Shut up and let me eat my fucking cake."

Peko and Hajime did exactly that, though they had to grab a bunch of napkins for Natumi when she accidentally dropped the cake all over herself and her bed.

(She slept with Peko that night, muttering about how she didn't deserve friends as good as Peko and Hajime in her sleep.)
"Since I've finally been released from the hospital, now I have to send texts to Chiaki-san, Fuyuhiko-kun, and Ibuki-san whenever I leave or get home," Mikan explained as she tapped away at her phone. "Sometimes Chiaki-san will wait for me to finish my shift so we can walk home together too."

'...are they your overprotective mom squad or something?' Hajime wondered.

Since Hajime couldn't say that out loud, he settled for "Isn't that weird for you?"

"Not at all!" Mikan smiled as she put her phone back in her purse. "It just means that they care about me enough to make sure I'm safe."

"Mikan, they're your friends," Hajime sighed. "Of course they want you to be safe."

Mikan's smile turned wistful. "I know. I just like being reminded."

"How do you forget something like that in the first place?"

"Don't you ever worry if your friends don't care about you?" Mikan asked in return. "Don't you ever wonder if they're just pretending to put up with you?"

"I trust you more than that," Hajime replied, before hesitating. "But... I do know how you feel."

"You...you do?" Mikan was completely, utterly baffled by the idea. "How? You were always so friendly and ready to listen... you cared about everyone, so how could they not care about you?"

"...it sounds stupid in hindsight, but..." Hajime frowned, trying to recount his perception of events that happened years ago. "I thought, as an untalented person, I had no right to even be near you. Once I became the SHSL Hope, I was so excited to learn all about you and interact with talented people as equals," Hajime let out a derisive laugh at the thought. "But then, I found out that the scientists did absolutely nothing for me. They didn't magically give me a talent or anything. They pretty much just said 'your true potential can only be reached through effort' and let me go on my merry way."

"When I found out, I was devastated. I thought I wasn't worthy of your care or anything. And then you found me by that fountain," Hajime smiled slightly at the nurse, remembering orange leaves and falling tears.

"...and I had no idea why you were upset, or why you thought you were unworthy of anyone's concern," Mikan finished, eyes widening as she remembered the day Hajime was recounting. "But I thought you had it the other way around. I wasn't worthy of your concern."

"We were both really stupid, huh?" Hajime let out a small laugh. "We were a mess of self-esteem issues and loneliness, and even though you would expect us to be an even bigger mess together, we actually managed to make it work out for the best."

"I..." Mikan paused, before giggling in response. "I guess we did do that! Or, well, you did."

"A friendship is a two-way street, Mikan. I wasn't the one who kept trying to assure me that you still wanted to be my friend."
"I thought it was a really weird, roundabout way of trying to tell me you didn't want to be my friend anymore!" Mikan exclaimed defensively, turning bright pink.

"Why would I do something like that?" Hajime asked. "If I didn't want to be friends anymore, I would just say it."

"I knoooooooow!" Mikan wailed, hiding her face in her hands, not wanting to show her blushing cheeks to the world.

Coffee dates with Hajime were always unpredictable. The only constant was the cafe they frequented. Conversation topics were about as random as dice rolls, but then again, neither one of them would have it any other way.

"You tried to bribe a homeless person into assassinating the Kuzuryuu heir," The nameless Yakuza boss repeated in disbelief.

"Correction: I would have succeeded in bribing a homeless person into assassinating the Kuzuryuu heir if that braindead, brunette, big-breasted buffoon hadn't jumped in the way!" The equally nameless underling replied, pouting. "I guess she's like his secret bodyguard or something. Maybe we should take that into consideration next time."

"There won't be a next time!" The Yakuza boss snapped, pulling out a knife. "I don't know what you're trying to pull here, but you expressly disobeyed orders and tried to kill one of our allies. You know the punishment for insubordination."

"Oh please," The underling smiled smugly in response. "You would be thanking me if it worked. If it did, we would be able to take their position of power."

"This isn't a matter of power or not!" The Yakuza boss scowled. "Do you realize what you've just done?! You just fucking handed the most powerful Yakuza family in Japan an excuse to kill all of us! And if they spare any of us, it won't be as anything more than their underlings!"

"So we can take them over from the bottom of their ranks!"

"NO!"

Suddenly, furious cackling came from the door, a blonde woman standing in the doorway.

"Thanks for the idea," Kuzuryuu Natsumi smirked, walking into the room without fear. Even if she was wearing a poofy, sparkly skirt and an equally sparkly pale pink top, she was still intimidating enough to terrify the Yakuza boss.

It might have had something to do with the fact that she was covered in blood from head to toe, and the mysterious absence of security...

Despite the boss's fear, the underling just frowned slightly, like things weren't going according to plan.

The blonde hummed to herself, crossing her arms over her chest as she stared the pair down.

"While it does seem to be this guy's fault," Natsumi gestured at the underling, before sighing dramatically. "I can't just let the family that shot the boss's wife go free."

"What...?" The Yakuza boss paled, wondering what they did to deserve any of this.
"Aha, so that was the wife?" The underling continued smiling, even as Natsumi was rapidly approaching.

"I'll save you for Fuyuhiko," Natsumi declared, snapping her fingers. Out of nowhere, a silver-haired samurai rushed in, pointing her sword at the underling.

"Thanks Peko!" Natsumi smiled cutely at the swordswoman, before turning to the Yakuza boss, frowning in fake sympathy. "I know you had nothing to do with this, but you know that going after the boss's wife is a grave offense."

The Yakuza boss nodded, sweating almost literally bullets in the face of the terror known as Kuzuryuu Natsumi.

"So if you want to continue living, you and your family will join the Kuzuryuu family, no questions asked, got it?"

"Y-yes."

"And if you ever betray us..." Natsumi trailed off, letting the boss's imagination fill in the blanks.

'Not only do I get a rebellious underling, we also get taken over by another family?!' The boss wailed mentally, before wondering again what horrible, heinous crimes they did to deserve something like this happening.

Not counting typical Yakuza activities, of course.

"Should we tell the Young Master about the... 'marriage'?" Peko inquired, wiping the dried blood off her sword.

"It doesn't really matter if we do or don't," Natsumi replied, removing her skirt so she could get changed. Peko was completely unaffected by Natsumi's partial nudity. "If he finds out, we tell him it was part of the plot to take over another family. If he doesn't, we tell him we found the family that tried to have him killed and forcibly employed them in retribution."

Peko snickered to herself quietly, though Natsumi heard her. They were the only two people in the room, so it would be more surprising if Natsumi didn't hear her.

"What's so funny?!" The blonde demanded, stripping off her bloodstained shirt as she glared at the swordswoman.

"It's strange," Peko grinned, amused. "You are much more serious about deceiving Fuyuhiko than you are about infiltrating another family's home and taking control."

"Fuyuhiko's smarter than all of those guys combined!" Natsumi exclaimed, her sisterly pride shining through the cracks of her flustered outburst. "I don't need to be serious about those guys!"

"Don't underestimate our rivals," Peko said seriously, her smile disappearing in an instant. "That arrogance can get you killed."

"It's not arrogance if I know we can kick their fucking asses!"

"You still have to be cautious," Peko advised. "If you waltz into every fight with absolute certainty you'll win, without taking into account how skilled your adversaries are, sooner or later, you will die."
"Stop sounding so grim!" Natsumi retorted, scowling. She looked down at her body, her scowl deepening as she realized that her body was splattered in blood too. "It's not your job to worry about me, so what does it matter if I lose a few fights or not!"

"You should bathe," Peko stated, staring at the blood. Natsumi's clothes had covered up the area from her torso to Natsumi's knees, but everywhere else could be compared to the result of trying to make a tomato smoothie without closing the blender's lid.

"I don't need you to tell me that!" Natsumi huffed, stomping off to the bathroom.

'Like brother, like sister, I suppose," Peko mused as she continued cleaning her sword.

"Mikan, do you want to play Smash or-" Chiaki froze in the doorway to her room, staring at the scene.

Mikan had pulled her short hair into a ponytail, wearing an old dress shirt and pink pyjama pants. She had obviously outgrown the shirt, but Mikan didn't seem to care about how the fabric was clinging tightly to her skin. She was much more concerned with the game she was playing, resting the game console on her knees as she sat on Chiaki's bed. Her feet rested on the mattress, her knees parallel to her chest, presumably so she didn't have to bend over too much to stare at the screen. Her brows knitted together in concentration, her fingers expertly tapping away at the buttons. The only sounds came from the game console, though Mikan flinched every time the sound of an explosion overwhelmed the Tetris theme.

"You can disable the explosions," Chiaki offered, startling Mikan.

"E-e-e-e-e-er! I-I...!" Mikan nearly dropped the game console, holding it to her chest as she turned paler than an albino ghost. "I'm-so-sorry-I-just-wanted-to-play-a-game-and-then-one-game-turned-into-another-and-then-it-got-out-of-hand!"

"It's fine," Chiaki moved to sit next to Mikan. She leaned over the nurse's shoulder, watching as Mikan accidentally let blocks pile up until the game over screen showed. Mikan hesitated, switching between sending wary glances in Chiaki's direction and staring sadly at the game over screen.

"What's wrong, Mikan?"

"Can I play again?" Mikan requested. "I think I like Tetris."

"Sure."

Chiaki watched as Mikan started another game. Mikan was actually pretty good, but she kept jumping at the sound and sight of the explosions that signified a complete line.

"Why don't you turn off the explosions?" Chiaki suggested. "It might help you focus."

Mikan paused the game so she could formulate a good response.

"It might sound silly, but..." Mikan smiled to herself a little at her answer. "An explosion is a good thing in this game, right? So... it feels like the god of explosions is looking out for me."

Chiaki couldn't find anything to say to that, staring at Mikan blankly. Mikan got more and more anxious the longer Chiaki remained silent, culminating in, "I'm s-s-sorry! I said something really,
"really, super weird, didn't I?!"

Chiaki only giggled in response, agitating Mikan even more. Just as Mikan was about to scream something about saying something she shouldn't have said, Chiaki finally spoke up.

"You sound like Ibuki if you say it like that," Chiaki covered up her amused smile with her hand, before succumbing to another fit of giggles.

"I-Is that a bad thing?!" Mikan yelped, assuming the worst.

"No. It's... cute, I think."

"You think I-I'm cute?" Mikan stammered, turning pink.

"Yep."

"I...see... Thank you," Mikan mumbled, unable to get her voice louder than a whisper. A small, dazed smile made its way onto Mikan's face, the nurse feeling happy and embarrassed and-

'Cute,' Chiaki noted as Mikan covered her pink face with her hands, the game forgotten.

"...is there a reason why you're covered in blood?" Ibuki asked tentatively, staring down at the Yakuza heir in the doorway.

"Quit exaggerating," Fuyuhiko retorted, wiping dried blood off his face and accidentally smearing more of the stuff on his cheek. "It's not that much."

If Ibuki didn't know that he was a Yakuza (and if he weren't covered in motherfucking blood, goddamn), she wouldn't have been able to guess it in that moment. For some reason, the blonde had worn a cerulean hoodie and jeans instead of his usual suit. The solid shape of a crown was printed on the hoodie's chest in baby blue. His clothes were somehow completely free of blood, despite his face and hands being drenched in the stuff. Ibuki didn't really want to know how that happened, but morbid curiosity was a bitch.

"Um, are you bleeding?" Ibuki gestured to Fuyuhiko's bandaged hands, unsure if the dripping blood belonged to him or not.

"Maybe," Fuyuhiko answered cryptically, glaring up at Ibuki. "Now are you going to let me inside or not?"

"Sheesh, you don't have to be so rude!" Ibuki sighed as she opened the door all the way, letting Fuyuhiko enter. "I'll go get Mikan-chan."

Ibuki decided to let Fuyuhiko do whatever as she went to Chiaki's room. It was probably a good idea, since he wanted to do nothing but brood and glare at the wall. Ibuki didn't even feel a fraction of a decimal of a percent of an ounce guilty leaving him to his own devices.

"Mikan-chan!" Ibuki called out, accidentally opening Chiaki's door too hard. The door slammed against the wall, startling the nurse inside. Chiaki didn't seem to notice though, still focusing on the game they were playing together.

"Fuyu-chan is in the kitchen," Ibuki could practically hear the blonde yelling at her for the affectionate nickname already. She ignored it, her tone completely casual as she went on. "He's wearing your birthday present. Oh, and he's bleeding, I think."
It should be noted that Ibuki needed to get her priorities straight.

"B-bleeding?!!" Mikan immediately dropped the game console (thankfully Chiaki managed to catch it) and rushed out of the room. It was a good thing she kept the first aid kit in the kitchen.

"You know you don't actually have to do this, right?" Fuyuhiko asked as Mikan bandaged his hands once again.

"I don't want your wounds to get infected," Mikan answered, grabbing her scissors to cut the bandage. The new layer covering Fuyuhiko's hands was slowly beginning to turn red, and Mikan watched for any signs that she might have to place another layer on top of that.

"Well, thanks anyways," Fuyuhiko frowned, trying to think of the best way to word the news he came to deliver. Being blunt was probably a good choice. "We found the guy who shot you. Er, the guy who paid another person to shoot me and hit you instead."

Mikan's smile became a little less sincere, barely restrained anger bubbling up under her wide grin. She kept her eyes on Fuyuhiko's hands as she spoke, a sharp edge to her voice. "I see. Is that how you got hurt?"

"More or less," Fuyuhiko replied vaguely. "But don't try to talk to that person or anything, okay? It's a family matter, and you shouldn't get involved."

"But you're my friend!" Mikan protested. "I don't want you to die!"

"I don't want you to die either! And this is the second time you've almost died because I dragged you into the family business!" Fuyuhiko shot back.

"It doesn't matter if I die or not! You have an entire family depending on you! People need you to be alive!" Mikan hesitated before she continued, biting back words she couldn't say out loud. Instead, with a mournful voice, she said, "It's not the same for me."

"Don't you dare say that," Fuyuhiko snapped, glaring at Mikan with a look that could kill dragons. The nurse shuddered in response. "There are people who need you to live, and if I hear you say otherwise, I'm going to rip your fingernails out."

Mikan frowned, staying silent. Then her head shot up, not quite looking Fuyuhiko in the eye, but staring at his face as she voiced her revelation.

"You're right! How could I forget about my patients!?!"

"That's not what I meant!" Fuyuhiko growled, but before Mikan could voice her apologies, he continued. "What do you think would happen to Hajime, or your roommates if you died?! Or all of your other fucking friends for that matter?!"

"Huh? Why would anything happen to them if I die?" Mikan asked, confused. "They don't depend on me."

"That's still not-" Fuyuhiko cut himself off, getting an idea. "What would happen if I died?"

"...um, your family wouldn't have a boss, fighting, chaos, and societal collapse-"

"What would happen to you if I died?" Fuyuhiko clarified, interrupting Mikan's over dramatic conclusion.
"I..." Mikan grew silent, her eyes slowly filling up with tears. "I would be... I-I would be really upset... a-and sad... because you're someone really important to me."

"So what makes you think it would be any different for me if you died?"

Mikan couldn't say anything in response, instead staring at Fuyuhiko in shock as tears rolled down her face.

"You're someone special to me too, Mikan," Fuyuhiko said. "It's the same for Hajime, your roommates, and everyone else."

"...are you trying to make me feel better?" Mikan asked tentatively.

"No. I wouldn't say it if I didn't believe it," Fuyuhiko turned around, about to grab some tissues for Mikan, before she grabbed at her sleeve.

"T-thank- I'm so-sorry!" Mikan sobbed, her words quickly becoming an unintelligible mess. Fuyuhiko patted her on the head, still unsure how to comfort her whenever she cried. At least he was learning. Maybe.

"Don't...don't die! I need you!" Mikan's hands grasped at Fuyuhiko's arms desperately, like she was afraid he would suddenly disappear into light the moment she loosened her grip.

"Same to you," Fuyuhiko tried his best to look cool and unaffected even though he was beginning to lose feeling in his fingers.

When Mikan smiled afterwards, with bright red, still-watery eyes and thanked him for caring about her so much, Fuyuhiko couldn't help but think that the numbness in his hand was worth it.

"Don't tell anyone I did this for you, alright?" Hajime said as he opened the door for Mikan. "Knock on the door when you want to leave."

Mikan nodded in response, stepping through the door.

"Thank you again!" Mikan smiled, just before Hajime closed the door. She turned around, coming face-to-face with the would-be assassin... sort of?

Assassin... contractor? Something like that.

Mikan almost immediately turned around to leave.

The assassin contractor was in no position to hurt her, she knew that. Mikan trusted in the chair that held the prisoner and the ropes tied in knots Mikan didn't even know existed.

But that person... was in really bad condition. Bruises painted nearly every single speck of visible skin. And the way that those arms bent in the midst of ropes and knots was definitely unnatural. Dried blood and pus stained dirty clothes, and any wounds under those clothes had to be infected.

Mikan needed to find a first aid kit.

"Ah... you're the one," The assassin contractor spoke. Amusement shined in their cracked, broken voice, and the person smiled. Though it looked more like you took a piece of badly rotten cheese and cut a curve in it. "You ruined everything, and now you're here to taunt me?"

Mikan shook her head. She pitied their horrible condition and injuries, and half of her was
screaming to treat those wounds and save their life.

But the other half was demanding that the person who almost killed Fuyuhiko suffer horribly for that.

Mikan decided to let both halves win.

"Hajime-kun!" Mikan called out, knocking on the door. When he answered, she whispered her request in his ear, and he brought back a first aid kit for her.

The assassin contractor was completely silent as she cut off the dirty shirt and cleaned up day-old cuts and bruises. They only managed to speak up when she had finished bandaging their chest and moved on to their face.

"Why... why are you doing this?" Shock was evident in wide eyes and a gaping mouth that seemed to have lost a few teeth.

"This is my duty as a nurse," Mikan replied coldly, the affection and care she usually had when speaking to her patients completely gone. "I'm not doing this out of kindness. I'm doing this because you're depending on me."

"That's more like it," The assassin contractor's amused grin returned. "Are you going to swear revenge on me? Shoot me in return for shooting you?"

"No. I couldn't care less what you do to me," Mikan's anger began to rise to the surface, and it took all of her self-control not to descend into screaming hysterics. It was obvious that she was barely holding herself back just from her voice, but the way her hand kept inching towards the scissors helped. "But if you try to hurt Fuyuhiko-kun again, I swear you-"

Mikan cut herself off as the prisoner before her began laughing madly. Laughing without self-control, laughing like a person who had lost everything in their life.

"You two really are identical!" The prisoner exclaimed through insane cackling. "Both of you burst into here, saying things like 'I don't care if you hurt me, just leave her out of this!'"

"Fuyuhiko-kun said the same thing I did?"

The only answer Mikan got was more laughter, so eventually she just left, bringing the first aid kit with her.

"A lovey-dovey couple whose first priority is the other's safety, huh?" The assassin contractor mused, an amused grin still on their face. "This will be fun to watch."

The laughter continued until Hajime burst into the room just to tell the assassin contractor to shut the fuck up.
Hajime couldn't remember much about his childhood. Hell, he couldn't even tell you much about his middle school years.

But if he was asked about an event he would remember until the day he died, he would tell you about Kuzuryuu Natsumi.

Natsumi was actually unforgettable in general. Her viciousness, her harsh glare, her tendency to pick fights... those all left an impact on someone. But Hajime knew that beyond that, Natsumi had a soft side, she could be generous and considerate and a bit of a dork actually. Not that he would say that to her face.

Even if Hajime treasured Natsumi as a precious friend, that wasn't the reason why he would bring her up. No, even if he was old and grey and/or got a lobotomy, he was sure he would never forget the first time he killed someone.

The memory was actually a bit fuzzy around the edges. He knew it started with walking Natsumi home, since they lived in the same direction. Hajime knew he said something stupid, something that made Natsumi storm ahead of him until she was barely a speck in the distance in his eyes, even if he couldn't remember what he said.

But still, he kept his eyes on Natsumi, watching her back and smiling at the blonde as they (technically) walked together.

That smile disappeared the moment she was grabbed, the assailant dragging her into an alleyway as Natsumi kicked and screamed and punched and struggled.

Hajime dropped his things immediately, running to the alleyway. The person who had grabbed Natsumi kept his back to the street, restraining the blonde with one arm and using the other to point a pistol at her head. The gun was pressed right against her temple. Natsumi stood still, though Hajime imagined it was more due to the gun at her head than fear.

He couldn't move. Not a single squeak emerged from his mouth, not wanting to startle the assailant into shooting.

They were talking. Hajime couldn't hear the words. His heart was racing, drowning out their conversation in his ears. Every fiber of his body was screaming at him to interfere or flee, choose one, choose one, but he forced himself to stay still.

They seemed to come to an agreement, the assailant moving to put the gun away, and Hajime finally chose.

He fought. The assailant got a punch to the face, Hajime's body knocking into the attacker right after, knocking all of them over. Natsumi yelped from the bottom of the pile, but that was a minor thing compared to Hajime and the attacker's struggle.

No matter how determined, an average middle school student would never be able to put up a good fight against an armed adult, which is exactly why Hajime had one goal on his mind; grab the gun.

Hajime couldn't remember all of what happened. He knew that he was close to death, but the only thing on his mind was getting Natsumi out of there.
But Natsumi was the one who saved them both. Where Hajime wasted his energy on countless punches and kicks and scratches, she slammed her elbow straight into the attacker's windpipe. Natsumi took full advantage of the assailant's pain and suffering to scramble out and stand, just as Hajime grabbed the pistol.

He wasn't thinking. He was scared, he was hurt, he was desperate.

If he was thinking, he would have called the police. If he was thinking, he wouldn't have shot the assailant until blood soaked the ground and stained their clothes. If he were thinking, he wouldn't have shot the attacker until the gun did nothing when he pulled the trigger, he wouldn't have continued to try to shoot even when he knew he used all the bullets.

"Hajime!" Natsumi screamed, shaking his shoulders to get him to stop. "Hajime, stop! He's dead!"

Hajime felt sick. Horribly, awfully sick. Acid burned his throat as he stared at the assailant's body in horror, counting the bullet wounds.

The gun fell to the ground, Natsumi rubbing his back and offering comforting words, meaningless words as his tears mixed with his vomit.

Natsumi wasn't going to Hope's Peak. The brother she had idolized had turned away from the offer of prestige and talent to stay with his sister.

Hajime couldn't help but smile as Natsumi recounted the story, even though, some days, he couldn't be around Natsumi without remembering blood and guns-

Hajime shuddered, paling. He couldn't even think of the words without panicking. It took all of his mental fortitude not to scream, forcing himself to listen to Natsumi's words.

Natsumi treated him to ice cream after that. She did it every time Hajime freaked out.

The ice cream parlor became a comforting place to him. It was a safe place, where he went to go with friends so he could be calm and relaxed. The building and even the ice cream itself was full of reassuring memories.

Natsumi wasn't going to Hope's Peak, but he was.

Because Hinata Hajime was humanity's hope for the future.

It still felt like a dream.

Here he was, attending the school of his dreams, with a talent that made him equal to everyone else.

The nerves left him jittery as he stood before the classroom door, waiting for the teacher to call him in to introduce him. What should he say? How should he say it?

When the door finally opened, he was almost hit in the face with a shoe.

A muscular man with lightning shooting out of his eyes (how) and a brown-skinned brunette fought in the middle of the classroom, the rest of the student huddling against the walls to avoid getting caught in the fight.

That was...certainly different than what he expected.
"You are humanity's hope for the future," The scientist said as he was removed from the pod. "Your true potential can only be reached through effort. Remember this as you go about your school years."

The words floated around in his mind, only to realize something.

He had fallen asleep studying. Again.

Hajime wiped at his eyes, trying to process the words he was reading so intently before he fell asleep, but fatigue clouded his eyes, and he couldn't make sense of it.

But he had to try. He had to try harder than anyone else.

Or else he would fail to live up to the expectations that being humanity's hope placed on his shoulders.

"Hinata-san... you really should rest," Tsumiki stared up at him, already fretting. "You can't go on sacrificing sleep like this."

"There's no other way," Hajime retorted. He left out all of his doubts and worries, left out how he wouldn't be worthy to even be standing next to her without being the SHSL Hope.

"No!" Mikan squeezed her eyes shut, her hands clenching into fists at her side as she yelled with a surprising amount of force behind it. "As a nurse, I absolutely cannot stand for this! I'll explain your absence to our teacher, just go to sleep!"

"I can't!" Hajime shot back. "I need to do this. So just..." He trailed off, staring at the nurse in confusion. "What are you-"

"I'm sorry, Hinata-san!" Mikan exclaimed, just before tossing Hajime over her shoulder, running towards the dorms. "But you really need to rest! Nurse's orders!"

He was locked in his room, all his textbooks and workbooks confiscated until he got a decent amount of sleep.

Mikan made him a schedule after that. He had very clearly defined study times (at least four hours less than he usually crammed into one night) as well as long sleeping hours.

Mikan was a really good friend. In hindsight, it was probably obvious from the beginning, with how Mikan supported Hajime with all her heart. She got him snacks while he was studying, made sure he was sleeping, brought various books from the library for him, and helped him review his notes.

The only reason this fact wasn't known throughout the school was because of how the nurse didn't have many friends in general.

Actually, Hajime might have been her only friend. 'Might have been' because he honestly wasn't sure what was going on between Mikan and Hiyoko.

So, when the new transfer student invited him to play video games with her and Ibuki after school, he dragged Mikan along with him, determined to help Mikan make friends.
"Huh...?" Chiaki looked up at the pair sleepily, yawning. "Did I invite Tsumiki-san...?"

Before Mikan could offer to leave, Hajime spoke up.

"I brought Mikan. Hope you don't mind."

"Ibuki has no objections!" Ibuki exclaimed, smiling brightly. "She always wanted to know Mikan-chan better!"

"H-h-h-h-huh?!" Mikan gasped in shock.

"I agree," Chiaki nodded. "Four-player multiplayer is usually more polished."

Mikan nearly started crying when they made it inside the arcade.

"Good fucking hell!" Natsumi groaned over the phone. "It's literally hell here. I'm going to die. Get me out of detention before I rot away into mush."

"What did you do now?" Hajime asked.

"Why do you assume that I did something?!" Natsumi demanded. "For all you know, it could be an incident that affected the entire school and had nothing to do with me!"

"What did you do," Hajime repeated, slightly less energetic this time.

"I may or may not have attempted to set someone's shoe locker on fire," Natsumi confessed.

"...how have you not been expelled yet?" Hajime wondered, genuinely curious about the question.

"Please, I'm a Yakuza baby. Like those assholes can even touch me."

"You shouldn't throw around your family name just to avoid getting in trouble," Hajime sighed, disappointed in Natsumi.

"That guy was totally asking for it!" Natsumi retorted. "He actually thought he would get away with trying to mess with my brother!"

"What did he actually do?" Hajime rolled his eyes, not thinking for a second that anyone would be stupid enough to mess with a Yakuza family's son, and that Natsumi was blowing the entire thing out of proportion-

"He tried to steal my brother's binder."

-Never mind, apparently these people had a death wish.

"Hey, you're Enoshima, right?" Hajime asked as he approached the blonde, earning strange looks from her black-haired sister. "Enoshima Junko?"

"Yeah? You need something?" Enoshima crossed her arms over her chest, looking up at Hajime. "Cuz, if you think I'm the kind of girl to agree to a one-night stand-"

"W-what?! That's definitely not it!" Hajime exclaimed, blushing, before trying to compose himself. He couldn't magically make his blush disappear, but he looked calmer, so he continued. "I just wanted to thank you."
"Huh? I don't even know you," Enoshima stared at him in confusion. "What did I do for you?"

"No, you didn't do anything for me-"

"Are you one of those weirdos who walks up to their idol and thanks them for inspiring them-"

"No!" Hajime snapped, even redder, before forcing himself to calm down. "I'm Mikan's friend. And you've been a really good influence on her. She's becoming more confident and happier, so I wanted to thank you."

"Oh!" Enoshima's eyes lit up in recognition. "So that's what you wanted to thank me for!" She flashed him a peace sign, a huge grin on her face. "No problem! It's my duty as my girlfriend to help her out, right?"

"Yeah," Hajime smiled in return. "Keep making her happy, okay?"

"Of course! What sort of girlfriend would I be if I didn't help her with her asininity?"

"...you mean ascension, right?" Hajime asked uncertainly, suddenly wondering if he made the wrong choice.

"Oh whatever!" Enoshima waved her hand dismissively. "You know what I mean!"

He really didn't, but he pretended he did, thanking Enoshima for her time before leaving.

"Happy birthday, Natsumi," Hajime smiled, passing the blonde a slice of cake.

"Thanks," Natsumi mumbled, before digging in.

"Hey, won't your parents notice that you're missing?" Hajime asked, passing Natsumi a napkin before eating part of his slice.

"Thwey-" Natsumi paused to swallow and wipe her face, before continuing, her face more sullen than before. "They won't care."

"Why?"

"They're too busy celebrating Fuyuhiko's birth," Natsumi grumbled, stabbing at her cake. "They had twins for fuck's sake!"

"There's only a birthday party for your brother?" Hajime stared at Natsumi in confusion. "I thought you just skipped the party."

"Thanks for your faith in me," Natsumi huffed sarcastically, glaring at her cake. She didn't feel hungry anymore.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Hajime offered.

Natsumi hesitated, before shaking her head.

"Not now. Today is supposed to be a celebration, right?" Natsumi smiled, surprisingly genuine. She stood, no longer caring about her cake. "Come on! Let's go have some fun!"

"I guess we're getting a box," Hajime muttered to himself, staring at their half-eaten cake slices.
"WHAT THE FUCKING HELL IS WRONG WITH YOU?!" Hajime roared, glaring at the supermodel.

"Is something the matter?" Enoshima replied casually.

"YOU FUCKING CHEATED ON MIKAN?!"

"What?!" Enoshima gasped, offended. Hajime almost had hope that she would angrily deny it, revealing that it was all a misunderstanding, but she crushed that hope the moment she started talking. "Cheating?! Of course that's not it! My heart's just too big to belong to just one person!"

"If that was the fucking case, then you probably," Hajime put as much emphasis on the word as possible, scowling, "should have talked to Mikan about it!"

"She wouldn't have understood!" Enoshima whined. "I knew she would react badly, so I didn't tell her!"

"OF FUCKING COURSE SHE REACTED BADLY, YOU'VE BEEN CHEATING ON HER FOR THREE YEARS!"

Hajime had to stop himself from punching Enoshima. It would be a very bad thing for the him to be found punching a world-famous mode in the face.

Hinata Hajime had just graduated high school when he took up the job at Gundham's pet shop. He figured that since no one else was lining up for the position, he might as well try it.

He had no idea that by taking the job, he had intertwined his fate with a serious silver-haired samurai and a baby-faced blonde boss-to-be.

Or maybe they were destined to meet all along, whether he chose to take the job or not.
"It is five in the morning, what the fuck do you even want?" Fuyuhiko grumbled into the phone, irritation drenching his voice.

"The Yakuza can 'deport' people, right?" Hajime asked nervously.

"Give me names and I will kill the fuckers who hurt you," Fuyuhiko said immediately, all traces of fatigue gone.

"I-it's nothing like that!" Hajime stammered, trying to placate Fuyuhiko.

"Then why would you call at fuck you o'clock?!" Fuyuhiko yelled, his annoyance returning in full force.

"Well... uh, would you be able to send... a lion to another country, for example?"

"What? Where are you?"

"I'm at the pet shop," Hajime sighed before explaining himself. "And the owner just... got a baby lion somehow. Possibly illegally."

Fuyuhiko hesitated, his tired mind working to process the situation.

He concluded that it was way too early for this shit.

"Call back when I have a decent amount of sleep," Fuyuhiko hung up before Hajime could answer, setting his phone to vibrate and tossing it away from him.

"I can't believe you!" Natsumi exclaimed, barging into Fuyuhiko's room. "You abandoned a friend in need when he needed you! How can you call yourself a Yakuza?!"

"It's too early for this!" Fuyuhiko shot back, sitting up so he could glare at his sister. "Why the fuck are you even awake?!

"I'm awake because you abandoned Hajime, which meant he had to call me to deal with it!" Natsumi pointed at Fuyuhiko accusingly. "I was sleeping, you bastard!"

"I was sleeping too!"

"It's your duty as the heir to take on the burden in place of your underlings!"

"You're just trying to push your work off to me!"

The argument continued for at least an hour, at which point, Fuyuhiko quite literally kicked Natsumi out of his room and tried to go back to sleep. It took a while for his irritation to fade until Fuyuhiko could fall into an uneasy rest.

"Are you ready?" Chiaki asked, pulling her hood over her head.

"Yep!" Mikan smiled.
"Don't forget your hood," Chiaki pulled Mikan's hood over her head too, smiling at the nurse.

"Have a great day!" Ibuki waved energetically.

"Bye!"

At exactly seven in the morning, Chiaki and Mikan left the building, walking towards their bus stop.

"I've been meaning to ask, but why do I need to wear a ho-" Mikan cut herself off, eyes widening as she spotted a stray cat. Her hands immediately went to her purse, pulling out her phone and snapping a picture.

"What are you doing?" Chiaki asked, stopping to wait for Mikan as she furiously typed something.

"I'm in an agreement with Pekoyama-san where if one of us sees a cat or a dog then we send each other photos but I forgot to ask her phone number so I have to send it to Hajime-kun so he can send it to her," Mikan explained quickly, talking so fast that Chiaki almost didn't understand her. She finished her text, smiling as she sent the picture.

"Can we go now?"

"Yep! Sorry to make you wait!"

"I...I apologize, Young Master, but there is a matter of the utmost importance that I must attend to!" Peko bowed her head, her words formal even for her.

"Is it an emergency or something?" Fuyuhiko rubbed at his eyes, frustrated that he couldn't even get an hour of sleep.

"No... it's just..." Peko blushed. "A cat. I saw a cat."

"We own a cat," Fuyuhiko pointed out, already glaring at Peko.

"Not Tangerine! I saw a stray cat and can I please go and pet it?" Peko pleaded desperately.

"You've got to be kidding me..." Fuyuhiko sighed, grumbling something along the lines of 'go do whatever you want'. Peko thanked him profusely before running out of his room as fast as she could.

Fuyuhiko briefly wondered if he should barricade the door to keep more intruders from interrupting his sleep. He decided against it, since it would be too much trouble.

The dining room was just as traditional as the rest of the house, which really shouldn't be a surprise at this point. A low table along with plenty of cushions to kneel down on (never know when there might be guests) sat in the center of the room. The walls were mostly bare, but a painting of the Kuzuryuu crest, a spiraling dragon, hung in an alcove above the head of the table. In the four corners of the room were vases, with colourful flowers sitting in them.

Each of them meant something, a value that every member of the Yakuza ought to have, from the lowest underling to the boss himself. In the north-east, there were bright orange flowers, loyalty to the family. In the north-west, light pink flowers meaning bravery. Blue, purple, and pink sat in the south-east corner, signifying pride in your place as part of the family. And finally, in the south-
"Jeez, what's up with you?" Natsumi demanded as Fuyuhiko trudged his way into the dining room. She casually leaned on the table, propping herself up with her elbows despite their parents' (and Peko's) constant reprimands.

"Shut the fuck up," Fuyuhiko replied, a scowl etched into every line of his face. If that continued, he would have wrinkles in a day or two. Maybe an hour at most.

"Did you wake up on the wrong side of the bed or something?" Natsumi asked, taking a sip of her soda.

"I didn't get to sleep at all, thanks to some assholes," Fuyuhiko continued standing, glaring down at his sister. The implications of his words were as subtle as a piano to a flat miner.

"Wha- are you accusing me?!" Natsumi slammed her hands down on the table, standing so she could tower over Fuyuhiko. Her soda can fell over, spilling on the table, though neither one of them cared about that at the moment.

"I'm sorry, was that not blindingly obvious?" Fuyuhiko retorted, his irritation and fatigue manifesting in an aura of sheer snippy grumpiness.

"Fuck off!" Natsumi decided to fight back with a fiery anger and lots of defensiveness.

"I'm too tired for this anyways," Fuyuhiko sighed, turning around so he could get some breakfast. Er, it was noon, so lunch? Brunch.

"Hey! Get back here, you fucking coward! If you have a problem with me, fight me!" Natsumi yelled, chasing after her brother.

"It probably wasn't the best idea to try to challenge him when he's in such a bad mood..." Hajime sighed as he bandaged Natsumi's cuts.

"What's up with that, anyways!?" Natsumi demanded. "I thought a good fight would help him feel better, but now he's even worse!"

"Maybe it was the fact that you broke into his room again."

"He's just being a whiny brat!"

"Just let him sleep," Hajime ordered, unwilling to think of what would happen if Natsumi managed to wake him up again. "He'll get better after he takes a nap."

He didn't.

In fact, three hours later, he was probably even worse. Like a volcano about to erupt, he managed to crush any attempt at talking to him with his suffocating aura of fatigue, frustration, and a bunch of other 'F' words. Natsumi and Hajime only felt safe enough to talk when they were huddling together in the opposite corner of the room and whispering to each other.

"I thought you said he would be better!" Natsumi hissed into Hajime's ear.

"Well, I was wrong then!" Hajime replied, watching carefully for any sign of Fuyuhiko noticing them. Thankfully, the Yakuza heir was either ignoring them or too tired to care about anything but his cereal. "Seriously, where's Peko? She might be able to deal with him."
"She left like six hours ago! To pet a cat!"

"Oh god. We're all going to die," Hajime wondered if he could pre-order coffins. It would be useful.

"The Kuzuryuu family died suddenly in a mysterious incident, in which the heir went mad and stabbed everyone to death with a butter knife," Natsumi announced dramatically, only half joking.

Both of them fell silent as Fuyuhiko's phone buzzed, all of Fuyuhiko's anger and irritation suddenly becoming focused on that phone like a laser pointer. They honestly thought he was going to set it on fire or even crush it with his bare hands as he looked at the screen.

Instead... a miracle happened.

"He's..." Natsumi trailed off, too shocked to finish her sentence.

"...smiling..." Hajime finished, just as surprised.

Somehow, Fuyuhiko's demeanor did a complete turnabout. Imaginary flowers and sparkles and beams of light and other shoujo stuff appeared about him as he laughed, not demonically cackled, actually laughed. Every time he stopped laughing to himself, he would take another glance at his phone, before beginning to laugh again. A grin persisted on his face, even though it seemed like before, a scowl was the only expression he would wear for the day. All traces of his bad mood seemed to have disappeared, leaving an entirely different person in his place.

Natsumi and Hajime were frozen in place, too stupefied to move or speak. They silently wondered if the sight was a hallucination, a kind gift before their death, their minds shielding them from the monstrous face of the vicious beast about to kill them.

Technically, Mikan was responsible for Fuyuhiko's sudden change in demeanor.

Chiaki had to work overtime, (even though Mikan wasn't sure if Chiaki ever did any work), and she was urged to go home by herself.

As she walked through the Research and Development floor, she slowed down, marveling in awe at the various robotics projects.

"Oh! Miss Tsumiki!" A tester waved her over, bowing his head in respect. All of the employees respected her and acted formally around her, though Mikan didn't really understand why.

"Hello! What are you working on?" Mikan asked, trying to act calm and dignified even though she was nervous and also so happy a stranger was treated her kindly.

"A bird," The tester showed off the half-finished construction, a skeleton of metal and wires the size of Mikan's head. "We haven't perfected the flight yet, but the prototype is fully functional!"

"Really?" Mikan gasped in shock as a tiny, even smaller than her fist, flew around the room, flapping its wings. The tester held a remote control, smiling as Mikan gaped at the sight, completely fascinated as the robotic bird did tiny twists and turns in the air.

For some reason, when she watched the bird move, it reminded her of a one-eyed man who would smile brighter than all the stars combined around her. Maybe it was the amazement she felt as the bird moved, the same amazement Mikan felt when she realized how lucky she was to be able call to herself his friend.
"Can...can I record this?" Mikan asked shyly. "I think my friend would like seeing this."

Just saying the words 'my friend' brought a smile to her face.

"Sure, go ahead!" The tester said enthusiastically. "A friend of Miss Tsumiki is a friend of mine!"

"Thank you so much!"

[Fuyuhiko-kun! Look! They made a bird!]
[Er, not a real life bird. A robot bird!]
[It flies and turns and everything! Isn't it so cool!? These people really are skilled! I'm not surprised at all that they managed to make Chiaki-san!]

Fuyuhiko couldn't stop laughing at Mikan's gushing. It wasn't that her words were particularly funny, or anything like that. But somehow, with a poorly-shot video and a couple lines of text, Mikan managed to make all his stress and irritation disappear. And she probably didn't realize it either.

[Hey, are you free right now?]

Fuyuhiko wasn't exactly sure what he was doing. He didn't really have a plan.

He just wanted to see her.

[I am!]
[Want to go out for coffee?]

"Do you want milk with your coffee?" Mikan asked, pushing the basket of sweeteners and milk towards Fuyuhiko.

"Get that shit away from me," Fuyuhiko glared at the straw basket like something in it had grievously insulted him. Despite that, he grabbed a bunch of sweeteners, pouring most of them into his coffee without a second thought.

"That's a lot of sugar," Mikan noted, taking a sip of her completely black coffee.

"I don't know how you can drink that stuff without sugar," Fuyuhiko shot back, grabbing one of the mixing sticks for his drink.

"As long as it isn't cold, I'll drink it," Mikan replied simply.

"Seriously? That's the only requirement?" Fuyuhiko raised an eyebrow, before remembering something. "Oh yeah, you said something like that in Nanami's weird question video."

"Well, it's true," Mikan admitted bashfully. "I can have anything, as long as it's hot."

"Huh. You don't even like it better one way or another?"

"I haven't really tried coffee with sugar, actually," Mikan confessed. "But if I try it and I don't like it, then I'll have to drink a bunch of bad coffee..."
"Here," Fuyuhiko pushed his mug towards Mikan. "Try mine and say if you like it or not."

Mikan hesitantly picked up the mug, staring into its depths instead of drinking.

"What's wrong?"

"...you poured around six packs of sweetener in here, so I'm a bit scared..." Mikan muttered.

"Just drink it already!"

Slowly, Mikan brought the mug to her lips, taking a sip. She set it down on the table, grimacing.

"Was it that bad?" Fuyuhiko asked, just as Mikan brought the mug to her lips again.

"It's hard to get used to the taste," Mikan sighed as she handed the cup back to Fuyuhiko. "But it's good."

"Glad you like it then," Fuyuhiko replied.

"Wait, don't you want to taste my coffee in return?!"

"Hell no," Fuyuhiko immediately shot the idea down. "There's no way I would be able to handle the taste."

Mikan pouted, looking disappointed. Her head hung low, eyes narrowed, and a frown on her face. She stayed silent for several minutes, eroding Fuyuhiko’s HP until he snapped.

"Argh, just give me that!" Fuyuhiko snatched Mikan's coffee cup out of her hands, gulping some of it down before slamming it down on the table. Thankfully, nothing spilled or broke, but he did gag and had to force himself to swallow the horrible, horrible, awful drink.

"W-what are you doing?!" Mikan gasped in concern. "Don't force yourself! Fuyuhiko-kun!"

"Shut up! I just couldn't stand seeing you look so disappointed and sad, alright!" Fuyuhiko snapped, drinking from his own cup to counter the awful, horrible, terrible, disgusting taste. How the fuck did Mikan handle drinking that?!

"Huh," Mikan paused, staring at Fuyuhiko strangely.

"What?" Fuyuhiko demanded, halfheartedly glaring at Mikan over the rim of his mug.

"I just thought that you said something really sweet and cool," Mikan said with a smile.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean..." Fuyuhiko muttered, slowly turning red.

"I meant that you're really sweet and cool, Fuyuhiko-kun!" Mikan exclaimed earnestly, only making Fuyuhiko's blush worse.

"Same to you," Fuyuhiko grumbled. "But don't say things like that to a man. I have my pride, alright?!"

"Um, okay?" Mikan replied, confused. Fuyuhiko felt like bathing in lava for ruining the good mood.

"Never mind," Fuyuhiko sighed.
"Are you okay, Fuyuhiko-kun?" Mikan looked concerned, closely examining Fuyuhiko's face. "You're looking pale. Have you been sleeping well recently?"

"If by sleeping well, you mean 'get woken up by some idiot bastards every hour or so', then yeah, I guess I did sleep well tonight," Fuyuhiko set his cup down, crossing his arms over his chest. He let his irritation slip out without thinking, and he only realized it after he finished speaking. Just as he was about to apologize, Mikan spoke up.

"Maybe you should invest in some noise-canceling headphones then. And a lock-" Mikan froze, her eyebrows scrunching together as she thought. "...can you even lock a sliding door like that...?"

"No. Trust me, I've tried," Fuyuhiko grimaced at the memory. "But thanks for the advice."

"That's what friends are for, right?" Mikan smiled giddily, proud to be able to honestly say that they were friends.

"Yeah, it is," Fuyuhiko grinned in return. "Do you want to stop by the movie theater? I'll pay."

"I can't just let you pay for me!" Mikan exclaimed. "If you're going to pay for tickets and food, then I need to get something for you that's worth just as much!"

"What is this, an alchemy book?" Fuyuhiko laughed, his smile growing even brighter. "There's no need for an equivalent exchange! Just let me treat you, okay, Mikan?"

"But I want to pay you back!" Mikan declared, her cheeks turning red from her outburst. "I'm going to make you just as happy as you make me!"

"You're already doing that! I was pissed off all day since I didn't get any sleep, but the moment I started talking to you, I'm sunshine and rainbows!"

Both of them froze after Fuyuhiko's exclamation, the meaning of his words hitting both of them at the same time. Their faces practically burst into flames.

"IGNORE WHAT I JUST SAID!" Fuyuhiko yelled, slamming his hands down on the table.

Mikan on the other hand, looked like she was about to burst into tears.

"I-I'm so happy! I was able to b-be of some use t-to you!"

"That's a really weird thing to be happy about...!"

"It's because of you that I feel this way," Mikan said, suddenly serious. "Since you gave me even more joy just now, I need to compensate. Let me pay for your next meal."

"I told you already! There's no need for that!" Fuyuhiko objected, though there wasn't a big red word bubble or anything like that. "You already made me plenty happy, so let me repay you instead!"

"W-what?!" Mikan gasped in shock. "You're the one in debt here?! I-It's not possible!"

"Of course it's possible! This isn't a loan shark business or anything! It's possible for both parties to be in debt if they get loans!"

"Wait a second..." Mikan paused, staring at her already empty coffee mug as she thought, distracted. Then her head snapped up as she realized something. "You probably own a loan shark business!"
"Wasn't that obvious from the start?" Fuyuhiko retorted, his voice completely monotone. All his embarrassment disappeared in an instant as he explained to Mikan. "You can't be the biggest family in all of Japan if you focus on one branch of activities."

"Oh! It's like one of Chiaki-san's games!" Mikan exclaimed, continuing before Fuyuhiko could express his offense at having his family being compared to a video game. "You can't win a battle if you only focus on physical attack, since some monsters are weak to magic! You need to balance his skills if you want to be successful!"

"I guess? But since when were you get so familiar with those game-" Fuyuhiko cut himself off, a horrible revelation hitting him like a carton of eggs dumped on his head. "You've been doing more of Nanami's videos, haven't you?"

"It's actually really fun!" Mikan smiled, clasping her hands together. "I really like the M.o..." Mikan hesitated, forgetting how to pronounce the acronym, "Uh, the role-playing game with a lot of people! Even if sometimes people can get mean, it's really fun!"

"What do you mean, 'people can get mean'?" Fuyuhiko growled, immediately turning to 'overprotective' mode.

"Er... sometimes they..." Mikan was uneasy even thinking of repeating some of the phrases and words she had been called. With a forced smile, she tried to laugh it off. "It's not important!"

"How the fuck is that not important?!" Fuyuhiko demanded. "I swear, I'll rip out their arteries and use them to hang those assholes!"

"But they would be dead of blood loss, so why would you need to hang them?" Mikan pointed out. Fuyuhiko's anger drained away like air being let out of a balloon, until the blonde was left with regret and embarrassment in its place.

"Shut up," Fuyuhiko huffed. "I'll come up with better threats when you tell me what those bastards said to you."

"You...you're not going to act on those threats, right?" Mikan asked doubtfully.

Fuyuhiko responded with nothing but silence, which did nothing to reassure her.

"Please don't kill anyone, Fuyuhiko-kun!" Mikan begged, bowing her head and clasping her hands together.

"Why not?! They probably don't have a life anyways, if they're going to bully someone over a game! What would be lost if they died?!" Fuyuhiko demanded furiously.

"You're talking about committing a serious crime he-" Mikan cut herself off. Yakuza. Right.

"Weren't you the one who said 'You're a Yakuza, it would be surprising if you haven't killed anyone'? Quit acting like this is new to me."

"I forgot..." Mikan muttered dejectedly.

"How?" Fuyuhiko asked, completely baffled.

"Well, you just act so normal around me that it kind of sort of slips my mind!" Mikan babbled, waving her arms around in embarrassment.
"What's that supposed to mean!?"

"Nothing! I'm just f-forgetful!"

"That is not what you were saying!"

The impromptu coffee date was very energetic. But at least they were having lots of fun.
Mortifying Marriage Makes Mikan Melt

A bomb flew ahead, the explosion blowing away three of the racers ahead of Mikan. Her dinosaur avatar let out a cheer as they passed the three, taking third place.

"Did you see that?!" Mikan exclaimed, smiling proudly as she turned to Fuyuhiko.

"Yeah, good job," Fuyuhiko grinned back, smiling down at her from his spot, perched over the top of the couch. His hands weren't holding a controller, but that was just fine, since he was okay being a spectator.

"Praise me too!" Ibuki demanded, just before she dropped a banana peel right in front of Mikan, making the brunette swerve out of control. Mikan whimpered, her pride shattering instantly.

"Like hell I'm doing that!" Fuyuhiko snapped at the musician. Ibuki just giggled ominously in response.

"You need to focus on the race," Chiaki muttered impassively from her nigh-impenetrable spot in first place. And her place sitting on the floor.

Then, all of a sudden, a loud, shrill beeping emerged from the dining table. Mikan apologized, pausing the game so she could answer her phone. She hid away in the kitchen, hoping to keep the conversation nice and quiet-

"MIKAN!" The voice at the other end shrieked.

"Gah-!" Mikan held the phone away from her ear, flinching at the volume. "H-H-Hiyoko-san! Please, not so loud! You're going to burst my eardrums!"

"Sorry," Hiyoko said at a lower volume, before grumbling. "But can you blame me?! Something horrible just happened!"

"What's wrong?"

"I'm getting married!" Hiyoko screamed, sounding horribly frustrated.

"Um... congratulations...?" Mikan muttered, unsure how to respond to that.

"No! Not congratulations! I hate this! I'm being forced to marry a-a-!" Hiyoko swore, her words jumbling together in a melting pot of curses and something about sticks.

"Are... are you okay?" Mikan asked warily, not wanting to set off one of Hiyoko's outbursts.

"OF COURSE I'M NOT OKAY! I'M GETTING MARRIED TO A FUCKING BASTARD!"

"Calm down!" Mikan stammered, getting agitated.

"Just-just, urgh. I really don't want to go through with this," Hiyoko sighed. "Anyways, I'm inviting you."

"E-er- wait. When's the wedding?"

"Two months from now. I tried to make it five million months from now, but they didn't bite," Hiyoko groaned, already not looking forward to this.
"Hiyoko-san... you're not happy with this at all, are you?" Mikan frowned, both pitying and worrying for her friend.

"Of course not," Hiyoko replied seriously. "But what choice do I have? It's not like I can run away," The last part was spat out, bitterness oozing into her voice.

"I'm sorry..."

"Don't apologize for something that isn't your fault," Hiyoko ordered. "Rehearsals start two weeks before the wedding. You get your own clothes and you get to sleep on a boat for three days."

"Um, what are you talking about?" Mikan asked, suddenly completely lost.

"Since I put off dealing with the engagement party for so long, they had to make it the day before the wedding," Hiyoko explained, though Mikan wasn't sure how that was related to the boat at all. "It takes a day by boat to get to the island where the wedding is happening," Oh. "so there's the engagement party the night before the wedding, the day of the wedding, and the after-party on the day getting back."

"Okay. I understand now."

"So, are you coming?"

"Yeah, you seem like you need all the support you can get," Mikan said, before realizing something. "W-wait, are you inviting Chiaki-san and Ibuki-san?"

"Who the fuck?" That was all the answer Mikan needed.

"O-okay... I'll call you back later..." Mikan mumbled as she hung up.

Her friends found her kneeling on the kitchen floor, staring at the phone in her hands in despair.

"Don't worry about your dress, Mikan!" Ibuki announced, brandishing her sewing kit with pride. "I'll make it so dazzling, you'll steal the show from everyone!"

"Three days...I-I'll be all alone, on a huge boat... with a bunch of strangers..." Mikan muttered to herself, too absorbed in her panic to pay attention to Ibuki.

"It will be fine," Chiaki said in a monotone, patting Mikan on the head.

"All you have to do is stand there for the ceremony. You don't have to make a speech or anything," Fuyuhiko reassured the nurse.

"Actually... they told me that as Hiyoko-san's only friend... I have to make a speech..." Mikan replied.

"Wow."

"Hey! How come you're all ignoring me?!" Ibuki demanded in the background. She huffed as no one reacted, leaving for Mikan's room so she could sulk and sew at the same time.

Mikan's phone shook, letting out shrill beeps to alert everyone to its new message. Mikan gulped as she checked it.

[they said they're moving the wedding up. it's two weeks from now and one week is for rehearsals.
[oh yeah. the bitches in my family are really judgmental, and they might not let you come.]

[i]

[i hope you get to go. i want to at least have one person supporting me.]

"I'm so sorry..." Mikan mumbled to her phone, heart shaking with pity.

"What's wrong?" Chiaki inquired, sitting next to Mikan on the couch.

"I wish there was something I could do for her..." Mikan sighed. "Hiyoko-san doesn't deserve to be forced into a marriage she doesn't want..."

"Maybe we can shoot her fiance," Fuyuhiko suggested.

"Won't that cause a scandal?" Chiaki retorted. "You can't just kill the fiance of someone from a rich, influential family."

"Hold on...!" Mikan rushed towards Ibuki's room, loud crashes audible from within. Just as Fuyuhiko and Chiaki were wondering if they should go check on her, Mikan returned, a DVD case badly hidden behind her back.

"Okay! I'm ready for anything now!"

"We can see the-" Fuyuhiko quieted as Chiaki hushed him, silently motioning for him to go along with whatever Mikan was planning.

Even if it was a plan based off a movie that would probably fail, it wouldn't hurt to let her have her fun, right?

"You're in the right place, right? You're at the huge, traditional Japanese house?" Mikan paused, waiting for a response from the other end of the call.

"You're there. Thank you again for doing this," Mikan said before hanging up. She pulled a map out of her purse, checking to see if she was in the right place. Satisfied, she put her map and her phone away, stepping in front of the building.

It felt nostalgic, standing in front of Hiyoko's home once again, after so long. And a bit weird, for the same reason Mikan felt weird standing in front of the Kuzuryuu home for too long.

Because it was so strange to see convenience stores, office buildings, parks, and apartment complexes all around, only to have the urban landscape disturbed by a gigantic traditional Japanese house out of nowhere. And yes, ginormous. Mikan could not emphasize the size enough. It towered over her, looming overhead like a monster about to gobble her up. It was uncomfortable, but Mikan forced herself to move forward, taking one step at a time while the mantra of 'It's for Hiyoko-san, it's for Hiyoko-san' repeated in her head.

Mikan immediately felt overwhelmed. Even though Hiyoko told her to dress casually, she felt out of place in her pink sweater and blue skirt among the gathering of people, all in traditional kimonos. Despite the formal clothes, some people had pieces of paper taped to their chest, saying things like 'priest' and 'shrine maiden'. A piece of paper taped to the ground also represented the shrine.
"Mikan, you're here!" Hiyoko exclaimed in relief, wheeling her way over. She wore a really elaborate kimono, exquisitely detailed flowers blooming across the fabric... which only made Mikan feel even worse about her attire.

Everyone had turned towards her, already practicing their roles. Maybe it was her imagination, but Hiyoko's grandparents were eyeing Mikan strangely...

"H-Hi..." Mikan stammered, uneasy with all eyes on her.

"Oh my! Did you lose your watch?" Hiyoko's grandmother asked, gasping. "You're late, Tsumiki-san."

"Ah, it hasn't been long enough!" Hiyoko's grandfather declared, making his way over to Mikan. He examined her carefully, making the nurse shudder and shift nervously. "Goodness gracious, you've grown even bigger over the years!"

"We're getting carried away over such a small matter," Hiyoko's mother fanned herself with one hand, waving Mikan over with the other. "Come dear, I'll show you where to change."

"I'll do it," Hiyoko grumbled, grabbing Mikan's hand. She tried to pull Mikan along, only to fail when she realized how hard it was to drag a person behind you while trying to move her wheelchair at the same time. With a huff, she released Mikan's hand, wheeling away and expecting Mikan to follow her.

Hiyoko's grumbling continued as she tied Mikan's obi for her, a scowl on her face.

"I'm sorry..." Mikan whispered quietly, turning around to face the other woman when she was done.

"Don't apologize for my family being assholes," Hiyoko snapped. "Just don't talk to them and we'll try to get this over with."

"O-okay!"

"Tsumiki-san, are you feeling alright?" Hiyoko's grandfather inquired, leering at her as he pretended to be concerned. "You look unwell. Perhaps you should take a break. Reading your speech would be such a heavy strain for a woman like you."

"Shut up, old man!" Hiyoko snarled, glaring at him. "She's just fucking nervous, and bitchy comments like that aren't helping!"

"I-I can keep going! Really!" Mikan insisted, grabbing the papers again.

"You shouldn't push yourself, darling," Hiyoko's grandmother sighed. "Shinjiro is right. Take a break, you've been working yourself too hard."

'But I was j-just reading off a piece of paper!' Mikan whimpered as she was practically shoved away by Hiyoko's mother.

As Hiyoko's grandmother went to practice her speech, the groom himself made his way over to Mikan.

"You ought to work on your posture," Togami Byakuya stated factually, crossing his arms over his large chest as he criticized Mikan's performance. "And fix that stutter of yours."
Mikan stayed silent, trying to hold back tears. Today wasn't a good day.

Mikan couldn't have been happier when she saw a familiar car pull up in front of the Saionji household, tears threatening to burst from her eyes.

"Fuyuhiko-kun!" She was practically skipping towards the car, overjoyed by her chance to escape-

"I know you don't have any way of telling the time, but the rehearsal isn't over yet," Hiyoko's mother said gently, crushing all of Mikan's hopes and dreams. Yes, all of them.

"The sun is already setting, you idiot," Hiyoko retorted. "We should continue this tomorrow."

"I think I would know if colourblindness was passed down in the family," Hiyoko's grandmother smiled insincerely, figurative bolts of lightning crashing to the earth as they clashed with verbal swords. "Perhaps it was your father's side that gave you that gift. The day is still young, Little Hiyoko."

"Don't you dare," Hiyoko growled with a glare that could probably pierce the heavens.

"Mitsuru is right," Hiyoko's grandfather joined in the attack, teaming up with his wife to-

"Stop narrating the argument," Togami Byakuya ordered.

"Yes sir..." Mikan nodded pitifully, pretty much groveling for forgiveness.

"I'm here to pick Mikan up," Fuyuhiko said coolly as he walked up to the makeshift practice ceremony, his hands in the pockets of his pants.

'T-that voice! It's an angel! I'm saved!'

"Mister Kuzuryuu!" The Saionji family (minus Hiyoko, who rolled her eyes and groaned) all froze, before suddenly switching to 'really polite and friendly.' It was scary how fast their demeanor changed.

"No problem at all, sir!" Grandma Saionji exclaimed. "In fact, we were just about to finish this rehearsal up!"

"Just let her return the kimono, and she'll be ready to go," Hiyoko's grandfather smiled, clasping his hands together to appear friendlier.

"Oho, but we're not so greedy that we can't let her keep it!" Mama Saionji laughed at her own joke, hiding a huge grin behind the back of her hand. "At the end of the week of course."

"You look really good, Mikan," Fuyuhiko ignored the trio, focusing on Mikan. He had to deal with a lot of suck-ups in his life, but he learned that if you pretended you were deeply invested in another conversation, they would leave you alone so that they wouldn't intrude and look bad. Most of the time.

"Thank you!" Mikan smiled, all the tension and panic from the stressful rehearsal disappearing the moment she was praised. But then again, what person hated being complimented?

Oh, she was so tempted to ask him to keep praising her, but if you asked for it, the compliments wouldn't be as sincere and-

"What, she just looks good to you?" Hiyoko crossed her arms over her chest as she glared at
Fuyuhiko accusingly. "She's beautiful, you blind bastard."

Just as the Saionji family minus Hiyoko was about to apologize for Hiyoko's rude words, Fuyuhiko destroyed her argument completely.

"She's always beautiful, what the hell are you talking about? If you didn't see that before, then you're the blind one here," Fuyuhiko retorted. He spoke aggressively, like he was only saying the words to spite Hiyoko, but Mikan was happy anyways. Fuyuhiko grabbed at Mikan's hand, saying with a blushing face, "We're going now."

Mikan's grin probably outshone spotlights as she was dragged off, still in the kimono. Hiyoko wasn't sure if she was so happy because she was leaving or because that (surprisingly smooth) one-eyed bastard praised her.

The various players in the rehearsal began to remove their costumes, stepping off the stage to their play to retire for the night. When all but the members of the Saionji family remained, Hiyoko attacked.

"Do you see why I chose to invite her now?" Hiyoko asked with a sly smile. Though it sickened her to act like this, Hiyoko needed to be a bit manipulative to get what she wanted, especially in her family. "She's not just a childhood friend, she has connections to the Kuzuryuu family too! She has the heir wrapped around her finger! Can you imagine what it would be like if things go on like this?"

"I'm so proud!" Her old hag of a grandmother exclaimed, pretending to wipe away a tear. "You're growing, Little Hiyoko, you're going to mature into a fine young woman!"

'I'm already a fine young woman!' Hiyoko kept her mouth shut, not wanting to let her true thoughts slip through and break her act.

"Yes, you're thinking like a true Saionji!" The wrinkly bastard declared, fondness in his voice. Ugh. "You'll climb to the top of the social ladder and get even richer!"

'Like hell I care about that!'

"Ah, but I'm so tired," Hiyoko pouted, putting on a sweet and innocent act over the mask to keep her thoughts and emotions from showing. It was a very complicated job, but she did it well. She had two decades of experience, after all. "I'll go sleep now."

"Oho, what do you really plan on doing, young lady?" Her bitch mother asked teasingly, seeing through one facade but not the other.

Alright, fine," Hiyoko rolled her eyes, dropping the sweet and innocent act as soon as she put it on. "I just wanted to see if I can get Tsumiki to be even more loyal to me."

"Haha! That's our girl!" Her gross grandfather exclaimed. "Go right ahead! None of us are stopping you."

'Goddamn fucking idiots."

Hiyoko made her way to her room, all acts and masks dropped as she collapsed on her futon, tired as hell. She didn't bother changing, but she grabbed her phone, typing one message before heading off to Dreamland.

[you're invited. thank fucking hell for that.]
The Saionji family wanted the wedding to go flawlessly, so every day, from noon to sunset, they would practice the ceremony. Mikan wondered if it counted as a vacation day if she was working so hard, but then again, it was listed as a used vacation day in her employer's book, so why should she question it?

"Mikan, what the hell are you spacing out for?" Hiyoko demanded grumpily. "Your ride's here."

"Oh! So-" Mikan cut herself off, remembering that Hiyoko didn't like apologies. "Thank you."

"Jeez, when does he get the time to do this?" Hiyoko asked exasperatedly, rolling her eyes. "Does he even have a job? At all? What a lazy bastard."

"I thought being the heir count-"

"I heard that, you little brat," Fuyuhiko said, startling Mikan with how he seemed to appear out of nowhere.

"Little? If I could stand, I would be taller than you!" Hiyoko shot back.

"N-n-n-n-no!" Mikan stammered, jumping between the two, hands clasped to her chest like she was literally praying for them to stop. Which... she sort of was, actually. "If you fight... if you fight..." Mikan paused, trying to think of a good threat. She came up with nothing, so she decided to resort to her usual methods. "If you don't fight, I'll let you cover me in honey and send me to the fish!"

"...what does that even mean?" Fuyuhiko demanded, wondering if that was a metaphor or something.

"I meant it literally!"

Hiyoko began laughing loudly at the thought, clutching at her stomach.

"H-Honey?!" Hiyoko sputtered between fits of laughter. "And sending you to the itty b-bitty fishies...!" Her wavering voice descended into another bout of cackling. Fuyuhiko took the chance to grab Mikan and run.

"Seriously! How the fuck do you put up with her?!" Fuyuhiko demanded, opening the door for Mikan.

"She's very kind and-"

"Cut the crap!" Fuyuhiko snapped as he sat down in the driver's seat. "What's the real reason!?

"Um, she was nicer when we were kids...?" Mikan offered, buckling her seatbelt. Fuyuhiko followed suit, still grumbling.

"I still don't see how you two get along at all," Fuyuhiko sighed, stepping on the gas and beginning the trip to Mikan's home.

"Well, she's also really brave!" Mikan smiled wistfully, thinking of bruises and scissors, though she looked back on it fondly. "Whenever bullies tried to beat me up or draw on me or make me eat weird bugs or cut my hair, she usually stopped them!"

"Usually?!"

"Sometimes she was busy with dance lessons," Mikan explained. "Or she just found it funny and let
it happen," Mikan paused, realizing that she probably shouldn't have added that last part. "E-er, her
dancing was really beautiful! Like, um, a-swan...?" Mikan plastered a smile on her face, but it
looked more nervous than anything. She hesitantly turned towards Fuyuhiko-

"I'm going to kill her," Fuyuhiko scowled, a killer aura swamping the car.

"N-no, it was all in the past! You don't have to! Fuyuhiko-kun!" Mikan's usual strategy to stop
Fuyuhiko from killing/brutally maiming someone was to jump in front of him and sometimes throw
her arms around him. Since she couldn't do that in a car, Mikan was stuck using verbal methods to
calm him down. "Um... er..."

"If it helps... I can-"

"If you're about to offer something weird, I'm going to kick you out of this car and let you walk
back."

"I-I-I was just going to offer to buy you ice cream!" Mikan wailed.

"Right," Fuyuhiko dragged out the word in disbelief, rolling his eye. "And I'm not lactose
intolerant."

"I know a good ice cream parlor! They have an option for people with allergies!" Mikan
exclaimed.

"I don't need any ice cream," Fuyuhiko stated. "So where was that ice cream shop?"

Mikan spouted off the address, before realizing something. "I thought you didn't want ice cream."

"Who said it was for me?"

"W-wha-?!"

Mikan made a note to herself to repay Fuyuhiko later as she licked her ice cream cone, opening the
door to her apartment with her other hand.

"Mikan-chaaaaaaan!" Ibuki jumped out the moment Mikan opened the door, almost making
her drop her ice cream. The rock star grabbed Mikan's other hand, dragging her towards her room.

"Er, Ibuki-san? Is something wrong?" Mikan asked, worried.

"Of course not! In fact, things are about as far as wrong as you can get! Like some impossibly-
high-number miles to the right of wrong!" Ibuki exclaimed, a huge, bright grin on her face as she
kicked open the door to her room. In the midst of a mess of fabrics and stuffed animals, there was
her dress. "Ta-da! Your dress is finished!"

"...is...is that even the same dress...?!" Mikan gasped in shock, gaping at the once-simple gown.

The skirt of the gown had once fell straight down to the floor, but now it poofed out in all
directions, crinoline helping the dress keep its poofy shape. Like a hill. At the summit of the hill,
pure white flowers of fabric bloomed across the golden ribbon that made up the belt. Loose
hanging sleeves made of sheer fabric stretched down to about her elbows, sewn onto the edges of
the illusion neckline.

"It's amazing what Ibuki can do when she puts her mind to it, right?!" Ibuki grinned excitedly,
proud to show off her work.
"I-incredible! You did all of this in a week?!” Mikan stared at the dress with wide eyes, amazed by Ibuki's handiwork. It looked like a wedding gown straight out of a fairytale! "Thank you! I'll definitely repay for this!"

"Well..." Ibuki grinned mischievously. "There is something you can do for me..."

"What is it?"

"Mahiru-chan let me borrow her camera!" Ibuki turned around, rummaging around in the awful mess to find the camera. She dug it out of a pile of what appeared to be sparkly flower print fabrics and brandished the camera with pride. "So let me take some good pictures!"

"Alright!" Mikan smiled, getting ready for a fashion show.

"And something else too..." Ibuki paused ominously, widening her eyes and trying to get a convenient shadow to fall over half her face like they did during scary moments in comic books. She failed, so her face just looked weird as she grumbled her next words. "Return my movie by tomorrow's noon."

"W-w-w-what movie!? I don't... I don't have any movie!" Mikan stammered, backing away nervously.

"Mikan," Ibuki frowned, crossing her arms over her chest.

"I have it in my room," Mikan confessed, averting her eyes guiltily. "I'll return it after dinner."

"Good. Now let's start the fashion show!"

Mikan was grateful for the last bit of fun before the wedding began.
Marrirage


The gigantic luxury cruiser alone was enough to overwhelm Mikan. She had never been on a raft, let alone a ship that probably dwarfed her city!

The main deck was covered in lights and tables, people in tuxedos and fancy dresses scattered everywhere. Mikan supposed that she counted as one of the people in a fancy dress, but she still felt out of place among all those socialites.

"Fuyuhiko-kun! Hajime-kun!" Mikan sighed in relief as she spotted two familiar faces in the crowd of unknown people. She made her way towards them, taking care not to trip any more than she already had.

"Nice to see you here," Hajime smiled at her, holding a martini glass, even though it was empty. "How are you liking the party?"

"Uh..." Mikan hesitated, unsure of how to answer. In its own way, that was her answer. "T-that's not important! Why are you two here?"

"They invited a bunch of influential figures in the Kuzuryuu family," Fuyuhiko answered. "Since my parents declined, me, Hajime, Peko, and Natsumi had to come in their place."

"I see!" Mikan smiled brightly. "I'm so glad you're here! I was really nervous, being around all these strangers!"

"Is it because people are staring at you?" Hajime asked, making Fuyuhiko choke on his own spit.

"E-e-er, there are?" Mikan asked uncertainly, looking around.

"It's probably just people admiring your beauty or something like that," Hajime reassured her. His words failed to reach Fuyuhiko, who kept looking around for perverts. Hajime brought Fuyuhiko back to reality with a (gentle) slap to the shoulder. "Right, Fuyuhiko?"

"Oh, uh, yeah!" Fuyuhiko nodded eagerly, not entirely sure what he was agreeing to.

"I think I see Mahiru over there," Hajime said suddenly, pointing to some far off corner of the crowd. "I'll go say hi."

"Where?" Mikan looked to where Hajime was heading, unable to find the redhead he was talking about.

Mikan looked back, realizing that she had lost Fuyuhiko along the way. Just as she was about to panic, she spotted him.

He was surrounded by boisterous men and women, all talking excitedly to him. Or around him. Fuyuhiko didn't seem to be participating much (or at all), looking aloof as he casually glanced around the area. But every time the Yakuza heir tried to extract himself from the crowd, another member pulled him back in, wrapping an arm around his waist or his shoulder to make sure he didn't escape.

'Poor Fuyuhiko-kun...' Mikan frowned in pity, watching the chaos unfold.
"Hey there, pretty gal," a very drunk man drawled, making his way to Mikan with a look of confidence on his face. "You alone there?"

"E-er, no, but-"

"I'll keep you company then!" The man declared over Mikan's flustered stammering, just before a bullet grazed his head, separating a few strands of hair from his scalp.

Both Mikan and the drunkard turned pale as they turned towards the source of the gunshot.

"Step away from Ane-san," Natsumi stated ominously, stifling all other voices with her intimidating glare. She stood on a table, towering over the crowd and invoking fear in everyone else.

"Security!" Hiyoko screeched from across the deck. She pointed at Natsumi, yelling for the bodyguards. "Get her off this boat! She's a public menace! Throw her overboard!"

"Got it, boss!" A dark-skinned brunette in a suit and a similarly-dressed man with lightning shooting from his eyes showed up to detain Natsumi.

"Make sure to be careful with her, Owari," the lightning man said, just before Owari tackled Natsumi to the ground, wrestling the gun out of her hands.

"I got this, old man!" Owari shot back, restraining Natsumi's hands behind her back. "You're under arrest!"

"We aren't police officers, but good enough," the man shrugged, confiscating the gun and walking the two of them away.

Mikan watched the scene, completely baffled by what just happened. But more importantly...

'What's an Ane-san?'

The drunkard man stumbled off, apparently frightened by the fact that he almost got shot. The crowd distanced themselves from Mikan, unwilling to face the same danger he did.

Fuyuhiko completely ignored the ordeal, sighing as he trudged over to Mikan's spot near the boat's railing.

"Are you okay?" Mikan asked, concerned.

"I'm just tired," Fuyuhiko grumbled. "Huge parties aren't my thing."

"But you were so popular!" Mikan exclaimed. "Those people loved you!"

"No. They just want to get at the Kuzuryuu family's money and power," Fuyuhiko rolled his eye, crossing his arms over his chest. "They keep trying to set me up with their kids. Like hell I'm going to fall for that."

"Is it troublesome for you?"

"Yeah," Fuyuhiko sighed once again. "Honestly, I would rather avoid huge crowds like that."

"I have an idea then-" "MIKAN!"

Fuyuhiko slapped a hand to his forehead as Hiyoko wheeled herself in their direction. Of course.
Mikan smiled apologetically, silently asking for permission. He just waved her off with his other hand, saying something about meeting up later.

"S-so this was where you were!" Mikan exclaimed, out of breath as she ran onto the observation deck. "I g-got so worried when I couldn't find you and I was all alone in a huge c-crowd and-"

"Oh, sorry about that, Mikan," Fuyuhiko waved her over, and Mikan joined him in leaning on the railing, watching the coastline. "Did you at least have fun talking to your friend?"

"Hiyoko-san was just complaining about getting married to 'some pork-feet bastard'," Mikan sighed. "Even if it's an arranged marriage, I hope it'll work out..."

"I doubt it, with a wife like that."

"I-I mean, there might be a lot of problems initially, but there are lots of stories where the people in the marriage grow to love each other and stuff, right?" Mikan rambled, picking at her gloves nervously.

"This isn't a fairy tale though," Fuyuhiko stated, destroying Mikan's argument in one hit.

"But still..." Mikan frowned. "I hope they can be happy."

"Yeah," Fuyuhiko grew silent, staring at the city lights from far away. Because of the roof over their head, he couldn't actually see the stars without leaning ridiculously far over the railing, so he stuck to staring at the lights of the cities and boats they passed and the reflection of the sky in the ocean.

"They're kind of like stars," Mikan noted, grinning slightly at a boat decorated in Christmas lights. "Don't you think they're pretty?"

"Not really," Fuyuhiko admitted. "I would rather see the actual stars."

"Hm, but right now, that would be dangerous, and the main deck is where the party is..." Mikan thought to herself for a bit, before coming up with an idea. "Why don't you go on a vacation? Go to the countryside and admire the stars?"

"No offense, but there's no way I'm leaving all my work behind just for some stars," Fuyuhiko left out the 'Natsumi would never stop complaining about me giving all my work to her'.

"But you deserve a break sometimes. You'll get headaches and muscle pain if you overwork yourself, along with fatigue and lowered immunity to sicknesses."

"You're a nurse even when you're off-duty," Fuyuhiko turned towards her, smiling at Mikan. His words were full of adoration and admiration, making Mikan blush brighter than the city lights.

"I-it's nothing much! Any n-nurse would know the symptoms of o-overwork!" Mikan stammered, trying to downplay her knowledge.

"But you're not just any nurse, are you?" Fuyuhiko asked, grinning triumphantly.

"H-h-h-how did you know I-I was the SHSL Nurse?!" Mikan demanded, gaping at Fuyuhiko's apparent psychic powers.

"I didn't," Fuyuhiko said with a smug smirk. "But you told me just now, didn't you?"
"U-unfair!" Mikan covered up her bright red face with her hands, before getting an idea. She clenched her hands into fists as she said the words a little too loudly. "L-l-let's talk about you instead! You were probably the Super High School Level Yakuza!"

"I wasn't," Fuyuhiko answered, shattering Mikan's bravado in a single blow. "I was invited to be the Super High School Level Yakuza, but I refused."

"Why?"

"Natsumi wasn't invited, so she got all mopey and depressed about it," Fuyuhiko spoke casually, almost dismissively about the entire thing. "I went to the same school as her just to shut her up."

'Even though he acts like he doesn't care, he still refused such a prestigious school for his sister...’ Mikan giggled a bit, smiling. 'That's so sweet!'

"You were thinking something weird just now, weren't you," Fuyuhiko said accusingly.

"N-No!" Mikan fumbled, trying to come up with a good cover story. "I...I wasn't thinking about how w-we could have met in high school at all!"

"Oh god," Fuyuhiko winced at the thought. "Trust me. You don't want to meet fifteen-year-old me."

"Why would I not want to meet you?" Mikan asked, curious.

"Look, it's just- It's not a good idea! Trust me, you really don't want to know! You really don't!" Fuyuhiko kept spouting off one refusal after another, like he was mashing the cancel button to get out of the conversation as fast as possible. He tried to cover up his blushing face with an arm, obviously embarrassed by whatever he did in high school.

"I'm sure that it wasn't that bad..."

"I pulled a knife on a guy trying to confess to Peko."

"...oh."

"I thought he was suspicious, okay?!" Fuyuhiko exclaimed defensively. "He kept sneaking around her and looking at her weird! He even slipped a bunch of weird letters in her locker! I seriously thought it was an assassination attempt!"

"Pft..." Mikan tried to stifle her laughter, covering her mouth with one hand.

"Don't laugh at me!" Fuyuhiko ordered, his face turning pinker than a rose-coloured puffball.

"I-I'm sorry! It's just-It's just...!" Mikan giggled, clasping her hands together. "When I think about it, I-I just...!" Mikan cut herself off, laughing.

"You just what?!" Fuyuhiko demanded.

"You're so protective of your family! It's really sweet!" Mikan smiled.

"I'm not sweet! Shut up before I knock your teeth out!"

"I'm sorry..." Mikan's face fell. Guilt took over in Fuyuhiko's mind, winning out immediately over his embarrassment.
"It's fine," Fuyuhiko said stiffly. "Call me whatever you want."

"Um, would you like being cool or handsome better?" Mikan asked.

"Does it really matter? A compliment is a compliment," Fuyuhiko sighed.

"But you got mad when I called you sweet..."

"I'm not mad!" Fuyuhiko snapped, bright pink. "It's just embarrassing! Do you always walk up to grown men and call them sweet?!"

"Hajime-kun doesn't have a problem with it," Mikan stated simply. "Komaeda-san too."

"Who's Komaeda?" Fuyuhiko tried to remember if he ever heard that name before. If it had, he didn't remember.

"Um..." Mikan hesitated, unsure how to describe him in a... tasteful manner. Mikan kept pinching at her gloved hands, trying to think, before settling on, "He's... a patient."

"Why are you so agitated?" Fuyuhiko poked at her hands, scowling. "This Komaeda guy didn't do anything to you, right?"

"No, not at all!" Mikan declared immediately. "He's just... (I'm sorry, Komaeda-san), weird."

"How come?"

"He just... he makes me nervous, but he doesn't do anything weird to me," Mikan frowned, remembering insane rambling about hope and eyes full of despair. "He keeps talking about 'making sure my hope shines brightly' whenever I do anything, and thanks me for 'caring about trash like him' whenever I'm nice to him."

"So he's a creep," Fuyuhiko concluded. Mikan felt ashamed to badmouth one of her patients like that, but she nodded in agreement.

"I'll shatter his bones and use the shards to make a hat," Fuyuhiko declared, cracking his knuckles.

"D-don't do that! That will make my job really hard! And that would be a really ugly hat!"

"Dammit," Fuyuhiko sulked, resting his head on the railing.

"But, h-he's been like this since h-high school so I'm used to it!" Mikan exclaimed, trying to recover, for Komaeda's sake (and bones.)

"Shit, now I'm really regretting not going to Hope's Peak," Fuyuhiko grumbled. "If I did, I could have punched this guy in the face without making it harder for you."

"You don't have to punch anyone in the face! A-and besides, I'm glad with the way things turned out in the end!"

"What are you talking about?" Fuyuhiko asked, raising an eyebrow at Mikan's outburst.

"B-because... it's because we met the way we met that we were able to become friends, right?" Mikan muttered uncertainly, trying to find the best way to put her thoughts into words. "And I wouldn't want to do anything that would change that..."

"So basically, you're afraid that the butterfly effect might set in and keep all of this," Fuyuhiko
gestured to himself and Mikan with one hand, "from happening."

"Er, I think?" Mikan paused, looking away as she thought. "What's the butterfly effect?"

"Hm..." Fuyuhiko hesitated, trying to think of how to describe it. "You know how in those time traveling books, you can change one little thing and that suddenly has huge effects on the present? That's what the butterfly effect is."

"Like Chiaki-san's 'Love is Strange' game!" Mikan smiled. "I think I get it!"

"What kind of game is that?" Fuyuhiko eyed her suspiciously.

"It's really fun! You can help a girl stand up to her bullies and then she'll-" Mikan cut herself off, yawning. She covered her open mouth with one hand, before forcing herself to focus on the conversation. "S-sorry."

"It is pretty late," Fuyuhiko noted, glancing at the darkened sky. "You should get to your room."

"Um... Hiyoko-san has the keys..." Mikan mumbled.

"Why are you sharing a room with the brat?" Fuyuhiko eyed Mikan suspiciously, though his suspicion was directed at a certain blonde brat instead of at Mikan.

"I can't afford to rent a room on this boat for a night, let alone three days. Hiyoko-san was kind enough to let me share with her."

"She didn't force you to do that or anything, right?" Fuyuhiko asked, wondering what Hiyoko's motives could be.

"N-no! S-s-she didn't! And, and, e-even if she did, I-I wouldn't have a-a-any other c-choice!" Mikan stammered, entrenched firmly in the river of denial. Her arms flailed about, like she was trying to swat away all of Fuyuhiko's suspicions.

"Couldn't you ask her to get a room for you?" Fuyuhiko offered, making Mikan pause.

"Er, maybe...? B-but, she was s-still kind enough to let me stay in her room..." Mikan clutched her hands to her chest, like trying to defend Hiyoko was too much for her heart.

"Last question. Is there more than one bed in her room?"

"..." Mikan raised her clasped hands, almost hiding her face behind them as she quietly answered the question. "...no..."

"So she was trying to sleep with you while pretending to be nice," Fuyuhiko concluded, all the nervous energy draining out of Mikan as she slowly nodded her head in agreement.

"B-but I'm sure it would be a mutually beneficial arrangement!" Mikan squeaked as a last-ditch attempt to defend Hiyoko's honour. "She gets to have a teddy bear and I get a warm bed to sleep in!"

"Do you really think a teddy bear is all she's going after," Fuyuhiko asked flatly.

"Um... yes...?" Mikan answered, voice full of uncertainty. She didn't believe her own words, and neither did Fuyuhiko.

"I'll let you sleep on my bed," Fuyuhiko decided. "Only if you want to, though."
"Thank you for the offer... but where will you sleep?"

"In the bathtub, probably?" Fuyuhiko shrugged. "I'm pretty sure there's a couch in my room too."

Now, normally Mikan would argue against this, declaring that the couch would be enough for her and that he shouldn't be that nice to her. But then Mikan had an idea.

With a bright smile, she thanked Fuyuhiko once again and let him lead the way to his room.

Fuyuhiko woke up with a hand under his shirt that was most definitely not his and a warm body clinging to him, which was weird, considering that he distinctly remembered falling asleep in the bathtub to avoid something like this happening. The two of them were on their side, the person in his bed hugging him from behind. Though Fuyuhiko couldn't turn around to check, he was pretty sure he knew who it was.

"Uwah..." Mikan moaned in her sleep, confirming Fuyuhiko's suspicions. "Don't go..."

"Mikan, wake up," Fuyuhiko tried to gently remove himself from Mikan's grip, not wanting to shove her off the bed. But unfortunately, Mikan apparently turned into a vice grip when she fell asleep, and she definitely wasn't going to let go anytime soon.

"If you're going to grope me, at least be awake for it," He huffed, more to himself than anyone else. Then he looked down at his stomach, realizing that it looked more like his t-shirt had naturally shifted up over the course of his sleep, and Mikan just happened to rest her hand on the exposed skin.

With a sigh and some grumbling, Fuyuhiko gave up, deciding to wait until Mikan woke up. It had nothing to do with how warm and comfortable it was. It was just him not wanting to interrupt her sleep, got it?!?

Mikan's left hand moved on its own, coming up to stroke Fuyuhiko's face intimately. Fuyuhiko would have definitely smacked her hand away, if he didn't notice something in that moment. Mikan usually covered her hands with gloves or sleeves long enough to hide her hands, but there was a bandage wrapped around her hand up to her... actually, he wasn't sure how high up the bandage went.

With his right hand, he ran his fingers over the bandage, confirming that it went nearly up to her elbow. But... the bandages were coming a bit loose.

Experimentally, Fuyuhiko tried to wriggle out of Mikan's hug once again. She mumbled something that sounded like a 'no' and tightened her grip, even throwing a leg over his body to keep him from escaping. A completely bare leg.

"Why the fuck are you not wearing pants," Fuyuhiko hissed, bright pink. He averted his gaze from the sight. He didn't really expect an answer, at least not at the moment, so he decided to turn back to the task at hand.

"Alright, she's not letting me go, even if it's to get new bandages," Fuyuhiko concluded. With a sigh, he quickly removed the bandages from Mikan's arm, intending to wrap them back up, tighter this time, before freezing at what he saw.

The skin underneath the bandage had obviously been covered for a long time. The contrast between just Mikan's fingers and her palm were immediately obvious, the uncovered skin several shades darker than the pale flesh underneath the bandage. But that wasn't what made Fuyuhiko
There were scars all over her arm, from her hand to her elbow. Some of them could have been self-inflicted, but not all of them. Even if Mikan could have inflicted all those wounds on herself, Fuyuhiko doubted she had much of a reason to carve things like 'Despair', 'Upupupu', and 'Unloved' into her own arm. He could feel his blood boil as he saw the rest of it, speaking of how Mikan would be unloved and alone, how she should fall into despair and beg for forgiveness. Fuyuhiko was tempted to jump off the ship and head towards that house, to cut off fingers and rip out eyes, but instead, he wrapped up Mikan's arm again.

'She's trying to forget the thing ever happened,' Fuyuhiko reminded himself. 'She's trying to live a normal life.'

'Mikan... you're really strong,' Fuyuhiko smiled to himself as he tied up Mikan's bandage like a Christmas present. 'I could never just forget something like that, leave it behind in the past like you did. No, I'd probably chase after the person who hurt me 'till one of us was dead.'

"You didn't deserve that, you know?" Fuyuhiko said out loud, not expecting an answer. He remembered Mikan breaking down and crying, voice cracking and red eyes. "You didn't deserve any of that."

"Heh, you're saying I'm always protecting you, but I'm not really doing it out of the goodness of my heart," Fuyuhiko traced circles and triangles on the back of Mikan's hand, his smile warm. "Truth is, I just hate seeing you cry. I like your smile much better."

Saying the words out loud seemed to lift a weight off Fuyuhiko's shoulders, even without a response. With a small grin still on his face, Fuyuhiko relaxed into Mikan's embrace, letting sleep take him once again.

"So," Fuyuhiko stared Mikan down, hands in his pockets. "Why did I wake up in my bed with you clinging to me?"

"I-I didn't think that it was f-fair that you were going to sleep in the bathtub when you were so kind to me, s-so I tried to switch places with you!" Mikan exclaimed, bright pink. "B-but then, it was just so comfy o-on your bed, and you were really warm a-and I accidentally fell asleep!"

Fuyuhiko sighed, pretending to be annoyed even though his cheeks were just as flushed as hers. "Just... make sure it doesn't happen again."

"O-okay! I'll ask Hajime-kun-"

"Actually, I change my mind," Fuyuhiko said suddenly. "If you're going to run around, falling asleep on people, i-it would just be better if I handled all of it."

"O...okay...?"

"Anyways!" Fuyuhiko quickly changed the subject, his cheeks even redder. "What the hell is up with your clothes?!"

"I'm sorry!" Mikan wailed, pulling at the tight dress shirt like she was trying to stretch it out to cover her bare legs. "I-I couldn't just fall asleep wearing the dress so I grabbed one of your shirts without asking!"

"That's fine!" Fuyuhiko exclaimed, flustered. "But why are you not wearing pants?" Fuyuhiko
asked, staring at Mikan's legs. (Though it wasn't for any weird reasons, got it?!) 

"I...I couldn't get them past my thighs," Mikan admitted.

"...wait," Fuyuhiko looked up at Mikan's face, horror etched into every line of his expression. "How the hell are we going to get your clothes?!"

Mikan's eyes widened with terror, having realized exactly what Fuyuhiko was talking about.

"H-Hiyoko-san has the key! My luggage is with her!"

"And you can't exactly go out like that either!"

"Um, can you...?"

"Mikan, I love you and all, but there is no way in hell I will be able to walk up to her and ask for your clothes," Fuyuhiko stated seriously.

"She would kill you," Mikan's shoulders slumped, an upset frown on her face. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have stayed with you tonight."

"No, it's fine. Maybe Peko has some clothes."

"Is that really okay?" Mikan asked.

"Trust me. It'll be fine," Fuyuhiko smiled up at Mikan, hoping to put a grin on Mikan's face too.

Mikan stared at him for a few seconds, before giving him a fond smile in return.

(Peko was with Natsumi and Hajime when Fuyuhiko found her. They wouldn't stop asking questions about why Fuyuhiko needed her clothes, and Fuyuhiko wouldn't stop avoiding the question with a bright red face, which didn't help his case at all.)

The ceremony was going well, the bride and groom being blessed by the priest. Hiyoko was very transparent about her unhappiness with the situation, but she did her part all the same.

Just before the two took their sips of the sake, Mikan threw the bomb down on the ground, grabbing Hiyoko and running.

All according to plan.
When the smoke cleared, the soon-to-be-wed couple was nowhere to be found.

Panic and fear gripped the crowd, causing an uproar.

"Thank you for agreeing to hear me out, Ikusaba-san," Mikan smiled pleasantly, keeping a calm, polite face on despite her panic at being inside Enoshima's house once again. Before she could scream and flee, a cup of tea was set on the table in front of her. She turned towards the brunette, her smile a little more genuine. "And thank you, Naegi-kun, for the tea."

"It's nothing much!" Naegi exclaimed bashfully, settling into the seat next to Ikusaba, the two of them sitting opposite to Mikan. He set identical cups of tea on the table for him and Ikusaba.

"What do you need?" Ikusaba asked straightforwardly, her grey eyes piercing like the daggers she was so skilled with.

Mikan took a sip of her tea as she collected her thoughts, the warm drink already calming her nerves.

"I need you to distract Togami Byakuya for the next eight days," Mikan answered. "Use any methods you wish, as long as he doesn't get anything done.

"Would you rather I kill him?" Ikusaba suggested, indifferent to the possibility of having to kill someone. Naegi, on the other hand, was so shocked that he choked on his tea. Ikusaba fretted over him, eyes wide with panic as she tried to figure out what to do.

"Keep coughing!" Mikan ordered, encouraging Naegi until he could breathe. When he had recovered, Mikan turned to the soldier. "There's no need to go that far for me."

"Actually, murder would be easier than what you had planned," Ikusaba's voice showed none of the worry or panic it did when Naegi was in danger, back to the apathetic monotone.

"Hold on!" Naegi interjected, his voice surprisingly aggressive. "You can't just kill Togami-kun! What the hell are you planning?!

Mikan set down her tea cup, staring into its depths sadly as she explained her tragic motives.

"My friend is engaged to him. She has everything to lose if she gets married. Her independence, her happiness, her home, her job... if she gets married, she'll be nothing more than a trophy wife for the rest of her life," Mikan looked up at the pair, her tone becoming desperate pleading. "That's why I need your help. Please."

"Okay," Naegi smiled at the nurse, his voice gentle and soft once again. "We'll help you."

"Wait, Naegi-kun! You don't need to get involved in this!"

"I can't just let you kill Togami-kun either," Naegi shot back, still smiling. "Don't worry. I can do this without hurting anyone. Have faith in me."

"I-I believe in you, I really do..." Ikusaba blushed, before turning to Mikan, glaring at the nurse. "I just don't know if we can trust her. What if this is a trap?"
"Call it instinct, but... when she was talking, I knew she was telling the truth," Naegi stated. "She's doing this out of love for her friend, so I want to help."

"Fine," Ikusaba huffed, before addressing Mikan. "We'll help you."

"Thank you so much!" Mikan smiled brightly.

Hiyoko finally managed to remove the hands covering her mouth and eyes, screaming at whoever had taken her.

"Get your fucking hands off me you asshole son of a lazy pig ass bitch!"

"I-I'm sorry!" Mikan shrieked.

"Wait, what?!" Hiyoko whirled around, staring at the person who was pushing her wheelchair.

Her fiance pushed her along. Mikan tossed over his shoulder. The nurse was facing forward, a hand on her back to keep her from falling.

"Keep your hands off the merchandise, pal!" Hiyoko barked at Togami, glaring. "Why the hell is she here?! Where the fuck are you taking me?!"

"You weren't happy with the w-wedding, so..." Mikan trailed off, answering in Togami's place. She turned towards the running man. "Thank you again for agreeing to do this."

"It's not that big of a deal," Togami (?) answered.

"Mikan, you're not making any sense! What's going on!?!"

"We're getting you out of the marriage," Togami said simply, almost dismissively.

"By kidnapping me?! Boy, you sure thought that out well! There's no way they're not going to call the cops on you or anything!" Hiyoko retorted.

"Ikusaba-san said that the smoke bomb should last for at least thirty minutes!" Mikan declared. "We'll have a head start!"

"Oh, and they don't have cars!" Hiyoko declared derisively. "And the fact that a fat guy carrying a crying brunette and wheeling around an incredibly cute person like me, all in kimonos, would definitely be able to fit in a crowd!"

"Calm down," Togami ordered. "You're going to attract unwanted attention."

"You're doing that just by existing!!"

"Hiyoko-san!" Mikan clasped her hands together, her tone pleading. "We're doing this for you! Please cooperate, and we'll make sure you're happy!"

"Do you even have a plan?!" Hiyoko demanded. She scoffed at Mikan's silence, before slumping her shoulders dejectedly. "I thought so. Just turn around and hand me over."

"No! You're not happy there, and you won't be happy as long as you stay there, no matter what happens!" Mikan shot back.

"So what?!" Hiyoko snapped, tears welling up in her eyes, her voice turning hysterical. "That's just
my life! I'll die alone and unloved, and I accepted that already! You don't have to do this!"

"You deserve to be happy, Hiyoko-san."

Hiyoko couldn't say anything to that, tears rolling down her face as she sobbed. Togami kept running through the city, putting as much distance between them and the shrine as possible.

In the chaos of the wedding ceremony, no one noticed that a guest was gone as well as the unloving couple.

Well, actually, there was someone who noticed.

"Peko, get a car. I don't care how, just get a car and report back to me," Fuyuhiko commanded, turning towards his most trusted companions. His leadership shined in moments like these, where thinking on your feet was necessary. "Natsumi, Hajime, get every single member that lives around this area out and looking for those three."

Orders were to be followed without a second thought, unless that second thought was how to carry out that order in the most efficient fashion.

But questions didn't count as second thoughts.

"Three?" Hajime asked as Peko ran off, calling a taxi.

"Didn't you notice? Mikan's missing too," Fuyuhiko stated.

Now, if it weren't for the kidnapping, Natsumi would have definitely made a joke about that. But it was a serious time, so she simply said 'Yes sir!'

"Where are we even going?" Hiyoko asked again as Togami directed them into an alleyway, panting. Her tears had already dried, leaving nothing but boredom in her tone.

"S-sorry," Togami said between gulps of air, setting Mikan down. "Tired."

"It's fine, Imp-kun!" Mikan exclaimed. "You don't have to apologize when you've been trying so hard!"

"Imp-kun?" Hiyoko raised an eyebrow questioningly.

"I am... someone without name or identity," Togami (?) declared, the pause more from being out of breath than for dramatic effect. "I have no family or anything outside of my ability to impersonate others."

"I call him Imp-kun for short," Mikan stated, ruining the dramatic moment.

"I am... someone without name or identity," Togami (?) declared, the pause more from being out of breath than for dramatic effect. "I have no family or anything outside of my ability to impersonate others."

"I call him Imp-kun for short," Mikan stated, ruining the dramatic moment.

"...so basically, you replaced the fiance with a fake, and decided to kidnap me," Hiyoko concluded. "Those are two separate plots. Why couldn't you have just left it at the imposter?"

"You would have to live pretending to be married to Imp-kun for the rest of your life," Mikan answered, making Hiyoko gag. "He's a good person!"

"There's no need to defend me," Imp-kun stated. "I'm feeling much better, so we should start heading towards the boat rental shop."
"Wait. Why are you going to go to a boat rental shop?" Hiyoko asked.

"We're going to give you a new life!" Mikan declared with a smile as Imp-kun gently tossed her over his shoulder and began pushing Hiyoko's wheelchair out of the alleyway.

"Good lord. I'm being kidnapped by a pair of idiots," Hiyoko grumbled, sighing as she slapped a hand to her forehead.

"Pull over! They're over there!" Fuyuhiko spotted the trio, grabbing at his gun.

"Of course!" Peko swerved the stolen taxi to a stop, right in front of the kidnapper. The two scrambled out of the car, pointing their weapons at the kidnapper.

"Oh great, it's you guys," Hiyoko grumbled, rolling her eyes.

"U-um, there's no need for w-w-weapons!" Mikan stammered. "This isn't what it looks like!"

"You'll have to do better than that if you want me to live," Togami (?) scoffed.

"O-Okay so this was all a plan to get Hiyoko-san out of the marriage and absolutely no one is in danger! Please, please trust me and put away the sharp swords and guns please!" Mikan rambled on, saying the entire thing without pausing for breath once. It was like she was Ibuki's disciple in the art of panic-talking.

Fuyuhiko and Peko exchanged a look, both of them confused by Mikan's weird story.

"I can assure you, this isn't some tale I fed her so I could avoid punishment," Togami said. "The only reason I'm carrying her is because she's a slow runner."

"I'm sorry..."

"Oh whatever! Just let us into your car!" Hiyoko ordered, seeing an opportunity.

It was a really good thing that Hiyoko had a folding wheelchair.

"You don't have to get anyone anymore," Fuyuhiko said into the phone. "Just get plane tickets to Towa. Seven, the soonest flight you can."

"Got it," Hajime replied from the other end. "Anything else?"

"What room were you and Natsumi staying in?" Fuyuhiko added.

"Why?"

"We can't just leave your luggage on the boat, right?" Fuyuhiko smirked.

"Where the hell are you?!" Hajime demanded.

"Peko's room, about to head to your room, why?" Fuyuhiko said teasingly, having way too much fun.

"Just go into room 1015," Hajime sighed, muttering something about crosses under his breath. There was a brief pause before he added, "Natsumi says she was in room 1612."
"Got it," Still smiling, Fuyuhiko gave the room numbers to Peko.

Peko broke the door down, scaring one of the staff members inside. She pointed her sword at the housekeeper until he fled, screaming. Mikan scrambled inside, grabbing luggage and giving it to Hiyoko, who had become the designated suitcase holder.

"Seriously! Just because I can't feel my legs doesn't mean you can just pile all this shit on me!" Hiyoko complained, leaning to one side to see around the tower of suitcases on her lap.

"I-I'm sorry..." Mikan mumbled. "I'll hold them then."

"Like hell you could carry all of this," Hiyoko glared at the approaching nurse, scaring her off. "Leave it or list it, I don't care either way."

"What does that even mean?" Imp-kun demanded.

"It means, 'shut the fuck up before I knock your teeth out'!" Hiyoko shook her fist at the imposter.

"You can't even reach my face," Imp-kun retorted, earning a laugh from Fuyuhiko.

"Shut up! You can't reach it either, you midget! And you don't have an excuse!" Hiyoko yelled at Fuyuhiko.

Mikan couldn't help but giggle too, earning a glare from Hiyoko.

"Why are you laughing at me?!"

"It's not because of what Imp-kun said, I swear!" Mikan promised, hiding her smile behind one hand. "I-it's just... I heard that somewhere before. Something about knocking someone's teeth out."

Realization dawned on Fuyuhiko's face, while Hiyoko was just baffled.

"You know, you and Fuyuhiko-kun are a lot more similar than you realize!" Mikan exclaimed with a bright grin.

"That's the worst insult you've ever said to me," Fuyuhiko stated seriously.

"I'm nowhere near as short," Hiyoko said simply.

"Is that all the rooms, Young Master?" Peko inquired, interrupting the conversation to get everyone back on track.

"Yeah, that's everyone," Fuyuhiko counted the suitcases on Hiyoko's lap, coming up to seven. "Let's go, we need to meet Hajime and Natsumi at the airport."

Mikan tried to push Hiyoko's wheelchair, only to struggle with the weight. Imp-kun, Peko, and Fuyuhiko helped out by carrying some of the luggage, allowing them to make a quick getaway.

Hiyoko's mother watched them leave mournfully behind the corner, like a creep. She had been waiting for her chance to have a heartfelt, dramatic, cliche goodbye with her daughter, only to be crushed when she never got the chance to speak with Hiyoko one-on-one.

All the words Hiyoko's mother never got to say swirled around her head, like a whirlpool of regret.

'Yukari, you coward,' She admonished herself, leaning back against the wall and staring up at the ceiling to keep the tears from falling. 'How hard could it be to tell her?'
'Tell her I'm sorry for letting her grandparents control her life, tell her I'm sorry for joining along instead of standing up for her, tell her that I'm proud of her, that I hope she'll be happy, that I love her...' Yukari sobbed to herself, sliding down the wall and sitting on the floor, hugging her knees to her chest.

'I really am a coward,' Her laughter tasted bitter on her tongue, regret and shame and anger and sadness bursting from her chest. 'I know what I have to do, but I don't know if I can do it.'

But she had to try. For her daughter's sake, for her late husband's sake, for the two people she loved more than life itself.

For the first time in her life, Saionji Yukari would defy her parents' orders, she would free herself from being their puppet and convince them to let Hiyoko live her own life.

'If I can do that... maybe I'll be worthy to be called her mother.'

Everyone except for Hiyoko had been seated together, a fact that Fuyuhiko was endlessly grateful for. There was no way he would be okay with sticking near her for longer than a few minutes, let alone a three-hour flight.

"But it was a really big surprise to meet you again like this, Ryota," Hajime spoke up, addressing the man to his left. Imp-kun nodded his agreement.

"You know him?" Peko inquired, leaning over the imposter to turn to Hajime.

"Of course he does!" Fuyuhiko exclaimed exasperatedly from the row in front of them. "He knows everyone, apparently!"

"We all met in high school, so it's normal that Hajime-kun would know him," Mikan reasoned, trying to calm Fuyuhiko down (even though he was mostly joking).

"Good lord," Natsumi groaned, turning around in her seat to face the three behind her. "Hey, Peko, Hajime, Whatever-your-name-is, one of you guys want to switch with me? I'll puke if I have to watch anymore of this lovey-dovey bullshit."

"What are you talking about?" Imp-kun asked, unable to see anything.

"Urgh, it's really graphic stuff," Natsumi gagged, narrating the experience. "Like, she's practically all over him, shushing him and holding him tight."

"Shut the fuck up!"

"Oh, and now they're holding hands!" Natsumi grinned, her voice overly cheerful. "I mean, yeah, it's to stop Fuyuhiko from punching me, but still! Tone down the PDA , will you?!!"

"Maybe it would be best if one of us switched places with her..." Peko muttered to herself, unsure how this scenario would unfold.

"It really would be," Imp-kun agreed. "If we remove the aggressor, the situation would calm down immediately."

"Then switch places with Fuyuhiko!" Natsumi retorted, completely missing the point.

"Natsumi," Hajime said sharply. "Quit messing with Fuyuhiko."
"Can you really blame me?! I mean, she's whispering sweet nothings into his ear!"

"It sounds more like 'oh my god please don't kill anyone' to me," Imp-kun noted.

"Oh, that reminds me," Peko stated, remembering something completely unrelated. She only brought it up in hopes that it would serve as a convenient topic change. "Young Master, what did you need my clothes for?"

"He can't really answer that right now!" Mikan shrieked. "But thank you, Pekoyama-san!"

"...why are you the one thanking her?" Imp-kun asked, raising an eyebrow in suspicion. "You aren't the Young Master in this scenario, are you?"

"No, that's Fuyuhiko," Hajime explained, before turning to the front, just as suspicious.

"Um... I... uh..." Mikan hesitated.

"She doesn't have to answer if she doesn't want to!" Fuyuhiko yelled, glaring at Natsumi, who grinned at him triumphantly.

Natsumi cackled, wiping away fake tears from her eye as she doubled over. "What is this?! A cross-dressing fetish!? I-Is that it?!"

"No! It's just-it's just that we didn't think things through, and I didn't have any clothes after!" Mikan exclaimed, trying to defend Fuyuhiko... and only succeeding in making them look more suspicious.

"You what...?" Peko gasped, wide-eyed.

"Don't say it like that!" Fuyuhiko snapped, bright red. "Nothing happened, you perverts!"

"W-we should really stop talking about this!" Hajime stammered, trying to ensure everyone's survival.

"Oh man!" Natsumi laughed. "At this rate, she really will be our Ane-san!"

"...what's an Ane-san?" Imp-kun turned to Hajime for the answer, just as Mikan asked Fuyuhiko the exact same question.

The difference in their reactions was apparent immediately.

"YOU DON'T NEED TO KNOW THAT! NATSUMI, SHUT THE HELL UP BEFORE I BURY YOU IN CONCRETE!" Fuyuhiko snapped, needing to be restrained by Mikan once again.

"'Ane-san' is the wife of the boss," Hajime explained, earning an unholy, ear-splitting screech from Fuyuhiko.

"Fuyuhiko! C-calm down!" Mikan begged, keeping the Yakuza heir from clawing Natsumi's eyes out.

"Seriously, why do you guys like cats anyways?" Natsumi asked, gesturing to the pair. "If this is what owning a cat is like, you must all be masochists."

"You own a cat," Hajime pointed out.

"Not willingly!" Natsumi protested. "Someone gave Peko a heartfelt gift of a fluffy asshole."
"I will not tolerate you badmouthing Tangerine like this," Peko said threateningly, glaring at the back of Natsumi's head.

"What an energetic family..." Imp-kun sighed, slightly amused and worried by the chaos happening around him.

"I can't believe those bastards forgot about me..." Hiyoko grumbled, pouting half a plane away.

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**Bonus: How They Distracted Togami**

"What are you two doing?" Byakuya demanded, narrowing his eyes at the pair.

"Hi, Togami-kun!" Makoto smiled, waving, just before he dove to the side to dodge a thrown grenade. The explosion charred the grass, but Makoto escaped unharmed.

"Don't take your eyes off me," Mukuro ordered, pulling a spear out of nowhere.

"I know you heard me, so will one of you imbeciles answer me?"

"Self-defense lessons!" Makoto yelped, hopping away from the spear, barely escaping with all his toes intact.

"Is there a reason why you're defacing public propriety with your 'self-defense lessons'?" Byakuya crossed his arms over his chest, looking down at the two, as if the near-death experiences of one Naegi Makoto was nothing but a children's game to him.

"Well, it would be rude to deface someone's business with this," Mukuro retorted, slightly sarcastic as she whipped out another grenade.

"That's enough," Byakuya grabbed Makoto by the hood, pulling him away from the strange class.

"Where are you going with my student?" Mukuro asked suspiciously, pulling out a pack of throwing knives.

"He will be receiving self-defense lessons from the finest instructors," Byakuya stated, before smirking. "Though even an infant would make for a better teacher than you. Now run along, your class is dismissed."

Makoto gave Mukuro a thumbs-up and a wink as he was dragged off.

Stunning Success.
Mahiru could picture it with perfect clarity.

A sleepy Hajime, yawning as he held the phone up to his ear, his kid running around, making chaos in the background. His golden gaze would be completely unfocused, and he would have to blink away sleep every now and again. Hajime would be adorable.

"Hey, Mahiru..." Hajime cut himself off, already yawning. "What's up? You usually don't call this late."

"What, am I not allowed to talk to you?" Mahiru asked, rolling her eyes.

"I'm not saying that you're not," Hajime said simply. "But what do you want to talk about?"

"Hmm..." Mahiru hesitated. She knew she wanted to tell Hajime, that was the entire reason she called in the first place, but... "Tell me about your life."

"What about my life?"

"Jeez, you have no imagination," Mahiru sighed. "Your jobs, your kid, what you had for breakfast... anything, really."

"Is there a reason for this? Are my answers going to be posted online for a poll or something?"

"No one would be interested in a poll like that," Mahiru retorted, leaving out the 'except for me, apparently.'

Hajime chuckled a bit at that, warming Mahiru's heart. "Sure, if you say so."

As Hajime described the things he saw in one day, rampaging pets and rude customers, Mahiru couldn't help but smile. Hajime had a weird way of cheering people up, just by existing. Sometimes Mahiru wondered if he knew he was doing it. Just talking to him made it feel like her worries and doubts disappeared, the weight off her shoulders for as long as she heard his voice.

Mahiru was so busy dwelling on the warmth Hajime gave her that she didn't even notice when he concluded his tale.

"Mahiru," He called out her name, startling her. "Is something wrong?"

'Now that you're here? No.' "No."

"You can tell me," Hajime offered, and Mahiru knew he was wearing that same kind smile that drew her to him. The same smile she photographed over and over, until she could see it with her eyes closed.

"I'm fine," Mahiru stated, not wanting to ruin the moment.
"Tell me about your day then?"

"Okay...sure."

Mahiru hesitated, sighing before starting her story.

"I work as a secretary for the hospital," Facts were always good. "I work with Mikan-chan, Chiaki-chin, and Ibuki-chan... I see them everyday."

"Okay."

"I watch them from my spot at the desk..." Mahiru frowned, realizing that she was getting closer and closer to sensitive territory. "Argh, never mind-

"Mahiru," Hajime said insistently, immediately seeing through the attempt at deflection. "Tell me what's wrong."

"I...okay," Mahiru gulped. She knew that Hajime would find a way to get the truth out of her, hell, that was why she called, so she could trust someone with the information but that didn't make it any easier!

"Mikan-chan... she became a wonderful nurse," Mahiru's voice tightened as she slowly opened up to Hajime. "And Ibuki-chan... she became a famous musician... They all became amazing people with their talents...! Why... why was it just me who failed?"

Hajime was silent, waiting for Mahiru to continue.

"It's like... the moment we graduated, my photos stopped being so beautiful," Mahiru sobbed. "I couldn't become a photographer like my mother, I-I couldn't even....! And it hurts to see Mikan-chan, helping others with her talent, just like she did back then! I...I can't stand it, so I hide every time she comes by. I think she forgot that I even work there."

"Mahiru," Hajime said softly, cutting through Mahiru's words. "I know that your photos are still as beautiful as they were before. You didn't just suddenly lose your talent or something. You just decided to do something else."

"But... it feels like I was meant to do something with my photos... and I couldn't."

"Who ever said that?" Hajime asked. "Being talented at something doesn't mean that you're meant to do it for the rest of your life. You're free to do whatever you want, talent or no."

Mahiru knew Hajime couldn't see the smile on her face, just from hearing those words, but she couldn't interrupt him. She was content to simply hear his voice.

"You work with Chiaki, right?" Hajime asked, continuing at Mahiru's small sound of affirmation. "She didn't become a world-famous gamer and win all the tournaments or something. She became a nurse."

"Hell, look at me!" Hajime added. "Er, actually... just think of me or something," Mahiru laughed a bit at his delayed realization. "I was the Super High School Level Hope, but I don't go around making hope speeches. I have three part-time jobs, and none of them have anything to do with hope."

'You're making a hope speech right now, you hopeless idiot.'
"So... quit thinking that you should have become a photographer or something," Hajime concluded vaguely, earning another laugh from Mahiru. "Just find happiness in your life right now, okay?"

"...okay," Mahiru sighed, though it was more joyful than anything. Like all her worries were being expelled from her body, thanks to the man on the other end of the call. "Thank you, Hajime."

"That's what friends are for," Hajime was probably grinning widely, his golden eyes full of warmth and fondness and pride.

"Yeah. Thanks for being here, even when it's so late," Mahiru was ready to conclude the call, the same goodbye she gave to her mother coming automatically. "Good night, love you."

"Love you too."

She froze, realizing what she had just said, immediately trying to backtrack. "E-er, as a friend! Platonic- wait, did you say 'love you too'?"

"Yeah, why?" Hajime replied casually, like he was completely unaware of how red Mahiru was turning. Or he was ignoring it, that je-

Oh right, it was a phone call. He couldn't see her.

"I-I mean, I still m-meant that it was platonic, but I'm not opposed to the idea-"

"Maybe we should talk about this tomorrow," Hajime offered.

"R-right... Good night, Hajime."

"Sleep well, Mahiru."

The phone call ended, leaving a blushing mess of a redhead wondering why the hell she opened her big mouth.

The next morning, she got a message from Hajime. And while she was briefly admonishing the brunette for using text messaging to talk about something so important, she couldn't help but smile and laugh at the contents.

The next morning, Mahiru pushed out her chest with pride, happily greeting Mikan and Chiaki.
After the wedding, things seemed to calm down. Sort of?

Mikan returned home to her roommates, bringing Hiyoko with her. They hadn't sorted out where Hiyoko could live, but Mikan refused to let Hiyoko live alone and Hiyoko refused to live with a complete stranger. For the time being, Hiyoko was a squatter.

Ibuki described it as 'bringing home a stray and trying to find a good adoption agency for it'. Hiyoko threw the nearest object at her, which turned out to be a pillow.

Mikan groaned to herself at the memory. That... pillow fights weren't supposed to be that vicious, right? In the movies, those scenes were always cute bonding moments, but... Both Ibuki and Hiyoko were out for blood. She didn't remember all of what happened that night, but she distinctly remembered hiding behind the couch with Chiaki and waiting for the danger to pass.

With a weary sigh, she opened the door, reminding herself to get back to work. She would work on the Hiyoko Situation later, when there wasn't laundry to toss away.

The Towa Prefecture Hospital wasn't particularly big or rich, so the laundry room was rather modest. Shelves lined with various fabric necessities lined three of the four walls, each one labelled and organized, the garments folded neatly. Bins sat in the center of the room, differently sized to accommodate sheets, clothing, and cleaning rags. Instead of labels, the names of whatever fabric the bins were meant to contain were scrawled on the side with permanent marker. Six washing machines sat at the fourth wall, two of them already running. A box of disposal gloves sat on one of the washing machines, along with a trash can next to the washing machine on the end. Next to the shelves were several baskets on wheels, meant to help with difficult deliveries and collection day.

The bloody gown and sheets went into their respective laundry bins, and her disposal gloves went straight into the garbage, where they belonged. Mikan quickly went over to the shelves, grabbing new bed sheets and a patient's gown.

If she hadn't glanced at the baskets, wondering whether or not to use one of them, Mikan would have never discovered the pair of women hiding in the container. Mikan almost dropped her cargo at the sight, bringing back old memories.

"U-uh... Kuzuryuu-san, Pekoyama-s-san..." Mikan muttered uncertainly, staring down at the two in shock. "Why... why are you hiding in the laundry basket?"

"Is there a reason why we shouldn't be hiding in the laundry basket?" Kuzuryuu shot back, glaring at the nurse.

"B-because this is an employee's only area...?" Mikan offered, shuddering in Kuzuryuu's harsh
"She is correct, Young Mistress," Pekoyama pointed out.

"Oh shut it! This is important! A matter of national security!" Kuzuryuu huffed, puffing her chest out.

"Really...?"

"No," Pekoyama shook her head. "We came here because we needed to investigate one of the patients at this hospital."

"Who? I can introduce you," Mikan offered, trying her best to be helpful.

"Komaeda Nagito," Pekoyama stated, serious and intense as she always was when cute animals and/or family members weren't directly involved. "Do you know of him?"

"Oh," Mikan couldn't really say she was surprised. She didn't know much about the white-haired man, but she wouldn't be all that shocked if Komaeda had killed someone before. "Yes, I do."

"Show us where he is," Kuzuryuu ordered.

"Um, s-sure!" Mikan paused, a forced smile on her face as she voiced her request. "But... can you please get out of the laundry bin?"

"Why?" Kuzuryuu crossed her arms over her chest, frowning at Mikan.

"I'm going to put these sheets in there, and it would be a bad idea for you to be in the basket while I do that...?" Mikan's words became more of a question as she went on, staring at the pair pleadingly. She held the sheets to her chest, making sure not to make any sudden movements.

"Alright," Pekoyama climbed out, before grabbing Kuzuryuu and forcing the blonde to climb out as well.

Kuzuryuu scoffed impatiently as Mikan gently placed the fabric in the bin, wheeling the basket out of the room with the strange pair following after her.

"Er, I'm not going to Komaeda-san's room right now..." Mikan mumbled, glancing at the two women flanking her. With their suits, they could be mistaken for bodyguards. "I could give you directions, if you want."

"We would be mistaken for intruders if we were not with you," Peko stated simply.

"A-alright," Mikan nodded lamely, before remembering the question that was on her mind for a while now. "If you don't mind me asking, Pekoyama-san, Kuzuryuu-san, why were you-"

She's cut off by a groan from her left side, the blonde hanging her head like she was sulking.

"You're hopeless," Kuzuryuu stated, staring at the nurse harshly, and Mikan could almost feel the flames on her, burning in Kuzuryuu's gaze.

"U-uh...!"

"Seriously!" Kuzuryuu threw her hands up in the air theatrically. "What would you do if you ever met our parents? You would call me 'Kuzuryuu-san', you would call mom 'Kuzuryuu-san', you would call dad 'Kuzuryuu-san'!"
"...why would I meet your parents?" Mikan asked, baffled by Kuzuryuu's rant.

"It's a hypothetical scenario, Miss Medicine!" Kuzuryuu snapped, making Mikan flinch.

"I'm sorry, I-I'm sorry!"

"Young Mistress," Pekoyama said insistently, looking disappointed in Kuzuryuu's behaviour.

"Okay. I'm sorry for getting all rude about it, but seriously!" Kuzuryuu sighed, rolling her eyes. "At least call me Natsumi!"

"Um, okay..." Mikan muttered, nodding slightly. Then she paused, noticing that she was right in front of her destination. "Please wait here, alright?"

Mikan fled inside the hospital room, bringing the bin with her.

"Thanks for coming with me, Peko," Natsumi smiled, leaning against the wall next to the door, crossing her arms over her chest.

"Are you sure your information is correct?" Peko paused, thinking of the right words to say. She didn't usually falter in her words, but... "Hajime's child can say strange things, and it would not be wise to believe all of her tales."

"I know that!" Natsumi huffed, pouting. "But I have to make sure, okay? I'm not blindly believing her, I'm looking for evidence proving whether she's right or not!"

"I only hope that this mission is not fruitless," Peko sighed. "I would hate to get arrested for trespassing."

"Yakuza can get arrested?" Mikan asked, opening the door. It was only as she wheeled the bin out that she realized that her words could have been interpreted as rude. "E-er, I'm sorry! I shouldn't have interrupted!"

"It's fine," Kuzu- Natsumi said stiffly. "Now show us to where that damn Komaeda is."

"... I need to put the bin back first..." Mikan mumbled, her voice quiet for fear of offending someone.

"That's fine," Pekoyama reassured the nurse.

A quick trip to the laundry room later, and Mikan had brought the pair to Komaeda's door, letting Natsumi inside. Mikan glanced at Pekoyama curiously, wondering if she would go inside as well, but the swordsman shook her head, standing outside with Mikan.

"So... um, what did Komaeda-san do?" Mikan asked as she closed the door, a little more comfortable now that Natsumi was gone.

"Pardon?"

"Did he blow up a school...? Or kill someone?" Mikan's mind wouldn't stop thinking of awful possibilities, things that she would horrified to discover but not really surprised to learn if the white-haired man was involved. "Did he break the power grid?! Or-or did he-"

"Nothing of the sort happened," Pekoyama stated, looking baffled by Mikan's guesses. "Though, I have to wonder what sort of person he is if those are your first guesses..."
"H-he didn't do anything illegal?!!" Mikan's voice rose in volume in her shock. She gaped at Pekoyama in disbelief, before coming to another strange conclusion. "Is this one o-of those things where you can't tell me since if I knew you would have to-to kill me?!!"

"No," Pekoyama said simply, placing a hand on Mikan's shoulder to calm her down. She looked down at Mikan, trying to look caring, but with her normal intense stare, it looked more terrifying than anything.

"Then... why are you interrogating him?" Mikan wondered, pointedly avoiding Pekoyama's eyes.

"As embarrassing as it is to admit..." Pekoyama blushed slightly. Mikan stared in shock at the sight, unsure of how to react. "We are here because the Young Mistress heard that Komaeda Nagito was Hajime's boyfriend."

"Huh?!" Mikan's eyes must have been wider than frisbees, the revelation too outrageous to process.

"The Young Mistress is very protective of those she likes, so she deemed it necessary to investigate him," Pekoyama sighed, like divulging the truth was too tiring for her.

Just as Mikan was about to respond, Natsumi kicked the door open. The door slammed against the wall.

"Peko! He's a dick!" Natsumi announced, loud enough to wake up the entire hospital.

"I understand," Pekoyama declared, pulling a knife out of her suit jacket.

"D-don't kill one of my patients!" Mikan exclaimed in horror, jumping in front of the open door, blocking it off with her body.

"Ah, Tsumiki-san? Here to come to my rescue?" Komaeda laughed lightheartedly from inside the hospital room, as if there weren't fucking Yakuza members out to kill him.

"Out of the fucking way, Miss Medicine!" Natsumi roared, stepping far too close to Mikan to yell in the nurse's face. "Don't think that I won't kill you if you don't!"

"Please, please reconsider!" Mikan screamed back, pleading. "Y-your brother wouldn't w-w-want you to kill someone here! You'll cause a-a scandal!"

"So fucking what?!" Natsumi turned to Pekoyama, who was watching the scene unfold. "Get her out of the way!"

"Understood," Pekoyama frowned, before grabbing her knife. "I apologize, Tsumiki-san."

"I'm not moving!" Mikan exclaimed, fiercely glaring at Pekoyama. Her spine only surfaced when it came to nursing and the safety of those she loved, and this counted, even though she didn't love Komaeda at all. "You'll have to cut me down!"

"Ahaha... just my luck," Nagito declared from inside the hospital room, not helping the case at all.

"Komaeda-san, please stop talking!" Mikan turned to yell at Komaeda, only for the swordsman to take advantage of the nurse's momentary distraction, pulling Mikan out of the doorway.

"Do not move, Tsumiki-san," Pekoyama said simply, pointing a knife at Mikan's throat. Mikan immediately disobeyed, struggling against Peko's grip.

"I really am lucky, aren't I?" Komaeda mused to himself, just before Mikan knocked the knife out.
of Pekoyama's hand, at the exact angle and speed necessary to stab through the nearest fire alarm. The sound of sirens immediately blared throughout the building, forcing Pekoyama and Natsumi to flee before they were discovered.

"I thought you were investigating him on Fuyuhiko-kun's orders!" Mikan squeaked, escorting the pair out of the hospital.

"What the fuck?!" Natsumi demanded, placing her hands on her hips as she glared up at Mikan. "Not everything we do revolves around my brother, sh-"

"Young Mistress," Pekoyama stared down at the blonde, using her height to her advantage.

"But still," Natsumi huffed. "I did this for my own reasons. Who even knows what my brother is doing now."

"I can't fucking believe this!" Fuyuhiko scowled as he slammed the teapot on the table, glaring at the pair in front of him. "You can't even abstain for one damn night, you dumbasses?!"

"Why are you yelling so loudly...?" Fuyuhiko's father groaned, reaching for his teacup with trembling fingers. "It's too early for this..."

"Well maybe you shouldn't have fucking got drunk the night before you two were going to meet with the heads of the Aishi family!"

"Good lord, did we raise such a loud and rude child?" Fuyuhiko's mother wondered as she took sips of her tea. "Oh, at least the tea is good. Helps with the headache."

"Just shut up, drink your damn tea, and make sure you look presentable before noon!" Fuyuhiko ordered, before stomping out of the room.

"He's probably just lazing around, doing whatever," Natsumi concluded.

"I kind of doubt that..." Mikan mumbled to herself.

"But still, thank you for helping us," Pekoyama bowed her head. "Even if it was completely pointless," She glanced at Natsumi, who glared at her in return, "we are grateful for your aid."

"Oh shut up!" Natsumi grabbed the swordswoman's arm, dragging her away. "We're heading home. See you, Miss Medicine!"

"Um... bye...?" Mikan waved uncertainly, unsure of how else to respond to the two who had broken into her workplace, threatened one of her patients with death, and yelled at her. Okay, that last one was only Natsumi, but the concept still applies.

That was... a weird work day.

If Mikan had arrived home just one hour before, her weird work day would have become a weird day in general.

Chiaki had to do more experiments with her fathers, leaving Hiyoko and Ibuki alone in the apartment.
"Is it finally over?" Hiyoko huffed, resting her head against the back of her wheelchair. Fifty rounds of 'Tic-tac-toe + Game of Death + Guitar Hero' did that to a woman.

"What? Do you not like bonding with Ibuki?" Ibuki asked innocently, already moving to clean up the board game resting on the dining table.

"Of course not," Hiyoko said simply, glaring at the musician. "I can't even stand being near you."

"You can't stand, period," Ibuki retorted, pointing a playing card at Hiyoko. She got a frustrated scream in response.

"See?! See, _that_ is why I hate you!" Hiyoko screamed, wanting to smack her head against a wall.

"Well, I guess this bonding moment is over," Ibuki pouted, crossing her arms over her chest. "Finally!"

"Well *you're* not a bucket of sunshine either!" Ibuki snapped, beginning to shove the various game components in the box with way too much force.

"Wowsers, did all the hair dye chemicals finally rot your brain?" Hiyoko smiling mockingly, snickering at Ibuki's irritation. "Is that why you're so gloomy?"

"No, I'm just giving myself a headache wondering how you and Mikan could ever consider each other friends," Ibuki huffed.

"You really are an idiot!" Hiyoko exclaimed, smiling brightly. "Isn't it obvious? We want to spend time with each other, that's why."

"I don't think that's it at all!" Ibuki stood up suddenly, glaring down at Hiyoko. "You're taking advantage of her, and that's that!"

"What the fuck?!!" Hiyoko demanded, gaping at Ibuki in shock.

"No! I've been nothing but nice to you up until five minutes ago, and you've always been treating me like this! It isn't just me, either! You treat everyone who isn't Tsumiki Mikan or Koizumi Mahiru this way!"

"Mikan's always doing _everything_ for you!" Ibuki declared, pointing at Hiyoko accusingly. "It's not even her nursing instincts when it comes to you! She's always trying to placate you, bending to your every whim! She even broke up a _wedding_ for your sake! But even though the one thing she asks in return is for you to stop picking fights with everyone, you never listen!"

"Shut the hell up, you brain-dead dumbass!" Hiyoko slapped her hands over her ears, refusing to listen.

"No! I've been nothing but nice to you up until five minutes ago, and you've always been treating me like this! It isn't just me, either! You treat everyone who isn't Tsumiki Mikan or Koizumi Mahiru this way!"

"Shut up! Shut up!"

"And you treating Mikan nicely is just a recent thing! A few months back at most!" Ibuki yelled, her voice growing in volume the more Hiyoko tried to ignore her. "You've been harassing her for
years! And you turn around and try to take it all back, saying that you're friends now?! How am I supposed to believe that?!!

"You idiot- you bitch, you, you motherfucking asshole-!" Hiyoko flung insults left and right, flailing about and desperately trying to regain control of the situation. Ibuki ignored the put-downs, continuing with her tirade.

"We all know the story!" Fierce protectiveness shone in Ibuki's eyes, resentment seeping into her voice. "You're Mikan's childhood friend, but when you get into high school, you find that people like talking to her and you're threatened! You shove your status as her best friend into everyone's faces and try to keep her from talking to anyone else! You try to keep her to yourself, even though you said you loved her!" Ibuki scoffed, her hands curling up into fists at her sides. "But you couldn't ever tell her! You were a coward who kept trying to think that 'best friend' and 'childhood friend' were good enough for you, but the moment you lost your chance to become her girlfriend, you snapped! Even though you should have been happy for her!"

"No! Shut up! Stop talking!" Hiyoko shrieked, tears welling up in her eyes as she grabbed at her ears again, desperately trying to block out Ibuki's words.

"You told her you hated her," Ibuki gritted her teeth together, feeling like she was digging shards of glass out of her chest as she spat out the words. "You said you didn't need her, you told her to die, you harassed her and bullied her and now what? Do you think she's just going to forget about that? Do you think she's going to forget every single fucking time she cried in the bathroom stalls because of you?!!"

It felt painful, to be saying those words, like she was opening old wounds all over again. But at the same time, to finally be able to direct her anger at the person she blamed for Mikan's sharp drop in confidence, self-esteem, and self-preservation... Ibuki couldn't be more satisfied.

"Do you think she would ever be able to forgive you for that?" Ibuki shut her eyes, all her energy and anger draining out of her with a single sigh. Her simple question was the final nail in the coffin, leaving Hiyoko speechless as the musician turned to leave.

The door shut behind her, leaving Hiyoko alone in the silent apartment.

"Oh, heya, Mikan-chan!" Ibuki smiled, having barely taken three steps away from the door.

"Hi, Ibuki-san!" Mikan grinned in return. "Did you have a nice day with Hiyoko-san?"

Ibuki groaned, pouting.

"She's a sore loser!" Ibuki whined, knowing that Mikan would just blame herself for the entire thing if she was told the truth. "I never want to stay home alone with her again."

"Well, it should be fine if I'm with you... probably..."

"Nah, I just want to go ahead and run around!" Ibuki 'hm'ed to herself for a moment, before getting an idea. "Oh, I know! Mikan-chan, let's go to the park! We can get coffee and go shopping too!"

"Are you sure?" Mikan asked uncertainly, staring at Ibuki in concern.

"Trust me, nothing would make me feel better!" Ibuki exclaimed, pointing her fingers at her grin to prove her point. "Do you want to come?"
"Sure!" Mikan smiled brightly, just before Ibuki grabbed her hand so they could skip towards the stairs together.

Ibuki hated to see her friends sad! So that's why Ibuki decided to protect Mikan from people like Enoshima and Hiyoko, making sure they wouldn't ever hurt her again.

Granted, her task was a bit harder since Hiyoko was currently living with them, but Ibuki wasn't a quitter!

She was going to make Mikan smile even more, and that was that!

"Is something wrong, Mikan-chan?" Ibuki asked, leaning over Mikan's shoulder to take a peek at whatever was puzzling the nurse so much.

"Do you think Fuyuhiko-kun would like this?" Mikan asked, pointing at a small bubble made of glass, glitter floating in a clear liquid inside it.

"I have no idea!" Ibuki shrugged. "You know him better than I do! Maybe you should ask him?"

"But if I ask him, then it'll ruin the surprise!" Mikan pouted.

"Well, what do you think?" Ibuki offered. "Do you think he'll like it?"

"What if he hates it but he puts on a smile and pretends he likes it anyways?" Mikan fretted, staring at the snowglobe like it held the answer to her worries.

"...Mikan," Ibuki said after a pause, looking almost disappointed in the nurse. "Is he really the type to pretend just to placate others?"

"Um, no..."

"Then what makes you think he'll pretend just to placate you?" Ibuki asked, feeling like a teacher explaining an incredibly obvious fact to a child.

"But then he'll just tell me outright that he hates it!" Mikan wailed.

"You're assuming that he'll hate it," Ibuki pointed out.

"T-t-t-t-this was probably a-a bad idea!" Mikan stammered, already turning to leave. "I-I'll go h-home!"

Ibuki followed after her at a distance, the nurse trying and failing to hide the fact that she circled through the entire store to come back at the same spot, hesitantly picking up the snowglobe.

Ibuki pretended not to notice when there was a suspiciously spherical lump poking out of the shopping bag, completely out of place among the various snacks and stuffed animals they had bought.

"Is something wrong, Mikan?" Ibuki asked, trying very hard to hide her amused grin.

"E-e-e-e-e-er! I t-think-I think I left something o-over there!" Mikan stammered, her hand shaking as she pointed in the direction opposite their home.

Even though their route had been going from their home straight to the store, and Mikan hadn't
even gone anywhere in that direction.

"Okay! Be quick!" Ibuki smiled, waving Mikan off. She pretended not to notice Mikan's incredibly obvious sigh of relief.

"A-alright!" Mikan ran off, taking the shopping bag with her.

Ibuki sank down on a park bench, unable to hide her grin any longer. She was tempted to follow Mikan, but then again, that would be creepy and stalker-y.

Instead, she pulled out her phone, already trying to think of what to tell Nagisa.

Nagisa...

Oh crap.

Ibuki's eyes widened in horror as she realized that Mikan had brought the stuffed animals they had bought in celebration of Nagisa acing his midterms along with her.

Mikan fretted, gnawing at her thumb's nail as she circled the house once again, unsure about her choice. What if he hated it? What if this was just an inconvenience? Oh, why did she get that stupid ball in the first place-

Her phone buzzed in her pocket, and she nearly dropped the bag to grab it.

[Quit pacing around my house like a stalker, you weirdo.]

Mikan almost screamed, paling as she looked up from her phone at the house. F-Fuyuhiko could see her?! And he thought she was a stalker?!!

Her fingers trembled as she typed out her response, her panic resulting in numerous spelling errors.

[ip;m sorry asoeey! p pplease for give me! fuyuhko-pjun!1]

[This is Natsumi, dumbass.]

Oh.

[I just stole his phone.]

[You should return that!]

[Quit trying to be a goody-two shoes, go up to the door, do whatever the hell you're trying to do, and then kindly FUCK OFF.]

Mikan decided to try to do exactly that.

Key word being: try.

Every step was a hurdle to jump over, her heart racing in her chest. Mikan's stomach was probably able to win gold medals in gymnastics with the complicated flips and turns it was doing. Her legs got shakier and shakier the closer she got to the door.

Which all felt absurd to her, since she was feeling this way because of a snowglobe.
Didn't that just make it worse? Mikan was pathetic enough to panic at the thought of giving a loved one a gift. She could barely even bring up the courage to do it.

But... whenever she thought of Fuyuhiko's face, there would always be a frown, or a harsh glare, and he would practically toss the gift back in her face, and she couldn't stand it. She didn't want Fuyuhiko to hate her. She wouldn't be able to handle it if he did.

Mikan's thoughts/self-loathing were interrupted by the front door being flung open in Mikan's face. Only the fact that she was still several steps away from the door kept her from being toppled over when Fuyuhiko was shoved out of the house, still wearing his home yukata. He almost fell on his face, only recovering thanks to fast reflexes.

"What the fuck?!" Fuyuhiko roared at the door, before realizing Mikan was there. "Uh... hi...?"

"I-I'm sorry!" Mikan exclaimed immediately.

"What are you even apologizing for?!!

"U-urgh, um, I kind of s-s-s-sort of talked to your sister, I mean, I talked t-to her earlier but that w-was when she was trying to-to kill someone so it d-doesn't count, I talked to her just n-now and-" Mikan's rambling was immediately halted by Fuyuhiko placing his hand on her shoulder.

"Okay, first, calm down," Fuyuhiko waited a few minutes, watching as Mikan inhaled and exhaled, her breathing slowly becoming more steady. "So, what the fuck is going on?"

"I, um, I got you a gift...?" Mikan forced a smile on her face, holding up the bag. She pulled out the snowglobe, holding it out to Fuyuhiko, before withdrawing her hand, practically flinching as the doubt crept in again. "E-er, but if you don't l-like it, you don't have to accept it! You really, really don't!"

Fuyuhiko gently took the snowglobe out of Mikan's hand, staring in awe at the way the light shone in the sparkling liquid.

"Wow..." Fuyuhiko smiled, before looking up at Mikan. "Can I really have something like this?"

"H-Huh?!" Mikan jumped, staring at Fuyuhiko with wide eyes. "Do...do you not like it...?"

"Of course not!" Fuyuhiko replied, looking at Mikan like she had just said the most baffling thing he ever heard. "I'm asking if you're going to keep something this cool for yourself!"

Mikan paused, completely stilling for several moments. She didn't even seem to breathe. When she finally spoke, her voice could barely be called a whimper.

"So... so you like it?" Mikan asked, shocked.

"Of course I do," Fuyuhiko said simply, smiling up at Mikan.

Mikan could feel her heart stop, taking a moment to abstain from its normal rhythm to process the situation.

All her worrying was for nothing. Fuyuhiko liked the gift.

He...he actually liked it.

Huh.
Even though the answer was staring her right in the face, Mikan still couldn't fully understand it. Even though it was obvious, she was so shocked that it was only after a minute that the words sunk in.

He actually liked the gift.

A small whimper escaped from her throat, sounding like a dying animal. Her lips trembled, just before she bowed before Fuyuhiko.

"T-t-thank you s-so much!" Mikan exclaimed.

"Why the fuck are you thanking me?!" Fuyuhiko demanded. "I'm supposed to be thanking you!"

"I... I was just! I was so worried that you would hate it!" Mikan sobbed, standing up straight just so she could bow once again.

"Mikan, stop," Fuyuhiko placed a hand on Mikan's shoulder, guiding her into a standing position.

"Huh?"

"Thank you for your gift," Fuyuhiko said seriously, looking Mikan in the eye. "I swear I'll make it up to you."

"Huh?!" Mikan gaped at Fuyuhiko, completely shocked.

"What?" Fuyuhiko rested a hand on his hip, staring at Mikan skeptically. "You gave me a gift, and I'm going to return the favour."

"B-but, I'm just grateful that you l-liked it!"

"That's not something to be thankful for," Fuyuhiko sighed. "It's just the natural result of you giving me a present."

"Really...?" Mikan asked hesitantly.

"Really," Fuyuhiko smiled, nodding at Mikan. "I can make you some tea if you want."

Mikan was about to agree, before remembering something.

"Maybe some other time?" Mikan offered. "I need to get back to Ibuki-san."

"She's here?" Fuyuhiko immediately looked like someone stuck a lemon dipped in milk in his mouth, wondering if he should call for security.

"No, she's at the park. But I should get back now," Mikan waved to Fuyuhiko, already turning to leave. "Bye then! See you later!"

"Bye," Fuyuhiko waved back.

He hid the snowglobe in his sleeve, making his way back inside, the smile on his face as obvious as a blooming flower in a wasteland.

When Mikan and Ibuki returned home, they opened the door to the strangest sight that week.

Chiaki was awkwardly patting a sobbing Hiyoko on the back, using her other hand to play Galaga.
A bag of opening Jingles chips rested on Hiyoko's thighs, and every now and then, Chiaki would pause in her patting duties to grab a chip.
Cutting off your hair wasn't nearly as dramatic as some of the movies Mikan watched. There was no inspiring music, there was no special sound effects, just the same snipping sounds that came with cutting paper.

Her hair fell to the ground in clumps, her classmates laughing at her disheveled appearance. The scissors stayed in her hand as she let it fall to her side, waiting.

"What are you guys doing?!" A familiar blonde demanded as she kicked the door open. "I go to the bathroom for five minutes and you force Mikan to cut her hair?!!"

"We weren't the ones who made her do that!" One of her classmates pointed out. Mikan found herself nodding to the words. "She's the one who cut her hair! We didn't force her to close the scissors or anything!"

"Like I'm going to believe that!" Hiyoko scoffed, before stomping past all the other children, coming to a stop right before Mikan. Her expression softened as she looked up at the brunette. Her voice was quiet and gentle as she spoke. "Are you okay?"

"I-I am now...now that y-you're here, Hiyoko-chan," Mikan stammered with a small smile.

"Mikan... we'll be friends forever, right?" Hiyoko asked, propping her face up with a hand as she stared out the window, looking away from her friend.

"Of course!" Mikan exclaimed, leaning on the desk to tower over the blonde. "Even if we're in different classes, I swear it! Forever and ever!"

Hiyoko smiled as she stared up at Mikan.

Mikan had grown. They both had. Now, Hiyoko was tall enough that she didn't need to look up at Mikan anymore, the two of them being about equal in height. They had grown together, and they would continue to grow. Not just in height, but in hearts and souls as well.

And maybe... Maybe Mikan would grow to love her back in time.

Hiyoko couldn't imagine anything that could split them up.

Chiaki looked up at the pair, and seeing that her patting was no longer needed (not that it helped in the first place), she stood up, grabbing her chips and game to leave for her room.

Ibuki pushed Mikan in front of her, retreating into her room so she didn't interrupt the moment.

"Hiyoko-san...?" Mikan approached the blonde warily, tiptoeing in case sound was enough to set her off.

Hiyoko sniffled, looking up at Mikan. Even though they had both grown and changed, it still brought back childhood memories.

"I-if I asked you to follow me... for the rest of my l-life, what would you say?" Hiyoko asked through tears and a hoarse throat.
"Huh?"

"You heard me!" Hiyoko snapped, her face turning even redder as she leaned forward, glaring at Mikan. "What would you- what would you say!?"

"I would follow you!" Mikan squeaked, her arms coming up to shield her face.

Hiyoko stared at the sight, regret and self-hatred and awful, awful guilt stopping her heart as the horrible truth set in.

Mikan was still afraid of her.

'This... this is all my fault.'

"Are you okay? Do you need me to help you? Should I bring you snacks?" Mikan asked frantically from her side of the phone.

"Mikan, you're freaking out," Hiyoko pointed out.

"Of course I'm panicking! The roof fell on you! You could have died and oh god your surgery-!"

"Mikan!" Hiyoko yelled, interrupting her friend's rambling. "Calm down, okay? I'll be fine."

"A-alright..."

"Just... talk to me normally, okay? Tell me about your day."

"Okay," Mikan took a deep breath, before launching herself into an explanation of how she managed to make some new friends.

"That's nice," Hiyoko mumbled tiredly.

"A-ah! Hiyoko-chan, I'm sorry, I must be keeping you up!" Mikan exclaimed, making Hiyoko curse herself. Of course Mikan would notice!

"Look, it's fine! You're more interesting than the stupid hospital room anyways!" Hiyoko sighed. "Look, I'm just going to hang up and go to sleep."

"Did I do s-something wrong...?"

"No, I'm just tired. Tell me all about your day tomorrow, okay? Don't ask about the surgery, just be normal."

"Okay..." Mikan muttered, just before the phone call was disconnected.

"Hiyoko-chan!" Mikan's smile was audible from her side of the call. "I have something to tell you!"

"Yeah... I have to tell you something too," Hiyoko sighed, wondering how to tell her best friend about her permanently disabled legs.

It was all their fault. She knew it, she knew it, but no one she told would listen!

Her grandparents wanted her to live as their puppet! They wanted to be able to control her every move and every word, and they didn't like how good she was getting at dancing. Hiyoko might have
been able to become completely independent if she made a name for herself in the dancing world, and she was already mostly there! She was the SHSL Traditional Dancer!

But her mother wouldn't do anything about it. She had already become her grandparent's puppet, bowing to their every whim and desire. The police were bribed and blackmailed into keeping their mouths shut. No one would listen.

But... Mikan would be different. Mikan was her friend. Mikan would listen and support Hiyoko with all her heart.

Hiyoko probably needed the support.

The whirlwind of bitterness and desperation ravaging Hiyoko's mind was so overwhelming, she almost missed Mikan's words.

"Enoshima-san asked me out on a date!" Mikan announced, before giggling to herself giddily.

"The...the model?" Hiyoko asked, shocked. "What did you say?"

"I said 'yes', of course!" Mikan paused to sigh dreamily.

This was all their fault.

It was all their fault. If she hadn't been caught up in that 'accident', then she would have confessed to Mikan by now! And Hiyoko knew Mikan would say yes! They would live happily ever after, the end! She would get the girl, become the best traditional dancer of all time, and she would finally get out of her grandparents' home! Her life would have been perfect!

But now, but now, what the hell was she?! Someone to be taken care of?! Ha, she was just someone to be used in her family's eyes! Just something to give their family more prestige and money.

Hiyoko hated the idea of becoming a puppet with all her being. She despised the thought of bending to their every whim and demand, the idea of becoming just like her mother. But with her legs and dancing career shattered to pieces... what else could she do?

Mikan couldn't help her. Her father couldn't help her. Her mother wouldn't help her.

In that moment, Saionji Hiyoko made a choice she would regret for the rest of her life.

She gave into her despair. And in that moment, she wanted nothing more than to make someone else suffer from the same despair she did.

"She's so cool and beautiful! I don't know why she would ever date someone like me!" Mikan continued her gushing, completely oblivious to Hiyoko's change in demeanor.

"Shut up!" Hiyoko snapped. "You think I give a damn about that?!!"

"H-huh?!" Mikan jumped at the sudden yelling, confused. Hiyoko could be rude and mean sometimes, but she always treated Mikan gently.

"Didn't you hear me?!!" Hiyoko demanded, her voice raising in volume. "I told you to shut up!"

"Hiyoko-chan...?!!" Mikan whimpered, unsure how to react.

"What makes you think you have the right to call me by my first name?!" Hiyoko roared, tears
flowing from her eyes But at the same time, a manic smile appeared on her face.

It felt wonderful.

"H-Hi-" Mikan cut herself off. "Saionji-san? A-are you okay?"

"Huh...?" Hiyoko paused, processing the question. "And why should I tell you? You don't deserve to know, you spineless coward."

"I-I'm sorry!" Mikan sobbed. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry!"

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, please forgive me!" Hiyoko echoed mockingly. "Shut up already! I don't want to hear your voice!"

Mikan let out a small whine at that, little sniffles coming from her end of the line.

Hiyoko felt her smile grow.

Because, Mikan was her friend, right? And friends helped each other out in times of trouble. It's just that the only way Mikan could help was by existing as a punching bag, taking all of Hiyoko's anger and frustration.

Hiyoko was strong and Mikan was weak. That was always how their friendship worked. Hiyoko demonstrated her strength by protecting Mikan, and Mikan demonstrated her weakness by depending on Hiyoko.

So it felt reassuring, almost comforting to know that, even though Hiyoko had lost use of her legs and her talent, even though she was forced to depend on people she despised just to live, Mikan was still weaker than her.

"Should I... should I come over...?" Mikan offered timidly. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"Are you looking down on me?!" Hiyoko snapped, nearly crushing her phone in anger.

"N-no!" Mikan stammered, frantic. "I just-I just, since we're friends-"

"Friends?" Hiyoko gritted her teeth together, before screaming. "Of course not! Who would ever be friends with a nasty fucking bitch like you anyways?!

"Huh?!

"I hate you, I hate you, I hate you!" Hiyoko wailed, too upset to take pleasure in tearing Mikan down anymore. "Stay away from me, you pig barf idiot!"

"H-Hiyoko-san...?" Mikan hesitated. She didn't know what was happening. Why was Hiyoko so mad? Why was she saying those things?

"How many times do I need to say it?!!" Hiyoko growled. "Get away from me! I don't need you!"

Mikan sobbed, her phone dropping to the floor.

"Weren't we... Weren't we friends...?" Mikan muttered to herself, tears dripping down her face.

"I'll leave then," Hiyoko murmured dejectedly, all her hysterics draining out of her in an instant.
"W-what?! Why?!” Mikan demanded, practically tossing herself at Hiyoko.

"You... Why would you even put up with me?” Hiyoko's voice was full of doubt and desperation, tears still shining in her eyes as she looked up at Mikan. "You're fucking terrified of me!"

"What are you t-talking about?!”

"You're practically trembling in your non-existent boots!” Hiyoko exclaimed, pointing at Mikan accusingly. Her face softened after the outburst, before attempting to apologize.

Key word: Attempting.

Mikan got to it first.

"I-I'm sorry! I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so so so so so sorry!” Mikan wailed desperately. "Please-please forgive me!”

"See?” Hiyoko gestured to Mikan, barely keeping herself together. She wanted to scream for forgiveness too, but...

Did she even deserve it at this point?

"I'll just... I'll just go," Hiyoko muttered to herself, keeping her eyes downcast.

"No!” Mikan shrieked, throwing herself at Hiyoko. She fell to her knees, grabbing at Hiyoko's hands. "What-what did I do wrong!? I'm sorry! I-I'll make up for i-i-it! I swear I w-will!"

"What?! You didn't do anything wrong! It's all my fau-"

"No,” Mikan stated simply, tears falling from her eyes. "It's all my fault."

"What are you even talking about?!!"

"You don't have to lie to make me feel better!” Mikan declared, forcing a shaky smile on her face as she wiped away her tears. She forced herself to sound cheerful, even though she was anything but. "I-our friendship was bound to fall apart someday, right? Because... Because... Because I was always so weak and useless."

Hiyoko felt her heart stop as she stared in Mikan in shock.

"That's not true,” Hiyoko said, gritting her teeth together. "That's not fucking true!"

"No, it's fine!” Mikan tried to placate the blonde. "It's true! You were always defending me, you were always giving up everything for my sake, and I did nothing in return! It's only to be expected that you would stop caring!"

"Stop saying that!” Hiyoko ordered, glaring at Mikan. "That's not it! I cared about you! I never stopped!"

"You don't have to lie to make me feel better,” Mikan echoed, her forced smile becoming more rueful. "You can scream at me and pull my hair and trip me as much as you want."

"I don't want to!” Hiyoko retorted.

"What do you want then?” Mikan asked. "My money? My food?” Mikan paused, thinking. "Do you want me to-"
"No!" Hiyoko interrupted. "Why do you think I want anything from you?!

"You don't want a-a-anything from me?!!" Mikan gaped, horrified. "No, no, there has to be something I can do! Please, order me around as much as you want!"

"I don't want anything from you!" Hiyoko yelled, making Mikan freeze in terror.

"No... no, no, no, no, no!" Mikan sobbed, her tone becoming pleading. "Please... please. There has to be something. Please! I-I...!"

'This is all my fault.'

"I can't! I can't, I can't!" Mikan shrieked, grabbing at Hiyoko's hands desperately, her tears falling on Hiyoko's immobile legs. "If I l-lost you again... If I lost anyone like t-that again...!"

"I'm so sorry," Hiyoko whispered, wanting to say the words a million times so Mikan would understand.

It felt like she was drowning, drowning in a sea of regret and guilt and a desperate need to fix the friendship she had broken.

Three sharp knocks of metal against wood caught both their attentions.

Mikan stood suddenly, looking for the source of the sound.

She found two cups of hot cocoa sitting on the dining table, with a sticky note saying 'For the two of you!' in cutesy handwriting.

Mikan smiled at the sight, grabbing the cups for her and Hiyoko.

"Thank you, Ibuki-san," Mikan mumbled, just before drinking the warm beverage, the smile still on her lips.

Hiyoko stared at the sight, before averting her eyes, gazing into the depths of the cup.

"Why do you even want me around?" Hiyoko asked, still staring ruefully at the drink.

"Huh?" Mikan pulled away from her cup, a chocolate mustache on her lips.

Hiyoko felt like laughing at the sight, but at the same time...

"I've done nothing but hurt you," Hiyoko explained, her voice surprisingly steady. "You really should be jumping at the chance to get me out of your life."

"That's not true!" Mikan exclaimed passionately. "You've been kind to me recently, and you were always protecting me when we were kids!"

"That was when we were kids," Hiyoko pointed out.

Mikan frowned, sighing.

"I guess... I was always hoping that it was a bad dream," Mikan confessed, taking another long gulp of the comforting beverage. "I kept hoping that you would stop being mean and we could be friends again. But at the same time, letting you be mean to me was probably the only way to repay you."
"What are you talking about?" Hiyoko asked, finally gathering up the courage to drink some of the stuff. It was sweet enough to rot your teeth... just the way Hiyoko liked it.

"I need to repay you for your kindness," Mikan stated simply, leaving out the 'so you won't leave me again.'

"No, you don't," Hiyoko answered. "You more than repaid me the moment you got me out of that marriage."

"Huh?" Mikan stared at Hiyoko in shock, not processing the words. "What...?"

"You repaid me in full already," Hiyoko repeated.

"E-er, but you're being kind to me right now!" Mikan stammered, grasping at straws. "So, so, I'll still do things for you! We can still-"

"Don't."

"W-what?!"

"If you want to be friends with me, just say so," Hiyoko said with a small smile. "Don't go hiding behind your weird gratitude complex to do it."

Mikan paused for a moment, hesitating.

"I want to be your friend!" Mikan exclaimed, a bright smile on her face.

"So... everything is forgiven?" Hiyoko asked, holding up her cup.

Mikan stared at the colourful cat coffee cup in confusion.

"It's a toast, Mikan," Hiyoko explained, faux exasperation and fondness seeping into her voice. "If you agree, you tap our cups together."

"O-oh! Okay!" Mikan smiled, clinking their cups together.

Maybe it wasn't perfect. Maybe their friendship had already gone beyond the point of recovery, and they were just clinging to the ashes of what used to be.

But in that moment, Saionji Hiyoko and Tsumiki Mikan agreed that, even if it was pointless and painful, they were going to try to make it work.
"Sorry, not today," Mikan smiled apologetically. "I have plans with Fuyuhiko-kun today."

The blonde pouted, disappointed. "Seriously? That little brat even stole my time with you?"

"L-little brat!? Don't call him that!" Mikan exclaimed protectively.

"I'm joking!" Hiyoko huffed. "Just have fun, okay?"

"I will!" Mikan grinned at her brightly, before smoothing out her dress and running out the door, accidentally slamming the door closed in her excitement.

"Oh, you made up... I think," Nanami mumbled, startling Hiyoko with her sudden appearance out of nowhere. (She was actually just behind her, but Hiyoko didn't know that.)

"Where the hell did you c-" Hiyoko cut herself off, remembering Mioda's words. The harshness of her tone wasn't entirely absent, but it was toned down a bit. "What are you doing?"

"I'm just getting ready for work," Nanami answered, drawing her jacket's hood over her head. "Have a nice day."

Hiyoko hesitated, before waving Nanami goodbye, trying to be polite.

"Well, that's an improvement from yesterday, at least!" Mioda noted, emerging from her room just to say that.

"Shut the fu-" Hiyoko scowled, forcing herself to smile politely. "Good morning, Mioda-san."

"You don't have to do that around me," Mioda said simply, earning a sigh of relief from Hiyoko. "I'm just grateful that you're trying."

"Seriously?" Hiyoko asked, genuinely shocked. "I thought you were itching to kick me out."

"I mean, I was," Mioda admitted without a hint of shame. "But now you're trying to make up for it! Actually this time!"

"What makes you think that I wasn't trying to do that before?!!" Hiyoko demanded.

"The fact that you were really rude to everyone and an all-around amoral asshole," Mioda stated simply.

"Since when were you so rude? What happened to the 'super cheerful excitement girl' we all know and hate?" Hiyoko said the strange nickname mockingly, even adding a peace sign and a wink to it.

"I am a super cheerful excitement girl! Just not around you," Mioda huffed, crossing her arms over her chest.

"And what did I ever do to you?"

"Absolutely nothing," Mioda confessed, earning a 'oh fuck you!’ from Hiyoko. The cheerful tone
returned to her voice as she continued. "It's what you did to Mikan that I can't stand!"

"Well, I'm trying!" Hiyoko exclaimed defensively. "What the hell else do you want from me?!"

"I want you to never ever hurt Mikan again!" Mioda declared. "But seeing as you leaving would just hurt her even more, you have to stay for a while!"

"Urgh, why do you even care?!" Hiyoko paused, before glaring at Mioda suspiciously. "You're not secretly in love with her or something, right?"

"It's possible to be protective of someone and not be in love with them at the same, you know," Mioda smiled teasingly, earning her another 'fuck you!'.

"Hm, I wonder if it's just a blonde thing then?" Mioda mused to herself. Hiyoko stared at her like the musician had lost her mind.

"What the goddamn fuck are you talking about," Hiyoko demanded flatly.

"You're, well, you were protective of Mikan, and you were in love with her," Mioda stated. "Fuyu-chan is super protective of Mikan, and he's probably in love with her."

"Probably?" Hiyoko rose an eyebrow at her words, scoffing in disbelief. "Please. If they aren't head-over-heels for each other, I will eat every insect I find in your disgusting hair."

"Huh? You're okay with this?" Mioda asked, completely ignoring Hiyoko's jabs. She eyed Hiyoko warily. "You're not going to freak out and tell Mikan you hate her again if they start dating, right?"

"Of course not!" Hiyoko declared, offended by the accusation. "Why would you even think-"

"-You already did it before, so why should I think that you won't do it again?!"

Hiyoko couldn't say anything in response to Mioda's outburst.

Mioda sighed, her glare falling off her face before storming off. She then stomped back inside, realizing that she was still in her colourful pyjamas, before leaving the building once again.

(=She couldn't just leave the place in pyjamas, after all. It was the end of December and it was freezing.)

Mikan was practically skipping through the snow as she made her way to the Kuzuryuu household, her arms swinging back and forth. She hummed a small tune to herself, excited about her little tea date.

Then her phone rang from her purse, forcing the nurse to stop near the bus stop to answer it.

Just below her [Goodbye apartment! I'm leaving for the Kuzuryuu house!] text to Ibuki, Chiaki, and Fuyuhiko, were a pair of texts from the latter.

[WHATEVER YOU DO, DON'T GO TO THE KUZURYUU HOUSE TODAY]

[YOU WILL DIE]

[Is this Natsumi? Did you take Fuyuhiko-kun's phone again?]

[Yes and also are you even listening?]
Mikan froze at the words appearing on the screen, remembering snippets of a conversation on a crowded cruise ship.

"They just want to get at the Kuzuryuu family's money and power... Like hell I'm going to fall for that."

"Is it troublesome for you?"

"Yeah. Honestly, I would rather avoid huge crowds like that."

Mikan grew determined, turning her phone off and then pocketing it. Her skipping became an all-out sprint, her resolve to save Fuyuhiko from gold diggers and glory hounds growing by the second!

"Why the fuck are you here?!" Natsumi demanded in disbelief. "Didn't you get my damn warnings?! Stay the fuck away! Get out of here! Shoo, shoo!"

"Oh thank fucking god you're here," Hajime sighed in relief, the exact opposite of Natsumi's reaction.

"Why are you relieved?!" Natsumi turned to Hajime, glaring. "She's going to die!"

"Or, she might manage to finally get rid of an overenthusiastic admirer," Hajime offered.

"Um... what's going on exactly?" Mikan asked, realizing how uninformed she was of the situation. She forgot to ask for important details in her haste, like the important detail of 'what in the world is happening?'!

"It's... it's technically a marriage meet-up," Hajime said hesitantly. "I think..."

"Technically?"

"Technically as in Fuyuhiko didn't agree to this at all," Natsumi huffed. "And she pretty much barged in to talk to him."

"I see..." Mikan mumbled under her breath.

"But still! You shouldn't be here!" Natsumi crossed her arms over her chest, moving to block the door.

"The back door's open," Hajime told the nurse, earning a punch to the arm from Natsumi.

"Why would you tell her that?!"

"Thank you very much, Hajime-kun!" Mikan smiled as she ran off.

"Look, we both know that Fuyuhiko can stop Shikabane if she gets out of hand. Mikan isn't in any immediate danger."

"What will you do if she sends people to go after Miss Medicine when Fuyuhiko's not around,
huh?!” Natsumi demanded, scowling at Hajime.

"Trust me," Hajime said simply.

Natsumi hesitated, before delivering another punch to Hajime's arm.

"You better be right, or I'm going to do a lot worse to you."

Hajime only laughed in response. What a weirdo.

The pair sat at the dining table together, on opposite sides of the table. Fuyuhiko listened in silence as Shibakuzo rambled on and on about the supposed benefits their marriage would bring, more than a little annoyed with the situation. The two of them were pretty mismatched, Shibakuzo wearing a white dress shirt and a black miniskirt, while Fuyuhiko wore plaid pyjama pants and a blue hoodie with a crown printed on the chest.

"It's an offer you can't refuse!" The Shibakuzo heiress smiled, sliding the papers over to Fuyuhiko's side of the table. "So what do you say? A springtime wedding?"

"Not interested," Fuyuhiko said immediately, crossing his arms over his chest. "How many damn times do I have to tell you?"

Just before Shibakuzo could pull out the knives, a voice called out.

"Fuyuhiko-kun! Where are you?!"

"Huh...? Mikan?"

The Yakuza baby pair turned towards the door, Mikan walking through, face a bit pink from her dash.

"I'm so glad I found you!" Mikan exclaimed, leaning against the sliding door a bit to catch her breath.

"Who is this?" Shibakuzo asked blankly, staring at the nurse.

Fuyuhiko ignored her, turning towards Mikan.

"Why the hell are you here?"

"Did you forget?" Mikan stared at Fuyuhiko in confusion, walking over to sit next to him. "We agreed to meet up today."

"I mean, yeah, but is now really the best time?" Fuyuhiko retorted, blushing as Mikan hugged his arm, resting her head on his shoulder.

"Is something wrong with meeting you now? I just wanted to see you," Mikan admitted with a smile on her face.

"It's because he's currently meeting someone," Shibakuzo grumbled.

Mikan's eyes widened, like she didn't even notice the Yakuza heiress was there.

"It's nice to meet you!" Mikan said cheerily, not moving away from Fuyuhiko. "I'm Tsumiki Mikan."
"Shikabane. Shikabane Shibakuzo," Shibakuzo said stiffly, scowling at the sight. "Fuyuhiko, why are you agreeing to let this nobody latch onto you?"

"Nobody?" Mikan echoed, before looking up at Fuyuhiko. "Am I really a nobody to you?"

"Of course not!" Fuyuhiko exclaimed passionately, before turning to Shibakuzo in anger. "Don't say stuff like that to her!"

"Who is she to you?" Shibakuzo demanded softly, barely restraining her rage as she glared at Mikan.

"Isn't it obvious, Shikabane-san?" Mikan's smile grew, pulling Fuyuhiko even closer to her as she continued. "I'm his lifelong companion!"

"Kch- don't say it like that!" Fuyuhiko ordered, turning pinker by the second.

Shibakuzo gritted her teeth together, feeling like she wanted to rip someone's teeth out or vomit at the blatant display of affection.

So basically, all her years of trying to win Fuyuhiko's hand and heart to ensure that her family wouldn't lose their status was completely pointless.

Like hell Shibakuzo was accepting that!

She might not know how to play most games, but she knew how to win dating sims! And she was either going to walk out of that house with a new alliance and a fiance, or she wasn't going to walk out of there at all.

'It's for my family!' With that battle cry, Shibakuzo threw herself back into the fray.

"Now, isn't it time to resume our conversation?" A gentle grin was plastered on her face, a subtle wink thrown in for good measure.

"Uh, right," Fuyuhiko nodded, having completely forgotten about that the moment Mikan appeared.

"And your answer is..." Shibakuzo leaned over the table, glad that she remembered to unbutton her shirt a bit. She had to seduce him, completely and totally! Or else, all her effort would go to waste!

Mikan absentmindedly snuggled against Fuyuhiko, completely ignoring the conversation. The bit of movement drew Shibakuzo's eyes to the brunette...

...and she realized she completely lost in terms of chest size to Mikan.

Okay, fine! Force Shibakuzo to use her winning personality! Breast size wasn't everything in this world, you know!

"Hey, Fuyuhiko~," Shibakuzo kept her sweet smile on, her voice teasing. "You already know what you're going to say, right? The answer is totally obvious!"

"I agree," Fuyuhiko admitted, crossing the arm Mikan wasn't hugging over his chest. "It's obviously no."

"Wha-!?"

Mikan giggled, lifting Fuyuhiko's hand onto the table, just so Shibakuzo could watch the brunette
Shikabane Shibakuzo was slowly realizing how sorely outclassed she was.

She knew she was pretty unattractive as far as looks went. Her black hair had been tied into pigtails, hair dye turning her bangs and the tips of her hair bright blue. Her hair was her only distinctive trait, styled to draw attention to her admittedly plain face. Her clothes didn't stand out at all, just a white dress shirt along with a black miniskirt. Shibakuzo cursed herself for trying to dress formally when she should have kept her appearance in mind. Some love interests need a high 'Beauty' stat in order to get their good ending, after all.

Mikan... god fucking dammit! It just wasn't fair! Shibakuzo had been trying to seduce Fuyuhiko into marrying her for three years now, then, all of a sudden, a big-breasted brain-dead brunette showed up to snatch her family's saviour away?!

The rival appeared out of nowhere, and Shibakuzo was already out of her depth.

For one, Mikan's 'Beauty' stat was so off-the-charts that it was probably floating in space somewhere.

Seriously, it was one thing for her target to be completely immune to most seduction tactics, but it was another thing entirely for a rival to show up out of nowhere, suddenly succeeding at seducing Fuyuhiko effortlessly!

Unfair! So! Totally! Unfair!

Like, Mikan had a sweet smile and gentle laugh, she was clingy without being creepy, and it wasn't even a contest when comparing their looks! While Shibakuzo had worn an outfit so plain she could be mistaken for a business woman, Mikan had shown up in a muted red sundress, white hearts plastered all over. Opaque black tights paired with pastel purple flats made up the bottom half of her outfit. She had tied her short brown hair into a ponytail with a red ribbon, nearly the exact same shade as her dress. Her purse rested on the table, a simple black bag bigger than Shibakuzo's head. And to top it all off, she had a huge sweater on, the cream-coloured pullover so huge that it flopped over her hands.

God! Everyone knew that sweater hands were one of the cutest things you could add to an outfit! She had probably boosted her 'Charm' and 'Beauty' by fifty points with that sweater alone!

(Shibakuzo had no idea that the effect was actually unintentional. Ibuki had insisted on dressing Mikan up for the special occasion, and Mikan's original choice of clothing was nowhere near as flashy.)

And-and-and, if that weren't enough, her 'Charisma' stat was so high drug addicts got jealous! Mikan was practically using Fuyuhiko as a ring!

"Fuyuhiko-kun, I thought you didn't want to get married," Mikan pouted.

"I didn't," Fuyuhiko replied simply.

"Then why is this meeting even happening? You don't have to," Mikan frowned at the blonde with pity in her eyes. "It must be so stressful, being forced to do this. Let me take care of all your troubles with a quick shoulder massage, Fuyuhiko-kun."
Shibakuzo felt like slamming her head on the table, over and over and over again.

She was trapped in the moment before a bad end, unable to load another save file. But Shibakuzo couldn't quit, either. She was stuck between loss and failure.

Her family was doomed, weren't they?

They were small, and they didn't have much influence. In fact, their lack of influence was how they survived that long in the first place. They never grew big enough to attract the attention of bigger families who would crush them in seconds.

But... some small part of her knew that she didn't have to go so far for her family's sake. She could have just asked for an alliance instead of dedicating three years of her life to some fruitless quest to seduce the Kuzuryuu heir.

Shibakuzo wouldn't admit this to anyone. She wouldn't say a word about it, even to her dying day.

Even if she was born and raised in the Shibakuzo family, there was not one drop of Yakuza blood in her. She couldn't fight, she couldn't shoot, her stomach turned at the things her family did, but she never had the spine to quit and live a legal life.

The only thing Shikabane Shibakuzo could do was lock herself in her room and play dating sims. She was no Yakuza heiress, she was just a shut-in who could only play her video games and stay silent.

In a family where cunning, strength, and speed were needed to survive, Shibakuzo was worthless.

And then she wasn't.

She was of marrying age, and she could get a bigger family to accept the Shikabane family with open arms. Shibakuzo could finally put her one and only skill to good use, using it to save her family.

Admitting that she lost would be admitting that the one skill she had in life was completely worthless. That she was worthless.

"Maybe... maybe I am..." Shibakuzo muttered to herself, watching the couple interact.

She was doomed to fail, wasn't she?

Shibakuzo had never heard of a player vs. player dating sim before. But her situation had become one, and all her dating sim knowledge was worthless in the face of this new rival.

"Huh? Shikabane-san?" Mikan turned to her, staring at the Yakuza princess in confusion. "Are you alright?"

"O-of course I am!" Shibakuzo screamed, refusing to admit defeat. "I'm fine! I'm completely, totally fine!"

"You're crying," Fuyuhiko pointed out awkwardly. "Uh... do you need a moment?"

"I'm just peachy!" Shibakuzo slammed her hands down on the table. "Just-just sign the stupid paper!"

"I already told you that I'm not interested!" Fuyuhiko retorted.
"Then you're condemning us to death!" Shibakuzo wailed, clenching her hands into fists. "Do you realize how much we need this marriage?! My family will be crushed without you!"

"You're looking for an alliance, not a marriage," Mikan stated, a neutral expression on her face.

(Shibakuzo was glad that her rival wasn't pitying her. It would be even more crushing if Mikan did pity her.)

"Tch, you could have just asked for an alliance," Fuyuhiko rolled his eye. "There was no need to keep trying to marry me."

Shibakuzo knew that. She knew it all along.

But since she would never tell a soul about her true feelings. Not her family, not Fuyuhiko, and definitely not Mikan.

Since Shibakuzo couldn't tell anyone, she lied.

"I could?" Shibakuzo gasped in faux disbelief.

It was so much easier to pretend she was stupid, to lie and say that she never realized it, than to tell the truth.

"That's it?" Natsumi asked incredulously, unabashedly eavesdropping. "Miss Medicine flirts with Fuyuhiko until Stalker-bane asks for an alliance?"

"You owe me one thousand yen," Hajime said simply.

"What?! I never agreed to that!" Natsumi retorted. "Fuck your stupid bet!"

"Would you rather I punch you in the arm instead?" Hajime offered. "It might be better, actually, since that was my price for losing."

"I didn't say I was going to punch you in the arm if you lost!"

"I'm pretty sure you threatened severe bodily harm on me, so aren't they the same?"

"Just shut up and take my fucking money," Natsumi grumbled.

"That's more like it," Hajime said with a smile.

"What do you even need it for? Going to buy snacks or something?" Natsumi paused, before adding, "Can I have some?"

"No, Ibuki's birthday is a few days from now. I need to get more ribbon for her gift."

'Technically, it was a month ago, though,' Hajime noted mentally. 'She just pretends her birthday is a month later to have a Christmas party and a birthday party at the same time.'

"WHAT?!" Natsumi exclaimed in shock. "You should have told me before! I would gladly sacrifice my salary for her sake!"

"That's a weird way of putting it..." Hajime got an elbow to the ribs for that.
"Thank you so much!" Shibakuzo exclaimed, before running off.

"...we could have solved this entire situation years earlier if she brought that up sooner," Fuyuhiko grumbled, before turning to Mikan, who was still clinging to his arm. "Is there a reason why you're so touchy-feely today?"

"Hm?" Mikan looked up at him, a grin on her face. "Well, I heard that she was trying to marry you, so I wanted to make sure she wasn't trying to marry you for money or power. Sorry if I made you uncomfortable, though."

"I didn't say that..." Fuyuhiko muttered, slightly pink.

Mikan sat up, finally releasing Fuyuhiko's arm.

"Should I go home now?" Mikan asked, stretching out her back. "You're probably tired from all that..."

"We had a meeting today," Fuyuhiko replied simply. "Don't go."

Mikan only giggled in response.

"I really am glad it all worked out!" Mikan exclaimed with a smile. "I'll be sure to keep any gold diggers or suck-ups away from you, Fuyuhiko-kun!"

"You really don't have to do that, you know," Fuyuhiko sighed.

"But I don't want you to be bothered by people trying to get to your money or power."

Fuyuhiko sighed once again, before smiling a bit at Mikan. "...thanks."

The pleasant silence lasted for a moment, before Fuyuhiko remembered something.

"What kind of tea do you like?" Before Mikan could respond, he added, "I know it has to be warm, but sweet or bitter?"

"Um..." Mikan hesitated for a moment, before remembering sugary coffee. "Whichever one you want."

"I'll be right back then," Fuyuhiko left, leaving Mikan alone in the dining room.

"Wow! It's really delicious!" Mikan practically gulped the sweet tea down, amazed by Fuyuhiko's skill.

"I thought you would like it," Fuyuhiko smiled with pride at his work (or maybe he was just smiling because Mikan was so happy.) "I'll make you Gyokuro tea next time."

"Next time?" Mikan stared at Fuyuhiko in shock, making the Yakuza heir flinch away from her gaze.

"W-what, do you not want to?" Fuyuhiko asked defensively.

"No, no, that's not it at all!" Mikan declared, politely setting her tea down before flailing her hands about. She was very careful not to knock the cup over. "I just... are you sure you want to?"

"What are you even talking about?" Fuyuhiko eyed Mikan suspiciously.
"E-er, are you sure you want to spend that much time with me? We won't be watching movies or anything!"

"I know that," Fuyuhiko sighed. "And yes, I still want to. What about you?"

"If you'll let me, I'd gladly do it!" Mikan exclaimed.

"That's not an answer," Fuyuhiko retorted, narrowing his eye at Mikan. "Do you want to or not?"

"I want to!"

"That's good," Fuyuhiko said stiffly, drinking his tea to avoid speaking for a few seconds. If Mikan noticed his blush, she didn't say a word about it.

He really was in too deep.

If someone had told him that he would fall in love with the shy, stuttering nurse when he was first admitted to the hospital, Fuyuhiko wouldn't have believed it. It wasn't even that he had anything against the nurse at the time.

It was just that Fuyuhiko had never felt attracted to anyone, male or female, before. Even when his high-school classmates were busy hooking up and were pretty much obsessed with the idea, Fuyuhiko couldn't really say he was interested. He didn't hate the idea with passion, as most people thought he would, but... he just had a non-reaction to it.

Whenever Fuyuhiko tried to picture himself in a relationship, it always felt fake and forced. He just couldn't do it. Kissing, going on dates, even sex... it just didn't interest him. And he was fine with that. Fuyuhiko could live with being single for the rest of his life.

Mikan was just another face in the crowd at that point. Someone he could kill without thinking, without caring much.

And then they got closer, to the point that he could call her a friend. He knew Natsumi was trying to push them together, but really, what was the point? Fuyuhiko just didn't do romance.

In hindsight, Natsumi, Mioda, even those fans of Nanami's video game videos, they all saw it before he did.

Because the closer they got, the more he found himself being affected.

Fuyuhiko suddenly feeling the urge to see her and talk to her, having all his annoyance and worries disappear the moment Mikan spoke to him... He didn't want to admit it, but when Mikan told him he was the only one she trusted about Enoshima, he was (extremely, really, incredibly) kind of happy. It meant that Fuyuhiko was someone Mikan could trust more than anyone else in her life. That he was important to her.

He got excited when his phone rang or buzzed, almost a bit disappointed every time it wasn't Mikan, and smiled every time it was. Fuyuhiko smiled a lot around Mikan, whether it was her silly 'I'm home!' texts or talking to her or watching movies with her. He could relax when he was around Mikan, laughter coming out a lot easier when in her presence. And he (adored, cherished, loved) liked her smile, especially if he was the reason behind it.

(The Kuzuryuu Fuyuhiko of a few months ago would have wondered when he became such a sappy idiot. The current Kuzuryuu Fuyuhiko wondered why he didn't care all that much.)
Fuyuhiko had no idea when these feelings started. He just knew the moment he realized it, the moment he saw Mikan in a hospital bed, thanking him for being safe. He honestly wasn't sure if that was when everything started or if it was just the moment he realized it. But either way, Fuyuhiko knew that he wouldn't forgive himself if he let Mikan die.

Because with Mikan... he wanted to stay by her side. Fuyuhiko wanted to spend time with her, wanted to keep making her smile, wanted to support her in rough times, but more than anything... He wanted to be special to her, like how she had become so important to him in such a small amount of time.

That... was love, right? Imagining stupid situations like holding hands and going on dates, then finding that you like the idea, and then realizing that you want to do it? Wanting to know everything about someone else, from nervous tics, to hobbies, to secrets they wouldn't tell anyone else?

"Hey Mikan," Fuyuhiko said suddenly, placing his empty cup on the table. He spoke without thinking, already reaching for the teapot. "Tell me something about yourself."

Fuyuhiko cursed himself for sounding like an interviewer, asking for bits of information that didn't make it on her resume.

"H-h-h-h-h-huh?!" Mikan stared at him in shock, almost dropping her tea. "Are-are you sure?!"

"What kind of reaction is that?! I wouldn't ask if I didn't want to know!"

"B-but, I'm exceedingly boring! So b-boring that you could f-find rocks m-more interesting than me!" Mikan paused, before adding. "Actually, rocks are really interesting! Most of them are millions of years old, made by-"

"I don't want to hear about rocks, I want to hear about you," Fuyuhiko huffed as he refilled his tea cup.

"Okay..." Mikan mumbled uncertainly, trying to think. She thought in silence for a few seconds, before coming to a terrifying conclusion; "I can't think of anything..."

"It's fine," Fuyuhiko sighed. "I shouldn't have asked out of the blue like that anyways."

"Ngh, no! I'll think of something!" Mikan exclaimed, not wanting to disappoint Fuyuhiko. She desperately tried to think, stumbling upon old childhood memories. "I never went trick-or-treating before in my life!"

"Were you one of those kids who thought they were too good for that or something?"

"N-no!" Mikan frowned at the memory. "I tried to, but..."

"But...?"

"But when I tried to be a mummy, I used toilet paper and tripped and ripped everything. I couldn't wear the swimsuit costume because I got cold, when Hiyoko-san lent me one of her kimonos, I couldn't wear it at all! It was too complicated (and small) for me! When I tried to be a ghost, I couldn't just cut holes in a bedsheat my parents would use, so I just put it over my head and then I walked into a tree. I tripped over my cape when I tried to be a vampire and I ended up ripping the dress."

"Wow," Fuyuhiko said simply. He couldn't keep the amused smile off his face, but he did manage...
to keep his laughter contained. Mostly.

"A-are you laughing at me?!!" Mikan demanded, staring at Fuyuhiko in shock.

"I'm sorry, but..." Fuyuhiko chuckled a bit, before descending into outright laughter.

"I guess it's fine..." Mikan smiled fondly at the sight. "It probably would be pretty funny."

All her worries and fears that Fuyuhiko would think badly of her, that he would be unimpressed and even laugh at her worthlessness were blown away by Fuyuhiko's smile. It was true that Fuyuhiko was laughing, but... with such a joyful and innocent laugh, Mikan honestly couldn't bring herself to think that he meant any harm. He was just having fun being with her.

Mikan paused, noticing something fluffy rubbing against her leg.

"Oh, hi Tangerine!" Mikan smiled, petting the cat.

"Why did you have to show up now?" Fuyuhiko rolled his eye, though even he couldn't be all that annoyed at a fluffy cat. "Don't let Tangerine drink your tea. I'm pretty sure it'll kill him."

"Aw... but what if he wants to have your delicious tea?" Mikan asked, smiling as Tangerine curled up on her lap. "He's so cute!"

Now, if Fuyuhiko were in a bad romance film, he would have muttered something along the lines of 'not as much as you.' Mikan wouldn't hear him, of course, instead remaining blissfully oblivious to Fuyuhiko's longing stares.

Thank fucking hell for the fact that Fuyuhiko knew how to keep his mouth shut, proof that they were not, in fact, inside a bad romance film.

Mikan wasn't completely oblivious to the longing gaze. Kind of.

"Do you want to hold him?" Mikan held up Tangerine, offering the tiny, tiny cat to Fuyuhiko.

"Huh?" Fuyuhiko was momentarily taken aback, before accepting the offer. "Sure."

He looked really silly, holding the cat on one knee as he petted Tangerine, like one of the bad Yakuza films Mikan gave him when they first met.

(God, he had to show her real Yakuza films one day.)

Mikan smiled at the sight, laughing a bit when Tangerine clawed at Fuyuhiko's shoulders, almost like he was reaching out for a hug.

"Fucking hell, screw off you little fucker-!" Fuyuhiko immediately turned to stare at Mikan when he heard the shutter sound. He glared at her, though the effect was lessened a bit by him blushing while doing so. "Did you just take a fucking picture of me?!!"

"Oh!" Mikan jumped a bit, too busy grinning at her phone to notice that taking a picture of someone without asking might be kind of rude. "I'm sorry. I can delete it if you want..."

"Tch," Fuyuhiko rolled his eye, trying to make himself look cool. Tangerine jumped off, walking out of the room without a care. Fuyuhiko didn't care all that much. "It's fine... if you let me get a picture in return."

"Hehe, okay!" Mikan smiled at him, clasping her hands together, though her huge sweater covered
up her hands. Her eyes slid shut, eyelashes fluttering a bit from the motion. She grinned so brightly that Fuyuhiko had to take a moment to just stop and stare, drinking in the sight like a man dying of dehydration stumbling upon an oasis. It took a few seconds for Fuyuhiko to get his act together enough to actually take the picture.

He didn't have his phone with him, so he used Mikan's instead. Didn't want to have to go all the way to his room and make Mikan wait. Fuyuhiko was about to send it to himself, before pausing.

"...Mikan."

"Hm? Is something wrong?" Mikan asked, her eyes fluttering open. She stared at Fuyuhiko in concern.

"Why are there so many hearts next to my name?" He paused, a sudden realization coming to him. "Did Mioda steal your phone again?"

"Oh, no," Mikan grinned once again. "But she did inspire me to do it. I thought it would be fitting."

"...how the hell is that fitting?" Fuyuhiko asked, raising an eyebrow at Mikan.

Mikan's smile slipped for a moment, before she giggled to herself. "No particular reason."

"Don't pull that evasive bullshit with me," Fuyuhiko said, cutting through Mikan's words in an instant. "If you want, you can tell me."

"...it's embarrassing," Mikan mumbled, a bit pink.

'Can't be more embarrassing than anything I thought about you.'

Since Fuyuhiko couldn't say that out loud, he just said, "Really?", instead.

"Uh-huh..." Mikan nodded, a timid smile on her face. "It's just... um..."

Fuyuhiko waited patiently for Mikan to say the words, sipping on his tea.

Mikan balled her hands into fists, forcing herself to say it out loud, though it came out a bit too loud as a result.

"Every time you've saved me! T-that's what the hearts mean!"

"What does that even mean?" Fuyuhiko asked, setting his tea cup down.

"I-I... um, one for the time in the restaurant, one for saving me from E-Enoshima, one for listening when I said not to kill her..." Mikan counted off each incident on her fingers. "One for helping me make up with Hiyoko-san, one for letting me trust you at the ice rink, the other time at the restaurant, the time you told me I was important to you... and one for helping with Hiyoko-san's wedding..."

"Those times... they were really important to me," Mikan muttered, her blush spreading throughout her face. "So... I wanted to remember them. I-I thought it would be f-fitting to put it on my phone but I couldn't find out which smiley face was best for the situation and Ibuki-san-told-me-it-would-be-best-to-put-a-heart!"

She began speaking faster and faster as she went on, her words a mess of unintelligible muttering at the end.
"That's... that's really sweet," Fuyuhiko smiled at her, touched that Mikan would even bother remembering stuff like that.

"Really...?" Mikan stared at Fuyuhiko uncertainly.

"Yeah."

Mikan beamed, giggles erupting from her lips. Her toothy grin was so bright that Fuyuhiko would have thought that someone had set off fireworks in the room. She was practically shining in a light of relief and happiness, overjoyed that Fuyuhiko didn't think she was embarrassing, overjoyed that he accepted it and even thought it was sweet!

(A small part of her compared Fuyuhiko's reaction to Hiyoko's, remembering 'gross! Don't bring your sappy stuff to me!' and exaggerated eye-rolling. That part of her was ignored in favour of focusing on the bliss Fuyuhiko gave her in just a few words.)

In that moment, Fuyuhiko learned something. Well, he learned one thing and was reminded of another.

He learned that, even if Tsumiki Mikan was surrounded by corpses, covered in blood, and holding a knife, the moment she smiled at him like that, he wouldn't be able to believe for a moment that she could do any harm. Not when her smile was sweeter than sugar and brighter than the sun. Hell, he would have fought anyone who said that she was guilty.

Fuyuhiko remembered that, even if he had no point of reference or anything to compare the feeling to, he was probably in love. Probably.

Definitely.

Chapter End Notes

Bonus:

"Hey, Mikan, when did I ever help you make up with Saionji?" Fuyuhiko asked, staring at Mikan in confusion. "When I met her, you two were already holding hands and saying that you were childhood friends."

"Oh, that's right!" Mikan clasped her hands around her cup, making a tiny tent with her fingers. "It was your birthday party that brought us together. If you hadn't invited me, me and Hiyoko-san would have never made up!"

Mikan hummed to herself, before adding, "You didn't really mean to, but you managed to help me anyways! Hehe, you might be my guardian angel or something!"


"So what?" Mikan replied simply, her grin becoming a bit more bashful as she turned pink. "You're still an incredible person. I'm really honoured to call you my friend."

"S-same to you," Fuyuhiko stammered, blushing.

God, who let her be so cute!?
Mikan simply giggled to herself in response.
When Mikan returned home, the difference in atmospheres was about as subtle as a baseball bat to the head.

If she was around Fuyuhiko, she could relax and smile, but now...

Mikan didn't want to blame it on Hiyoko. She really didn't want to, okay?

It's just... the moment Mikan opened the door, Hiyoko was staring at her intensely. Hiyoko was trying to hide the fact that she was, but she didn't get much further than 'hiding her face behind her sleeve'.

"Um... hello..." Mikan mumbled, awkwardly making her way inside.

"Welcome back," Hiyoko replied gruffly.

Neither of them made any attempts to start a conversation after that, Mikan silently removing her shoes. The silence was hopelessly crushing, awful and horrible, but what could either of them do? They promised to try to make their friendship work, but how?

'Maybe...maybe it was impossible from the start... maybe it was too much to hope for. We were children, and it's been so long since then-

And then Ibuki slammed the door open, nearly knocking Mikan over.

"Hellooooo everybody-" Ibuki cut herself off as she noticed the obvious tension in the air, staring at Mikan and Hiyoko. "Woah, what's going on with you two?"

"Nothing," Hiyoko huffed, crossing her arms over her chest.

"I-it's fine, Ibuki-san!" Mikan stammered, unintentionally confirming Ibuki's suspicions. "There's n-n-nothing going on at-at all!"

Ibuki took all of two seconds to decide that Mikan's claim was bullshit.

"Go to sleep," Ibuki ordered. "Both of you! We have a big morning tomorrow!"

"It's only six in the evening!" Hiyoko retorted.

"I don't care! It's sleepy time for you!"

Ibuki hurriedly shooed Mikan to her room, knowing that the nurse would be confused, though she would try her best to follow Ibuki's instructions. Now to convince Hiyoko.

"You were trying to make up with Mikan-chan, right?" Ibuki asked.

Hiyoko flinched, staring at Ibuki in shock.

"Who's saying that I'm not?!" Hiyoko demanded defensively. "I'm fucking trying, okay?!!"
"I can see that," Ibuki answered. "But it's obvious that you need help!"

"Are you saying that I can't do this on my own?!"

"Yes," Ibuki stated honestly, a stony expression on her face as she stared down at Hiyoko. "And you know it too, don't you?"

"Tch..." Hiyoko scowled, gritting her teeth at the musician. "So, what do you suggest, oh high mistress of the social arts?"

"I suggest that you never call me that again," Ibuki said simply, a smile appearing on her face. "And that you let me help you, okay?"

Hiyoko paused, eyes downcast as she played with her hair, thinking. Her cheeks began to burn with shame as she answered.

"I'm only letting you do this because you asked. I could definitely do it on my own if I wanted."

"Sure, sure, just get to bed already!" Ibuki's grin widened as she patted Hiyoko on the back.

It was hard to stay cheerful around someone as hardheaded and stubborn and mean and ever-so-slightly irritating as Saionji Hiyoko, but Ibuki was trying! (Kind of.)

Okay, fine, she sort of wasn't. Ibuki just liked messing with Hiyoko.

But still, even if she enjoyed messing with Hiyoko, Ibuki still had to help.

For both of them.

"Worthless... haha..." Shibakuzo laughed to herself, kicking at the snow on the ground. She had stayed at the Kuzuryuu house, sitting in their garden, not wanting to go home and face her family yet.

"Who was I even kidding...?" Shibakuzo's laugh was bitter and hollow, or at least, it was until she sneezed and ruined it. She couldn't even be sad properly.

"Huh? Miss, are you okay?"

Shibakuzo stared up at the person who had approached her, brief shock and confusion replaced by scorn.

"Why the hell would the head of the Simon family give a damn about my problems? Screw off, asshole."

"Former head, actually," The person corrected, taking a seat next to the Yakuza heiress. A huge coat covered their body, but their face was completely exposed, showing a gentle smile. Their broom fell on the small porch, making a small clattering sound.

Shibakuzo was confused, only to make the realization. "You were taken over..." Her eyes and voice held no small amount of sympathy and pity for the former boss.

"Yup. Became a maid and everything," The former boss chuckled a bit, though it was more than a little begrudging. They unzipped their jacket as they spoke, addressing the Yakuza princess. "But what about you-"
"WOAH, WOAH, WOAH!" Shibakuzo covered her eyes, bright red. "Buddy, I just met you! I'm not interested in getting an eyeful!"

"So you're interested in getting sick?" The former head replied cheekily, grinning teasingly at her as they held out the jacket to her. "I'm not an idiot, you know. You've been out here for a while, and you're going to die of hypothermia or get kicked out for being a stalker. Or both."

"Tch, what the hell does it matter to you...?" Shibakuzo muttered bashfully, though she still gratefully accepted the jacket, tossing it over her shoulders.

"It matters to me since I'm the one who would have to clean up your corpse."

"Oh shut up," Shibakuzo rolled her eyes, before realizing something. "What about you? You'll be freezing then."

"I have the magical ability to avoid all status effects," The former Simon head offered jokingly.

"Ugh, I hate RPGs," Shibakuzo grumbled, crossing her arms over her chest. "Get a better genre to reference."

"Like what?"

"How the hell should I know what sort of games you'll like? Figure it out yourself."

"Shooter games?" Shibakuzo frowned, shaking her head. "Platformers?"

"Nope."

"Puzzle games?"

"Nuh-uh."

"How about mystery?"

"How about no?"

"Um... escape games?"

"Those count as puzzle games."

"Really?" The former Simon head frowned, confused. "I thought they were their own genre..."

"That's like saying every game where you drive a car counts as a racing game," Shibakuzo huffed.

"Wait, that metaphor seems backwards," They noted. "Like, the escaping thing would be the big puzzle that takes up the entire game, while puzzle games are games that have puzzles in them. It's more specific."

"Ugh, what are you, the grand descriptor of game genres?" Shibakuzo rolled her eyes again.

"Maybe," The former Simon boss laughed, eliciting a small, almost non-existent smile from Shibakuzo. "Are you feeling better now?"

"...shut up," Shibakuzo hid her smile behind a hand, unwilling to admit how much the small conversation had helped.
At precisely nine in the morning, Ibuki dragged Hiyoko and Mikan to her favourite cafe. Almost literally, in fact.

"How the hell are you two alive?" Hiyoko groaned, chugging her coffee. She didn't give a damn if it would burn her tongue, because she was not a morning person.

"This isn't much later than when my shifts usually start, actually..." Mikan mumbled quietly.

"I'm just a natural morning person!" Ibuki exclaimed with a grin.

"You disgust me," Hiyoko said simply, giving Ibuki an evil glare. For some reason, Mikan yelped, while Ibuki was unaffected.

"Oh well, anyways, go ahead!" Ibuki declared. "Let your friendship bloom among the falling snow... ooooh, that sounds like a good song!"

"...what...?" Mikan stared at the musician in confusion, completely baffled by her words.

"You two are gonna be friends, so talk!" Ibuki declared, pointing at the two of them, crossing her arms over each other even though she could have just pointed normally.

"About what, dumbass?" Hiyoko all but slammed her empty coffee cup on the table.

"Gosh, what did you guys even talk about when you were friends?" Ibuki sighed.

"...we told each other about our days?" Mikan offered lamely, unwilling to admit that it had been so long ago that she didn't even remember.

"Then do that!" Ibuki's smile and cheer returned, though nearly 99% of it was directed at Mikan.

"Um... the day just started, Ibuki-san."

"Plus, I didn't even do anything yesterday," Hiyoko admitted. "I just watched TV and ordered takeout."

"Wow! Are you becoming a shut-in, Hiyoko-chan?"

"I have a job, moron."

"Ibuki-san, it was her day off!" Mikan tried to intervene, not knowing that the supposed argument was actually just how Ibuki and Hiyoko talked to each other.

"Well, onto less depressing topics!" Ibuki turned to Mikan, grinning. "How was your day? Tell us all about it!"

"Er... I was with Fuyuhiko-kun for the entire day..." Mikan muttered uncertainly. "Are you sure you-"

"WOAH WOAH, WHAT?!!" Hiyoko gaped at the nurse in shock. "You fucking what?!"

"Oh my, oh my!" Ibuki winked at Mikan, her grin growing wider by the second. "Tell us all about this super dramatic love love development!"

"Um...?!" Mikan gulped, unsure where to start. "We agreed to meet for tea, but there was another woman there looking to marry Fuyuhiko-kun-"
"A love triangle?" Ibuki gasped.

"No... I just scared her off," Mikan said simply, unsure of how to react.

"Scared her off? How the hell did you manage that?" Hiyoko asked. "I mean, you're shy, stutter a lot- OW!"

"Be nice, Hiyo-chan!" Ibuki admonished the blonde, before turning back to Mikan. "Go on!"

"Don't fucking kick my goddamn fucking chair you little horned bitch...!" Hiyoko swore.

"You wouldn't notice if I stomped on your toes," Ibuki retorted.

"Please don't resort to violence, Ibuki-san!" Mikan pleaded.

"It's fine," Hiyoko sighed, rolling her eyes. "She can't hurt me anyways."

"As much as I would like to punch you for that, we were listening to Mikan-chan," Ibuki smiled, though her eyes were practically screaming at Hiyoko. Something along the lines of 'OH MY GOD JUST FOCUS ON MIKAN THAT IS LITERALLY THE ENTIRE POINT OF THIS OUTING I KNOW I'M BEAUTIFUL AND FLAWLESS BUT FOCUS ON MIKAN'.

"Um, I don't have to talk about it if you don't want to..."

"I want to hear the story!" Hiyoko declared, a bit too forcefully. She faked a cough, before repeating herself, a bit quieter. "I want to hear how you scared her off."

Mikan hummed, trying to think of a way to put it into words. "I guess I just... I sort of hugged him and pretended I was his girlfriend until she gave up."

"...huh?" Ibuki stared at Mikan blankly. "That's it?"

"You didn't tell her that he was yours or anything," Hiyoko stated in disbelief.

"I didn't want to lie..." Mikan muttered, fiddling with her bandages nervously.

"Would that even count as a lie at this point?" Ibuki asked, turning to Hiyoko.

"What are you talking about?" Mikan stared at the two in confusion.

"Mikan, do you like that Kuzuryuu brat?" Hiyoko had an aura of authority about her, like she was suddenly an interrogator or something.

"I wouldn't be his friend if I didn't like him," Mikan answered, almost making Hiyoko slam her head against the table in irritation.

"What do you like about him?" Ibuki wondered, having to hold Hiyoko's head in place to make sure the ex-dancer didn't give herself a concussion.

"I guess... he's really kind," Mikan smiled for the first time since they left the apartment. "And he's sweet, but he gets so embarrassed when I call him that!"

"Why the fuck would you do this," Hiyoko hissed, glaring at Ibuki.

"Shush! Love gossip is a number one conversation starter!" Ibuki shot back, trying to keep her voice down and failing. Thankfully, Mikan either didn't hear her or was too busy gushing to notice.
"Fuyuhiko's really incredible!" Mikan clasped her hands to her chest, pink as she continued. "He's brave, passionate, he does things without hesitating! Sometimes I wonder if I'm even worthy to be his friend, but he wants me to be with him anyways!"

"That... That went from sappy to disturbingly sad really fast...!" Ibuki noted with a gasp.

"What the actual goddamn fuck, Mikan?" Hiyoko glared at the nurse, scowling. "You make it sound like he's some 'perfect angel from the sky'," She said the words mockingly, making air quotes at the notion.

"H-he's not, but..."

"So why the fuck are you going on about not being worthy of him?!" Hiyoko demanded angrily, pointing at Mikan accusingly. "He's a human being with flaws like you and me, so as far as humanity's concerned, you two are on equal footing! There's no question of whether you deserve to be there or not!"

Ibuki watched the exchange in silence, a smile slowly blooming on her face.

In that moment, Ibuki knew, even if Mikan and Hiyoko didn't. Ibuki knew, without a single doubt in her mind, that their friendship would work out. Not perfectly, mind you, but they would make it work.

With her help, of course.

"Couldn't you choose any other time to be a stalker?!" Natsumi demanded, crossing her arms over her chest. She glared up at the woman before her front door. "Honestly! You got your alliance, now scram!"

"I'm not here for your fucking brother," Shibakuzo shot back. "And frankly, you could be a little bit nicer to one of your allies!"

"Allies?!" Natsumi scoffed at the word. "You're just a piece of shit depending on us to survive. Your family can't offer anything in return that we don't have already, so why pretend and call us allies?!"

"Oh you fucking bitch!"

"What, think it's not true?" Natsumi smirked smugly. "Then why don't we ask Fuyuhiko to break off the alliance, right here and now?"

"Natsumi!" A voice called out from inside the house, a brunette rushing towards the door. He stood right behind the blonde, a panicked expression on his face. "Fuyuhiko is calling you."

Natsumi turned to the brunette, concerned, before turning to glare at Shibakuzo. "Leave before we get someone to slice your guts out."

Shibakuzo held her breath, trying to count to fifty, before promptly screaming the moment Natsumi shut the door. She stomped her foot against the ground, half-formed swearing and curses spilling from her mouth.

"Is something wrong?"
The Yakuza heiress jumped at the voice, whirling around to face the former Simon boss.

"You!"

"Me," The former head replied with that same gentle smile.

"Why the fuck are you here?" Shibakuzo demanded, bright red. (Though it was definitely from anger. Absolutely no other possibilities, got it?!) 

"Well, I work here-" 

"No! I mean, why the fuck are you here, at the front door, right when I'm screaming and fuming?!

"I came to get the mail," The former Simon head answered simply. 

"Oh for fucking hell's sake," Shibakuzo huffed, tossing her hands in the air in exasperation. "What was even her fucking problem?! She was all 'fuck off, you stalker', and I mean, yeah, I did spend three years trying to seduce the heir but that is so not the point-!"

"I mean, anyone would get mad if there was a letter saying that the heir's wife got kidnapped and is being held for ransom, right?"

Shibakuzo froze, staring at the former boss in horror.

"What."

"Argh, it's almost time for my shift at the store," Hiyoko grumbled, checking the clock mounted on the wall for the time. She pushed herself away from the table with a sigh, gathering her things. "I should get going then."

"I'll walk you there!" Ibuki exclaimed with a grin, standing up.

"So... I guess we should say bye then," Mikan smiled, grabbing her purse. "I'll pay-"

"Don't worry about it!" Ibuki declared, already grabbing money out of her (overly-cute and colourful) wallet. "I'll pay this time, 'kay Mikan-chan?"

"Um..."

"Just let her pay, I forgot my bag anyways," Hiyoko huffed.

"Wow, I think someone should give you the prize for the world's most forgetful person!"

"Shut up, demonic rock bitch!"

"P-please don't fight...!" Mikan threw herself between the two fretfully.

"Oh Mikan-chan, it's fine!" Ibuki smiled at the nurse, her cheerfulness 100% genuine, completely unlike the sickly sweet sort of slander she kept shoving in Hiyoko's direction.

"If...if you say so...?"

"Don't worry about it," Hiyoko rolled her eyes, before grinning a bit. "This sort of conversation is exactly what a 'super sunshine shithead' like her deserves!"

"Doesn't that title fit better for you?" Ibuki retorted, her smile suddenly seeming a lot more
threatening. "I mean, you're the blonde here and all."

"Are t-they on good terms or not?" Mikan wailed, backing away from the baffling kind of argument. Her eyes were fixed on the pair in front of her, so she didn't even notice when she backed up into another table's chair until she was on the floor. Her purse had smacked her right in the face, right before the table fell on top of her.

"...fuck," Mikan groaned in pain, ever-so-slightly as she shoved the table off her. She sat up, before noticing that Ibuki and Hiyoko were staring at her in stunned silence.

"Th-t-tthat... haaaaaaaaaah?!" Ibuki's face showed nothing but dazed turmoil and shock, which... explained absolutely nothing.

"What the... when the everloving son of a fuckbag?" Hiyoko gaped at the nurse, her words quickly becoming a mess of random nouns and swear words strung together.

"Are you two okay?" Mikan wondered if she should call for the hospital, waiting until one of them reacted in a coherent fashion. She stood up, quietly setting the table and the chair back in place.

"That was... that was the first time I've ever heard you swear!" Ibuki exclaimed in horror.

"You... never swore! Not in high school, not when we were kids, not ever!" Hiyoko added. "When did you start?!"

"Um... apparently... just now...?" Mikan offered lamely, an awkward smile on her face.

"Kuzuryuu's definitely a bad influence on her!" Hiyoko whispered conspiratorially to Ibuki. "I say we ban him from entering a 30-kilometer radius of her!"

"50! And we should delete his number from Mikan's phone!"

"What in the w-world are you two planning?!"

"You know, I'm really surprised," Ibuki said seriously as she wheeled Hiyoko down the sidewalk. She smiled as snow fell from the sky, covering the world in white. "You really are trying your best to be a good person."

"Don't be so shocked," Hiyoko huffed, crossing her arms over her chest. "I've been trying since the beginning."

"Of course you were!" Ibuki exclaimed, too cheerful to actually mean it.

"Oh shut up," Hiyoko grumbled.

"But... It's kind of amazing, you know?" Ibuki's voice became genuinely warm, pride and happiness shining through. "I thought I would have to force you to be nicer to everyone, but then you go ahead and do it yourself."

"Well, I guess you underestimated me, huh?" Hiyoko had a smug smirk on her face as she practically lapped up the closest thing to praise Ibuki had ever given her.

"Yup, I did," Ibuki admitted freely, no sign of the previous animosity she had previously shown Hiyoko. "You're a lot better than I thought you were."

"Of course I am!" Hiyoko grinned, placing her hands on her hips to puff her chest out
arrogantly. She had to be arrogant, since there was no way in hell she was admitting that she was flustered from all the praise. "I'm amazing, you know! Of course you were impressed!"

"Yup! You're really cool!" Ibuki smiled, taking the moment to ruffle Hiyoko's hair.

"Quit being so embarrassing!" Hiyoko exclaimed, bright pink. She turned towards Ibuki, pointing an accusing finger at the rock star. "What about you?! You're the one who tried so hard to get me and Mikan to make up! I wouldn't be anywhere near as successful if it weren't for your weird rant! And the only reason we could talk to each other normally today was because of you!"

"Hooray!" Ibuki threw a fist into the air, cheering. "You admitted that I'm awesome!"

"Oh shut up..." Hiyoko grumbled, turning forward again so she didn't have to face Ibuki with bright red cheeks.

Ibuki just giggled in response.

"Oh, I remembered something..." Ibuki mumbled to herself, before raising her voice to talk to Hiyoko. "I've got a concert in a few days. Want to come? I'll give you and Mikan and Chiaki backstage passes and everything."

"Really?! Er-" Hiyoko immediately tried to backtrack, trying to hide her excitement. "I mean, sure, I'll go. I don't have anything better to do anyways."

"Yay! Great! I'm sure you'll look forward to this concert's gimmick!" Ibuki paused, before explaining. "Every concert, I have a gimmick to spice things up, anything from-"

"I know how your gimmicks work!" Hiyoko explained, before hurriedly trying to act indifferent. "Sometimes I saw your concerts on TV and watched them when I got bored."

"Really?" Ibuki stared at the blonde, a bit surprised. "I thought you were the type of person to hate everything modern."

"Urgh, don't get me wrong," Hiyoko grumbled. "I prefer traditional things over everything else, when it comes to food, clothes, and candy, but if it's music... nothing can beat a good screamo."

"Seriously?!!" Ibuki leaned towards Hiyoko, delighted by the ex-dancer's words. "Not everyone loves screamo like that! Oh, tell me tell me tell me your favourite song! And your favourite band and singer and everything else you like and love!"

"Did I just walk into hell?" Hiyoko rolled her eyes, exasperated (and a bit amused) by Ibuki's excitement.

"You can't walk at all," Ibuki retorted immediately, patting Hiyoko's wheelchair as a reminder.

"It's a fucking figure of speech, moron!"

"Where were you?!" Mahiru demanded, yelling into her phone. "I've been trying to reach you all day yesterday!"

"Mahiru-chan?" Mikan was confused as she answered the call, unsure of the situation. "Is something wrong?"

"Of course something is wrong! Do you think I would be panicking over nothing?! It's-"
"This has to be a joke," Fuyuhiko's father gestured to the folder, the words 'WE HAVE YOUR WIFE' scrawled onto the envelope. He turned to his wife, saying, "You're right here."

"We should check it out anyways," Fuyuhiko's mother sighed, a bit offended that someone would think that she was so easy to kidnap. She ripped the envelope open, spilling the various black-and-white photos on the table. They all showed the same woman from various angles, bound up and gagged in a basement.

Hajime froze, grabbing one of the photos in horror.

"That's...!"

"Chiaki-chan is missing," Mahiru said softly, sorrow in her voice. "She never made it to work yesterday."
If they had been in the same class in high school, Mikan would have gotten confused.

Kuzuryuu had a small stature and a youthful face that could almost be called feminine. But the suit and the crew cut hair and the suit pointed to masculine... Oh, but then again, the suit was so loose that it was hard to tell if Kuzuryuu had breasts or not!

Thankfully, Kuzuryuu soon answered the question on everyone's mind.

"Kuzuryuu Fuyuhiko. Male," Kuzuryuu grumbled, glaring at everyone. "Call me anything else, and I'm chopping your toes off and dripping chili sauce in the wounds."

Mikan shrieked as she tripped over her own feet, her body colliding painfully with the floor. Her satchel flew through the air, along with her shoe.

The nurse scrambled to her feet, frantically searching for her belongings.

"Oi, bitch!" An annoyed Kuzuryuu called out, holding up Mikan's satchel.

"I-I'm sorry!" Mikan bowed immediately, fearful tears in her eyes. "Please f-forgive me! I'll give you m-my money o-o-or anything you w-want! Please d-don't kill me!"

"Why the hell would I do that?" Kuzuryuu looked completely unimpressed as he all but threw the satchel at her. "I have no reason to kill a normal person like you."

Mikan sobbed in relief as Kuzuryuu walked off, collapsing to her knees. That was scary!

Hiyoko stomped up to the Yakuza heir, glaring down at Kuzuryuu. Kuzuryuu, for the most part, ignored her and kept eating his lunch.

"Hey! How hard can it be for a little midget like you to turn around and face someone who wants to talk to you!?" Hiyoko demanded.

"Little midget?!" Kuzuryuu slammed his fist on the table, turning to scowl at Hiyoko. "What the hell do you want?! Spit it out in ten words or less, before your family has to pay for your funeral!"

"Ah, finally!" Hiyoko cheerfully grinned, just before grabbing Kuzuryuu by the collar, forcing the Yakuza heir to look her in the eye. Her smile became a lot more threatening, as close as you could get to 'I'm going to fucking kill you without saying it out loud. 'Apologize to Mikan."

"Who?"

"Tsumiki Mikan, the clumsy idiot with huge tits who bonked you in the head with her bag!" Hiyoko even tapped her fist against Kuzuryuu's head, making little 'bonk' sounds.

"Why the hell should I do that?" Fuyuhiko smacked Hiyoko's hand away, gritting his teeth. "She's the one who hit me."

"Because you made her cry," Hiyoko hissed, obviously thinking that it was a crime punishable by death. "And I swear, you better write her a thousand apology letters, you fucking better start them off with, 'I, Kuzuryuu Fuyuki-'"
"What the fuck did you just call me?" All outward signs of Kuzuryuu's anger immediately disappeared, leaving the Yakuza heir eerily calm as he stared Hiyoko down.

She wasn't scared. Hiyoko wasn't scared at all! She was in complete control of the situation, and she could prove it!

"What, can't you recognize your own name?" Hiyoko grinned mockingly, all of her protectiveness of Mikan forgotten as she continued to push all of Fuyuhiko's buttons. "Did you really think no one would notice? Did you think that you could waltz in here and pretend to be a guy without a single person noticing?"

"I'll fucking kill you," Kuzuryuu growled, barely keeping his anger under control. Hiyoko wasn't helping with his attempts to not kill anyone while he was at school.

"Like you could even-"

"HIYOKO-CHAN!"

Mikan dashed towards them, accidentally bumping in the table in her haste. She was out-of-breath from her run, but she threw herself between Hiyoko and Kuzuryuu anyways, shoving the dancer away from the Yakuza heir.

"Oh my god I am so sorry, p-please don't kill her, please f-forgive her! I'm sorry, Hiyoko-chan, let's go," Mikan rambled on, trying to diffuse the situation.

"Why the hell are you here?!" Hiyoko demanded angrily. "I told you to wait for me!"

"I-I'm sorry for not l-listening!" Mikan exclaimed, tears running down her face. "But, I g-got worried, and I didn't w-want you to do something like c-confront-"

"Well, news flash, Mikan!" Hiyoko interrupted, glaring at the nurse. "I didn't need your help! You don't need to protect me, so cut it out already!

"E-ep! I'm sorry!" Mikan shrieked, going ramrod straight as Hiyoko stared her down.

"Shouldn't you be thanking her?" Kuzuryuu asked, crossing his arms over his chest. "She's the only reason I haven't killed you."

"K-k-k-kill?! Hiyoko-chan, w-what did you do?!

"I didn't do anything!" Hiyoko snapped. "I was just trying to protect you!"

"Walking up to a guy and yelling at him to apologize isn't a good way of protecting someone," Kuzuryuu stated.

"I'm so sorry, Kuzuryuu-san, please f-forgive her!" Mikan begged, clasping her hands together. "She's j-just really protective o-of me, so please d-don't blame her!"

"Argh, why the hell are you begging for forgiveness?!" Hiyoko screamed, pointing accusingly at Mikan. "He's the one who should be apologizing to you!"

"N-no! I f-forgive him, s-so Hiyoko-chan, please forgive h-him too!"

"That babyface doesn't deserve my forgiveness!" Hiyoko declared. "Just-just, fine! If you want to suck up to that midget so much, go ahead!"
Hiyoko stormed off, fuming. Mikan turned to Kuzuryuu, who had returned to eating his lunch. "I'm s-sorry!" Mikan exclaimed once again, bowing to the Yakuza heir. "Plea-"

"Don't apologize for something that bitch did," Kuzuryuu muttered impassively. "Shouldn't you be going after her or something?"

"S-she'll calm down eventually..." Mikan mumbled. "It usually gets w-worse if I try to help her."

"So why are you staying here?" Kuzuryuu stared at Mikan suspiciously. "Couldn't you go anywhere else?"

"I c-can leave if you d-don't want m-me here!" Mikan declared immediately. "I just... I'm sorry. I s-still feel responsible for w-what she did, since Hiyoko-chan d-did it to protect me..."

"What people do for your sake isn't your fault," Kuzuryuu offered his advice, finding a bit too much familiarity with Mikan's situation. "All you can do is talk to her and try to stop her from going so far for your sake."

"...Kuzuryuu-san?" Mikan carefully approached the Yakuza heir, inspecting his expression. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine," Kuzuryuu said dismissively. "Your friend just pissed me off."

"E-er... what did she say exactly?" Mikan asked warily. "Because I'm so-"

"Quit apologizing for something that isn't your fault!" Kuzuryuu snapped, a bit annoyed from having to repeat himself over and over.

"I'm sorry..." Mikan muttered.

"Tch. It's fine. Drop it already."

"Okay..."

They remained there in silence for a few moments, before Kuzuryuu looked up at Mikan, making the nurse flinch. "Hey, Tsumiki?"

"Y-yes?!"

"Thanks for sticking up for me..." Kuzuryuu mumbled, a bit pink. "It's a good thing you showed up before I killed her."

"U-um... you're welcome!" Mikan smiled down at Kuzuryuu, clasping her hands together and holding them to her chest. "I'm j-just glad no one got hurt!"

After that, they were friends... sort of?

"Tsumiki, class rep's calling you," Fuyuhiko poked at the nurse in front of him, gesturing to the impatient brunette in the hallway.

"O-oh! Thank you, Kuzuryuu-san!" Tsumiki smiled at him, before rushing off to meet with Hinata.
Fuyuhiko sighed as he watched her leave, wondering what they could be talking about. It obviously wasn't schoolwork, from the way Hinata was blushing and avoiding his gaze when he asked Fuyuhiko to deliver the message to Tsumiki.

"Is something wrong?" Peko inquired from behind him, cutting herself off before she could say 'Young Master'.

"No," Kuzuryuu said immediately.

"Alright, I'll meet you after school!" Tsumiki said as she opened the door, taking her seat once again.

"Are you guys dating or something?" Fuyuhiko asked, his voice a whisper, like it was some huge secret. He had no idea why he was whispering though. Class hadn't even started yet, so it obviously wasn't fear of being caught by their teacher...

"Huh?" Tsumiki turned around to stare at Fuyuhiko in confusion. "No. Hinata-san tends to study too much, so I worked with Nidai-san to make him a sleep and study schedule."

"Always the dutiful nurse, huh..." Fuyuhiko grinned, a bit amused by Tsumiki's dedication to her work.

"Hey, aren't you getting a bit too chummy with Mikan over there?!" Saionji called out from across the room, standing so she could glare at Fuyuhiko.

"Hiyo-chan, it's rude to stop a budding friendship from growing fruit!" Mioda exclaimed, earning a 'shut up!' from Saionji.

As Tanaka proclaimed something about leviathans and Nidai and Nevermind expressed their approval, Fuyuhiko could feel a headache coming on.

A hope comment from Komaeda was what set Fuyuhiko off.

"Can you all shut up?!" He snapped, glaring at his classmates. "You're all pissing me off!"

"Stuff it, Lady Kuzuryuu!" Hiyoko retorted. "You're the most annoying person in this room!"

"What did you just fucking call me?"

"H-hiiiiiiiiie! Hiyoko-chan, d-don't say s-stuff like that! Please d-don't say stuff like that! A-And Kuzuryuu-kun, c-c-calm down! Please!"

"Hiyo-chan, that's below the belt!"

Peko watched the scene with intense eyes, staring at the dancer who dared to disrespect her Young Master like that.

The very next day, Mikan showed up with a basket of flyers. A headband held her bangs back, the words 'Go! Hiyoko-chan!' written on them. She stayed by the door, trying to hand out her flyers to everyone who passed by.

"Er, Owari-san!" Mikan called out. "Do you w-want to attend Hiyoko-chan's dance recital?"

"Will there be food?" Owari asked immediately.
"Um... I don't think so but-"

"Sorry nursey, not interested," Owari made her way to her seat, not even waiting for Mikan to finish her sentence.

"O-okay..." Mikan frowned dejectedly, before forcing herself to smile. She had to support Hiyoko!

Pekoyama and Kuzuryuu walked in together, Mikan stopping them.

"Kuzuryuu-san! Pekoyama-san!" Mikan held the basket of flyers out to them. "Do you want to support Hiyoko-chan?"

Kuzuryuu stared at the box in confusion. "What's going on?"

"One of Hiyoko-chan's dance recitals is happening next week! I hope you can come!"

Kuzuryuu looked up at Mikan, frowning. "Sorry. Can't, I have better things to do."

"Oh... okay..." Mikan's face fell, before she composed herself to turn to Pekoyama.

"D-do you want to attend?!" Mikan asked, a little too loud.

Pekoyama was silent as she grabbed a flyer out of the box. She felt a bit guilty about deceiving Mikan like this, but it had to be done.

Mikan gasped as Pekoyama smiled at her, dropping the box to wrap her arms around Pekoyama.

"Thank you! T-thank you so much!" Mikan wailed. "You're t-the first one to accept it!"

"Don't worry," Pekoyama assured the nurse, awkwardly patting her on the back. "I will definitely be there."

The incident was all over the news. The Super High School Level Traditional Dancer was hospitalized, the roof having collapsed on her during her recital. Whether it was sabotage or accidental was undetermined as of yet.

Tsumiki was practically a nervous wreck because of it, her choppy hair even more disheveled than usual. It had been obvious that she had been crying a lot more than usual, bloodshot eyes frantically staring at the door, like she expected Saionji to walk through it any moment now. Dark bags hung below her eyes, and her lips trembled, like she would burst into tears at any second.

"Tsumiki!" Fuyuhiko grabbed her hand roughly, pulling her away from her desk. "We're skipping."

"Huh?" Tsumiki stared at him in shock, confused. "W-what?"

"You're not in any shape to learn," Fuyuhiko retorted, practically dragging her out of the classroom.

"But what a-about you?" Tsumiki asked. "Aren't you going to m-miss out?"

"Like I give a shit about that," Fuyuhiko shot back.

He brought her outside the building, to the forest around the campus.

"Um... if you brought m-me here to ask f-for money, or for t-this and that... I don't h-have any-"

"What?! No!" Fuyuhiko stared at her in shock. "Underage sex is prohibited! And I wouldn't ask for
that!"

"E-eeep!" Mikan flinched away at his outburst, frantically apologizing.

"Don't apologize," Fuyuhiko huffed, rolling his eyes. "I brought you here so you could cheer up."

"Huh?"

"You know how to climb trees, right?" Fuyuhiko asked, already moving to one particularly tall tree.

"Um, sure...?" Tsumiki stared up at the Yakuza heir uncertainly as he clambered up one of the branches. She hesitantly tried to start climbing, but ended up looking more like she was hugging the tree.

Fuyuhiko sighed. He offered his hand to Tsumiki, looking away from her, "Here."

Tsumiki apologized as he pulled her up, the two continuing like that until they were nearly at the top of the tree.

"It'll be too thin to support our weight if we go any higher," Fuyuhiko noted as he sat on a branch.

"Y-you're not scared at all...?" Tsumiki noted, awed. She had to hug the tree trunk to feel completely safe, so she was impressed by Fuyuhiko's fearlessness.

"I've been doing this since I was a kid," Fuyuhiko stated, smiling wistfully. "It's always great to see the world from up here, don't you think?"

Tsumiki looked away from him, seeing the world around them.

The school still towered over them from their tree, but it wasn't nearly as big as it seemed from the ground. The sky stretched out above them, puffy white clouds on bright blue, though the view was obscured a bit from the leaves around them. The ground seemed so far away, but Tsumiki was glad for the fact that a fall from that height wouldn't kill her unless she landed in a position that would snap her neck.

"It's really beautiful..." Tsumiki muttered, amazed by the sight.

"So, are you feeling better now?" Fuyuhiko asked, turning towards her.

"Yes! Thank you very much!" Tsumiki exclaimed immediately. Her energy immediately disappeared when she realized something important. "But... why are you doing this for me?"

"Seeing you moping just pissed me off," Fuyuhiko shrugged. He blushed a bit, turning away from the nurse to stare into the sky. "And besides, what are friends for?"

"F-f-fr-friends!?!"

Tsumiki almost fell out of the tree.

The worst part was, it almost seemed like it would work out. For a few days, Mikan smiled, though it was still obvious from how she dozed off in class that she was still missing sleep.

"Hey, Mikan? You're taking care of yourself, right?" Hajime asked, as they cleaned up the class together.
"E-er, yes!" Mikan exclaimed, too quick to possibly be true. She forced a smile on her face as she handled the broom. "Don't w-worry about me, Hajime-kun!"

"Mikan, you're the reason I'm getting a healthy amount of sleep instead of studying all night," Hajime stated. "Isn't it fair to return the favour?"

"I mean, you don't have to-"

"Just make sure you sleep well tonight, okay?"

Mikan hesitated, before smiling, for real this time. It was small, but a smile nonetheless.

"Okay."

Tsumiki was even worse the next day. She was constantly tugging at her hair, muttering to herself under her breath. The bags under her eyes were even darker than before, standing out on her pale face.

Without another word, Fuyuhiko stood up and jostled her shoulder. Tsumiki flinched before looking at him.

"Come on," Fuyuhiko said insistently.

Even without him physically dragging her, Tsumiki followed him without question.

"Are you... are you trying to cheer me up again?" Tsumiki asked.

"Yeah," Fuyuhiko guided her outside, bringing her to a courtyard. The area's defining feature was the circular fountain surrounded by benches. He guided her to one of the benches, sighing as he leaned back against the stone seat.

"I'm sorry..." Tsumiki mumbled. "I don't w-want to be a burden..."

"Don't apologize!" Fuyuhiko snapped, turning to glare at Tsumiki. "I just did all that shit on my own. You didn't have a choice, so it's not your fucking fault!"

"B-but...!" Tsumiki finally let herself crumble, tears running down her face.

"Tsumiki?" Fuyuhiko stared at her in concern, before awkwardly offering, "Want to tell me about it?"

"I-I! I don't w-want to be a nuisance!"

"It's fine. You probably need to tell someone."

Tsumiki whimpered, before explaining her situation, making sure to make it as short as possible.

"No... t-t-there's no recovery!" Tsumiki sobbed. "She can't d-dance, or even w-walk...! And-and! It's all m-my fault!"

"How the hell is it your fault?"

"I should've... I should have noticed! I-I was there! I should h-have given her t-treatment, I s-should have made s-sure to immobilize her s-spine-"
"-Tsumiki-

"It's a-all, it's all my-"

"MIKAN!" Fuyuhiko roared, interrupting Mikan's hysterics. "There is literally no way this is your fault! You weren't obliged to save her, you were probably panicking and freaked out! And you can't blame yourself for the roof falling on her! So will you stop that already?!!"

Tsumiki stared at him in shock, hastily wiping away her tears with her sleeve.

"Saionji wouldn't want you to blame yourself," Fuyuhiko added.

Tsumiki's frown deepened, her eyes downcast.

"Thank you, Kuzuryuu-san," Tsumiki muttered, her frown becoming a small smile. "Thank you for trying to help me so much, Kuzu-no, Fuyuhiko-kun."

"H-huh?!" It was Fuyuhiko's turn to be confused, blushing as he realized that Tsumiki had used his given name.

"Uh... did I do something wrong?" Tsumiki asked immediately, her smile disappearing. "I thought... since you called me Mikan..."

"It's fine!" Fuyuhiko exclaimed, far too loud. "It's fine... Mikan."

Mikan smiled at him, and even though her face was still red from tears and there were still dark circles under her eyes, Fuyuhiko couldn't help but think that she was beautiful.

Mikan didn't even make it through the door before she started crying. She collapsed to her knees, bawling her eyes out in front of the classroom door.

Everyone stared at Fuyuhiko, who had apparently become Mikan's caretaker in this stressful situation. After a brief moment of 'why the fuck are you looking at me?', he escorted Mikan out of the way, bringing her to the stairs. Most of the students had already made it to their classrooms, leaving the stairwell empty.

"S-she... I don't understand," Mikan sobbed, beginning her explanation without prompting. "She g-got mad at me. I don't know w-why."

"What happened?" Fuyuhiko asked.

"I called her," Mikan said simply, trying to use small phrases in-between hiccups. "She... she asked me a-about my day... but when I talked a-about you... s-she got r-r-really mad...! She said s-she didn't care about m-me... and t-that I was a-a pig bitch...! W-what did I do wrong?! We w-were friends, right?!!"

"You were friends," Fuyuhiko confirmed, patting Mikan on the head as she whimpered.

"I-I don't know w-what I did! Did she... did she just get fed up with me?" Mikan's eyes widened as she realized something. Her voice became surprisingly steady as she explained her revelation. "That... that must be it... she was a-always protecting me...! And, and I could never do it i-in return...! She just-she just got tired of me...! She h-hates me n-now, because-"

"Mikan!" Fuyuhiko called out, interrupting her thoughts. "That's definitely not it."
"H-huh?"

"If something like that could ruin your friendship, you probably weren't even friends in the first place," Fuyuhiko stated. "Did you even like being around her?"

"She was always p-protect-"

"That's not an answer."

Mikan hesitated, her eyes downcast.

"She never listened to me, e-even when I was trying to keep her out of t-trouble," Mikan muttered. "And whenever I t-trying to help her, she got mad at me... but she was still... she was still my only friend."

"Not anymore, dumbass," Fuyuhiko said simply. "What about me? What about Hinata and everyone else?"

"...are we... are we friends?" Mikan asked uncertainly.

"I know everyone else thinks of you as a friend. And I consider you a friend."

"Really...?" Mikan looked at the blonde hopefully.

"I wouldn't say it if I didn't think it was true," Fuyuhiko smiled up at Mikan. "Trust me, okay?"

Mikan froze upon seeing Fuyuhiko's smile, before grinning in return. "Okay!"

When Saionji returned, the positions were reversed.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Fuyuhiko demanded, glaring down at the wheelchair-bound dancer.

"Huh? Is something wrong?" Saionji asked innocently.

"Why do you insist on treating Mikan like shit?" Fuyuhiko asked.

"Because she is shit, moron," Saionji giggled to herself, gaining pleasure from badmouthing the brunette even when she wasn't there. "Or maybe you're too blind to see it?"

"Fucking hell, what happened to you?" Fuyuhiko sighed, more to himself than anything. "You used to snap at anyone who made Mikan cry, but now you're the one who's making her cry."

"I realized something important when I was in the hospital," Saionji declared with a smile. "I learned my place in the world, and I learned hers too."

"So your place is to be a bitch, huh?"

"Not any more than you, Fuyuki-chan."

"Don't call me that," Fuyuhiko scowled, his hands balling up into fists.

Before Saionji could say something that would provoke the Yakuza heir into killing her, Mikan rushed towards them."Hi-" Mikan cut herself off, frowning. "Saionji-san, please don't mess with Fuyuhiko-kun."
"Oh look, it's the person no one wanted to see," Saionji sneered. "Why don't you go ahead and die since no one wants you?"

"Shut the fuck up," Fuyuhiko said dismissively, before turning to Mikan. "Come on, let's go."

"Huh?! You're just gonna ignore me?!!"

"Okay..." Mikan turned to leave with Fuyuhiko, leaving behind a fuming Saionji.

"Hey, Fuyuhiko-kun," Mikan frowned thoughtfully as she paused from her work. Biology was a little too easy for her, letting her mind wander from the homework to stranger topics. "Do Yakuza really name their guns?"

He was almost glaring at her as he looked up from his notes. "What shitty movie did you get that idea from?"


Fuyuhiko grumbled as he hurriedly erased the offending word. "After this, come over to my room."

"H-huh?!!" Mikan gaped at him in shock, almost getting scolded by the librarian for raising her voice. "Is this what Hanamura-san meant by 'climbing the stairway to adulthood'?!!"

"Absolutely not," Fuyuhiko said resolutely. "I'm going to show you some real Yakuza films."

(He wasn't sure who fell asleep first, but either way, he woke up with a napping nurse resting on his chest while his sister hurriedly took pictures.)

"You really shouldn't bind your chest with compression bandages," Mikan said immediately the moment Natsumi left the room. She stretched out her back, separating herself from Fuyuhiko. "Those types of bandages can break your rib cage!"

"Wait, hold on, what?!!" Fuyuhiko stared at her in shock. "How the hell did you-"

"I noticed that your chest was really squishy when I was resting on you," Mikan answered. "But then, when you moved, your chest got tighter. I didn't want to wake you up, though."

"Okay, okay, can we slow down?!" Fuyuhiko demanded. "You can't tell anyone, okay?!"

"Alright," Mikan left out 'but everyone knows already' to nod along.

"Y-you're not disgusted or anything?" Fuyuhiko asked, worry in his eyes as he looked towards her.

"Of course not!" Mikan exclaimed passionately. "There's no way I would ever be disgusted by you, Fuyuhiko-kun!"

"...thanks."

"No need to thank me!" Mikan smiled, before remembering. "But I can order a binder for you. Until then, you should stop binding your chest."

"There's no way I could walk around school like that!" Fuyuhiko declared.
"You can stay home or skip class, as long as you don't use those bandages anymore," Mikan stated. "I'll bring notes for you."

"Really?" Fuyuhiko stared at Mikan in disbelief. He sighed in relief when she nodded. "Thank you. I'll definitely repay you for this."

"Anything for a friend," Mikan's grin grew when Fuyuhiko didn't reject the label of friendship.

Mikan was determined not to lose this friendship, no matter what. She wouldn't make Fuyuhiko hate her.

The class was actually a bit protective of Fuyuhiko, Mikan and Peko most of all.

"Lady Kuzuryuu!" Hiyoko called out, poking her head in the classroom. Her voice held none of its usual venom, completely casual as she completely disregarded Fuyuhiko's identity. It was like she saw the insult as an affectionate nickname... not that it made it any better. "Teacher needs you."

"Who's that?" Mikan asked, staring at the ex-dancer in confusion.

"Kuzuryuu-kun's sister is not in this class," Peko stated.

"Natsumi is in the first year Reserve Course class if you need her," Hajime said.

"Oh, so she's in the same class as Satou-chan?" Ibuki noted.

"Oh dear..." Mahiru trailed off, her eyes widening in horror.

"Oi, Hinata! When the hell did you get on first-name basis with my sister?!" Fuyuhiko demanded.

"When the fuck did you get on first-name basis with the human trash can known as Tsumiki Mikan?" Hiyoko shot back.

But no matter how defensive class 77-B got of Fuyuhiko when his gender was brought up, it was nothing compared to the fury the class had in store for anyone who picked on Mikan.

"You want to fucking die, bitch!?" Fuyuhiko demanded, hands curling into fists.

"I won't forgive you if you keep going down this path," Peko warned, reaching for her sword. She immediately joined her Young Master's side, glaring at Hiyoko.

"That's no way to speak to one of your CLASSMATES!" Nekomaru roared.

"Yikes, it's like a bloodbath-to-be in here!" Ibuki exclaimed, immediately ruining the mood. "If that happened, you would need a bath right after your bath!"

"Hey, Peko," Fuyuhiko approached the swordswoman after class, making sure that there was no one in the area around the fountain before asking his question. "How would you confess to someone you liked?"

"Someone I liked?" Peko stared at Fuyuhiko in disbelief.

"I-it's a hypothetical scenario, alright!?" Fuyuhiko exclaimed, bright pink.

"Of course, Young Master," Peko nodded, thinking. "I suppose I would try to make chocolates for
them for Valentine's day."

"I'm not a girl, Peko," Fuyuhiko grumbled, annoyed that he would even have to remind her.

"A girl...?" Peko was confused for a few seconds, before realizing what he meant. "Ah. I forgot that girls are usually the ones expected to give out chocolates."

"Was that your only idea?" Fuyuhiko asked, rolling his eyes as he stuck his hands in his pockets. "Argh, never mind, I'll figure it out myself."

Several meters away, Sonia Nevermind sneezed, nearly dropping her sandwich on the table.

"This... this is just fucking ridiculous," Fuyuhiko stared in disbelief at the classroom. Everyone was milling about in excitement, swapping stories and sweets.

(Though, Fuyuhiko couldn't help but notice that a certain nurse was missing...)

Apparently, the girls all had a get-together to make Valentine's chocolates for everyone.

(Or at least, that's what he gathered from Peko.)

Unfortunately...

Mioda's gifts were incredibly obvious. She made statues of herself in chocolate, all varying in poses and clothes. Owari didn't even leave anything, just snacking on the food. For the girls, Koizumi had left homemade chocolate with personalized messages on all of them. For the boys, she left store bought chocolates still in the wrapper. She couldn't even pretend she made it.

(Save for Hajime's desk, which had a suspiciously huge amount of gifts compared to everyone...)

Saionji didn't come, so there weren't any gifts from her. Fuyuhiko sighed in relief. He didn't want the overgrown brat's chocolates. Nevermind... well, evidently she didn't understand the instructions, leaving practically poisonous puddings in fancy baskets on everyone's desk. Nanami made all her chocolates in the shape of various video game characters... though they came out more like lumps with sugar thrown on top. Peko was practically the only one who made normal chocolates, having followed the recipe book to the letter. Her chocolates were practically indistinguishable from store bought treats, the only sign that they were homemade being the letter attached to them. Usually, it was a brief message about how she hoped to work together and bond with her classmates next year too.

(But for Fuyuhiko, she had given him chocolates in person, including her extremely long letter detailing how honoured she was to serve him as his friend and aide.)

But Mikan...

Fuyuhiko couldn't help but be a bit disappointed at the sight. He had already tossed Nevermind's inedible concoction, passed the game lumps and the chocolate statue to Owari, and eaten Peko and Koizumi's chocolates. But there was nothing other than that, he noted with a sigh.

"Aw, are you feeling a bit glum?" Mioda skipped over to him, resting her elbows on his desk as she sang. "Were you expecting chocolates from a special someone~?"

"Shut the fuck up," Fuyuhiko ordered, though it had none of his usual annoyance behind it.

"Well, maybe it's because Mikan-chan was sick and couldn't make it to our cooking session!"
Mioda declared, her grin growing even wider.

"G-gah, what the- what are you- that's not it!" Fuyuhiko snapped, bright pink.

"Oh well, maybe she'll show up soon!" Mioda practically skipped away. Fuyuhiko regretted tossing Nevermind's pudding, since he wanted to throw something at the musician's head. With enough force to dye her hair red. The door opened with a crash, Mikan rushing in.

"I'm sorry I'm la-AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAIIIIE!" Mikan tripped over her own feet, the bag in her hands flying through the air. The nurse practically did a somersault in front of the class, ending her tumbling only when she collided with Saionji's desk. Mikan nearly knocked the desk over, dislodging what few sweets the ex-dancer had received.

"Oh wow, a rolling pig, wallowing around on the floor!" Saionji declared cheerfully, a bright smile on her face. "Are you having fun, rolling around in your own filth?"

"I'm s-sorry..." Mikan whimpered, sitting up. She rubbed her arm where she had collided with the desk, frowning.

"Hiyo-chan, today is a day of love!" Mioda declared, trying to defuse the situation. "Can't you be a little nicer-"

"She doesn't deserve any love," Saionji snapped, her eyes darkening as she glared at Mikan. "And who would love a little needy brat like her, anyways?"

"I'm-I'm sorry, I'm s-"

Fuyuhiko might have sworn that he wouldn't kill anyone, but he never said anything about punching a bitch in the face.

"Come on, Mikan," Fuyuhiko grumbled, forcing himself to stay calm. He offered a hand to the nurse, helping her up.

Mikan looked like she was on the verge of tears. Fuyuhiko barely kept himself from punching Saionji again.

The room was silent as Fuyuhiko and Mikan went back to their seats, Koizumi wordlessly placing the purple bag on Mikan's desk.

"What the hell?!" Saionji demanded, pointing a finger at Fuyuhiko accusingly. "That's assault, you asshole!"

"Shuddap already!" Owari ordered, annoyed with the situation. "Before I give you a whack on the head too!"

Saionji huffed, grumbling to herself. "... not like there's anything I want to say to you assholes."

When their teacher finally arrived (was he drunk? Again?), the silence in the room was so heavy it could crush a whale.

"Why do you even put up with her abuse?" Fuyuhiko demanded, walking alongside Mikan. She held her bag to her chest, not saying a single word in response.
Frankly, he had no idea where they were going, but he didn't really care. They wandered through the campus, before Mikan pulled him towards the forest, still silent.

"I guess... it's because I understand," Mikan admitted with a sigh, staring up at the trees. "If I were her, and I lost everything, from my talent to my independence, I would probably try to take it out on someone weaker than me too. Anything to prove that you still had a little bit of power."

"Quit trying to justify her shit," Fuyuhiko huffed. "It doesn't matter what her reasons are, you don't deserve that."

Mikan sighed again, looking towards her feet.

"Hey, Mikan?" Fuyuhiko wasn't sure what he was saying. His mouth kept moving, even without input from his brain. "You know, Saionji was definitely wrong about you not deserving love."

"Huh?" Mikan looked up, facing Fuyuhiko.

"Because..." Fuyuhiko began turning red, his words becoming slower as he realized what he was doing. "I...I like you."

"I like you too!" Mikan exclaimed, before suddenly holding the bag out to him. "I-I made this! I made it with all my feelings for you! I hope we can stay together forever!"

"H-huh?!" Fuyuhiko turned even redder than a stoplight, almost flinching away from Mikan's gift. "Are you-are you asking me out!?"

"Asking you out?" Mikan repeated in confusion. "We're already outside..."

"Ugh, never mind," Fuyuhiko huffed, unwilling to admit his disappointment. He took the bag out of her hands. "Thanks."

Mikan smiled as he opened it, taking out one of her...

"I-it must have been... When I dropped it..." Mikan mumbled dejectedly, staring at the misshapen chocolate. "It was supposed to look like a heart..." Fuyuhiko wouldn't admit it, since he wasn't a jerk, but he was a little glad that Mikan had dropped the bag. Eating your crush's homemade chocolate (which she made for him and him alone) that just happened to be shaped like a heart (that she supposedly made with all her feelings for him) would be a bit too much for him. He took a bite out of the former heart, grinning as the sweet flavour filled his mouth.

"It's delicious," Fuyuhiko said simply.

"I'm so glad!" Mikan grinned back brightly. "I was worried that you might reject it or something!"

"There's no way I would reject a gift from you..." Fuyuhiko muttered, still a bit pink.

Mikan gave no indication that she heard him, instead looking up towards the sky.

"The sun is setting," She pointed out. "We should probably get to our rooms now."

"Yeah," Fuyuhiko took in a deep breath, trying to calm himself down. False alarm, nothing is going on. Quit blushing already, you goddamn idiot. "Let's go."
Mikan hummed to herself happily as they walked side by side.

"We're going to be second-years soon," Mikan said with a smile. "Are you excited?"

"Fuck no," Fuyuhiko replied casually. "Can you imagine having to deal with all those brats?"

"They're only a year younger!" Mikan exclaimed in protest.

"They're younger than me, so they count as kids," Fuyuhiko smirked.

"Oh, that's right!" Mikan raised her index finger to her face as she remembered. "Ryota-kun, ('when the hell did you get so close to Mitarai?!')", told me that there's going to be an SHSL Delinquent next year!"

"And?" Fuyuhiko raised an eyebrow at the nurse, not getting her point.

"Aren't you excited? Won't he be your disciple in illegal activities or something?"

"Alright, listen up!" Fuyuhiko snapped, crossing his arms over his chest. He stopped in the middle of the path, forcing Mikan to stop to hear him out. "Delinquents are just brats who get kicks out of breaking the law for no reason! They're just trying to rebel to look cool! There's no way I would ever let anyone like that join the family, and I would never teach a delinquent anything!"

Fuyuhiko scoffed, not wanting to completely lose his temper. He continued his explanation, only a little bit miffed, "Yakuza have honour. Laws and traditions and codes. We don't break the law just to look cool. It's just our duty to run the underground. It's not something that can be done by just anyone."

"Wow...!" Mikan stared in awe at Fuyuhiko, a huge grin on her face. "You're really cool, Fuyuhiko-kun!"

"H-huh?!" Fuyuhiko switched from slightly annoyed to flustered faster than a certain hedgehog could say 'You're too slow!'.

"You're really dedicated to your family and your talent! And even though you seemed so scary before, you're really nice and sweet!" Mikan exclaimed. "It's admirable! You're a really good person, Fuyuhiko-kun!"

"Uh... t-thanks..." Fuyuhiko mumbled, bright pink.

He wasn't going to admit how happy that made him. There was no way Kuzuryuu Fuyuhiko would confess to his (enormous) small crush on the nurse.

Fuyuhiko held the door open for her as they went inside the building, feeling a bit tired from their late walk.

"Good night, Fuyuhiko-kun!" Mikan waved to him with her bright smile, even though they were right across the hallway from each other. (Seriously, what a dork.)

"Actually, hold on a moment, Mikan."

Apparently, Fuyuhiko was an idiot. An idiot who did things without thinking.

Because, just before Mikan went inside her room, he grabbed her by the collar, pulling her down so he could press a kiss against her cheek.
"I think this is what you call 'a hell of your own making,'" Nanami said simply as she laid down on Hiyoko's bed, holding a game console above her face so she could play.

"Did you come here just to badmouth me!?!" Hiyoko demanded, balling her hands into fists. "Argh, just get out of my room before I run you over!"

"If you wanted me out of your room, you would have done it by now," Nanami stated, completely serious. She set the game console down, sitting up to stare at Hiyoko. "There's a reason why you haven't yet."

"The reason is because I'm in a wheelchair and there's no way I could lift you off my bed!" Hiyoko shrieked.

"You could just shove me off," Nanami offered. "And then throw me out of your room."

"Thanks for the idea!" Hiyoko said cheerfully, before glaring at Nanami. "Now leave."

"No. I want to hear what's going on."

"No thanks! Just get out!" Hiyoko shot back.

"You and Tsumiki-san were best friends," Nanami stated. "So why are you suddenly being cruel to her?"

"This doesn't concern you! Stay out of this!" Hiyoko shrieked.

"You've been like this ever since your accident. Maybe you got hit in the head..." Nanami reasoned, staring at Hiyoko with a bit of pity in her eyes.

Hiyoko couldn't stand it.

"Don't look down on me!" Hiyoko roared, clawing at the armrests of her wheelchair. "I'll kill you, I'll fucking toss you into a pool of acid!"

"Why do you not want me to pity you?" Nanami asked calmly, even with the blonde screaming at her.

"It's annoying! I don't need it! I don't need your damn pity! I'm too good to need your pity!"

"Ah. That's it, isn't it?" Nanami saw the hole ripped in Hiyoko's defenses, showing her weakness. If she wanted, Nanami could strike at that weakness, and completely destroy the monster known as Saionji Hiyoko.

She really could have.

But she didn't.

"SHUT UP! SHUT THE FUCK UP! DIE, DIE, ROT IN HELL!" Hiyoko wailed, desperation in her eyes. Tears ran down her face, but she didn't say anything more, instead choking on her sobs.

"Saionji-san..." Nanami had no idea how to comfort the blonde, reaching out to her fruitlessly. "You can talk to me."

"And why--why the hell would I do that?!" Hiyoko demanded, pointing an accusing finger at Nanami. "You think you can walk in here, try to figure out what's up with me and Mikan like it's one of your mystery games, then say I can trust you with my deepest, darkest secrets?! Just fuck
"But who will you tell?" Nanami asked. "No one in the class will approach you, not when you keep bullying the Yakuza heir's best friend."

"I-I don't need to tell anyone! I don't need to!"

"Do you want to?"

Hiyoko hesitated, staring at Nanami uncertainly.

The gamer extended her hand to the ex-dancer once again, smiling sweetly.

"I will be here to listen," Nanami said reassuringly.

Hiyoko said nothing, waiting for it to turn out to all be a trick, a lie to get her to drop her guard and betray her.

It didn't.

The morning after Valentine's Day, Mikan had stationed herself by the door, though she didn't hold any flyers or wear any headbands.

"Good morning, Fuyuhiko-kun!" Mikan smiled, waving at the Yakuza heir.

"Uh... good morning to you too," Fuyuhiko muttered. He was a bit relieved that she didn't seem to hate him for the kiss but at the same time, how dense could one person b-

Mikan pressed a kiss to his cheek as he moved towards his desk.

"W-what the-?!" Fuyuhiko spun around, staring in shock as Mikan... went back to the door, waving hello to Nevermind and Owari.

That shock turned to exasperation as Mikan gave both of them kisses on the cheek before returning to the door. Of fucking course.

He rested his head on the desk, wondering why he bothered to get his hopes up. His head stayed there until he heard a certain cook's annoying voice.

"Ah! Miss Tsumiki! You must have been charmed by my high-class charm!" Hanamura exclaimed, before switching to a more seductive tone. "Now, can you please do the same thing, but a bit low-"

The cook screamed in pain as he was kicked into the wall. Though... it might have also been pleasure. Hard to say, actually.

Fuyuhiko scoffed, suddenly next to Mikan. "Like she would ever be charmed by you."

Hanamura laughed as he made his way back to them, dropping down to one knee to hold Fuyuhiko's hand.

"Oh, my, that was wonderful! Please, allow me to feel more of this exquisite-"

"E-eeeek!" Mikan screamed, 'somehow' tripping over her own feet even though she was standing still. She flailed about as she fell, 'accidentally' slapping Hanamura in the face before slamming onto the floor. "I fell!"
"What a weird couple," Hinata sighed, watching Hanamura switch targets, only for Fuyuhiko to kick him away again.

"It's like soccer..." Mioda noted.

"Hey, can I play?!" Owari ran up to them excitedly.

"Teruteru's going to die at this rate..." Hinata stood, getting ready to tell them to not kill one of their classmates, when the door opened.

"Good morning everyone!" Saionji declared with a smile. Nanami waved to everyone silently from her seat on Saionji's lap, playing her game with one hand.

"Woah, that's a complete one-eighty!" Mioda gasped in shock. "What happened?!"

"Who cares!" Saionji said dismissively. "Not something a bitch like you needs to know!"

"Yup, still the same Hiyoko on the inside," Hinata muttered to himself.

"Hiyoko-chan..." Nanami muttered sleepily. "That's a bit rude. Mioda-san didn't deserve that one."

Saionji rolled her eyes, before saying, "I'm sorry," with far too much exasperation and annoyance to be genuine.

"Good morning, Nanami-san..." Mikan nervously approached the pair, quickly pressing a kiss to Nanami's cheek before fleeing in fear of Saionji.

"Hey!" Saionji glared at the nurse. "What about me, you fucking pig bitch?!

"That attitude is exactly why she didn't greet you!" Fuyuhiko retorted.

"Fuck off! I want my childhood friend to show me some damn affection, okay?!"

"...I thought we weren't friends...?" Mikan was completely confused by the situation.

"Urgh, fine! I don't want your stupid kiss anyways!" Saionji pouted, making it very clear that she did, in fact, want a kiss.

Mikan was just plain baffled.

"This is an intervention," Koizumi stated, staring Mikan down.

"D-did I... Did I do something wrong?" The nurse asked nervously.

"No. We are simply teaching you in order to make sure you don't make mistakes in the future," Pekoyama reassured the brunette.

Koizumi paced around her room, looking like a general about to give orders to the troops. Which... looked strange against the background of smiling faces pinned up on Koizumi's wall. Like all those people were excited to see Mikan's punishment (no, wait, she couldn't be punished if she didn't do anything wrong).

"You can't just go around kissing everyone. Even if it's on the cheek."

"Huh...?"
"You can make people feel uncomfortable," Pekoyama added. "And I know you wouldn't want that."

"I-I'm sorry! I must have-"

"We're fine with it," Koizumi interrupted. "But you have to ask everyone else. Especially Kuzuryuu."

"But Fuyuhiko-kun was the one who showed me the greeting in the first place..." Mikan mumbled, getting confused.

Koizumi and Pekoyama exchanged a glance, before the swordswoman spoke up.

"Perhaps that wasn't his aim."

Mikan stared at them in confusion, waiting for one of them to explain.

"Perhaps... Kuzuryuu-kun is..." Pekoyama trailed off awkwardly, looking to Koizumi for guidance.

"Talk to him," Koizumi instructed simply. "And kiss him on the lips."

"But... that's for lovers..." Mikan mumbled, not wanting to admit that she was getting a bit suspicious. Maybe they just didn't know...?

"That's the point, Mikan-chan," Koizumi stated.

"H-h-h-h-h-huh?!"

"Tsumiki-san..." Pekoyama stared at Mikan, baffled. "Did... did you actually not notice?"

"No way!" Mikan gaped at the pair with wide eyes. "No way, no way, no way! There's no way Fuyuhiko-kun would ever, ever, ever, ever, ever fall in love with someone like me!"

"Mikan-chan, what are you talking about-"

"I'm clumsy, I'm always relying on him, I'm troublesome, I'm ugly, I'm stupid, I'm a pig-"

"Enough," Pekoyama cut through Mikan's self-loathing effortlessly. "We know for a fact that isn't true."

"Yeah! Don't listen to Hiyoko-chan, okay!" Koizumi walked up to Mikan, patting the nurse on the head.

For some reason, it didn't feel as comforting as it was when Fuyuhiko was the one doing it.

"But..."

"Is something wrong, Tsumiki-san?" Pekoyama asked, staring at the nurse intently.

"He's amazing... he's kind and wonderful and selfless..." Mikan muttered, her frown deepening with every praise she gave him. "Admirable and incredible... why...why would he be in love with me...?"

"Shouldn't you ask him that?" Koizumi answered Mikan's question with a question. "Me and Peko-chan aren't qualified to answer that for him. The only way you can find out is if you ask him."
"What if you're wrong?" Mikan shot back. "What if he's not interested, and this is... this is just doomed to fail?"

Koizumi sighed. "Mikan, I can assure you. You're worrying yourself over nothing. Now go and talk to him already."

"Okay... thank you very much..." Mikan whispered, giving both of the girls a hug before leaving the room.

"I can't believe this..." Koizumi muttered to herself, sighing once again.

"Saionji-san seems to be a bad influence on Tsumiki-san," Peko noted, though she felt a bit silly about pointing out the obvious.

"No kidding... I hope things work out for them."

Peko nodded, silently wishing her Young Master luck.

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"What the fuck do you want-" Fuyuhiko cut himself off, staring up at the nurse. "Oh. Hi Mikan. Need something?"

Mikan hesitated, staring at Fuyuhiko for a few moments before directing her gaze at the floor.

What if she was wrong? What if she was just assuming things?

Mikan... Mikan didn't want to lose Fuyuhiko. She didn't want to make Fuyuhiko hate her like Hiyoko did.

"No... It's nothing," Mikan mumbled. "I'm sorry for disturbing you."

"Like hell I'm about to believe that," Fuyuhiko snapped. "Is it something you can't say if people are listening? Do you want to come inside?"

"I don't want to be a burden..."

"You're never a fucking burden," Fuyuhiko stated, pulling Mikan into his room. "And besides, what kind of guy would I be if I left you all alone when you're so upset?" He paused, before adding, "Actually, it doesn't matter."

"I know you're not that kind of person..." Mikan mumbled, leaving out the 'I wouldn't love you if you were.'

She didn't take even a single step into the room, staying as close to the door as possible. Her fingers couldn't stop moving, toying with her hair, her uniform's ribbon, even the bandage around her hand to control her nervous energy. Emphasis on 'nervous'.

"So what happened?" Fuyuhiko stared up at Mikan in concern. "Did Saionji do something again?"

"No, that's not it," Mikan gulped, before sighing. "Never mind. It's not important."

"Anything that makes you upset is important," Fuyuhiko's eyes widened, before his expression darkened. "Is it something you can't trust me with?"

"No!" Mikan exclaimed immediately. "I trust you! It's just..."
"Just?"

"Are-are you in l-love with me!?” Mikan asked hurriedly.

Fuyuhiko froze, staring at the nurse in shock.

Mikan took his silence as a 'of course not, dumbass.'

"Ahaha... I shouldn't have asked... Of course the answer was no," Mikan forced a smile on her face. "I was just being silly, thinking that someone as wonderful as you would ever fall for someone as stupid and ugly as me-"

"Mikan, shut up."

Mikan clamped her mouth shut, her frown deepening as she worriedly watched Fuyuhiko for any signs of irritation or anger.

"You are not stupid, and you are not ugly," Fuyuhiko started off, pointing a finger at the brunette. "I wouldn't ask for your help with homework if you were stupid. And..." Fuyuhiko hesitated a bit, turning pink as he looked away from the brunette. "I think you're beautiful."

"H-huh?!

"You... you really should have let me answer your question first, you know," Fuyuhiko said awkwardly.

"You-you...!" Mikan gaped at Fuyuhiko, paling. "You r-really...u-um...?"

"Yeah. You have a problem with that?"

"...why?" Mikan asked, her eyes downcast as she frowned. "What did I do to deserve this...?"

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

"You're incredible, you're strong, you're brave, you're kind, you're too good for me!" Mikan exclaimed, tears in her eyes. "Why... why in the world would you even-"

"You don't give yourself enough credit," Fuyuhiko stated, cutting through Mikan's words. "You're always looking out for other people, I can have fun just being with you, which isn't something that happens with just about anyone! You weren't disgusted by me, and you even helped me out even when you didn't have to!"

"That's just... that's just my duty as a nurse..." Mikan mumbled.

"Right, and you worked up the courage to go up to Nidai and ask for his help for Hinata's sake 'just because you're a nurse'," Fuyuhiko rolled his eyes, sarcasm coming much too easily in that moment.

"And you even ordered a binder for me, with your own money!" Fuyuhiko added, more evidence added to his arsenal. "Even if that was 'just because you're a nurse', you could have forced me to pay for it instead! There was no need for you to buy it for me!"

"I-I...!"

"If you're about to badmouth yourself, don't," Fuyuhiko shot through Mikan's words before she even said them. "Quit listening to Saionji already. I told you, she's wrong about you."
"How do you know that?!!" Mikan demanded, barely holding back tears.

"...Mikan. Do you trust me?" Fuyuhiko asked, completely serious as he stared up at Mikan.

"Yes," Mikan said immediately.

"Then trust me when I say that you're a good person."

Mikan hesitated, before smiling.

"Okay."

Fuyuhiko returned her smile, before realizing something, horror evident in his face.

"Is something wrong?" Mikan asked, worriedly looking at Fuyuhiko, inspecting him for any injuries.

"Just... isn't this weird for you?!" Fuyuhiko demanded, bright red. At Mikan's confusion, he continued, becoming even redder as he went on. "I mean, you're in a guy's room. Alone. Together. And... he has feelings for you."

"You don't advocate underage sex though," Mikan pointed out.

"But still!" Fuyuhiko averted his eyes, looking anywhere but at Mikan. "Are you seriously telling me that you're completely unaffected right now?"

"I don't feel nervous or anything," Mikan stated, almost destroying Fuyuhiko in one hit. Almost. "But I feel the same right now as I usually do around you."

"What is that supposed to mean?" Fuyuhiko eyed Mikan incredulously.

"It means that..." Mikan grabbed Fuyuhiko's hand, pressing it against the base of her neck so he could feel her rapid pulse. "I'm incredibly happy."

"Oh my god," Fuyuhiko pressed his other hand across the bottom half of his face, hoping to hide his blushing cheeks. "You're so embarrassing."

"Oh..." Mikan frowned dejectedly, releasing Fuyuhiko's hand. "So, you're ashamed because of me then?"

"That's not what I fucking said," Fuyuhiko retorted, before smirking at Mikan. "Who said I didn't like it?"

"W-wha-?!" Mikan gaped at him, immediately turning redder than blood.

'No, wait, blood is what's making my cheeks go red in the first place so how in the world are my cheeks redder than blood, ah, he's too much for me-!' Mikan wailed mentally, hiding her crimson-clad face in her hands.

'Cute,' Fuyuhiko laughed, smiling up at the nurse he loved.

Fuyuhiko and Mikan walked into class the next day holding hands.

"What the fuck?" Saionji gaped at them in shock.
"Wow! Congrats, Fuyu-chan, Mikan-chan!" Ibuki declared, before stepping up on her chair. She cupped her hands around her mouth, amplifying her words. "Three cheers for the new couple!"

"Oh, I get it!" Saionji smiled cheerfully. "Tsumiki must have gotten so desperate for love that she bribed the trap into putting up with this!"

"Oi, Saionji!" Fuyuhiko called out, though Mikan tried to hold him back. "Quit badmouthing my girlfriend already! I'll send you to Europe in a body bag if you don't!"

"Congratulations, Tsumiki-san, Kuzuryuu-kun," Peko smiled, clapping for the couple even as Mikan literally had to drag him to his seat to keep him from unleashing divine retribution on Saionji.

"Perhaps you would like a feast prepared in honour of your union?" Hanamura offered. "I could easily whip something up that could send you to the pits of ecstasy, leaving you moan-"

"-Anyways," Koizumi ignored the cook, even as she stole one of Souda's screwdrivers to smack him over the head with. ("Hey, that's mine!") "Congratulations!"

"Oh, why don't you pose for a picture?" Hinata offered, pointing at Koizumi's camera. "It would be nice."

"Hey, why didn't anyone cheer with me yet?!" Ibuki demanded, still on her chair. "Come onnnnnnn, people! Don't you know how to celebrate!?"

"Maybe it should be a party..." Nanami mumbled, though most of her focus was on her game.

"Is no one going to ask us about it?" Fuyuhiko asked, leaning forward to whisper to Mikan.

"Just let them have their fun," Mikan turned around in her chair to whisper back. "I'm sure it'll be fun! It's always great to spend time with everyone!"

"There's only two people I want to spend time with," Fuyuhiko retorted.

"...who?"

"One's you, the other's my sister."

"Isn't your sister in the Reserve Course?" Mikan asked.

"She doesn't even care about that," Fuyuhiko grinned to himself as he recalled the memory. "Remember how she just showed up in my room? The security can't force her to leave, so she just goes wherever she wants."

"That feels like an abuse of power..." Mikan giggled a bit to herself, smiling at Fuyuhiko. "Will she show up to the party?"

"Maybe," Fuyuhiko replied cryptically. "Who knows if we'll be there, though."

"Huh? Where else would we be?" Mikan stared at Fuyuhiko in confusion.

"Who knows?" Fuyuhiko repeated, a grin on his face. "But I know a good cafe around here. You'll love it."

"Woah! You two lovebirds are going ahead, planning your first date?!" Mioda gaped at the pair, grinning widely. Fuyuhiko flinched when she addressed them, though Mikan just turned to face the
"Were you listening the entire time?!” Fuyuhiko demanded.

"Hehe, who knows?" Mioda winked at them. "You'll have to torture me to find out~!"

"Oh believe me, I will!" Fuyuhiko slammed his hands down on his desk as he stood, starting to march over to Mioda.

"FUYUHIKO-KUN!" Mikan pulled him back, wrapping her arms around his waist. She practically pulled Fuyuhiko onto her lap, though the blonde was still furious.

Unable to think of any other ideas, Mikan pressed a kiss to his cheek, eliciting cheers from the rest of the class (besides Saionji).

Fuyuhiko froze in her arms, slowly turning red.

"I can't fucking believe this..." Fuyuhiko grumbled, hiding his blushing face in his hands.

"Mikan-chan! Remember!" Koizumi exclaimed, earning an 'Oh, right!' from Mikan.

"Remember what-"

Mikan turned him around, not letting Fuyuhiko recover before she pressed a kiss to his lips.

"Ah, what's with this racket..." The teacher finally showed up, obviously hungover as he opened the door. He noticed the couple, before smiling in amusement. "I remember when I was that age... What a time to be young."

"Shut up, old man!" Saionji screamed. "No one cares about your youth speeches!"

"Yeah, everyone's busy planning their celebration party!" Mioda declared with a grin.

"Well, do whatever you want, I guess," The teacher shrugged, a carefree grin on his face.

When Mikan and Fuyuhiko separated, Fuyuhiko didn't waste a moment before standing, pulling Mikan up with him. He turned towards the teacher, shouting, "Old man! We're skipping today!"

"We are...?"

"Those idiots are gonna be too busy being excited over the party to learn, and the old man won't even bother trying to teach them," Fuyuhiko reasoned. "Why not skip then?"

"Think of it as a surprise party!" Mioda offered.

"Alright," Mikan smiled as she took Fuyuhiko's hand in hers.

"Have fun on your little date," The teacher waved them off, grinning.

Fuyuhiko pulled Mikan to the side of the door, barely out of the classroom's sight. He pulled Mikan down by the collar, smiling as he kissed her.

Mikan returned it in full, both the smile and the kiss.
Disappearance

"I don't get it," Hiyoko huffed. "You're pretty much famous. Why aren't people swarming around you, begging for autographs?"

"For some reason, people mistake me for a copycat or cosplayer," Ibuki frowned, pouting. "Which doesn't make any sense! How can I copy myself?! That's like... infinite loop-around! I copy myself copying myself copying myself copy-

"I get it already!" Hiyoko cried out, interrupting the never-ending sentence. "Seriously, never do that again."

"I'm never going to do what I'm never going to do what I'm never going to do what-

"STOP-"

"-never going- Oh, my phone's ringing, hold on," Ibuki paused, pulling Hiyoko towards a bus stop so she could answer the call. "Mioda Ibuki, lover, but not a fighter!"

"...she's gone..." Mikan whimpered from the other end of the call.

"Mikan-chan? Who's gone?" Ibuki's smile fell off her face, concern filling her eyes.

"C-C-Chiaki-san!" Mikan sobbed. "She's been missing s-since yesterday and I-we didn't notice!"

Ibuki froze. The oxygen was stolen from her lungs, terror coursing through her veins. While Mikan was crying, Ibuki felt completely empty with the realization. Like her cheerfulness had disappeared along with Chiaki.

"It's all... It's all my fault..."

Because... if Ibuki didn't force Mikan and Hiyoko to go to sleep, they would have been awake long enough to realize that Chiaki had been gone far longer than the duration of her 12-hour shift. And Chiaki couldn't have been lost, or run away, because why would Chiaki run from her home of games and snacks? And that woman must have had a GPS in her brain or something, because Chiaki never got lost. Ever. Even in other countries, the gamer could easily find the fastest route to their destination, completely at ease in foreign lands. So something had to have happened to her, and it was Ibuki's fault that they didn't notice-

"What the hell are you going on about?" Hiyoko demanded, though her voice held none of its usual annoyance. "What's your fault?"

"Chiaki is gone," Ibuki said simply, surprising herself with how hollow her voice sounded.

"She's dead?" Hiyoko gaped at Ibuki in shock, her voice surprisingly gentle.

"No, she's not dead!" Ibuki screamed, tears beginning to flow from her eyes. "We... we didn't notice her not coming...not coming home y-yesterday, because, because, it's all because of me!"

"Then what are you doing crying your ass off about it?!" Hiyoko demanded, pointing an accusing finger at Ibuki. "Call the fucking police, idiot!"

"O-oh, right! Right, right..." Ibuki blabbered, hanging up on Mikan and dialing the proper number, sniffling as she began talking into the phone.
Hiyoko watched the scene with concern in her eyes. She didn't know Nanami all that well, but a missing person case was definitely alarming. Especially since it was someone close to Mikan.

The effect on Mioda was obvious too. Mioda's bright smile and cheerful demeanor had practically shattered-

"Okie-dokie, Hiyo-chan! Let's get you to your work, super-duper fast!" Mioda exclaimed, putting away her phone with a bright grin.

"..." Hiyoko stared at the musician in shock, startled by how fast her attitude had spun around, only to reply with a succinct, "What the fuck?!"

It was like she hadn't even been crying in the first place! That redness could be mistaken for a byproduct of the cold, and the trail the tears left was quickly wiped away.

"I can't stay sad forever!" Mioda replied cheerily, eerily cheerily (oh hey that rhymed), as she pulled Hiyoko away from the bus stop, continuing the trek to Hiyoko's place of employment aka the convenience store that absolutely no one ever visited. "Come on, come on!"

Staying with Mioda was going to give her whiplash at this rate. With a sigh, Hiyoko gave up on trying to understand the musician and her mood swings.

(But she made a mental note to herself to make sure Mioda was okay later, just in case. But, it was only so Hiyoko wouldn't have to put up with a crying, blubbering asshole, got it?)

"Haven't we already established that I literally do not give a damn about murder mysteries?" Shibakuzo huffed, crossing her arms over her chest.

"Ah, I was actually hoping that question would lead into an explanation about the kidnapping, but I guess not," The former Simon head laughed as the pair walked together through the snow-covered streets.

"Are you going to explain or not, asshole?!" Shibakuzo demanded, before growling as she tugged at her multi-coloured hair in frustration. "Argh, if I knew you would be this wishy-washy, I wouldn't have followed you! Seriously, spit it out before I stab you in an alleyway!"

"I was planning on explaining it, but I do appreciate the added incentive," The former head smiled as Shibakuzo rolled her eyes. "Well, they say that the first step to resolving any crime is to establish a motive."

"Who in the history of when the fuck ever has said that?" Shibakuzo raised a dyed eyebrow at the words incredulously.

"I actually watched a documentary on forensic analysis. They even had the SHSL Detective and everything!" The former Yakuza boss rambled on excitedly, a dorky grin on their face. "She mentioned that every time, she needs to establish why someone would want to commit the crime before finding out how."

"What they would want, huh..." Shibakuzo pondered for a moment, before a rushing brunette nearly knocked her over. "Oi! Watch it, dumbass!"

"I-I'm sorry...!" The brunette whirled around, revealing the tears running down a familiar face.

"Tsumiki...?" Shibakuzo stared at the other woman in shock. "What the hell happened to you?"
"...one of my roommates is missing," Tsumiki sobbed, wiping at her face.

"Who is that?" The former Simon boss asked, turning to Shibakuzo, their voice quiet.

"Tsumiki Mikan," Shibakuzo hissed back, hoping that the wailing woman didn't overhear. "I'm pretty sure she's Fuyuhiko's girlfriend."

"Oh," The former head stared at Tsumiki with wide eyes, not saying a word.

"So... I hope you find them," Shibakuzo offered awkwardly. Tsumiki nodded, though she didn't seem to be listening all that much.

"Don't worry," The former Simon head placed a hand on Mikan's shoulder to calm her. "She'll show up soon."

Tsumiki nodded again, before bowing and thanking them for listening to her, walking off.

"Should we really let her go off on her own?" The former Simon head asked, staring at the brunette's retreating figure.

"Nah, we'll probably make the situation even worse," Shibakuzo stated, staring at her companion seriously. "Come on, I'm bored now."

The former Simon head was nothing short of baffled when Shibakuzo dragged them along, traversing a route she knew well to bring them both to an arcade.

Mioda wasn't there to pick her up when her shift ended, Hiyoko noticed. It wasn't that she wanted the musician to pick her up or anything, but Hiyoko was just a bit worried after Mioda's behaviour that morning.

The apartment was pretty much crushingly silent when Hiyoko entered. She wasn't sure if Mikan and Mioda were just in their rooms or absent, but... it felt haunting, to be alone in an apartment that used to house so much energy and love.

'...they must be feeling horrible,' Hiyoko sighed. The mopey atmosphere was getting to her too.

"Fucking hell," Hiyoko grumbled to herself, wheeling herself over to the kitchen. "I'll die if I spend a second around those depressing bastards! I have to get them to cheer up before their moping kills me!"

Her grumbling continued as she pulled random ingredients out of the drawers, determined to do something to change the mood. She would be crushed alive if this went on, for the second time in her life! And she was not looking forward to having the lower half of her body crushed again!

When Mikan and Mioda had returned from their police interviews, Hiyoko had blown up the oven.

"It was an accident!" Hiyoko huffed as Mikan wiped the batter off her face with a wet cloth. The nurse kept fretting over her, muttering things like 'please don't move', 'you'll be okay', trying to reassure Hiyoko even though she wasn't upset.

"If you knew you couldn't cook, you shouldn't have tried!" Mioda snapped, before forcing a smile on her face. "Oh-oh well! Ibuki will just have to clean up this mess! Maybe she'll turn this into a game, like-"
"Will you stop forcing yourself?!" Hiyoko demanded, glaring at the musician. "It's fucking obvious that you're upset! It's obvious to me, it's obvious to Mikan, and it's obvious to you! So why the hell are you pretending that you're not?!

"Hiyoko-san...!" Mikan tried to calm the ex-dancer down, only to be rebuked.

"No! I know I'm right, and she knows it too!" Hiyoko turned back to Mioda, balling her hands into fists at her sides. "Do you know why I tried to cook today, dumbass?! There was a reason, you know! I didn't just decide to try to cook for myself after a lifetime of being waited on, hand and foot!"

"What does that have anything to do with this?!" Ibuki retorted, pointing at Hiyoko accusingly.

"I did all of this," Hiyoko gestured widely to the mess around them, batter plastered all over the walls and floor and also Hiyoko, "because I knew, tonight, you and Mikan would be too depressed to cook!"

From the sidelines, Mikan's mouth fell open into a perfect oval, and her hand rested on her chest. She was touched that Hiyoko had been thinking of them.

Mioda stared at the blonde in shock, all anger and irritation disappearing from her expression. For once in her life, the musician was completely silent.

"Don't be so surprised," Hiyoko huffed, wondering why the hell the two looked like they had just seen a miracle along the lines of 'your comatose friend coming back to life after a decade of being a vegetable'.

"...thank you, Hiyoko-san," Mikan smiled for the first time since she heard the news. "Thank you so much!"

Mikan pulled the ex-dancer into a hug, repeating the words 'thank you' over and over, her voice eventually dissolving into meaningless sobs. With a subdued grin, Mioda joined the hug, spouting off promises of Nanami's return that were meant to reassure herself as much as the others.

'Idiots,' Hiyoko sighed, wrapping her arms around the grieving pair in return.

"You guys are freaking out over nothing," Hiyoko stated. "They'll find her, and they'll drag her back, whether she wants it or not." 'Even if she ran away.'

"Ha... you're right," Mioda smiled, pulling the two in her arms even closer to her.

"Of course I am," Hiyoko rolled her eyes, running her fingers through both Mikan and Mioda's hair. "Of course I am."

"Find her at all costs!" Souda Kazuichi roared, slamming his fist down on the table. The employees gathered around the table jumped at the noise, even more so when he pointed a trembling finger at them. The tears in his eyes did nothing to affect his volume as he yelled. "Chiaki is my pride and joy! She's a treasure among treasures, so find her! Or I'll cut all your paychecks in half!"

"Um... sir, is it possible that... she might have just gotten lost?" An employee asked, despite everyone in the vicinity (even Chihiro!) trying to stop the question from coming out.
"You think I would build my daughter and leave out a GPS?!" Kazuichi demanded angrily, completely offended. "She can't get lost, period! Chiaki has a map system that automatically updates every single hour! It doesn't matter if she's in Japan, Antarctica, or fucking Europe, she could find her way around with her eyes blindfolded!"

"Anyways!" Chihiro called out, interrupting Kazuichi before he could launch himself into one of his 'I'm so proud of her, she's amazing!' rants. "You have your orders. Carry them out immediately. You are all dismissed!"

"Yes sir!" The employees saluted, before rushing out of the room. Only Chihiro and Kazuichi were left.

"You aren't planning on going through with that threat, right?" Chihiro asked for confirmation. "They've already suffered enough pay cuts..."

"I don't care!" Kazuichi snapped, pointing at Chihiro too. "Shouldn't you be more concerned about this?!"

"You built her to be durable," Chihiro replied simply. "I doubt even a train crash could hurt her."

"T-that doesn't mean we should just let some pervert disassemble her, tear her apart, piece by piece, and mess with her innards!"

"You're the only one who could find something like that perverted..."

"Shut up!" Kazuichi froze upon realizing that his phone was ringing, clearing his throat so there was no evidence of distress in his voice. "'Ello?"

"Kazuichi, I know Chiaki is missing," Hajime stated, nearly eliciting a scream from the mechanic. How the fuck?! "I just want to say, the entire Kuzuryuu family is willing to help you look for her."

"Woah-woah, what?!" Kazuichi gaped, too many questions filling his mind just from those few words. His confusion manifested in the form of a lot of baffled 'what the fuck's.

"Fuyuhiko wanted to offer it to you himself, but he also said he was annoyed by you, so he made me do it," Hajime sighed. His words only brought up even more questions.

"Well, I'm going to hack into the traffic cameras," Chihiro said, standing up with a huff. "I'll tell you if I find anything useful."

Kazuichi wondered when the fucking heck his life got so complicated. And confusing. And when the Yakuza showed up.

He concluded that high school was the root of all his problems. Possibly elementary school too.

"Oh fuck you!" Shibakuzo roared, nearly snapping the plastic gun in half. "Why the hell are you so good at shooting games?!"

"Well, it's easier than using a real gun," The former Simon head smiled, collecting the tickets pouring out of the machine.

"Shut up!" Shibakuzo glared at the large amount of tickets in the former boss's hands. It got to the point that they had to stuff the tickets in their pockets and even get Shibakuzo to hold some for them. Shibakuzo rolled her eyes, groaning. "And here I was, hoping that I could blow off some
steam before talking to you! This is just pissing me off even more!"

"You wanted to talk to me?" The former Simon head asked, before grinning. "About what?"

"I-I was just thinking," Shibakuzo huffed. "About...what you said about motives. Reasons why someone would want to kidnap Kuzuryuu's wife."

"Alright," The ex-boss nodded, listening intently to Shibakuzo's words.

"And I realized..." Shibakuzo's face darkened as she went on, eyes downcast. "The first person you would suspect... is someone with a grudge against that family. Someone who had lost everything because of them. Power, money, authority... You get what I'm trying to say, right? I don't need to spell it out for you?"

"It's crystal clear," The former Simon head answered, still wearing that same gentle smile. "Looks like you've caught me."
"Hey!" The woman snapped, getting into a fighting stance as she stared the man down. "You're not the Kuzuryuu head."

"I'm a representative," Fuyuhiko said with a smirk. "Shouldn't the heir be good enough?"

"Do you think I'm an idiot?!" Fuyuhiko had to bite back the 'yes' on his tongue. "You're obviously trying to trick me!"

"Look, as much as I'd like to discuss this deception at length, I'm in a rush," Fuyuhiko sighed, pulling out his pistol. "So tell me exactly what your employer wants, before I start playing target practice."

"I won't say anything! I'm loyal to the family!" The woman screamed defiantly... which only put another smirk on Fuyuhiko's face.

"So you work for another family, huh..." Fuyuhiko watched as the woman shifted nervously, moving into a defensive stance. But she was completely unarmed. "You don't have a gun or anything?"

"Shut up!" The would-be negotiator growled. Fuyuhiko just pointed his pistol towards her to get her to stay still.

"What kind of family wouldn't even properly equip their members..." Fuyuhiko regarded the woman with a bit of pity in his eye. That pity disappeared as he put his gun away, snapping his fingers with his other hand. "Whatever. I don't have time to deal with you. Peko!"

"Guh-!" The lady jumped as a knife was suddenly pointed at her throat, the assailant coming from behind. "The letter said you had to meet me alone!"

"And what can you do about it now?" Fuyuhiko asked cheekily, before turning to his companion. "You know where to take her."

"Of course, Young Master," Peko nodded, before quickly knocking the would-be negotiator unconscious.

As time went on, Mikan and Mioda got even worse. They would have forgotten to eat most of their meals if it weren't for Hiyoko constantly badgering Mikan to cook something. Their phones were constantly within arm's reach, always visible. The pair were jumpy every time the phone rang or someone knocked on the door, only to be disappointed and downtrodden when it wasn't news about Nanami.

No one even went near Nanami's room. When Christmas came, the two just left their gifts in front of the gamer's door, unable to celebrate anything when one of their best friends was missing.

Hiyoko couldn't even pretend to be annoyed anymore.

"Are you sure you still want to do this?" Hiyoko asked, openly showing her concern.

"Of course," Mioda answered. She was smiling, but it was more bittersweet than the bright and energetic grins Hiyoko saw before. "I don't want to disappoint my growing fanbase."
"Don't be so arrogant," Hiyoko huffed, rolling her eyes.

"Not arrogant if it's true," Mioda countered, her grin growing warmer.

"Glad to see you're feeling better."

Both Hiyoko and Mioda froze, shocked by how genuine the blonde's words were.

"Ahaha! You don't need to worry about me!" Mioda laughed, and for once, it wasn't completely aggravating.

"I can see that," Hiyoko said simply, a small grin on her face.

"Oho ho ho! It's the first time I've ever seen a non-creepy smile on your face!" Mioda exclaimed, leaning towards Hiyoko. Hiyoko hurriedly shoved Mioda's face away, grumbling.

"And it's the fucking last time, got it?!"

"Ah... you're so energetic," Mikan smiled as she watched the scene, already holding her bag.

"Oh, Mikan! There you are!" Mioda immediately abandoned Hiyoko to run up to Mikan. "Are you sure you don't want to come to the concert? Because there's lots of good food! And you'll have fun!"

"She's terrified of your music and horrible with crowded places," Hiyoko countered the words on Mikan's behalf.

"Um... I'm sorry, Ibuki-san," Mikan frowned, her eyes downcast. "But I don't think I could go. I have a shift tomorrow, so I can't stay up..."

"But still!" Mioda huffed, her hands on her hips as she pouted. "Letting you stay with Fuyu-chan seems like a horrible idea!"

Hiyoko's jaw dropped. "She's what?!"

"Haven't you heard?!" Mioda turned to the ex-dancer, already in 'gossiping mother' mode. "He invited her to stay the night in her time of need! What a knight in shining armour!"

"He's just trying to get laid, isn't he?!"

"What are you talking about?" Mikan asked innocently, staring at the pair in concern.

"Are you sure?" Mioda popped up in front of Mikan again, grabbing the nurse's hands as she continued babbling. "This is your last chance, so are you sure that you want to? Like one hundred percent, completely, totally, super sure?!!"

"Y-yes!" Mikan nodded. "I'm sorry, but... I would feel safer there than at home alone or at your concert."

"Well, fine..." Mioda pouted, deflating a bit. "But I'll be sure to bring back things for you!"

"Is Kuzuryuu coming to pick you up, or should we walk you there?" Hiyoko asked, before adding, "Mioda, I know I can't walk, shut up!"

"I wasn't saying anything!"
"You were about to, weren't you?!

"Er, Fuyuhiko-kun is coming to pick me up," Mikan offered timidly, not wanting to intervene in... whatever Mioda and Hiyoko's squabbling could be called.

A knock came on the door, startling all of them.

"That's gotta be him..." Hiyoko grumbled, still unwilling to hand Mikan over to that tiny midget.

"I'll see you tomorrow!" Mikan smiled as she waved, only to be pulled into a hug by Mioda.

"Come back safely, okay?" Mioda said pleadingly. Her voice was devoid of all the energy she had just moments before, becoming dead serious in her desperation.

"Of course, Ibuki-san," Mikan returned the hug, before turning towards the door. "Goodbye!"

"See you!" Hiyoko waved, having to elbow Mioda into doing the same. She scowled at the musician, rolling her eyes. "She'll be fine, moron. Get ready for your concert already."

"Got it," Mioda nodded, giving Hiyoko a thumbs-up before retreating to her room.

'What a fucking idiot,' Hiyoko sighed wearily. 'But at least she's getting better.'

"Even though you said you weren't good at mystery games, you managed to figure that out fast!"
The former Simon head beamed with pride.

"You... you're not mad or anything?" Shibakuzo asked in stunned disbelief. "You're not going to say 'you ruined my plan! Curse you!' or anything like that?"

"Not really," The former Simon head shrugged. "To be honest, I'm more relieved than anything."

"...why?"

"Well, I guess I thought you would understand. You would do anything for your family, right?"

"T-that has nothing to do with it!"

"Doesn't it have everything to do with this? I did this to save my family. You can understand that, right?"

"But! Doing something like that... that's dishonourable!" Shibakuzo protested. "If you want your family to regain their status, do it honourably!"

"If we did it honourably, we would be killed," The former boss's smile faltered for the first time since the truth came out, concern and fear showing in their face. "I... I can't fail them twice like that."

"Do you really think you can go up against the biggest Yakuza family in Japan and not die? You think you can take the heir's..." Shibakuzo trailed off, eyes widening as she realized something. "The wife...? But... we saw Tsumiki...?!"

"Haha... that's kind of what happens when there are two big-breasted brunettes in the same building." The former Simon head laughed gently.

"What?! What's wrong with you?! You got a completely innocent person involved?!" Shibakuzo's
horror turned into anger, glaring up at the former Simon boss with genuine fury for the first time since she met them. "Do you even take pride in your position as a Yakuza?! You-

"I don't have a position as a Yakuza," The former boss cut through Shibakuzo's words with a smile. It was bitter and resentful, to the point of poisoning their words, but it was a smile nonetheless. "Not yet, at least."

"This... this isn't right! Aren't you supposed to follow the codes, just like everyone else?!!"

"Shikabane," The former head said seriously, addressing the woman by name for the first time since they met. "It's not a matter of following the code or rules. It's for my family. Wouldn't you do the same thing?"

"I...?"

"It's fine if you don't have an answer," The former Simon boss smiled genuinely, patting Shibakuzo on the head. "But once you find your answer, meet me in the basement of the movie theater."

Shibakuzo stared at their retreating back, unable to say a word as doubts began clawing at her mind.

'Doing anything for your family...'

Late at night, a trio traversed the snow-covered streets together. A brunette wearing a long trenchcoat leaned on one woman, his arm flung over her shoulder, while the other woman walked off to their side, slightly away from the group. The woman separated from the pair had tied her hair into twin braids, crossing her arms over her chest.

"I can't believe this!" The twintailed woman huffed, annoyed. "Getting drunk at this time... you're completely useless."

"S-" The brunette hiccuped, his eyes unfocused. "Sorry..."

"Ugh, where should we bring him?" Miss Twintails turned towards the other woman.

"Over here," The other woman pulled the brunette towards an apartment, sighing. She guided them towards a basement, opening the unlocked door for them.

The moment the trio got inside, the twintailed woman and the brunette's demeanor changed immediately.

The silver-haired woman shed all signs of irritation, instead becoming serious and silent, while the brunette removed the hidden knife from the other woman's throat, yawning as he stretched out his back. They had dropped their acts.

"Doesn't seem like a place they could keep Chiaki," Hajime noted, staring at all the boxes and dust.

"Hajime, my sword," Peko said simply, her intuition screaming at her to prepare for a fight. She knew they shouldn't have trusted that woman!

"Sorry, won't that ruin everyone's fun?" The other woman smirked arrogantly as she opened the door, revealing the crowd of gunmen behind her.

"Of course it's an ambush," Hajime sighed, tossing off his coat. Peko quickly grabbed the sword
from the case on his back, before charging towards the army on the other side of the door.
"Hey, Fuyuhiko, she's not here," Hajime said into his phone, cautiously stepping over the crowd of unconscious gunmen to avoid stepping on any body parts.

Peko wasn't nearly as considerate, stepping on toes and fingers without caring about their pain. Though... that might have been the part where these unconscious people had just tried to kill them.

"I won't tell you anything!" The woman screamed defiantly as Peko tied her up, staring at her intensely.

"You don't have a choice," Peko stated, slowly showing her sword to the woman.

"Correction: I can't tell you anything!" The woman cried out, her voice switching from defiant to desperate in a second. "My job was just to get you off my employer's tail for a few days! I don't know anything!"

"I see," Peko nodded, standing and brushing the dust off her clothes. "We should get back to Fuyuhiko-kun, then."

"What do we do with Owari?" Hajime gestured to the woman, making her flinch.

"H-h-how do you know my name?!" Owari demanded, staring at Hajime in fear.

"I know your sister, Akane," Hajime said nonchalantly. "You're... Midori, right?"

"...and why the hell should I tell you?!"

"Because we're dropping you off at her place," Hajime stated. "And she would beat me up for getting your name wrong."

"Won't she get mad that we tied up her sister?" Peko asked.

"Nah, I'll tell Akane that she was trying to trespass and it was the only way to keep her from getting arrested," Hajime shrugged.

"No, no!" Owari wailed. "She'll ground me for months! Please! Spare me!"

"Sorry, no can do," Hajime retorted with a wry grin.

"There's no way I'm letting you sleep in my room," Natsumi huffed, crossing her arms over her chest.

"U-um... Do you have a guest room then...?" Mikan asked timidly.

"If you mean you want to sleep with the cat, go right ahead."

"Okay, thank you-"

"What?! No!" Natsumi exclaimed suddenly, growling at the nurse. "That was not the right answer! You were supposed to be like 'hell fucking no, I am not sleeping with your fucking cat, bitch'-."

"But I'm fine with that-"
"No you are not!" Natsumi snapped. "You are supposed to go 'oh, well, what other options do I have?' and then I offer Fuyuhiko's room or my parents' room, except my parents' room isn't an option because they would crush you alive and-

"I'm o-okay with sleeping with the cat!"

"Do you want to be crushed alive?! Or shipped off to space?! Because that's what I'm going to fucking do to you!" Natsumi threatened, glaring at the nurse.

"E-eep! Please forgive me! P-please don't k-kill me!" Mikan pleaded, clasping her hands together to beg for mercy.


"E-eh?! Won't he b-b-be uncomfortable w-with that?!

"Trust me, he won't mind," Natsumi left out the 'if anything, he'll enjoy it'. Rolling her eyes, she began shooing Mikan away, even making little 'shoo shoo' noises.

Natsumi sighed as Mikan nervously moved past her, heading towards the bedrooms.

'There's no way I can have the patience to hear her out... Fuyuhiko, you better make her feel better, or I'll hang you and drag your body through the streets!'

---

Natsumi was very good at persuading Fuyuhiko to agree with her idea. It might have had something to do with how she kept saying the words 'You're the only one who can help her'. But no matter how charismatic Natsumi was, Fuyuhiko was beginning to wonder if he could help Mikan at all.

She had been extremely quiet even since she entered the room, wordlessly dropping her bag on top of the extra futon. The space between them felt insurmountable, even though it was just a few steps.

Fuyuhiko wanted to help, but... how?

Suddenly a sob broke the silence. Mikan began to tremble as tears ran down her face.

"Mikan?"

The brunette stared at Fuyuhiko, her lips wobbling as she cried. "I-I'm sorry..."

"You didn't do anything wrong," Fuyuhiko stated. "You didn't know that she would disappear."

"But... but...!"

"You can tell me."

"...okay," Mikan nodded, whimpering. "Is it too m-much to ask...? C-can I... can I have a hug?"

Without another word, Fuyuhiko walked up to her, wrapping his arms around the taller woman. Even though she was several centimeters taller than him, she rested her head on Fuyuhiko's shoulder, grabbing at his clothes as she cried.

"What if she d-doesn't come back?!" Mikan wailed, desperately clutching at Fuyuhiko. "What-
what if h-he'll be gone for years?! Decades! O-or... if she... if he comes back... and-and he's someone completely d-different? After b-being gone for so long, wouldn't a-anyone become a completely different person?"

"Mikan? Are you still talking about Nanami?" Fuyuhiko asked carefully, not wanting to upset her even more.

"I-! Um, yes- no, E-er! Um..." Mikan cried out in distress. "I don't know! Both of them!"

"Both?"

"C-Chiaki-san... and my father," Mikan confessed. "I'm talking about both of them."

"What's going on?" Kotoko stared at the TV in confusion, wincing as Ibuki missed another note. The musician's smile was strained and obviously forced, which didn't fit at all with her usual performances. "Is she pulling some sort of 'Halfassed' gimmick or something?"

"No!" Nagisa said immediately, his worried eyes fixated on his sister's performance. "She must be sick or something. There's no way Ibuki would do anything halfway!"

"I-I'm sorry..." Ibuki stopped her song suddenly, dropping her false smile. "I thought I could do this, but... I don't think I can perform."

"Ibuki...?"

"I'm not going on hiatus or anything!" Ibuki exclaimed onscreen, trying backtrack, before frowning. She crossed her arms over her chest, but... it looked more like she was hugging herself, trying to provide comfort for herself. "One of my best friends, my roommate... she's been missing for a week now."

Nagisa's eyes widened in shock, immediately paling.

"Nagisa?" Kotoko turned to her blue-haired friend, staring at him in concern. "You okay?"

"..." Nagisa sighed tiredly, grimacing.

"I... I should have known!" The musician cried out, tears beginning to roll down her face. Almost immediately, the crowd began screaming things like 'It's not your fault!' and 'Don't worry!', but Ibuki continued, her grief drowning out all other noises. "It's-It's all... it's all my fault... I should have... I f-failed her..."

"That idiot," Nagisa growled, gritting his teeth at the scene.

"Huh?"

"She's always had a habit of bottling up her emotions and letting herself burst at the worst times!" Nagisa exclaimed, trying his best to be annoyed, even when concern was obvious in his tone. "I can't believe her..."

Kotoko couldn't think of anything to say to that, before suddenly asking, "Do you think she'll feel better if she gets cookies?"

Nagisa froze, before laughing at the words. Not repressed chuckling or mocking snickering, outright laughter. He smiled at Kotoko, relieved that she would bring up that option.
"Yes. Yes she would."

"They're-they're both missing, but my father has been m-missing for almost twenty y-years now," Mikan sighed bitterly, obviously pained by bringing up those memories. "My mother... she was a policewoman, a-and she never gave up o-on finding him alive. She was a-always throwing herself into the search... and every t-time she got reckless and got hurt, I had to patch h-her up. Even though... even though the other officers told her that t-there's no way he's alive, even if- even if the chances of s-someone being dead after being missing... for three days, I think? They're almost...almost always dead after three days."

Mikan shook her head, relaxing her grip on Fuyuhiko. Even if she was still clinging to him like a lifeline, she seemed... a bit more at peace, at least.

"Mikan, I'm sorry," Fuyuhiko's voice was uncharacteristically quiet, guilt evident in every word.

"Huh?" Mikan lifted her head from Fuyuhiko's shoulder to stare at him in confusion. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm the reason why Nanami was kidnapped," Fuyuhiko confessed. "And they were probably going after you."

"What...?" Mikan's eyes widened in shock, staring at Fuyuhiko in disbelief. "You... You what?"

"Another family wants to get something from us. I don't know what it is, but they went after 'my wife'," Fuyuhiko would have sighed and grumbled about Natsumi lying to everyone if the situation weren't so dire. As it was, he just continued explaining, unable to look Mikan in the eye. "And as long as you're with me, it might happen again. People trying to kidnap you or kill you to get to me. People torturing you for information. Other families going after your friends to break you."

Mikan's shock turned to horror and panic as Fuyuhiko finished, concluding his explanation with, "If you don't want that... If you really want to live a normal life, you should stay away from me."

'Stay... away...?'

Fuyuhiko had accidentally struck at Mikan's greatest fear. A fear that had been born from a father that might have run away, a mother who grew reckless and frustrated and angry and distant, a best friend turned tormentor, a loving girlfriend turned into a despair-inducing monster, a fear born from a lifetime of being abandoned and betrayed.

"No, no, what did I do wrong!" Mikan shrieked, her grip on Fuyuhiko tightening desperately. She pulled him even closer when faced with the threat of being separated. "D-don't leave! Don't!"

"I'm not going anywhere!" Fuyuhiko declared, before softening his voice. He had to be calm, or else they would both end up spiralling into hysteria. "I'm leaving the choice up to you."

"You just want to abandon me!" Mikan screamed accusingly, sobs erupting from her throat. "L-like Dad and Hiyoko-s-san a-and...!"

"That's not it!" Fuyuhiko sighed, his voice becoming mournful as he went on. "I love you. I really do. But as much as I would love to spend the rest of eternity with you, I can't stand the thought of you dying. Or even getting hurt," Fuyuhiko grimaced, remembering an almost-empty hospital room and a bullet wound much too close to the heart. "As long as you're safe and happy... as long as you keep living life with a smile on your face, even if I'm not around...I'll be fine with that."
"That's... that's basically the same thing..." Mikan wept despondently. Her eyes were facing the floor, but she wasn't focusing at all, lost in her grief. "I don't want... I don't want to lose you...! If I lost you, or anyone else, e-ever again...! T-that would be- That would be worse than death for me!"

"Mikan, breathe," Fuyuhiko reminded the nurse. He could feel her chest expand and contract, Mikan's sobs slowing down until they were just hiccups in the silence. After a few minutes of simply holding Mikan close, he spoke again.

"Mikan. I'm part of the Yakuza," Fuyuhiko said seriously. "I might be killed tomorrow, or the day after that, or the day after that. People die around me, day after day. You might be one of those people. That's just the world I live in. Are you..." A bit of doubt crept into his voice. "Are you sure you're okay with that?"

"Yes!" Mikan exclaimed immediately, her head snapping up to stare into Fuyuhiko's eye. "O-of course I'm sure about it! As long as I'm w-with you... I'll be happy."

"I mean... that's nice and all, but consider your safety, goddammit!" Fuyuhiko huffed, almost glaring at Mikan. 'Almost', since he couldn't actually muster up the anger and/or annoyance to do a proper glare. Then he frowned, averting his eyes guiltily. "I wouldn't be able to forgive myself if you got hurt. And as long as you're with me, you're in danger."

"Is there a way that I could be with you and still be safe?" Mikan asked, smiling slightly as she recalled the man in her arms snapping at her to split the damn bill in annoyance. "A compromise seems like a good idea."

"Hm, you could live with us," Fuyuhiko suggested, completely serious. He was thinking more of how to protect Mikan than the implications of his offer. "You'll constantly be surrounded by gunmen, the best swordswoman in all of Japan, Natsumi, Hajime, and me."

"Would you really let me do that...?" Mikan gaped in awe at Fuyuhiko's generosity.

"Um... yeah...?" Fuyuhiko stretched out the words, hurriedly hiding his face in Mikan's shoulder so she didn't see his blush. He finally realized the implications of, you know, inviting this woman to fucking live with him. "But maybe we should discuss better options first. Uh, just to be sure."

"Okay," Mikan quickly removed an arm from around Fuyuhiko's shoulders to wipe at her face, before returning it to its previous position, just as quickly.

"Maybe we could teach you how to fight," Fuyuhiko offered, imagining a battle-torn Mikan swinging around knives without a trace of fear on her face. He hurriedly tried to dismiss the thought, because he did not need to imagine things that made Mikan even more attractive.

(Key word: Tried. The idea would stick with him for a while, haunting his dreams and plaguing his imagination for days to come.)

"I don't think I would actually be able to hurt you..." Mikan muttered. "Not unless I drugged you or something."

"That's why you're getting training then," Fuyuhiko retorted, grinning. "So you can learn how to beat someone like me without drugs."

"Maybe after fifty years," While Mikan had meant the words completely seriously, Fuyuhiko thought it was a joke, laughing at her words. The joyful laugh managed to put a smile on her face as well, tears and worries completely forgotten just from being in each other's presence.
"I'm sorry, I-I swear... you'll all get a r-refund...!" Ibuki cried out, collapsing to her knees. Her tears didn't stop, even with the crowd yelling encouragement at her.

"HEY, IDIOT, WHAT'S YOUR ROOMMATE'S NAME?!" Hiyoko demanded from the crowd, forcing herself to be as loud as possible to be heard over the audience. Even with the people around her shushing her to prevent her from upsetting the musician, she didn't give a fuck. "MAYBE SOMEONE IN THE AUDIENCE KNOWS SOMETHING ABOUT IT, AND YOU DIDN'T CONSIDER IT BECAUSE YOU'RE TOO BUSY BLAMING YOURSELF FOR THE ENTIRE GODDAMN THING!"

"H-huh...?" Ibuki paused, staring in shock at the area the blonde's voice came from. Just before the mob could have lynched Hiyoko for being a bitch, Ibuki jumped to her feet, hope gleaming in her eyes. A genuine grin appeared on her face. "You... surprisingly enough, you're right! Thank you!"

"Her name is Nanami Chiaki!" Ibuki exclaimed. "She has a really famous let's play channel, or whatever it's called, and me and Mikan show up in her videos a lot!" Ibuki paused, before adding, "Mikan is the third of our roommate trio. We...We've all been together for what, six years now?"

"Ha..." Ibuki's smile turned a bit bittersweet, staring off to the distance as she remembered a daily life she might never be able to attain again. "We... we were always admiring how well Chiaki played her games... Seriously, she had a reaction speed better than a cheetah!" Ibuki laughed to herself, even though it was obvious she was only barely holding her tears back. "She was incredible."

"Er, was? Did I say 'was'? I meant 'is'! Haha, present tense!" Ibuki corrected as she grinned widely, her cheerful demeanor returning all of a sudden. It was hard to say how much of it was real or not. "Silly me! Anyways, sorry to waste your time with all this crying and junk. I'm gonna pack my bags and go, you should too! See ya!"

Ibuki rushed off the stage suddenly, leaving the crowd in an uproar.

'That fucking dumbass!' Hiyoko scowled, slamming her fist down on the armrest of her wheelchair. 'What the fucking hell does she think she's fucking pulling?!!'

Hiyoko had to wait for the idiot to show herself, long after the audience had trickled out, leaving no one but Hiyoko, a few stragglers, and the staff in the hallways.

"What the hell were you thinking?!!" Hiyoko glared at the musician, gritting her teeth together as she pointed at Mioda accusingly. "I asked you if you were okay doing this concert, and you said 'oh, I'll be fine! Don't worry about me!' You fucking liar!"

"I thought I was fine!" Mioda countered defensively, before the energy bled out of her system. Her shoulders slumped as she stared at the floor, a small frown on her face. "I...I thought that maybe singing might help."

"So much for that," Hiyoko rolled her eyes dismissively. "Come on, we're leaving."

"Ah, you probably want to go home-

"Nope, we're getting ice cream," Hiyoko stated. "I'm paying, and I will literally punch your guts out if you say otherwise."

"Huh...? Seriously?" Mioda stared at the blonde in stunned shock.
"Don't be so fucking surprised!" Hiyoko retorted automatically. "Argh, look, do you want free comfort ice cream or not?!"

"Of course I do!" Mioda exclaimed with a grin.

"I thought so," Hiyoko smirked, secretly glad that Mioda was ever-so-slightly back to normal.

"Heh, you're a surprisingly good person," Ibuki mumbled to herself as she went to push Hiyoko's wheelchair.

"Did you say something just now?"

"Nothing."

Shibakuzo kept staring at the screen, even long after the concert had ended. The musician's words stuck with her, bringing back memories of the basement the former Simon head had shown her.

Her stomach twisted with guilt at the recollection, not for the first time. Shibakuzo remembered how disgusted she felt, seeing the woman bound up and gagged, not with the surroundings or the hostage before her, but with how Shibakuzo was so close to her, and how she could have saved her, but didn't.

'I wonder... if that woman had friends and family like that,' Shibakuzo sighed to herself. 'People who miss her dearly and blame themselves and want her back safely...'

Shibakuzo grimaced, the thought summoning another stab of guilt.

'I could have... I could have ended their pain just then,' Shibakuzo realized. 'I could have freed her and returned her to her family...! I...'

Stupid, sickening, spineless... Shibakuzo's list of insults and put-downs grew longer and longer the more she dwelt on the topic, but... what was the point of calling herself names? It... it just made her feel worse, and it didn't help anyone.

'It's obvious what I have to do,' Shibakuzo smiled slightly, the answer perfectly clear to her in that moment. If she wanted to help that woman, her family, and stop feeling so guilty... then it was unmistakable.

She had to do the right thing.

...even if she had no idea how to do that.

The two had laid their futons side-by-side, close enough to touch as they tried to get some sleep.

But Mikan had a question on her mind, and no matter how much she tried to convince herself to forget it and let Fuyuhiko sleep, she couldn't get the idea out of her head.

"Um... Fuyuhiko-kun... Are you awake?" Mikan asked cautiously, turning towards him.

"Yeah," Fuyuhiko gave up on trying to count sheep and faced Mikan. He figured that talking to her might be a better remedy for insomnia than counting sheep. "Do you need me to show you to the kitchen or something?"

"No... but, uh, do you think that..." Mikan sighed, her voice becoming much more morose as she
asked the question. "Do you think that Chiaki-san is still alive?"

"Of course," Fuyuhiko said casually. "What kind of idiot kills the hostage before negotiations even start?"

Mikan nodded, making a small sound of affirmation.

"She'll be fine," Fuyuhiko stated. "Trust me."

Mikan smiled, beaming in the dark room.

Her worries, her fears, her insecurities... she could trust Fuyuhiko with them. She could always depend on him. And for once, Mikan knew that the relationship went both ways. He depended on her to restrain his temper and trust with his worries. They trusted each other, depended on each other, loved...

Well... the love part might have been a lie.

Mikan... she wasn't sure if she could call it love, really. Wasn't it just an obsession?

She wanted Fuyuhiko to stay with her at all costs, even if she had to commit inexcusable crimes for that to happen. Mikan wanted him to love her, to forgive anything that she did, to continue wanting her around. She wanted to be special to him, since apparently, being his friend wasn't good enough. To make him to love her above all others.

But that was how Mikan felt towards Enoshima.

The same Enoshima that manipulated her and took advantage of her and tricked her and lied and-

Mikan knew that Fuyuhiko would never do that. She trusted him. She believed in him, but...

That meant Mikan was the one responsible for those feelings. She was completely and utterly obsessed with the idea. If she couldn't hide those impure feelings, it would poison everything. Their friendship would be completely shattered.

She couldn't have that. No, no, that would be worse than death, that would be worse than everyone around her dropping dead! Mikan couldn't lose anyone else! Never again, never, ever again!

"Mikan?" Fuyuhiko stared at her in concern, his voice cutting through her hysteric thoughts. "Are you okay?"

"I...yes," Mikan nodded, her smile returning. Fuyuhiko was amazing. He could calm her down in an instant, just by being there.

And that was why she couldn't afford to lose him.

"You know, this is technically a birthday present," Ibuki noted as she licked her ice cream.

"No it's not," Hiyoko countered in an instant. "Don't think I didn't notice Mikan and Nanami handing you presents a month ago."

"Wow, you're more observant than I thought!" Ibuki exclaimed with a grin. "I would have thought for sure that you would have missed that!"

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?!"
"It means that you surprised me with your good qualities!" Ibuki winked at the blonde, lifting a finger off her ice cream cone to point at the blonde.

"E-er, of course you were surprised!" Hiyoko puffed out her chest with pride, even though she was turning red, even in the heated food court. "I'm really amazing!"

"Yeah, yeah, you really are!" Ibuki agreed, earning an even deeper blush from the ex-dancer.

"Heh, since I'm feeling generous, I'll buy you anything you want on the way home!" Hiyoko declared, earning a cheer from Ibuki.

'She really was nicer than I gave her credit for...' Ibuki frowned, pausing.

"What the hell's up with you? Finish your damn ice cream already, I'm getting impatient."

'Or maybe not.'

"Wowsers, you're like one of those old ladies in line who can't wait for five seconds before yelling at the staff."

"WHAT THE FUCK IS THAT SUPPOSED TO MEAN, DAMMIT?!"

"Nothing, nothing."

"LIES!"

When Fuyuhiko woke up, he was alone.

The only sign that Mikan had ever been there was the bag near the wall. She had already cleaned up the futon she used, and she was probably just in the washroom or eating breakfast or something.

With a yawn, he stood up, stretching.

"Wait-!" Out of the corner of his eye, Fuyuhiko spotted something. Without a moment of hesitation, he rushed towards Mikan's bag, grabbing the envelope resting on top of it.

His eye widened with horror as he ripped open the manila envelope. Black-and-white pictures spilled onto the floor, showing two women, tied up in some basement somewhere. One of the pictures was a close-up on Mikan's unconscious face, a gag stuffed into her mouth. Large words were scrawled across the length of the image;

'GOT THE RIGHT ONE THIS TIME'
To say Fuyuhiko was shaken would be a severe understatement.

It was understandable, of course. Someone he loved, disappearing while he was in the room? Finding those photos, the words written seeming to mock him? Knowing that he could have stopped the disappearance- no, kidnapping if only he had been awake?

It was all too easy to see why the Yakuza heir was freaking out in this situation.

"We have to find her!" Fuyuhiko declared, not thinking about much beyond Mikan's safety. "I don't fucking care if we have to tear this city apart-"

"Fuyuhiko," Peko said sharply, cutting through Fuyuhiko's panic in an instant. "You need to calm down."

"She's right," Hajime agreed calmly as he searched the contents of Mikan's bag. He was completely unfazed as he pulled drugs out from the sack. "We won't find her by going on a wild goose chase."

"Then what do you suggest?" Fuyuhiko demanded harshly, obviously still on edge from the situation.

"Gather everyone in one room," Hajime instructed. "And I mean everyone. The staff, your parents, Natsumi, everyone in the building. I'll investigate with Peko."

"Got it," Fuyuhiko moved to leave the room, before pausing in front of the door. "I'm trusting your judgement, so you better be right."

"Of course I am," Hajime nodded with a grin.

"Don't be so arrogant," And with that, Fuyuhiko left, leaving Peko and Hajime in the bedroom.

"What did you find?" Peko inquired, kneeling down to watch Hajime search the bag.

"I'm not entirely sure," Hajime stated, holding up a clear vial half-filled with some strange, light blue liquid. "I'm not sure what this does, and I'm not sure I want to find out. Meanwhile..." Hajime pulled out a small plastic bag, containing a syringe and a bottle of pills. "I'm pretty sure these are sleeping pills."

"Did she bring those?" Peko's eyes widened in shock, wondering if Mikan had been plotting something-

"Probably," Hajime stated with a sigh. "She probably brought it in case there was an insomniac here. Or if she had trouble sleeping."

"Oh," Peko frowned, feeling a bit guilty about assuming the worst.

"She usually does stuff like that," Hajime mused, noticing that the syringe had its tip broken off before putting all the medicine away. "Crackers in case someone is feeling seasick, ice packs on a hot summer day, bandages for scrapes and cuts... she was really thoughtful."

"Tsumiki-san will be alright," Peko offered, trying to comfort Hajime in wake of his friend's disappearance...in her own awkward, socially-stunted way.
"Heh," Hajime smiled at the silver-haired swordswoman. ". . .thanks."

"Mnnrgh..." Mikan groaned as she woke up, blinking her eyes open. It didn't take her more than a few seconds to realize that there was something stuffed in her mouth, unwelcome and unwanted. The ball of fabric was quickly spat out on the floor, Mikan recovering with a few hasty coughs.

"Oh, you're awake," A familiar voice noted from next to her.

"Chiaki-san! You're okay!" Mikan grinned in relief, turning to face her friend-Only to stop as she realized that something was holding her back.

"Huh?" Mikan tried her best to look behind her, but she couldn't see her hands behind her back. Every movement caused *something* to chafe against her wrists, along with the rattling of chains.

"Handcuffs?" Mikan frowned, still trying to see what was restraining her hands.

"Pretty much," Chiaki shrugged, sitting with her legs crossed.

Mikan looked around, taking care not to move around and jostle her chains too much.

The two of them were in some sort of basement, the wet concrete floors and the insulation-packed walls were proof of that. The smell of mold and dirt permeated the room, making Mikan gag. The only source of light was a single light bulb on the ceiling, a cord hanging down next to it. Mikan and Chiaki were sitting right next to the decrepit stairs, infuriatingly close to the exit.

"Do you know where we are?" Mikan asked, trying to turn toward Chiaki.

"Nope."

Well... at least Chiaki was honest?

"I've been here for a few days now," Chiaki stated. "All I really know is that people leave food for me every couple of hours and let me go to the washroom if I ask."

"Maybe we-"

"There's always a guard right outside the door, and there aren't any windows on the way there," Chiaki added, destroying Mikan's suggestion before she could even finish her sentence. "Actually, it's a one-way trip to the washroom, so even if you ask, you won't get out unless you beat up the guard."

Mikan *knew* it wasn't the time, but...

"You can go to the washroom? How?"

"..." Chiaki stared at her seriously, a shadow coming out of nowhere to fall over the top half of her face. That only made it creepier as Chiaki's eyes bored into Mikan's soul. "Trust me. You don't want to know."

Mikan could only make *very* confused sounds of confusing confusion in response.

"...Mikan almost hurt herself in her confusion..." Chiaki muttered quietly.

"Did you say something just now?"
"No."

"I found some scraps of blue fabric," Peko stated, holding up her discovery for Hajime to see.

"It sort of looks like..." Hajime trailed off as he stared at the fabric, before grabbing Peko's hand and dashing out of the room.

"What are you doing?" Peko asked, keeping pace with Hajime easily.

"That fabric- It's the one everyone wears- The laundry room, we need to go to the laundry room!" Hajime explained... or at least tried to. His thoughts were jumbled and disorganized, spilling out in a mess that would have made more sense if it had never existed in the first place.

"You need to calm down."

"No, I need to see the laundry room," Hajime retorted. "You need to get to Fuyuhiko and ask if he remembers anything about last night!"

"Will you... will you be fine on your own?" Peko stared at Hajime, doubt creeping into her expression.

"Of course I will, just find Fuyuhiko!"

"Alright," Peko nodded, untangling her fingers from Hajime's. "Good luck."

"You act like this is something I need luck for," Hajime grinned, waving Peko off.

They separated, Hajime slowing down his pace in order to enter the laundry room in a calm and peaceful manner.

"Heh, thought so," Hajime smirked at the sight, kneeling down to collect more scraps of blue fabric.

'Torn up...better take note of that,' Hajime glanced around the room, finding nothing out of the ordinary except for the cloth scattered around the floor. 'Whoever was here was in a rush. They couldn't even clean up the mess...'

'Wait...' Hajime's eyes widened as he realized something, before hurriedly turning away to leave. 'If they didn't have time to clean up, then why...?'

"Does anyone else smell blood?" Natsumi wondered, trying to sniff out the source of the smell.

"Maybe you're just a bloodhound," A younger member of the staff winked at her, earning a high-five.

Fuyuhiko groaned, slapping a hand to his forehead. "Enough with the puns already..."

"I guess puns aren't in your bloodline," His mother chimed in, getting a high-five from both the staff member and Natsumi and an even deeper groan from Fuyuhiko.

"But seriously, does anyone smell that...?" Natsumi trailed off, before suddenly grabbing at Fuyuhiko. "It's you!"

"What the-"
She grabbed at his yukata, pulling it off his shoulders, exposing him to the world. Or at least everyone in the room. Fuyuhiko immediately began trying to shove her away, yelling something that sounded a lot like 'WHAT THE GODDAMN FUCK NATSUMI!?'

"Excuse me, Young Mast-" Peko opened the door to find Natsumi attempting to strip her brother. "Er..."

Fuyuhiko took advantage of the distraction to give Natsumi the final kick she needed to fucking let go of him. He composed himself, fixing his clothes so he wasn't half-naked. "Did you need something?"

"I wanted to ask you about what you remember of the night before," Peko said honestly. "Can you come with me please?"

"He's injured, so treat his wounds!" Natsumi called out, picking herself up from off the floor.

"Of course, Young Mistress," Peko nodded as Fuyuhiko followed her out of the crowded dining room. She stopped in front of the door to the dojo, turning around so she could interrogate Fuyuhiko.

"So, do you recall anything strange happening the night before?" Peko asked.

"Not really," Fuyuhiko shrugged. "I was just talking to Mikan before we fell asleep, then I wake up and she's gone."

"I see," Peko frowned. "Then... how did you get injured?"

"Injured?" Fuyuhiko echoed, staring at Peko in confusion. "What are you talking about?"

"Your chest was significantly bruised, from what I saw," Peko gestured to his clothed torso. "Did you have that yesterday?"

"What...?" Fuyuhiko blinked, before rushing to the washroom. There was no way he was going to strip in the middle of the freaking hallway, thank you very much.

Peko followed after him, intent on treating his wounds, only for the two of them to pause as they saw the washroom.

"What the fuck."

"What happened here...?" Peko stared in shock at the room. Stools, combs, and towels were thrown about the room. The same scraps of blue fabric from the bedroom were scattered around on the floor, along with small bloodstains.

Fuyuhiko said nothing, only scowling at the sight.

Peko saw something out of the corner of her eye, turning to find more scraps of fabric in the hallway. It was almost like it was making a trail...

With a silent tug on Fuyuhiko's sleeve, Peko got the Yakuza heir to move, the two of them following the blue fabric road until they were standing in front of Fuyuhiko's bedroom door.

"Mikan, is something wrong?" Chiaki asked, watching as Mikan tried and failed to stand for the seventh time. Sharp pain shot through her foot, eliciting a scream from Mikan just before she fell.
"It... it just hurts," Mikan confessed, sitting back down and extending her legs. She rested her hands on the floor behind her, grateful for the fact that her restraints were lenient enough to allow a proper and comfortable sitting position. "When I was taken, the person had a weapon... I couldn't get a good look at them, but I managed to get a cut on my foot..."

"...did you... did you try to kick someone with a weapon?" Chiaki stared at the brunette in disbelief.

Mikan smiled bashfully, a bit ashamed to admit it. "I guess I did."

"Why?!" For once, Chiaki wasn't stoic or numb to the situation, instead allowing shock and small, small amounts of 'what the fuck' to stain her voice.

"...I thought that person was aiming for Fuyuhiko-kun," Mikan blurted out. "Since we were right next to each other, it was hard to tell which one of us was the target, but I couldn't just let Fuyuhiko-kun die!"

"...That's..." Chiaki hesitated, unsure of what to say. "That's admirable...I think."

"Is that a good thing?" Mikan asked uncertainly.

"Yes," Chiaki stated immediately, smiling gently at her friend. "It's amazing how brave you are."

"It wasn't really being brave!" Mikan protested, immediately trying to downplay her actions. "I just... I just didn't want him to get hurt."

"Doesn't that make it even more incredible? You managed to become that courageous for Kuzuryuu-kun's sake."

"I guess... it's only because it was for him," Mikan sighed. "...that must be the power of obsession."

"...obsession?" Chiaki stared at Mikan in confusion. "I thought it was the power of friendship."

"I mean, I would do the same thing for you or Ibuki-san, but..." Mikan sighed once again. "When it's Fuyuhiko-kun... I get selfish."

"Selfish?" Chiaki parroted, utterly baffled by Mikan's words.

"I- er, is now really the time?!" Mikan blushed, trying to change the topic. "We should be focusing on escaping!"

"You can't even stand and my arms are behind my back, so I can't carry you," Chiaki retorted, shutting Mikan down immediately. "We might as well, since we have time."

"How are you so calm about this situation?! I-I'm sorry, but I think your priorities are out of order!"

'There was no way these photos could have existed before Mikan was taken,' Hajime concluded, staring at the black-and-white photographs. 'Which means that the kidnapper returned in order to put them here. But why wouldn't they clean up the mess then...?'

"I have to meet with Peko later, then..." Hajime muttered to himself, taking note of the evidence. He stood to leave, going over his discoveries in his head.

'Photographs of Mikan and Chiaki, scraps of fabric in the bedroom and the laundry room,
medicine, and a used syringe with the point broken off...’ Hajime sighed to himself as he opened the door. He felt like he was so close to figuring it all out, but there was something he was missing...

Hajime was so preoccupied with his attempts to unravel the mystery that he almost ran into the woman he was looking for in the first place.

If it were a bad harem anime, they would have collided and fell in some sort of weird, improbable, suggestive position.

Thank fucking hell for Peko's fast reflexes, her years of practice with a blade serving as proof that they were not, in fact, in a horrible harem anime.

She jumped away from Hajime immediately, almost reaching for a weapon that she had surely concealed in the folds of her clothing, before she realized it was Hajime. Fuyuhiko was momentarily stunned by his sister suddenly jumping away in the middle of their conversation, before noticing the brunette.

"Did you find anything?" Fuyuhiko asked, staring at Hajime warily. He wasn't really suspicious of the brunette, but more on edge than anything.

"I did, but I need to find out more," Hajime sighed. "Peko, what about you?"

"There seems to have been a struggle in the washroom," Peko stated, crossing her arms over her chest. "Fuyuhiko-kun seems to have been injured as well. His chest and arms are bruised, and there's a small puncture in his arm."

"Don't ask how I got hurt, I don't remember a second of it," Fuyuhiko said gruffly.

"Was it last night at least?" Hajime offered as an alternative.

"Yeah, it was," Fuyuhiko crossed his arms over his chest.

Suddenly, Hajime got an idea. He might have known what caused those bruises.

"You and Mikan were sleeping in the same room, right?"

"Yeah, why?" Fuyuhiko narrowed his eye at the brunette in suspicion.

Hajime found himself blurting out a lie, saying, "Because that would mean that you were there while the abduction was taking place."

Both Peko and Fuyuhiko froze, while Hajime realized... his words weren't actually false.

"Were you two in the same futon?" Hajime asked, his face impassive so he didn't give away the accidental truth he just said.

"W-W-What?!" Fuyuhiko sputtered for a few seconds, before glaring at Hajime. "OF FUCKING COURSE NOT!"

"Then why was there only one futon?" Peko inquired, confused.

"It was like that when I woke up!" Fuyuhiko retorted.

"Fuyuhiko has no reason to lie...’ Hajime's eyes trailed off as he stumbled upon a revelation. "Fuyuhiko was sleeping, Mikan was gone, the staff never go into a room that someone is
"Hajime-kun? Are you alright?" Peko stared at the brunette in concern, watching as Hajime became lost in thought.

He could see all the branching paths and possibilities, a tunnel of light stretching out before him. The evidence was floating in front of him, showing Hajime clues and signs as to what happened. He just had to piece it all together.

"You what?" Chiaki stared at Mikan in disbelief, her jaw almost dropping.

"I know that it was terrible of me!" Mikan cried out. "But... I thought... I didn't want anyone to ever leave again, I didn't want anyone to be taken from me again!"

"So you smuggled sleeping drugs there to kidnap him," Chiaki reiterated, showing the most exasperation she ever had in the years Mikan had known her.

"...yes," Mikan sighed. "But I never used them."

"Was it your conscience telling you that what you were doing was wrong?" Chiaki asked hopefully.

'Actually, I was just thinking that I couldn't do that without him hating me...' "Yeah, that was it."

"Hm... that's proof that it's not an obsession..." Chiaki muttered.

"Huh?"

"You were about to commit a serious crime to keep him close to you, but you stopped," Chiaki pointed out with a smile. "You were able to consider things beyond your feelings with Kuzuryuu-kun, so it doesn't fall under the definition of 'obsession'... I think."

"I was just being selfish," Mikan mumbled, her expression darkening. "I just...I just didn't want him to hate me. I wanted him to stay with me out of his own free will."

"Mikan, that's not being selfish," Chiaki stated with a sigh. "It's completely normal to love someone like that."

"...love?" Mikan hesitated uncertainly. "That...that's not it! I... it's just going to be unhealthy and wrong!"

"As long as it isn't hurting anyone, it isn't unhealthy," Chiaki pointed out. "And it's not wrong to love someone."

"But that's exactly what my relationship with Enoshima was! And... if I feel the same way for the two of them... won't it just end up the same way?"

"Kuzuryuu-kun isn't Enoshima-san," Chiaki said simply. "They're very different, so the relationships would also be very different."

"If you say so..." Mikan sighed, trying to stand up once again. She put all her weight on one leg, avoiding her injured foot. She couldn't get much higher than kneeling on the floor, since the chain was still holding her back. With a sigh, she sat back down on the floor. "Chiaki-san, maybe you can try?"

"Sure," Chiaki tried her best, only Mikan couldn't see it, since suddenly, the chain was pulling her
back, making her fall back on the floor. Mikan froze, her eyes following the chain as it snaked around the staircase's old, weak, decrepit railing... to connect to Chiaki's restraints.

"We're each other's counterweights," Mikan realized as she sat up. There was a gleam of hope in her eyes as she turned to Chiaki excitedly. "I have an idea."

"Huh? What are you talking about?" Chiaki stared at Mikan blankly as she tried to push herself up again.

"If we both try to move, we might be able to break it!" Mikan declared, grinning in anticipation. "Come on! We can get out of here?"

"How? We break the railing and then what?"

"Er, we can figure that out after!"

"What's the point?" Chiaki sighed apathetically. "If we get caught, we'll just end up thrown back in here."

"You... you don't even want to try to escape?" Mikan gaped at Chiaki in shock.

"What's the point?" Chiaki repeated simply. "Even if we don't get rescued, those guys will realize that they won't gain anything from keeping us hostage and release us. And even if they don't, we can just wait for them to die of old age."

"No, we can't?!" Mikan rebutted, horror clear on her face. "I'll be dead by then!"

"Oh. Right. Sorry," Chiaki frowned. "I guess we can try to escape then."

"W-why are you so nonchalant about this?!!" Mikan demanded. "Do you even care about the fact that you've been kidnapped?!"

"Not really," Chiaki shrugged. "It's inconvenient, but I can deal with it."

"Do you even care about your own safety?" Mikan grimaced, her voice pained as she spat out the words. "Me and Ibuki and your fathers... we've all been so worried about you! We were hoping for your safe return! Do you even want to be rescued?!!"

"There's no point in it," Chiaki muttered. "It doesn't matter what happens to me, as long as you get out alive."

"Do... do we really matter so little to you?" Mikan whispered fearfully, her eyes watering as she stared at Chiaki. "We were- we were all hoping that we would get to see you again! Did you not want to s-see us again? I-is that why...?"

"That's not it!" Chiaki retorted, an emotion other than apathy and exasperation appearing in her voice for the first time since Mikan had woken up. "I care about you, but... you don't need to worry about me."

"Of course we do! You're our friend, Chiaki!" Mikan paused, before timidly adding a small, "We're friends... right?"

"We're friends," Chiaki confirmed, before sighing. "I'm sorry for troubling you like this. Now what was your idea for getting out of here?"

"Um..." Mikan hesitated, unsure of whether to drop the subject or not. But they could talk about it
later, when they weren't handcuffed in a dusty basement. "The railing looks really fragile, so I was thinking that we could break it...

"How do we do that?" Chiaki asked, smiling to herself a bit as she encouraged Mikan to speak up. She felt... well, like a mom. Like a mom with a shy daughter.

"We both need to try to stand and move away from the railing at the same time," Mikan stated.

"That's a great idea," Chiaki's smile grew brighter and warmer as she tried to stand, though it looked more like a sort-of squat.

"Alright!" Mikan hopped up on her uninjured foot, moving in the direction opposite Chiaki. They both leaned forward, using their weight as a weapon against the old railing. "Please take two steps forward!"

The wood began to splinter a bit, being pulled at by their weight on the chain.

"Again, please!"

It began creaking, cracks forming as the wood began to give in-

"Almost there! Four steps this time, please!"

And then-

The two of them fell forward from the wood snapping suddenly, first into two, then fragments, scattering all over the floor. Chiaki simply slumped forward, smacking her chin on the floor in a way that would have hurt more if she were human. Mikan however... she had practically done a somersault, stopping only when her legs slammed into the floor. Chiaki winced at the sound, wondering if Mikan had cracked something important. Mikan didn't seem to care, a delighted grin appearing on her face.

"It broke!" Mikan exclaimed excitedly, quickly trying to push herself off the ground. It looked like a weird version of the crab, since her hands were still handcuffed behind her back. She quickly lost her balance, forgetting about her injured foot in her haste.

"You should be more careful, Mikan," Chiaki stated as she stood up.

They were still chained together, their hands handcuffed behind their backs, but there was hope!

"Let's finish this escape game," Chiaki said with a determined grin.
"Hajime? Are you still there?" Fuyuhiko waved a hand in front of Hajime's blank eyes, wondering if he needed to punch him to get the taller man back to normal.

"Why wasn't Fuyuhiko awake?" While Hajime's question was simply a way of trying to collect all his thoughts, his words still evoked a stab of guilt in the Yakuza heir. "You would think that he would be..."

Both Peko and Fuyuhiko watched as Hajime made the connection, golden eyes widening, even his antenna straightening out a bit from the shock.

"The syringe! The kidnapper was trying to make sure that Fuyuhiko didn't interfere, so they used that weird drug...! It must have been a sleeping drug or something!" Hajime started to pace around, talking to no one but himself as he pieced evidence together, slowly uncovering the truth of what happened. "But Mikan... there was a struggle, and that's how Fuyuhiko got hurt!"

"Is...is he okay?" Fuyuhiko turned to Peko warily, wondering if they needed to get their friend to a hospital. His worries were only aggravated when Peko only shrugged in response.

"But you'd think that someone would hear what happened..." Hajime paused, reviewing all of his unused evidence bullets. The only syringe was broken, and it would be unlikely that the kidnapper would be able to force sleeping pills in Mikan's mouth before she could scream... maybe they threatened Fuyuhiko's life, but if that happened, Mikan would most likely stay quiet and not cause the mess in the bathroom-

"There was a struggle in the washroom," Hajime declared suddenly, startling Fuyuhiko and Peko. "So the abductor brought Mikan to the washroom... hold on," Hajime wavered for a moment. The syringe was most likely broken in the struggle and unusable, the pills were already ruled out, and Mikan was conscious up until the washroom, so that left... "Peko, were there more scraps of fabric in the washroom?"

"Er, yes, there were, but-"

"That's probably it then," Hajime fit the piece into the puzzle, grinning with satisfaction as he realized that it fit perfectly. "There were scraps of fabric in the laundry room, the bedroom, and the washroom. The same fabric that makes up everyone's yukatas. The kidnapper probably ripped one up and used it as a gag, but since Mikan was fighting the entire time, pieces fell in the bedroom and the washroom."

"O...okay," Peko nodded uncertainly, trying to keep up with Hajime's tirade.

"Just wait until he's done, he'll explain it normally then," Fuyuhiko said with a sigh.

'But where did they go from the washroom?' Hajime shut his eyes, trying to put himself in the kidnapper's mindset at the time. 'The target is unconscious in the washroom, but she might wake up at any time. Someone might walk in and free her. I need to find some way to get her out, and get her out fast.'
"Hide her and get her out..." Hajime muttered to himself, cycling through the clues he had found. There was only one thing he could think of that would fit. "The futon. The motherfucking futon."

"What the fuck," Fuyuhiko stared at Hajime blankly, unable to discern what the futon did wrong.

"The kidnapper hid her body in the futon and the sheets and pretended they were just taking out the laundry!" Hajime concluded, pointing a finger at the pair, even though they didn't do anything to deserve it. He just thought it suited the situation.

"Stop making it sound like she got murdered," Fuyuhiko huffed, crossing his arms over his chest. Peko just watched the entire thing, equally baffled and concerned for Hajime's well-being. She couldn't even formulate a proper response, just waiting for Hajime to finally start explaining what was happening.

Fuyuhiko had a much more direct approach though.

"Hey asshole, are you going to start making sense any time soon?" Fuyuhiko demanded.

"Yeah, I am," Hajime nodded, smiling. That smile quickly disappeared as he started his explanation. "There was obviously a bit of premeditation involved, seeing as the kidnapper prepared syringes and various sleeping medications in advance. They also ripped up one of the spare yukatas from the laundry room, planning to use them as restraints. However, their plan was quickly derailed, and their attempts to keep things on track only led to more problems."

"The first complication was the fact that Mikan and Fuyuhiko were sleeping together," Hajime stated, counting it on his fingers. He almost laughed at Fuyuhiko's flustered reaction, but he had to remain serious. "Because of that, the abductor had to choose between two undesirable situations; Mikan being awake for the kidnapping, or Fuyuhiko being awake for the kidnapping. They chose the former, possibly because they figured that an untrained civilian would be easier to subdue than a Yakuza heir."

Hajime grinned slightly as he continued, "But they were wrong. Mikan woke up soon after Fuyuhiko was injected, and she fought for her life, breaking the syringe in the process. The struggle was so bad that Fuyuhiko got bruised just by being too close. It probably took a lot to actually get Mikan in the bathroom and knock her unconscious, especially when she was fighting them every step of the way. That was the second complication."

"With things going so off-course, the kidnapper was probably panicking. Why wouldn't they be? Their plan was falling apart before their eyes, and they could be caught at any moment. They had to improvise, so they hid the medicine in Mikan's bag to cover their tracks. They also stole the extra futon from Fuyuhiko's room, along with the sheets. Mikan was hidden in the pile, and the kidnapper pretended they were just innocently doing the laundry. That was how the kidnapper escaped with Mikan in their clutches!" Hajime grinned triumphantly as he finished his explanation of the case.

Peko applauded, as Fuyuhiko stared at Hajime in shock and huge small amounts of awe.

"Are you suddenly a detective or something?" Fuyuhiko asked, slightly impressed by the entire thing.

"Ha, well, I do like murder mystery games..."

"As impressive as your logical prowess is, there isn't anything that could actually identify the culprit," Peko stated, ceasing her applause to point out the obvious flaw.
"Oh, we just have to inspect everyone for injuries," Hajime said casually. "Since Fuyuhiko got hurt just by being too close to the struggle, it's not that far of a stretch to assume that the kidnapper got hurt too."

"...wow," Fuyuhiko laughed a bit to himself, grinning. "You know, if being a Yakuza doesn't work out for you, you could always make it as a detective."

"What are you talking about? The pressure would eat me alive!" Hajime smiled in return.

Peko could feel her heart warm at the sight, a small grin appearing on her face as well.

"Oh, by the way," Hajime added, the cheery attitude disappearing so he could add one last thing. "The kidnapper is still in the building. They would have had to return in order to leave the photos and clean up the evidence, only they were interrupted before they could do the latter. As long as no one left since you gathered everyone, they should still be here."

After a brief pause, an impressed grin appearing on Peko's face. "It's incredible how quickly you managed to piece this all together."

"We can compliment Hajime later, after we find Mikan," Fuyuhiko said suddenly, the severity of the situation hitting him once again. He was almost antsy as he began walking off, the two automatically moving to follow him. "It was whoever got injured, right?"

"Right," Hajime nodded, trailing after Fuyuhiko as the Yakuza heir guided them to the family's dojo.

Mikan and Chiaki were practically saved already! The two of them would be home before Ibuki could suspect a thing-

Hajime's eyes widened with horror as he stopped in the middle of the hallway.

No one told Ibuki about Mikan's disappearance.

11:15 am

"How are we supposed to open the door?" Chiaki realized belatedly, staring up at the top of the dilapidated steps. She then turned to Mikan, specifically staring at her injured foot. "Better question; how will we get you up there?"

"I'm sure you'll find a way, Chiaki-san!" Translation: 'I have no idea, so I'm leaving the work to you.'

Chiaki sighed, moving in front of Mikan and kneeling down a bit. "Come on."

"Huh!?

"I'll give you a piggyback ride," Chiaki said plainly. "We don't really have much choice, so please try to be quick."

"O-okay!" Mikan quickly looped her legs through the gamer's arms. Chiaki quickly lifted her up.

"Hold on tight," Chiaki smiled as she carefully climbed up the stairs. "Now... hm... Mikan, brute force or stealth? Which one do you want?"

"Er... is one easier than the other?"
"Brute force is only easier if we don't get caught," Chiaki answered, staring at the door like it held the answer to all of their problems. "While we might have to get into a fight if we use stealth..."

'Hold on, that analogy seems backwards!' "I probably won't be much help in a fight... I might even be a burden in that case... so...brute force, please?"

"Alright then," Chiaki shut her eyes in preparation, summoning encouraging thoughts to gather all her strength.

'I am-

She lifted her foot, kicking at the door.

'-not-

Again and again, she attacked the door, pistons and engines and parts she didn't completely understand working inside her body to force more strength into her blows.

'-powerless!'

Chiaki gritted her teeth together at the thought, the word bringing up memories she would rather forget-

'Not anymore.'

She was not chained by pain or fear of death. Chiaki didn't feel fear anymore.

Nanami Chiaki was no longer human. She could perform amazing feats effortlessly, anything from tests to gaming to nursing was a task easily fulfilled by her machinery.

Breaking a door down was easy compared to constantly fearing for your life, stress and panic and anxiety eating at you until you could hardly eat and-

With a deep breath (even though she didn't need to breathe), Chiaki walked through the hole created in the door.

Her one and only goal was getting Mikan out safely. Nothing else mattered.

11:39 am

"So... how long are we supposed to stay in here?" One of the staff members spoke up, addressing Natsumi in the crowd of people.

"Until Fuyuhiko says you can leave," Natsumi replied simply.

"But I have to go to the washroom."

Natsumi sighed. "Be back in five minutes or I scalp you."

"Of course," The staff member smiled as they left.

'Better get to the entrance.'

There was no one in the hallways, but that didn't mean that the staff member didn't have to be careful. After all, what in the world would the big, bad, Kuzuryuu heir do to them if he caught
them sneaking out? Ground them for life?

The former Simon head chuckled a bit to themselves at the thought. Someone so tiny and cute, serving as a parental figure? *Please.*

There wasn't any time to clean up any evidence, and if they were right about what the Kuzuryuu heir was doing, cleaning up didn't mean a thing. Not when there was already a bonafide investigation going on. They avoided all sounds, footsteps or otherwise, taking care to move silently in the hallways.

It probably helped that the former Simon head avoided the fastest route to the dojo at the heart of the home, circling around the outer hallways to get to the front entrance.

A bright grin was plastered on their face as they opened the door. They were-face-to-face with Shikabane.

"Oh," She didn't even look all that shocked to see them, removing one earbud from her ear to address the former Simon head. "Good morning."

"What the fuck are you doing here," The former Simon head growled, staring at the young woman in shock.

"Waiting for someone to answer the door," Shikabane replied simply as she walked past the former Simon head to move inside. "You could've answered sooner y'know, it's freezing outside."

"Why are you here at this house?! And why now?!"

"Shouldn't you know the answer to that?" Shikabane sighed as she pretended to inspect her nails, neon colours plastered on a pitch black background. "I'm here to do the right thing. I'm going to make sure that woman is freed."

"What?! You can't!" The former Simon head cried out in horror.

"You got an innocent person caught up in all of this!" Shikabane retorted, pointing one of her meticulously-painted fingers at the former Simon head. "And if I'm right, you're planning on getting another one involved too. I can't let this happen."

"How could you," The former Simon head seethed, their friendly demeanor cracking in wake of Shikabane's betrayal. "You're condemning us to death."

"How do you know that?!" Shikabane scowled, glaring up at her friend. "Challenge the boss to a one-on-one duel before you say something like that! You had your chance to do it fairly, but you chose to be a coward and take a fucking hostage!" She hesitated for a moment, before balling her hands into fists, forcing her wavering voice to say the words on her mind. "You're a coward... and, that's why I don't feel guilty at all about doing this! Not at all!"

The former Simon head froze at the younger woman's blubbering, before letting out a small laugh.

"That's right. I'm a horrible coward you shouldn't be worried about," The former boss smiled gently as they patted her head. "You have absolutely nothing to feel guilty about."

"Shut up and get out of here already," Shikabane huffed, crossing her arms over her chest. "I have a meeting with the heir."
"Of course," With one last pat on the head, the former head walked through the door, not turning to face the younger woman.

'Is... is it really okay to let it end like this?'

"I'll be waiting!" Shibakuzo declared, yelling at the former head's retreating back. "At the arcade! You better find a way to get your ass over there after this!"

Her friend said nothing in return, only turning to smile and wave at her.

'I can't put this off forever,' Shibakuzo sighed, before shutting the door behind her. She began running through the hallways, cupping her hands around her mouth to amplify her voice as she called out.

"Kuzuryuu! Kuzuryuu Fuyu-fucking-hiko! I know where your fucking girlfriend is, so answer me already!"

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11:22 am

The rest of the building was just as dilapidated as the basement, holes apparent underneath the sagging carpeting and peeling wallpaper. Old movie posters decorated the hallways, though most were torn or falling off. Multiple routes and doors were blocked off by safety tape and orange cones. Chiaki refused to cross those boundaries, citing Earthbound as the reason why. Even though Mikan had never played Earthbound before. Chiaki had promised to let her play it after they escaped.

Mikan almost gagged on the even stronger smell of rot and decay, the scent so overwhelming that she could feel it... or maybe that was just the tension of being in an obviously-abandoned building and practically waiting for something to appear and drag you away.

If this was how it felt to be in a horror movie, then Mikan... actually, she didn't really regret enjoying the characters' helplessness, but that didn't mean she enjoyed the situation either!

'Wait, didn't we pass that poster three times already?" "Are we-

"We are not lost," Chiaki insisted with a pout, adjusting her grip on Mikan a bit. "It's impossible for me to get lost."

"I-I'm sorry, I just thought... s-since you were walking in circles..."

"I am not."

"I'm sorry..."

"It's fine!" Chiaki huffed, puffing her cheeks out. "If the answer isn't in the map, then I'll just have to make an exit!"

"Chiaki why are you running towards that- CHIAKI NO-"

Thankfully, Chiaki could not burst through the wall like a certain juice pitcher. Her attempt at wanton destruction of public property only led to the pair falling back onto their collective behinds, Mikan groaning in pain from the impact. Chiaki didn't care much about the damage done to her own systems, only caring about Mikan.
"Are you okay?" Chiaki turned to Mikan, concern in her voice. "Maybe I should have put you down before trying that..."

"I'm okay!" Mikan yelped, though bruises were quickly forming on her body. "But... can we please not do that again?"

"Yeah, the answer was probably in the environment anyways, like a puzzle game..." Chiaki hummed to herself, carefully examining the area for clues.

"Chiaki-san, are you okay? You ran into that wall really hard..." Mikan left out the 'so please don't do that ever again,' mostly because Chiaki already said she wasn't going to.

"I can't get hurt," Chiaki said simply. "I'm worried about you. Are you okay?"

"Yes!" Mikan exclaimed immediately, despite the horrible pain in her lower body. "I'm fine!"

'I forgot how fragile humans are...’ Chiaki sighed to herself, before pushing the thought away. She had to get Mikan out.

That was her only goal. It didn't matter how much Chiaki sacrificed for her friends' sake.

A robot was expendable. Her friends weren't.

That's why Chiaki could safely say that, if she could die, she would die for Mikan and Ibuki and Hajime every hour of every day.

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11:46 am

"One condition before I tell you though," Shibakuzo added, even as Fuyuhiko was pointing a gun at her. Peko quickly drew her blade, pointing the weapon at the daughter of the Shikabane family. Shibakuzo, for her part, didn't flinch, staring at the one-eyed man without wavering.

"At least hear her out," Hajime advised, whispering to the pair without outright screaming 'PUT DOWN THE FUCKING WEAPONS GODDAMMIT IF YOU KILL HER NOW YOU’LL LOSE THIS CHANCE FOREVER'.

"Why should we trust you?" Peko inquired, glaring down at Shibakuzo.

"Because I'm not affiliated with the real cause of this mess," Shibakuzo replied simply, rolling her eyes. "The Simon family is pissed that you took control of them, and they're trying to regain their independence."

"Still doesn't give us a single fucking reason to trust you," Fuyuhiko retorted, his gun not-so-subtly inching closer and closer to Shibakuzo's face, until there was less than five centimeters between the pistol and her left eye. Shibakuzo replied with another eye roll, though she didn't move to put more distance between herself and the weapons.

"Well, live with the knowledge that you could have saved Tsumiki and didn't because you couldn't listen for a few seconds."

"Peko, Fuyuhiko, at least try to listen," Hajime asked pleadingly. "You can shoot her after you hear her condition."

"...it better not be stupid," Fuyuhiko huffed, not moving his pistol away. Peko followed his lead,
still ready to skewer Shibakuzo in a moment's notice, but waiting for the other woman to make the first move.

Figuring that their response (or lack thereof) were as good as she was ever going to get, Shibakuzo explained her motivation.

"Just give the Simon family a chance to fight fairly," Shibakuzo stated plainly, staring Fuyuhiko in the eye resolutely. "Swear that you'll do that, and I'll tell you where your precious wife is."

"I swear," Fuyuhiko nodded, earning a look of shock from Hajime and Peko.

"She's at the old movie theater no one uses, the one that's going to be demolished next week," Shibakuzo said with a smile, before quickly dropping her grin. "You better not go back on your word."

"What kind of man would I be if I did that?" Fuyuhiko rebuked the idea with a smirk as he put away his pistol. "I wouldn't be worthy of the Kuzuryuu name if I didn't have honour."

"..." Shibakuzo stared at the one-eyed man blankly, before letting her smile return. "Of fucking course."

"Come on then," Fuyuhiko turned to Peko and Hajime. "We need to grab Natsumi and the others."

"Thanks Shikabane," Hajime waved at her, grinning. "See you then!"

Peko and Fuyuhiko were already on the other side of the hallway when Hajime turned back, forcing the brunette to rush ahead to catch up with them.

They slowed their pace as he joined them, letting Hajime catch his breath. It was at that point that Hajime realized something.

"Did you just... let her call Mikan your wife? Without yelling at her or anything?"

"Shut the fuck up," Fuyuhiko retorted immediately, putting a grin on both Peko and Hajime's faces.

12:03 pm

'It's weird...why haven't we run into anyone yet? You would think there would be at least one mook around here...' Chiaki sighed to herself as she pushed aside the safety tape, since she obviously wasn't getting anywhere by following the railroading signs.

"Do you hear that?" Mikan asked as Chiaki stepped through the hallway, carefully avoiding weak spots in the flooring.

"What are you talking about?" Chiaki wondered if she needed to turn up the volume on her ears' sensitivity, only to decide against it. She had learned the hard way to never set her hearing to the highest setting.

"...never mind," Mikan mumbled, slumping her head against Chiaki's shoulders as the android brought them both to what seemed to be a partially-flooded lobby. An empty doorway stood on the other side of the room. The daylight shining through the doorway was practically blinding after the dark, damp hallways, forcing Mikan to avert her eyes from the sight.

Chiaki could hear the din of everyday life just outside, the sound of traffic and conversations and
chaos. Occasionally, a dark shape would pass in front of the light, civilians passing by innocently.

"That's the exit," Chiaki realized with a grin, already rushing towards the door-

"WAIT-!"

Mikan realized something as she forced Chiaki to the ground, keeping both of them low to the floor and away from the door.

The reason why Chiaki hadn't noticed the sound Mikan did was because it wasn't a sound. It was *instinct*. The insistent racing of your heart and the feeling that something is *wrong*, the feeling that you're in danger that ties itself to your stomach and sinks down to your toes. The need to run or fight, *anything* to ensure your survival.

Mikan had *sensed* the bullets right before they shot through Chiaki's skull, saving Chiaki from having to remove flattened bullets from her hairline. While Chiaki didn't really *need* the rescue, she appreciated the thought behind it.

"I'll try to see what's going on," Chiaki stated, trying to reassure the woman clinging to her. "It'll be okay."

Chiaki lowered the brightness on her monitor, her equivalent of squinting at the light flooding the decrepit room, zooming in her to get a closer look at what was outside that door.

The first thing she saw was a beautiful woman with blood-red eyes. Her silver hair was pulled into braids at both sides of her head, red ribbons tying them together. She was practically dancing in the light, the black suit she wore clinging to her body as she moved gracefully. In her pale hands was a sharp blade that Chiaki *recognized*, from more fighting games than she could count.

And then that beautiful woman beheaded her opponent with her katana, the blood staining her face.

"There's a woman with a sword," Chiaki said plainly, leaving out the woman's beauty and bloodied suit and-

"P-Pekoyama-san!" Mikan cried out immediately, before quickly covering her mouth. Her eyes were wide as she waited for *something* to appear from the doorway. Mikan wasn't sure if she was expecting a friend or a foe, trembling as she tightened her grip on Chiaki.

*(Pekoyama wasn't the only swordswoman in the country, and what if this one wasn't friendly-)*

"I'll go then," Chiaki immediately moved to stand, only to be dragged down by Mikan.

"Don't! You'll *die*!" Mikan screamed, grabbing at Chiaki desperately.

"Mikan, I *can't* die," Chiaki reminded the hysterical nurse, gently shoving Mikan off of her. "And besides, I've played *Double Dragons II*, I'll be fine."

"That's not- Chiaki, no-!" Mikan reached out for Chiaki, only to fall short as the android stepped away, getting closer and closer to the light.

'It would be an honour to die for you,' Chiaki smiled down at Mikan, leaving the words best left unsaid in the air as she walked away.

Naturally, Mikan wouldn't have this.

"C-Chiaki!" Mikan scrambled to her feet, only to bowl over in her haste, accidentally putting
pressure on her injured leg. After a brief moment of pain and bright white, Mikan carefully, carefully stood, limping towards the doorway with desperation and determination in her eyes.

"CHIAKI! CHI- huh?"

Mikan paused as she stepped into the daylight, having to adjust to both the brightness and... well, uh...

"What... what happened here?" Mikan stared in shock at the sight of a bloody corpse draped over the snow-covered sidewalk. It wasn't long before a pair of people in suits came to pick up the body, carrying the dead woman off.

That woman was far from the only casualty. Mikan almost felt like screaming at the sight, spotting the numerous bodies strewn around her feet. Tears began welling in Mikan's eyes as she jumped back, covering her mouth so she didn't cry out.

Unfortunately, she forgot about her injured foot once again, biting her tongue as she fell back, giving her a beautiful view of the bright blue sky.

The worst part about it was the fact that the scene was almost picturesque. Almost. The closed cinema was located at the corner of the street, right across the street from stores with bright displays and colours (though she couldn't help but notice that the window of 'Strawberry Sweets' had a few bullet holes in it...), snow piles at the edges of the road like tiny hills... if it weren't for the blood and bodies, it would be a scene out of a movie.

Mikan shivered as she pushed herself up, sitting up on the cold ground. Being dressed in only a yukata was not helping the freezing atmosphere. As decrepit as the destroyed movie theater was, it still provided much more warmth than the outside. It also helped that Chiaki was a living space heater, emitting enough heat to compete with the sun.

"Ah, Mikan! She's over here!"

Was that... Hajime's voice...?

"Mikan! Mikan, you're-"

Mikan's teeth were clattering as warm arms wrapped around her, lifting her up. She heard muttered swearing, informing her of her rescuer's identity without her needing to look up.

"Fuyuhiko..."

"We're going to get you to the hospital," Fuyuhiko stated as he walked, hurrying towards the car. "You'll be fine."

'You're not supposed to say that to a patient...' Mikan held her tongue, knowing that Fuyuhiko wasn't bound by the reasons why a nurse couldn't make promises to their patients.

And... maybe it was also because she trusted that this promise wouldn't be broken.

"Why are you here?" Mikan asked, staring up at the blonde.

"Hold on, I'm getting you inside," Fuyuhiko paused as Hajime opened the car door for them, letting them into the heated automobile.

"Oh, are we leaving now?" Chiaki noted the pair entering the car, only to be pulled back by Hajime
before he shut the door.

"Give them a little privacy," He ordered, igniting a spark of recognition in Chiaki. She nodded immediately, the two moving off to clean up the mess.

Mikan liked Fuyuhiko's car. Even if she was pretty sure that it was a hearse.

At least it was a _heated_ hearse, with soft seating and pale brown leather on everything, from the seats to the dashboard and even the door handle.

"The family that got you was a rival," Fuyuhiko explained as he set Mikan down in the backseat, sitting next to her as he waited for the others to return. "We had to kill them so they couldn't try anything like that again."

"They're all dead?" Mikan stared at Fuyuhiko with wide eyes. "You... you killed them?"

"Er," Fuyuhiko froze, realizing that being honest _might_ have not been a good idea for once. "They're... gone?" Fuyuhiko offered, before groaning. That attempt was so awful that it would be less damaging to tell the truth than to continue trying to hide it. "They're dead."

Horror was obvious on Mikan's face as she moved to leave, only to be stopped by Fuyuhiko.

"What the hell are you doing?!"

"Let me go! I need to save them!" Mikan shrieked.

"Mikan, they're fucking _dead!_" Fuyuhiko shot back. "There's no point!"

"I have to try!" Mikan retorted, tears beginning to well up in her eyes. "It's the duty of a nurse to save everyone!"

"They _kidnapped_ you! And tried to use you as a bargaining chip! And you _still_ want to save them?!!"

"That doesn't mean that they deserved to die!" Mikan screamed, before pausing, all her hysteria bleeding out of her as she stopped fighting. Her eyes were downcast as she spoke up with a pained voice. "Did they... did they really deserve to die because of someone like me?"

"They didn't," Fuyuhiko stated, lifting Mikan's chin so she could see the sincerity in his eye. "They died because they betrayed the Kuzuryuu family."

"Why did _anyone_ have to die?" Mikan lamented.

"That's just how it is when you're born a Yakuza," Fuyuhiko sighed, averting his eye guiltily. His arm fell back to his side.

"Fuyuhiko..." Mikan trailed off, the severity of the situation finally catching up to her. Now that the idea of escape and the adrenaline coursing through her veins weren't bolstering her mood, Mikan finally let herself break down, bawling. "I-I thought you were _dead._"

"Huh?" Fuyuhiko looked up at Mikan, confused and startled by her words.

"I was s-scared! I was so, _so_ scared!" Mikan wailed, tears running down her cheeks. "And Chiaki, s-she didn't _care!_ And t-the bodies, _oh god,_ the _bodies._"
"Mikan..." Fuyuhiko frowned remorsefully, knowing that he was the reason why she was going through so much distress.

"What's wrong with me?" Mikan asked, not expecting an answer. "A nurse... a nurse is supposed to save people. Why did they all die because of-"

Mikan's voice died as Fuyuhiko pulled her close, wrapping his arms around her tightly. It took a while for her to process the sudden action, but then her arms came up to Fuyuhiko's shoulders, clutching at him desperately. Fuyuhiko was sure that he would have nail marks in his back later, but that wasn't important. What was important was that Mikan's words became a mess of broken sobs and wordless screaming, all of her fear and worry and stress coming out in the safety of Fuyuhiko's presence.

Tsumiki Mikan was a completely normal person, Fuyuhiko realized as he comforted the weeping woman. She had never killed anyone, not intentionally. Seeing all those bodies must have been a shock for her. Maybe even traumatizing.

Fuyuhiko, on the other hand... he had stopped flinching at blood and death a long time ago. A full-on massacre wouldn't be unthinkable to him. He was completely numb to the hell Mikan must have been going through.

One of the things he loved most about Mikan was the fact that, in her eyes, he wasn't defined by his family name. She had admitted that she had completely forgotten he was a Yakuza before. Fuyuhiko wouldn't admit it, but those words were a huge relief to him. Fuyuhiko didn't have to worry about living up to expectations, he didn't have to hide his weakness around her, stressing over whether she would think he would be too feeble to lead the family. He didn't have to suspect that she was trying to get close to him for fame, fortune, and power, or think that she was trying to manipulate him either.

There was a tranquility around Mikan, and even though their conversations were as wild and chaotic as the wind, it was amazing. No one, not Peko, not Natsumi, not Hajime, no one else could give that to him. In Mikan's eyes, he was just a normal man, a friend, and someone she trusted dearly.

But... at the same time, he wasn't a normal man. He was a Yakuza, through and through, and nothing would ever change that. It was obvious, just from the horrified look on Mikan's face at the sight of the corpses. They lived in completely different worlds, and Fuyuhiko understood exactly why Mikan wouldn't want to live in his.

He really should have known.

Normal people got scared when they learned he was a Yakuza. The fact was so ubiquitous that he stopped questioning it by the time he was seven. Fuyuhiko learned that if people were going to run away after learning his family name, he might as well frighten them off with harsh words and a bad attitude. Fuyuhiko had his sisters, anyways, and what else did he really need?

Except Mikan wasn't just a normal person to him, she was Mikan, and she wasn't afraid of him at all. And Fuyuhiko didn't want to scare her away, it was the exact opposite. He wanted to be special to her, he wanted to be closer to her than anyone else.

It's just that being close to her would mean putting Mikan in danger. And Fuyuhiko knew that, as painful as having Mikan leave his life would be, it would be merciful compared to having her die because of him.
As long as she was safe and happy, he would be fine, even if it meant staying out of her life forever. Really, he would be.

...he would miss her. A lot, actually. Fuyuhiko wouldn't be able to wear that huge blue sweater she gave him, no matter how comforting and comfortable it was. And certain films would forever be associated with her in his mind, so he couldn't watch those either. Fuyuhiko wondered if he would be able to smile as brightly as he did if Mikan was gone.

Okay. Maybe he wouldn't be completely fine. But that really didn't matter, did it?

'I guess that's love for you.' Even in the wake of Mikan's kidnapping and the massacre of the Simon family, Fuyuhiko managed to smile as he hugged the brunette. True, it was rueful, and more than a little bit bittersweet, but it was a smile nonetheless.

If Mikan was happy, he would find a way to live with it.

"Hello hello, what's your order?" Ibuki smiled into the phone as she spoke. "Would you like pizza, pie, or a slice of me?"

"What the-" Hajime cut himself off, slapping a hand to his forehead. "Never mind. There's good news and bad news-"

"And the awful, terrible, incredibly horrible news?" Ibuki added, her teasing grin growing even wider.

"Look, do you want the good news or the bad news first?" Hajime asked, slightly annoyed.

"Good news, please!" Ibuki exclaimed.

"We found Chiaki," Hajime stated, earning a gasp of shock from Ibuki. He waited until Ibuki had finished firing question after question before adding the rest. "But Mikan's in the hospital."

"WHAT?!"

"At least they're both alive...?" Hajime offered lamely, earning an unholy screech of rage from Ibuki.

Chapter End Notes

i forgot to add the bit where the handcuffs shattered after mikan and chiaki fell on their collective asses but im too lazy to add it in now, so please feel free to imagine that they just evaporated for the sake of drama and plot
"...mnrgh..." Mikan moaned in pain as she woke up, blinking her eyes awake.

Blue walls, blue sheets... the room was so monochromatic that Mikan thought she was in the ocean. She knew it was because the hospital thought that the colour would calm and relax patients, but... Mikan still wished for some variety. The only thing that broke the mold of blue, blue, blue was the white ceiling above her and the light brown, almost-pinkish hair of the nurse staring down at her.

Wait. What?

"H-hello?" Mikan squinted, trying to make out the face of the woman leaning over her.

"Glad to see you're still with us," Chiaki quipped immediately, standing over Mikan with a clipboard.

(technically, she didn't even need the clipboard, since she already had photos of all the sheets she needed, but the clipboard made it easier to play sudoku without getting caught.)

"Chiaki-san?" Mikan's voice was raspy as she looked up at the other nurse. "What day is it...?"

"December 28th," Chiaki replied simply. "You'll be in the hospital for..." Chiaki puffed her cheeks out as she tried to remember. Her expression returned to normal with a quick pop, saying, "...three days, I think?"

"I see," Mikan sighed, almost disappointed. While everyone was celebrating, she would be stuck in her monochrome hospital room, all alone...

"That's why we're moving Hajime's birthday party and the new year's party here," Chiaki stated, earning a startled 'EH?!' from Mikan. As if that weren't enough, Chiaki began moving towards the door, talking as she walked. "By the way, you have a guest, but..." She opened the door, sticking her head outside to witness the spectacle in the hallway.

"YOU WERE SUPPOSED TO PROTECT HER!" Ibuki shrieked, pointing an accusatory finger at the smaller Yakuza heir.

"I know that!" Fuyuhiko shot back.

"...Kuzuryuu-kun is a bit busy," Chiaki concluded as she shut the door behind her, returning to Mikan's side.

"Oh..." Mikan frowned slightly, before quickly throwing a more neutral expression on her face. "Fuyuhiko-kun is here?"

"Yeah, is something wrong with that?"

"N-no! Not at all!" Mikan stammered, digging her own grave in her attempt to dig herself out of the situation.

"Mikan."
"It's nothing!"

"I will delete your World of Warcraft account," Chiaki threatened seriously.

"...um, I don't have one...?" Mikan replied, all her nervous energy replaced with confusion and caution. "You just let me borrow your account."

"I'll..." Chiaki hesitated, trying to come up with a proper punishment. "I'll get Hajime to... uh, set your house on fire?"

"Chiaki-san, we live in the same building," Mikan pointed out. "The building that is your fathers' company. Are you sure?"

Chiaki grumbled something, though Mikan didn't hear it. Disappointment was obvious on the gamer's face, immediately sending a wash of guilt over Mikan.

"I'm sorry, Chiaki-san... I would tell you, but..." Mikan mumbled in return. "I just... I don't know how to put it into words."

"Then tell me what you're feeling right now," Chiaki's face quickly returned to her usual stoic expression. "Aside from physical pain, of course."

"It's just... weird," Mikan concluded with a sigh. "Whenever I think of all those bodies... it's terrifying. We were so close to all that death and we couldn't save anyone!"

"But...?" Chiaki added, trying to prompt Mikan to continue.

"But..." Mikan sighed once again. "At the same time... I think that those people might have deserved to die."

Chiaki stared at Mikan in shock, the only thing escaping from her mouth being a flat 'what'.

"I mean, they kidnapped you! And they betrayed Fuyuhiko-kun, a-and they even tried to kill him!" Mikan exclaimed, her face darkening as she said the words. "If it's someone who tried to hurt the people I love... I would be completely okay with their death."

"Killing is just wrong, though!" Chiaki exclaimed.

(Incompatible, it was completely incompatible. When did the kind, generous Mikan that saved her life condone killing? The Mikan in front of her and the Mikan in her memories just didn't match-)

"I know it's horrible," Mikan replied, her voice emotionless, almost numb, as she spoke. "I know it's wrong, but I can't help feeling like it."

"Mikan-"

"It's just because- It's because..." Mikan hesitated, frowning. "I'm too selfish, aren't I? It's because I'm selfish, wanting to keep everyone close to me..."

Chiaki wasn't sure whether to tell Mikan that she wasn't selfish or tell her off for wanting people to die, so instead, she decided to do something stupid.

"You know... you're the reason I became a nurse," Chiaki confessed suddenly.

"You were so kind and loving and supportive when you were taking care of me. You gave me hope that everything would be okay!" Chiaki's voice became more passionate as she spoke, her diversion
slowly becoming more of a heart-to-heart, long unsaid words coming to light in the heat of the moment. "I wanted to give that feeling to people who needed it most. That's why I'm a nurse right now."

Mikan froze, stunned by the sudden supportive words. She gaped at Chiaki, slowly beginning to tear up.

"So that's why, whether you're right or you're wrong, I will support you no matter what," Chiaki stated, smiling serenely. "Life or death, I will stand beside you."

"Thank you... t-thank you so much!"

"It's nothing, Mikan," Chiaki said, completely sincere.

The interrogation room was small and roomy, with simple light brown walls and black carpeting. There was less than two meters between the two even though their folding chairs were in opposite ends of the room.

On one side was the pink-haired mechanic people knew and occasionally managed to tolerate, co-head of the 'Fujisaki & Souda Robotics and Programming' company, Souda Kazuichi himself.

On the other side was a beautiful, busty, bespectacled, blonde bombshell, sitting with one long, creamy leg crossed over the other. Her white dress shirt clung to her skin. Her black pencil skirt was just as tight, managing to show off a lot while being completely modest. She was totally his type.

"Souda Kazuichi," The detective had an accent to her words, one that Kazuichi would have guessed was sort of European. Maybe. She tapped her finger against her thigh, drawing the mechanic's eyes towards the motion. And her lovely legs. "My name is Justine Gumshoe. It is my pleasure to have you here."

"No, no, the pleasure's all mine!" Kazuichi exclaimed with a wide grin. "So, what do you need me for?"

"It is my wish to question you as to your relation to the Nanami Chiaki disappearance case," Gumshoe stated formally, though she had a slight quirk to her lips, one that could almost be mistaken for a smile.

'She's into me!' Kazuichi almost pumped his fist at the thought, but he had to look cool. He casually leaned back in his chair, trying to think of what to say.

Kazuichi settled for a suave (in his mind),"Sure, I'll tell you anything you need to know."

"Thank you for your cooperation. Let us begin," Ms. Gumshoe pushed her glasses up, managing to add to her 'seriously stoic' charm tenfold in the mechanic's eyes. "What is your relation to the victim?"

"Chiaki's pretty much my daughter at this point!" Kazuichi exclaimed with pride. "We're great pals, you know?"

"When did you first meet Nanami Chiaki?"

"We met in high school and we've been close ever since," Kazuichi declared with a boisterous smile. "We're inseparable!"
"I see," Ms. Gumshoe's tone became icy, her brown eyes becoming piercingly frosty as she stared Kazuichi down. He gulped, suddenly feeling a lot more jumpy than he did a few seconds ago. "It cannot be a coincidence, the fact that Ms. Nanami has been listed as legally dead since her high school years.

The confident grin fell off Kazuichi's face as he stared at the detective in shock. "What? That's-that's not right!"

"I am not a liar," Ms. Gumshoe stated. "Every one of Ms. Nanami's records say she succumbed to disease at exactly sixteen years of age. The same time frame you provided for your first meeting with her."

"A-are you accusing me??" Kazuichi demanded, pointing a finger at the woman. "I didn't have anything to do with that!"

"Then why is it that you are claiming that a dead woman is your child?" Ms. Gumshoe asked.

"She's not dead!!" Kazuichi screamed. "We built her prosthetics-"

"The truth, Mr. Souda," Ms. Gumshoe's words were sharper than a sword as she cut through the mechanic's words like butter through a heated cheese wire.

"I am telling the truth!"

"This is just so messed up!" Mioda groaned, scratching at her head in frustration. "Why did it have to be you?"

"What are you talking about?" Fuyuhiko asked cautiously, staring blankly at the rock star.

"You know what I'm talking about," Mioda huffed, crossing her arms over her chest as she let all her energy and anger bleed out of her. Her eyes were practically devoid of emotion as they bore into Fuyuhiko, something completely new for the usually-energetic Mioda. "You're much better for Mikan than Hiyoko-chan or Enoshima, but then she gets hurt just by being around you."

"I know that," Fuyuhiko stated, narrowing his eye up at Mioda. "Do you think I want her to get hurt?"

"I mean, unless you're a complete weirdo lunatic who likes inflicting pain on the people you love, I would say no," Mioda retorted with a grin.

"Wha-" Fuyuhiko immediately turned bright pink, looking away from Mioda's almost-mocking smile. "Love isn't the word I would use..."

"Oh?" Mioda leaned towards him, her voice becoming a sing-song as she kept teasing him. "Then what word would you use? Smitten? Crush? Head-over-heels?"

"Shut up..." Fuyuhiko retorted, though his voice lacked the annoyance and harshness you would expect from him most of the time.

"Hehe, fine," Mioda stretched out the last syllable as long as she could as she bounced away, standing on the very tips of her toes. Her arms stretched out to the sides, like she was about to hug the entire world, or at least try her best to.

When she ended her long 'fine', Mioda let her arms swing behind her, clasping them together
behind her back as she smiled. True, it was a lot more subdued than you would think to expect from Mioda, but it was a genuinely joyful smile nonetheless.

"You know, if you find a good way to protect her, I would definitely give you guys my support," Mioda said with a wink, earning a few seconds of unintelligible blubbering and half-formed swearing from Fuyuhiko before he recovered enough to speak.

"What the fuck are you even saying?!"

"I mean, you guys are totally cute together!" Mioda exclaimed, her grin growing even brighter as she went on. "Plus, you're so damn sweet around each other! I can't remember the last time I've seen Mikan smile so much."

"I just... thank you," Mioda's smile went from teasing to surprisingly sweet and sincere in seconds. Fuyuhiko almost had a headache from the sudden changes in her moods. "You're a really good influence on her, and she's really happy with you around."

"I might not be around for much longer," Fuyuhiko confessed, frowning. Mioda's grin dropped as she gaped at him in stunned silence. "What are you looking at me like that for? You're the one who said it; she's in danger as long as I'm around."

"That doesn't mean you should just up and leave!" Mioda exclaimed, pointing at Fuyuhiko once again. "Isn't there a better way to work this out?!"

"..." Fuyuhiko hesitated, unsure if he was willing to trust the rock star with the main reason behind his decision.

He really only knew her though Mikan, and Mioda only really got on his nerves. Mioda was another normal person to him.

But at the same time, Fuyuhiko couldn't show his weakness to anyone in his family. Mikan was the source of the problem, sort of, so he really didn't want to go to her either...

Mioda sighed as she saw the conflict on the smaller man's face. Her voice became serious once again as she stared Fuyuhiko in the eye. "Talk to Mikan about this, not me."

"That's the fucking problem!" Fuyuhiko snarled, his patience snapping. "She's going to be too scared to even be near me-"

"I'm sorry if I'm interrupting your conversation," Mikan whimpered as she poked her head out of the door, interrupting their conversation. "But can I please talk to Fuyuhiko-kun for a bit?"

Mioda's grin was nothing short of insufferably arrogant as she gave Mikan a thumbs-up. "Don't worry about it! Have him for a year, I don't mind!"

Fuyuhiko wasn't sure whether to punch Mioda, slap a hand to his forehead, or address Mikan right away. He decided to do the latter, walking over to Mikan's door, fighting the sinking feeling in his stomach all the way.

"The truth, Mr. Souda!" Ms. Gumshoe snapped, stomping her foot against the carpeted floor. The impact was strong enough to make Kazuichi flinch, the mechanic breaking down even more.

"I-I am telling the truth!" Kazuichi wailed, tears and snot running down his face. "Why won't you believe me?!!"
"Because it is not terribly uncommon for criminals to lie to cover up their crimes," Ms. Gumshoe stated, glaring at the pink-haired man with what could only be described as unbridled rage in her eyes. "And all evidence points to you and your accomplices doing something terrible to Ms. Nanami. I intend to carry out the will of Lady Justice, and her will is to see you punished for your crimes henceforth!"

"What are you even talking abooooooooooot?!"

"Would you like to hear what Ms. Nanami herself had to say on the subject?" Ms. Gumshoe's words might have been phrased as a question, but there was no doubt that, no matter how much Kazuichi wanted to say 'no' and also run, he would listen.

Ms. Gumshoe silently leaned over, reaching for a tape recorder she had taped to the bottom of her chair, just in case. With a press of a button, voices emerged from the device.

'Ms. Nanami, I would like to know... why is it that you are legally dead?' Ms. Gumshoe's voice asked, surprisingly gentle considering her cold demeanor to Kazuichi.

'It's because I'm not human,' Chiaki answered in a monotone. 'I am Souda Kazuichi and Fujisaki Chihiro's daughter, and their most prized creation.'

'Daughter...? Why would you say that? Are you not older than Mr. Fujisaki?'

'That might be true, but...' The smile could be heard in Chiaki's voice as she spoke, admiration clear in her voice. 'If it weren't for them, I wouldn't be alive right now. If it weren't for those three, not even this heartless creature would exist. I owe them my life.'

Ms. Gumshoe stopped the recording then, complete and utter loathing completely evident in her eyes.

"So, Mr. Souda, what did you and your accomplices do to Ms. Nanami?" Ms. Gumshoe asked, more than a few undertones of threats in her words. "What could you have possibly done to her to make her feel so grateful to you, even though it's because of you that she feels inhuman?"

"W-what...?" Kazuichi wasn't listening though. He was too busy staring at the tape recorder in the detective's hand, trying to process what he had heard. "She doesn't even... feel human anymore?"

"Stop feigning innocence!" Ms. Gumshoe ordered. "You know exactly what you did, and I intend to hear your confession, criminal!"

"I didn't- I didn't do anything wrong!" Kazuichi protested. "She was... She was dying, and we built her prosthetics, since her arms were rotting off-"

"Stop speaking!" Ms. Gumshoe barked, staring in Kazuichi's eyes coldly. "I never named the disease Ms. Nanami was suffering from. How would you know that her arms were rotting off?"

"Because I was freaking there!" Kazuichi screeched. "Why are you not believing me?!"

"Because you're a liar, Mr. Souda, and I need to hear the truth!"

"I-I'm not lying!" Kazuichi wailed.

"So, you... uh, you wanted to talk to me?" Fuyuhiko floundered about awkwardly as he stepped into the room. The two of them were alone. That didn't exactly bode well.
The pressure in the room was so heavy it was nearly crushing the Yakuza heir alive. He couldn't stop worrying about what Mikan was going to say, even though he kept trying to tell himself that he would be fine with any outcome. Whether she left or stayed, Fuyuhiko would be okay with that.

"Um, actually, I was thinking... maybe we could get some coffee while we talk!" Mikan forced excitement into her tone, an equally-fake grin on her face. She sat on the edge of her bed, fiddling with her fingers as she avoided Fuyuhiko's eye. "The cafeteria is on the second floor, so just let me get my crutches-

"You can't walk?" Fuyuhiko stared at the nurse in horror.

"Er, well... I sort of got stabbed. In the foot," Mikan explained simply. "So I'm using crutches for a few days until the wound heals."

"You know, Chi-chan usually just gives her a piggyback ride whenever she needs to go anywhere," Ibuki chimed in, opening the door just enough to pop her head into the room.

"-that's not-"

"-a bad idea," Fuyuhiko finished, even though that wasn't what Mikan was trying to say at all.

"But- Fuyuhiko-kun!" Mikan's eyes widened, staring at the Yakuza heir in shock. "You don't have to!"

"I'm not going to fucking carry you through the hallways or anything dumb like that," Fuyuhiko stated, crossing his arms over his chest. "I'm just going to help you walk so you don't need crutches."

"But you still don't have to!" Mikan protested.

"I'm the reason you got hurt in the first place, so at least let me do that much," Fuyuhiko sighed guiltily.

Mikan couldn't say no to that.

Mikan wordlessly slung her arm around Fuyuhiko's shoulders. The blonde helped Mikan stand, the two leaving the room.

"Ahaa, look at them go!" Ibuki laughed. Behind Mikan's back, Fuyuhiko gave Ibuki the middle finger, causing Ibuki to laugh even louder as they rounded the corner and left Chiaki and Ibuki's line of sight.

"It's faster than letting Mikan trip over her crutches again," Chiaki stated, completely impassive to the situation around her. She hugged her clipboard to her chest, even though it had nothing but half-finished sudoku puzzles.

"So cute!" Ibuki cooed, before sighing. "I seriously can't believe it! Why aren't they dating yet?!

"Mikan refuses to ask him since she's convinced that her feelings are selfish," Chiaki stated.

"And Fuyu-chan won't ask her out since Mikan-chan's in danger with him around!" Ibuki threw her hands up in the air, frustrated. "I mean, he's right and all, but that just leaves everyone at a stalemate! It's like the stupid puzzle with the chicken and the wolves and the river, only you can't even move the boat!"
"Professor Layton is not stupid," Chiaki glared at Ibuki, though the effect was lessened a bit by her puffing her cheeks out while doing so.

"Yeah, yeah, but gosh! One of them needs to stop being so damn 'oh, I want my beloved to be happy so I'll give up my desires' and just ask for a date!"

"That would fix a lot of problems," Chiaki agreed. "But it's not like we can do anything about it."

"That's it!" Ibuki's bright grin returned as she grabbed Chiaki's hand. Her aura of energy was so pronounced that Chiaki might have seen stars around Ibuki's face. "We're going to do something about it!"

"...don't you have work?"

"It's playtime, I have at least five more minutes," Ibuki answered, too excited to stay still. She was bouncing in place, ready to jump off after them-

"It's eleven forty-five," Chiaki pointed out, checking her internal clock for the time. Ibuki's face fell.

"CRAP! I NEED TO BRING THEM TO LUNCH!"

"Have fun," Chiaki called out stoically as Ibuki ran off.

The hospital's cafeteria was comforting and inviting, the walls painted a warm orange. It almost seemed like a cafe, with circular tables surrounded with red, wedge-shaped chairs spread across the area. Colourful plastic flowers, all in their own specially decorated pots lined the display case of the counter, the glass case showing off an array of healthy dishes. A few patients were eating, some alone, some with family and friends, but it was mostly quiet in the cafeteria,

Fuyuhiko stared at Mikan intently, wondering (worrying) about what she had to say. Mikan fidgeted under his gaze, too nervous to move a muscle, let alone speak. Neither of them touched their coffees, leaving the beverages abandoned on the table.

Fuyuhiko was the one who broke the silence.

"You know, my offer still stands," He said out of nowhere, earning a look of confusion from Mikan. "If you've changed your mind about being with me after seeing all that, you're free to leave."

"Wha-" Mikan almost looked shocked at his words, horror blooming on her face. "That's not it! E-er..." She quieted down after her outburst, her shoulders slumping as she muttered. "That's not what I wanted to tell you."

"Then what did you want to say?" Fuyuhiko asked, amazing himself with how calm and careless his voice sounded in that moment.

"It's actually..." Mikan hesitated, her face falling, then scrunching up into a pout. Then a frown appeared on her face, confusing the fuck out of Fuyuhiko with her unpredictable facial expressions. Finally, she settled on an uneasy smile as she forced herself to speak. "Even though it was really scary when we saw all those bodies, and I still feel bad about not being able to save them... I can't think of you any differently."

The first thing out of Fuyuhiko's mouth was an eloquent, "Huh?"
"So, um!" Mikan smiled at Fuyuhiko hopefully, rushing to get her words out. "I hope- I hope we can still be friends!"

" Seriously?" Fuyuhiko gaped at the nurse, disbelief obvious in his eye. "Even after you saw a massacre?"

"I was the one who said 'You're a Yakuza, it would be more shocking if you hadn't killed anyone', right?" Mikan clasped her hands together, her grin brightening as she brought up the memory. "Even if it was scary to see it up close, you're still the Fuyuhiko-kun I know and love!"

Fuyuhiko wasn't sure what to say to that. He could have said a lot of things, like 'Love?!' or 'Thank you' or anything else.

Instead, he found himself gaping at her, the words slipping out from his lips without his permission.

"You're incredible."

Mikan faltered, her lips forming a perfect circle as she gaped at Fuyuhiko. Then, with a blush on her face, Mikan grinned excitedly.

"Y-you really think that?!"

"Yeah," Fuyuhiko mumbled, his face slowly beginning to match Mikan's in terms of redness. He grabbed his coffee, taking a sip to hide his embarrassment-

He regretted it immediately.

"Fuyuhiko-kun! Keep coughing!" Mikan yelled, concern and panic in her eyes as Fuyuhiko forced himself to gulp down the vile concoction.

"This coffee is disgusting!" Fuyuhiko declared loudly, slamming the cup down on the table. He got a glare from the person working behind the counter, but he really didn't care about that.

"Really?" Mikan eased the mug out of his hand, taking a sip. Her eyes widened in shock as she set the cup down, right next to hers. "It's so bitter!"

"I can tell," Fuyuhiko groaned, wanting to scrape the flavour off his tongue. Or at least have something else to drink, just to wash down the awful, awful taste. "Did they even bother with the sweetener?!"

"No hospital would ever let a patient have seven spoonfuls of sugar in his coffee."

"Do I look like a fucking patient to you?!"

Their conversation (and by extension, every conversation in the entire cafeteria) was interrupted by what could only be called a horde of babies.

"Alright kiddies! Grab a seat and prepare to eat!" Ibuki twirled around to face the line of children behind her, giving them a dazzling grin and a peace sign. The kids replied with various forms of assent, running off to their seats. The hospital's patrons all looked at the scene with differing levels of fondness in their eyes, some of them making conversation with the children as they sat down.

"What the hell is she doing," Fuyuhiko asked flatly, staring at the scene in disbelief.

"She's doing her job," Mikan answered simply.
"What does she even do?" Fuyuhiko turned back to Mikan, unable to watch the little brats run around and scream without wanting to punch one of them.

"Ibuki-san is the director of childcare management," Mikan tried her best to sound official, even though she had no idea what Ibuki's position was called. "She plays with the long-term care children and cheers them up."

"So she's a babysitter," Fuyuhiko summarized.

"Kind of? I mean, it's probably a lot more complicated than that..." Mikan trailed off, trying to think of more ways to make Ibuki look better. Her eyes fell on a small boy, who timidly waved towards her. She waved back with a grin, slowly encouraging the child to come closer.

Before the kid could reach their table, Ibuki scooped him up, placing him on her shoulders as she sang a loud tune. The children joined in, screaming something about a red wagon.

Fuyuhiko groaned, slapping a hand to his forehead. He could already feel a headache coming on.

"Do you want me to grab some more sweeteners for you?" Mikan asked. "I know the kitchen staff, so they might let me grab some..."

"It's fine," He grunted, trying to shut out the noise with nothing but sheer mental prowess.

"We can go outside if you have to," Mikan offered. "I know a spot no one uses at this time."

"Seriously?" The shock and gratitude in Fuyuhiko's voice were so obvious that he couldn't have hidden them, even if he tried. It was a good thing Fuyuhiko didn't try to hide them.

"Yup!" Mikan smiled brightly, glad that she was of use to Fuyuhiko. "It'll be nice and quiet, and we can stay there as long as you want."

"Thanks Mikan," Fuyuhiko said with a small grin. "You're a lifesaver."

"It's part of the job description," Mikan joked, clasping her hands together under her chin.

Fuyuhiko stopped and simply stared at her for a moment. Mikan fidgeted under his gaze, unsure if it was a bad thing or not. Maybe she said something out-of-line...?!

Before Mikan could apologize for saying something out-of-line, for overstepping her boundaries, for things she thought she didn't have to worry about when she was around him, for anything, as long as it brought back his smile-

Fuyuhiko let out a tiny laugh, grinning in amusement.

Mikan was the one who had to stop and stare for a while, a bright blush blooming across her cheeks.

A few tables away, a young boy pouted.

"How come I can't play with Big Sis Mikan?!" He demanded with a huff.

"It's 'cuz she's on a date right now," Ibuki explained, pointing at the pair. "You get it, right? Why you don't interrupt people on a date?"

The young boy gasped scandalously. "Are they gonna kiss?!"
"Maybe~" Ibuki sang, before poking the child's cheek. "But you gotta finish your food before I tell you anything."

"Fine..." The kid pouted. Ibuki smiled as she patted him on the head, promising to sing his favourite song on the way back. That brought his smile back quickly.

"Mikan, are you sure about this?" Fuyuhiko asked suddenly as he helped Mikan through the hallways.

"I mean, you looked like you were getting really annoyed with all those children around." "That's not what I meant," Fuyuhiko grumbled, staring down at the floor as they walked. He frowned, doubt creeping into his voice. "I mean... being friends with me. Are you sure about that?"

"Of course!" Mikan replied immediately. "Why, do you not want to?"

"That's not what I was saying!" Fuyuhiko snapped. "Of fucking course I want to... but what the hell do you gain from being around a guy like me, anyways? You just end up getting hurt..." He sighed, his frown deepening.

"Fuyuhiko-kun..." Mikan stared at him in disbelief. "Do you have any idea of how amazing you are?"

"What?" Fuyuhiko was nothing short of completely baffled as Mikan stopped them. She leaned against the wall so she could be comfortable while giving Fuyuhiko his pep talk.

"...Fuyuhiko-kun..." Mikan almost looked disappointed in him, pity obvious in her eyes. "You're really, really amazing. The fact that you put up with me and support me is proof of that."

"Mioda and Hajime and even Saionji would do the same thing," Fuyuhiko huffed.

"They've been doing that for years," Mikan stated with a wistful smile. "But even though I've known you for, well, a small fraction of the time I've known them, you're equal to Ibuki-san, Hajime-kun, and Chiaki-san in my eyes."

"Actually..." Mikan paused, thinking. "You might be even higher than them. I've trusted you with things I wouldn't tell them, so..."

Fuyuhiko tried his best to ignore the blush on his cheeks, his ears more sensitive to Mikan's words than he would like.

"But anyways!" Mikan briefly puffed her cheeks out, trying to get herself back on track. "You're trustworthy and honest and brave and all-around admirable! I'm so lucky to be able to call you my friend, Fuyuhiko-kun! I won't ever stop being grateful that you want me around!"

"Same to you," Fuyuhiko replied with an embarrassed smile.

He was acting like a lovesick moron- no, he was a lovesick moron. With the way his heart was doing Olympics-worthy flips and the bright blush on his face, there was no doubt about it.

But Fuyuhiko didn't really regret it. And that might have been the scariest thing about the whole ordeal.

"E-e-enough..." Kazuichi whimpered, pulling his hat over his ears to muffle out the yelling, the
Screaming, just a little bit.

"Confess, sinner," Ms. Gumshoe ordered.

"Yeah..." Kazuichi nodded, his voice broken from nonstop sobbing. Anything to end the accusations, the insults and inhumanity and-

"I did something unforgivable to Nanami Chiaki."

Chapter End Notes

Bonus:

"Bath time, bath time~!" Mikan chanted cheerily as Chiaki led her towards her hospital room.

"You know, I realized something," Ibuki grinned towards Fuyuhiko, immediately putting a suspicious glare on Fuyuhiko's face. "But if a nurse's duty involves bathing patients... does that mean that Mikan-chan's seen you naked, Fuyu-chan?"

"Gah, s-shut the fuck up! Get your fucking head on straight!" Fuyuhiko snapped, bright red.

"I'm not hearing a 'nope'~!"

"SHUT THE HELL UP BEFORE I RIP OUT YOUR PIERCINGS, HEAT THEM IN A FIRE, AND STAB THEM BACK IN!" Fuyuhiko roared, loud enough to shake the entire building.

Naturally, Mikan, being in the room next to Ibuki and Fuyuhiko's 'conversation', overheard Fuyuhiko's words.

"Fuyuhiko-kun! Please don't kill Ibuki-san!" Mikan shrieked as she slammed the door open. She wore nothing but a hastily thrown-on bathrobe, the nurse too rushed to even bother tying it together. Her left hand was the only thing that stopped Mikan from exposing herself completely. She held the robe together at her chest, though you could still see her legs, long-

"M-Mikan, what the hell are you doing?!" Fuyuhiko demanded, somehow managing to turn even redder. "Get back inside before someone sees you!"

"You seem like you're enjoying the view though~"

"I will fucking kill you-"

"Fuyuhiko-kun, no, calm down-!" Mikan rushed forward, pulling Fuyuhiko back. She held his hands behind his back firmly, to make sure he didn't try to punch Ibuki in the face.

"I will fucking calm down when-" Fuyuhiko froze as he realized something. Mikan had grabbed him, a hand on each of his wrists... but that meant-
Ibuki wolf-whistled as she 'appreciated' the sight.

She got a shoe to the face for that, right before Fuyuhiko hurriedly shoved Mikan towards her hospital room, promising not to kill the rock star. (No matter how much he wanted to.)
"OH FUCK SON OF A FUCKING BITCH I HATE YOU-!" Natsumi roared, clutching her controller so hard that she might snap it in half at any time.

"You really shouldn't call your mother a bitch," Fuyuhiko retorted, smirking smugly as his attack hit, knocking Natsumi off the boundary of the stage once again.

Natsumi screamed as she respawned. Peko awkwardly gave her a pat on the head, trying to comfort her sister.

"This is so unfair!" Natsumi growled. "My partner left in the middle of the game! Now it's just you and Peko beating me up!"

"If you want, I can quit playing," Peko offered. Her green-clad swordsman brought out a bomb, ready to blow himself off the stage if Natsumi wished it.

"No! I can beat you two!" Natsumi declared, her blue-haired avatar rushing towards Peko's, ready to fight-

The bomb exploded, knocking both Peko and Natsumi off the floating island as Fuyuhiko cackled madly in the background.

While Natsumi was shrieking and about to throw something at her brother, just outside in the hospital's hallway, Hiyoko, Ibuki, Chiaki, and Mikan were listening intently to Chiaki's phone call. It was on speaker so everyone could hear and participate in the conversation.

"Are you kicking us out, bastard?!" Hiyoko demanded, glaring at the phone like she was about to punch it. She wished she could hit that pink-haired fuckass in the face.

"I mean, it's only reasonable!" Souda declared defensively through the speaker phone. "The only reason I let Tsumiki and Mioda live in our building was to see if normal people could tell that Chiaki was a robot! Since everyone knows already, you guys don't have any reason to stay!"

There was a brief moment of silence, before both Ibuki and Hiyoko looked up at Chiaki, yelling in unison. "YOU'RE A ROBOT?!

"E-eh!?" Mikan gaped at the two in shock. "I can understand why Hiyoko-san wouldn't know, but Ibuki-san, you didn't know after all this time?!

"Well, now you know!" Souda grumbled. "So you're not allowed in our building!"

"Where w-will we stay then?!" Mikan demanded, worry and fear in her eyes.

"Don't worry!" Ibuki reassured Mikan. "Since our place has been a police stampede ever since Chi-chan's miraculous reappearance, me and Hiyo-chan have been staying in a hotel room these past few days. We can stay there until this clears up."

"It's a good thing we grabbed some of everyone's stuff," Hiyoko turned to Ibuki, already expecting the rock star's response-
"You said my idea was a good idea~!" Ibuki sang, delighted by Hiyoko's words.

"Yeah, yeah," Hiyoko sighed, waving her hand dismissively.

"You two sure got close," Chiaki noted, completely impassive to the situation around her.

"...even if the police leave, you guys aren't welcome at our place," Souda said gruffly. "Ever. Find another place to live, since we're done letting you freeload!"

"We pay rent, you fucking moron," Hiyoko retorted.

"I'm sorry...!" Mikan wailed.

"Why the hell are you apologizing?!!" Hiyoko demanded, pointing a finger at the timid nurse. "He's the one kicking us out!"


"Don't call me a fucking brat!"

"H-H-Hiyoko-san! Calm down!"

"Before you tell Hiyo-chan to calm down, you need to calm down first. Come on, do some deep breathing with me!"

"This is a weird situation," Chiaki mumbled to herself. "Since when was Ibuki the voice of reason...?"

"Pst, Chi- Nanami," Souda hissed, prompting Chiaki to grab the phone. "Turn it off and activate your headset. I need to talk to you. Alone."

"Of course, father," Chiaki walked off, leaving the trio to their own devices.

"Decorating? Can't you do it for me, Peko?" Natsumi groaned.

"I would, but I have to buy the food and drinks," Peko frowned apologetically.

"Quit depending on Peko for everything," Fuyuhiko snapped, gathering up the controllers and setting them by the TV.

"Why are we even doing this again?" Natsumi rolled her eyes, slumping down on the couch.

"Don't you want to celebrate Hajime's birthday? Plus, this doubles as something good for the-" Fuyuhiko cut himself off, suddenly realizing why his explanation shouldn't have continued past the first point.

"For the who?" Natsumi sat up, grinning at Fuyuhiko excitedly.

"Patients," Peko finished, remembering the explanation Mikan had given earlier. "It's tradition for the nurses to decorate the hospital for the holidays, in order to lift the patients' spirits."

"Aw, you want to help Miss Medicine out," Natsumi cooed. In the same cutesy tone, she continued, even though her words didn't match her voice. "I'm going to fucking hurl."
"As long as you decorate your part of the building first," Fuyuhiko retorted immediately, moving to leave the room. He was not dealing with Natsumi's teasing at the moment.

As an afterthought, he added, "Peko, make sure she does her work."

"Of course, Young Master," Peko nodded without thinking.

Just as Natsumi began to complain, a loud crash rang out from the hallway, along with whimpering and lots of apologies. Almost immediately, Fuyuhiko rushed out, trying to see what had just happened.

("What an idiot..." Natsumi sighed, just before Peko threw a pillow at her head, ordering her to get to work like Fuyuhiko asked. With lots of complaining and encouragement from Peko, Natsumi began her decorating.)

"I-I'm sorry!" Mikan screamed, trying to wriggle her way out of the mess of colourful ribbons she found herself in. Her hands were tangled in the mess, hanging just above her head. She sat on the floor, her legs spread wide, a box full of firework-themed wall stickers sitting between her thighs. "I fell!"

"How the goddamn fuck...?" Hiyoko stared at the scene in disbelief, almost annoyed with the brunette. "How the hell did you even- Urgh. Deal with it yourself."

"Hiyoko-san!" Mikan wailed, struggling against her bindings in an attempt to signal for help.

Fuyuhiko walked over to the nurse, pulling out a switchblade to cut straight to the escaping part. "Hold still."

"Thank you, F-Fuyuhiko-kun..." Mikan whispered gratefully, tears in her eyes.

"Oh great, it's you," Hiyoko glared at the Yakuza heir, earning a scowl from Fuyuhiko. "Now I have to deal with the worst possible person in this situation. Great."

Fuyuhiko sighed in frustration, mostly out of the fact that the jumble of streamers was even more complicated than he thought. He wasn't really listening to the conversation, trying to figure out how to cut through the complex tangle of ribbons without hurting Mikan.

'Is he really that hurt by Hiyoko-chan's words?!' Mikan immediately assumed the worst, gathering her courage to address Hiyoko's rudeness-

"Please don't say that about Fuyuhiko-kun..." Mikan whispered, her voice low to avoid setting off one of Hiyoko's outbursts.

Unfortunately for Mikan, Hiyoko exploded anyways.

"Are you kidding me?!" Hiyoko immediately pulled out her phone, quickly unlocking it. She jabbed an accusatory finger at the screen as she leaned towards Mikan. It would have been intimidating if Hiyoko was closer to Mikan, but... Fuyuhiko was directly in front of the nurse, forcing Mikan to tilt to the side to see Hiyoko's face, which lessened the effect. A lot.

"...um... what are you trying to show me...?" Mikan asked cautiously.

"Gah, what-" Hiyoko turned the phone around, staring at the loading screen for a few seconds before growling in aggravation. She nearly threw her phone at the floor, only restraining herself because she fucking paid for that phone and she was not about to waste that money. "Never
fucking mind then! I have to sum it up, just like I have to do all the work around here!"

"I'm sorry-"

"Saionji, shut up or get to the point," Fuyuhiko snapped, cutting off Mikan's apology.

"This is entirely your fault!" Hiyoko screamed, turning her hatred and fury towards Fuyuhiko. "I turn on the TV, but instead of my goddamn history channel, there's a fucking press conference with your face plastered all over it! Saying stuff like 'I apologize profusely for killing around a fuckton of people!' A thousand people died! What the fucking hell?!"

There was a small moment of silence, before Mikan spoke up.

"...you watch the history channel?"

"That's all you care about?" Fuyuhiko stared at the nurse in shock.

"...I like the stories about the Japanese navy, okay?" Hiyoko said defensively, holding up her arm to hide her blush behind her kimono's sleeve.

'Not you too!'

"Argh, anyways!" Hiyoko glared, although the target of her glare wasn't exactly clear. "Mikan, are you fine with staying around a guy as dangerous as that?! You won't be able to run when your foot is that messed up, and I'm not giving you a ride!"

'Is she worried about Mikan...?' Fuyuhiko paused, before wondering why he was letting himself get so caught up in their conversation when Mikan was still tied up. He decided to focus on his work-

"I don't care about that! I'm still going to stay by his side, no matter what!"

O-o-okay.

Fuyuhiko nearly dropped the knife in his state of sheer embarrassment. His face was so red that Hiyoko could tell he was blushing, even from behind. She rolled her eyes at the sight, completely apathetic to the display.

"You're an idiot," Hiyoko huffed. "Run around with him, skipping and holding hands like a pair of goddamn morons if that's how you feel."

"But I want to help!" Mikan protested as Fuyuhiko sawed through the ribbons, forcing himself to get back on track.

"You're completely useless with that foot, dumbass!" Hiyoko shot back, giving Mikan a glare that would wilt flowers and make children cry. Mikan shuddered, and Fuyuhiko instinctively moved to block Hiyoko from Mikan's line of sight. "You'll be more of a nuisance than help, so get out of here and rest! If you stick around here, you'll just mess everything up!"

'Talk about mixed messages!' Fuyuhiko wasn't sure if Hiyoko was trying to be encouraging in her own, messed-up way, or if she was trying to tear Mikan down as viciously as possible.

Apparently, Mikan assumed the latter.

"I-I'm sorry for being useless and-"
"Mikan, let's go to that place you showed me yesterday," Fuyuhiko interjected quickly, cutting off Mikan's frantic apology. And the rest of the ribbons.

"Huh?" Mikan blinked up at Fuyuhiko in confusion as the tangle of ribbons finally released her, mumbling a quick 'thank you'.

"He's asking you out, idiot," Hiyoko grumbled, rolling her eyes.

"That's not fucking it!" Fuyuhiko retorted. "Shut up and go back to whatever the hell you were doing."

"Don't tell me what to do, gnome!"

"...seriously? Gnome?" Fuyuhiko raised an eyebrow at the ex-dancer, unimpressed by her shortsighted attempt at an insult.

"G-gah, shut up! Shut up and leave already!" Hiyoko barked, blushing.

"Hiyoko-ch-" Mikan cut herself off, quickly correcting herself. "Hiyoko-san? Are you okay?"

"I'll be fine the moment you get out of my face!"

"Unng... okay," Mikan mumbled dejectedly. "Fuyuhiko-kun, can we...?"

"Yeah," He said simply, scowling at Hiyoko before tossing Mikan's arm over his shoulders, leading them away.

"I'm... I'm sorry," Kazuichi said quietly. "You're not my daughter or my best creation. You-you're a person, and I..."

"You didn't do anything wrong," Chiaki reassured him.

"Nanami?"

"You're right," Chiaki said with a warm smile. "You gave me a chance to live again. You gave birth to me anew, so wouldn't you be worthy of being my father?"

"All I did was make you a robot body!" Kazuichi shot back. "And besides, you have actual parents, don't you?!"

"That doesn't matter," Chiaki answered simply.

"Yes it does! Have you even kept in contact with them?! Have you even spoken to them anytime in the past year?!"

"...it doesn't matter," Chiaki repeated softly. "I'm not related to them anymore."

"Um, yes, you are!" Kazuichi screamed in response. "You didn't stop being related to them or anything!"

"It would just be talking to a ghost."

"Chiaki, you're not dead!"

"...you're getting agitated," Chiaki noted.
"Of course I am!" Kazuichi exclaimed defensively. "You're acting all weird!"

"Then, should I hang up?"

"Chiaki, don't even fucking think about-"

"Whoops," Chiaki said flatly to no one in particular. "I hung up by accident."

With a weary sigh, Chiaki picked herself back up, puffing her cheeks out as she psyched herself up to return to work.

'I'm worrying Father with the way I act... I should pretend that I've seen his point of view until he calms down.'

"Hey, Hajime-chaaaaaan~!" Ibuki drew out the word in her excitement, grinning widely. "Guess who's about to go on a date!"

"Ibuki-chan, what are you doing?" Mahiru hissed from beside the rock star. "You're supposed to be inviting him to his birthday party-"

"You are!" Ibuki answered, completely ignoring Mahiru's words. "Now, now, next question! Who's your date?"

"What in the world-"

"Ding ding ding! Correct!" Ibuki laughed, hopping up on Mahiru's desk as she continued talking into the phone. Mahiru would have told her to get off, if not for Ibuki's next words.

"It's our favourite freckled redhead, Koizumi Mahiru!"

Mahiru froze, staring at Ibuki in horror.

"Well... don't tell Mahiru-chan, but..." Ibuki grinned deviously, dropping her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "...she actually wants you to come to the hospital tomorrow, so she can see your pretty face but pretend she's working at the same time."

"Ibuki!" Mahiru cried out, her face even redder than her hair. "S-stop! Don't say stuff like that!"

"She's super embarrassed though!" Ibuki winked, even though Hajime couldn't see her. "Like, Mahiru-chan is screaming at me not to tell you this stuff, and saying 'oh, that's not what she meant!'"

"Ibuki, I will hang the most embarrassing pictures of you I have in the hallways if you don't stop!"

"Oh, and now she's threatening me," Ibuki noted impassively. Hajime seemed to say something, making Ibuki's face brighten. "Great!"

She hung up, pointing finger guns at a blushing (and ever-so-slightly anxious) Mahiru.

"He'll be here at eight! Wear something nice!"

"Did you just try to get me and Hajime to date!?" Mahiru demanded, her blush growing brighter by the second.

"Correction: I tried and I succeeded~!"
"Mikan, tell me something about yourself," Fuyuhiko said suddenly as they walked through the hallways together.

"Oh, you want to learn about me again?" Mikan asked in anticipation.

"Obviously."

"Ah, I guess that goes without saying..." Mikan muttered to herself, thinking. "If it's a story, then..."

"It doesn't really have to be a story," Fuyuhiko interjected. Before he could stop himself, he found himself saying a bit too much. "I could listen to you talk about stitches, if that's what you want."

Okay, what the hell?! Why would he even say something like that!?

"Wow, you read my mind!" Mikan exclaimed with a grin, earning an undignified sound of shock from Fuyuhiko. "I was thinking of telling you about the time Chiaki-san introduced me to a hospital simulator game."

"O-oh, really?" Fuyuhiko did his best to recover, though he couldn't fully cover up the stutter in his words. Really, he had no idea why Mikan liked being around him when he became a blabbering dumbass whenever they spoke.

"Yeah..." Mikan did her best to keep the smile on her face, though her voice became more mournful as she went on. It looked more bittersweet than anything. "I was so excited, but then I managed to lose the first patient to blood loss..."

"Must have been a stupid game then," Fuyuhiko offered, trying to discreetly comfort the nurse.

"Maybe..." Mikan sighed, before turning to Fuyuhiko with a small smile. "Can I learn something about you too, please?"

"Seriously?" Fuyuhiko stared at Mikan in disbelief, almost shocked by her proposition. "You want to learn about me?"

"Er, you don't have to!" Mikan declared quickly. "I just... thought it would be nice... sorry."

"It's fine, I just didn't expect it," Fuyuhiko paused, trying to think of a good story to tell. He didn't want to talk about people he had killed or anything like that, so he dug around in his childhood memories, trying to find one Mikan would like.

"When I was a kid, I was a brat who hated studying," Fuyuhiko started off simply. Mikan tried to imagine a tiny, chubby-cheeked Fuyuhiko, turning away from a pile of books with a pout on his face. The idea was so adorable that she almost began cooing over him.

"The only way I would ever go within fifty feet of a bookshelf was if I was reading about the family history or mythology. I loved mythology, since dragons were so huge and powerful, and..." Fuyuhiko cleared his throat, halting his gushing mid-sentence. Didn't want to get off track, now did he?

(Okay, it was mostly because dammit, he wanted to impress her, to be someone she could be proud to call her b- friend, (holy hell, Fuyuhiko, focus!), and rambling on about dragons was not the way to go about accomplishing either one of those goals.)

"Well, anyways, one day Natsumi sat next to me when I was reading about evil spirits. She pointed
at the picture and said 'that's you' with a big, stupid grin on her face..." Fuyuhiko smiled fondly at
the memory. "It became a game after that. We would run to the library, and find the ugliest,
nastiest, most bloodthirsty monsters in the entire world, and then we would say we found the other
one's real twin."

Mikan stared at Fuyuhiko blankly, the silence becoming more and more awkward as Fuyuhiko
waited for an answer.

'Fuck, I should have told her another story! Why couldn't I have said something like how I never
cried when I lost a fight or-

"...will your sister hurt me if I say I understand how you can compare her to bloodthirsty
monsters?" Mikan asked warily.

Fuyuhiko wasn't sure whether relief or amusement was the primary emotion behind his laughter
just then, but he didn't mind either way.

Mikan didn't bother turning on the lights, instead tossing the black curtains apart, suddenly
flooding the room in light. Fuyuhiko had to shut his eye for a moment, cautiously opening it after a
moment to adjust to the brightness.

The meeting room was plain, business-like, and true to Mikan's word, completely empty. In a stark
contrast to the sterile air of the hallways and the hospital rooms, the room smelled crisp and clean.
The smell was like fresh laundry or newly printed paper, and for a few seconds, Fuyuhiko
genuinely wondered if there was a paper-scented air freshener.

A whiteboard leaned against the wall opposite the door, covered in plans for charity events, budget
adjustments, and requests for music in the lobby. Every single music request was surrounded by a
ring of hearts and ended by a multitude of exclamation points. Fuyuhiko was pretty sure that every
single name on the list was one of Mioda's songs, since who else would name their song 'Oh My
God, There's Blood Everywhere!'?

A wooden table stretched from one end of the room to the other, completely bare except for a
small pot of fake flowers. Chairs circled the table, and Fuyuhiko took a seat. Mikan sat down next
to him, smiling.

"Excited for the party tomorrow?" Fuyuhiko asked, managing to grin just from seeing Mikan so
happy.

"Ehehe, yeah! Even if I'm not too good around parties, I'm sure it'll be fun!" Mikan answered
brightly. "Everyone worked so hard to celebrate Hajime-kun's birthday and the new year, so it'll be
great!"

"You're really close to Hajime, huh..." Fuyuhiko was not bitter about that, okay? He just...noticed
it. A lot.

"Aren't you close to him too?" Mikan countered, though Fuyuhiko was pretty sure it was
unintentional. She frowned thoughtfully, pinching at her fingers as she spoke. "...you and Hajime-
kun are really close. You use his first name, you've known him for years..." Her face darkened, her
eyes downcast. "Am I losing...?"

"Who are you losing to...?" Fuyuhiko stepped carefully, not knowing whether he wanted to hear
the answer or not.
"..." Mikan hesitated, before throwing on a smile. "It's not important."

"Don't just back out at the last second!" Fuyuhiko screamed in frustration, nearly slamming his head down on the table.

"No, no, it's fine! It really isn't important!" Mikan insisted, trying to reassure the Yakuza heir. Though... her panicked attempts were probably only making the situation worse.

"It's so damn easy to say stuff like that, but you can't even say what you're really thinking!" Fuyuhiko honestly wasn't sure whether he was talking to himself or Mikan at that point.

"I'm sorry..." Mikan mumbled. "But I don't want to bother you with my selfishness..."

"Don't worry about shit like that. We're friends, right?" Fuyuhiko continued at Mikan's nod. "You can trust me, and I can trust you."

"Ngh... but what if I don't want to just be friends?" Mikan asked, looking conflicted as she stared at Fuyuhiko. "I just... even if I should be satisfied with just that, I want to be special to you... More than anyone else."

Fuyuhiko froze, staring at her in shock. His heart seemed determined to become a world-class gymnast, flipping and turning skillfully. He wouldn't be all that surprised if his cheeks were redder than Christmas lights, since his face felt hotter than a furnace.

'I-Is this seriously happening?!'

"Is the position of best friend too much to ask?!" Mikan yelped, forcing herself to say the words.

"...it's not too much to ask," Fuyuhiko sighed, wondering why he even bothered to get his hopes up.

The night of the party, Hajime ended up becoming a chaperone. Natsumi had had a bit too much to drink, and that didn't mix well with an angry Koizumi... Plus, there was Miola's screeching, and Saionji's attempts to prank everyone... Nanami and Peko were recruited into the peace keepers, helping Hajime keep everyone alive.

Barely an hour into the event, Fuyuhiko ended up stealing a bottle and retreating into the meeting room. Crowded rooms and chaos really weren't things he wanted to deal with, and he knew he would only get a headache if he stayed. He didn't bother turning on the lights, instead letting the city lights illuminate the dark room.

Fuyuhiko wasn't really surprised when Mikan opened the door, carefully stepping into the room.

"Were you looking for me?" Fuyuhiko asked cheekily, an amused grin on his face as he turned towards the brunette.

"O-of course!" Mikan exclaimed. "I got really worried when I noticed you were gone... I thought you might have fainted in the hallway or something like that..."

"Always the dutiful nurse, huh?" Fuyuhiko laughed to himself cheerfully. And why wouldn't he be cheerful? The world just felt so warm and happy!

"Fuyuhiko-kun...? Are you okay?" Mikan asked cautiously.

"Never been better," Fuyuhiko admitted honestly, a bright smile on his face.
"Are you drunk?!" Mikan eyed the bottle in Fuyuhiko's hand warily, wondering if she would need to ban him from drinking.

"Of course not," Fuyuhiko answered, earning a sigh of relief from Mikan. "Three bottles isn't enough to get me drunk."

"Three bottles?!!" Mikan demanded in shock.

"That's what I just said," Fuyuhiko rolled his eye, though Mikan couldn't see the gesture all that well in the shadowed room.

"Stop drinking right now!" Mikan ordered.

"Shouldn't you be telling that to the pair downstairs about to kill each other?"

"Your sister scares me too much for that!" Mikan retorted. "And besides, I trust Pekoyama-san and Hajime-kun to keep them from dying!"

"Then why do you care so much about me drinking?" Fuyuhiko wondered, staring at Mikan intensely.

"Well, I wanted to stay with you, but it wouldn't be much fun if you were drunk..." Mikan explained, glad that the shadows hid her blush.

"Heh, should have guessed it was something like that," Fuyuhiko smirked knowingly, before looking thoughtful. "I still can't believe you want to spend time with me of all people."

"Huh?"

"Aren't normal people supposed to be scared of me? What happened to that?"

"I can't really be scared of you," Mikan answered. "I know that you wouldn't do anything to hurt me."

"And you trust me so much, too!" Fuyuhiko gaped at Mikan in awe, before smiling fondly at the nurse. "What in the world did I do to be able to deserve someone as incredible as you in my life?"

Before Mikan could say something like 'I should be the one saying that!', Fuyuhiko stepped closer, looking up at her with complete adoration obvious in his eye.

"I just figured that you deserved to know," Fuyuhiko said, even though Mikan had no idea what he was talking about. "I sucked at hiding it anyways, so, well, here goes."

With liquid courage spurring him on, Fuyuhiko confessed.

"I love you."

Chapter End Notes

lol
His sister was dead. A twice-bloodied baseball bat rolled around his feet, mocking him for his failure to save Natsumi.

(He should have been there. He should have stopped it, he should have saved her-)

Peko's mangled corpse laid in front of him, covered in stab wounds. A mask hid her face, untouched by the blood soaking Peko's body.

(He should have seen it coming. He wasn't good enough to stop her death-)

Hajime had been shot, right between his eyes. His body joined the steadily-growing pile, and Fuyuhiko had to bite his tongue to stop himself from screaming at the sight.

(He had failed, and failure costed lives.)

The next bodies were his parents. They were so mutilated that he could only identify his mother's corpse by the tattoo of the Kuzuryuu crest on the back of her right hand. A gun dangled from her fingers, ready to fall at any second if Fuyuhiko didn't grab it.

But... Doing that would mean accepting every burden that came with the Kuzuryuu name. Was he really ready to carry the weight of so many lives?

He could hear the voices, the words said by countless people around him, uncles, aunts, cousins, gunmen...

'She's not ready! We can't have a little girl in charge of the family!'

'There's a dozen people more qualified than her!'

'Being the next-in-line doesn't automatically mean you're good enough.'

They had said it so many times that he honestly began to doubt. His value, his strength, his weakness...

But through all of it, he had to endure. He couldn't show weakness, even though the endless barrage was beginning to chip away at him, beginning to drive him insane-

'They follow you because they know you're going to be a great leader.'

Everything else became a hushed silence as a new voice appeared. The smell of blood and decay was replaced by the scent of rubbing alcohol and curry-flavoured popcorn.

'You're strong, you're brave, you're honest, you're kind, you do things without hesitation... you're really amazing, Fuyuhiko-kun!'

Fuyuhiko found himself smiling at the words, the weight of death and honour and his family's name being lifted off his shoulders for a few brief, wonderful seconds.

And then she screamed, ripping that joy away from him. A bullet shot through her arm, and
another body fell in front of him.

It was all his fault-

Fuyuhiko woke up, slumped over a couch with a foot poking him in the face. With a groan, he shoved the person off him, not bothering to check who it was. It was only when he heard the moan of pain that he realized that it was Peko. With a small apology, he pushed himself up, opening his eye to survey the room.

As expected, it was complete chaos. The room was a mess, streamers, food, and spilled drinks everywhere. There were a lot more people than he remembered being there unconscious on the floor, in all kinds of positions. Taking care not to step on Peko, Fuyuhiko stood up. He gently put her back on the couch to make up for pushing her off in the first place.

Standing up brought a stab of pain to his skull, and Fuyuhiko quickly sat back down, leaning his head back against the cushions. He would have fallen back asleep if not for the conversation in the hallway.

It was true that they were trying to be quiet, but with the dead silence in the room, the words were audible to everyone that was awake, i.e. Fuyuhiko. Fuyuhiko cursed himself for being born a morning person.

"So, who brought the cake again?" Saionji asked.

"I think it was Teru-chan," Mioda replied simply. "I can't even remember who invited him!"

"Well, the guy in charge of invitations seriously needs to get their head on straight!" Saionji declared in exasperation. "One guy brought his pets! One of them was a baby lion!"

"But Gundham-chan's baby lion was cute, right~?" Mioda's voice became teasing, making Saionji quickly sputter out a denial. "Don't lie! I saw you looking at him with tons of love and adoration in your eyes!"

"Oh shut up! Talk about something else! Anything else!" Saionji screamed desperately, earning a wince and muttered curse from Fuyuhiko.

"Love gossip?" Mioda offered.

"Sure, sure, whatever! Fine!"

"Well..." Mioda trailed off. "I'm kind of confused."

"You're always confused."

"Rude! Anyways, didn't you notice? Mikan-chan and Fuyu-chan disappeared last night!"

"What."

"But whenever I asked what happened, Mikan was totally dodging the question," Mioda's voice became concerned as she went on. "I hope nothing bad happened..."

Fuyuhiko's eye widened as he quickly searched for the events of last night in his memory. To his frustration and horror, all he could remember was Natsumi challenging a busty brunette to a rematch.
"I'm going to kill." Saionji's words were cut off as a blur rushed past her, running faster than Owari towards a buffet. "What... what was that...?"

"Wow, there goes Fuyu-chan," Ibuki noted casually, watching him go.

"What the fuck," Hiyoko said blankly.

Fuyuhiko was completely out of breath when he finally found Mikan, having forgotten that he had no idea where she was in his panic.

In a familiar office, Mikan sat down, her back facing the doorway as she signed her release forms. Fuyuhiko leaned against the wall, trying to calm his breathing before facing her.

He just had to apologize for whatever he did last night. That was all.

(Except what if he had done something unforgivable or worse-)

Mikan thanked the other person in the room, before turning to leave. She stepped into the hallway, before spotting the Yakuza heir resting on the wall.

Her eyes widened, staring at him in shock for a good few seconds, but before Fuyuhiko could force himself to apologize or just say something, Mikan broke the tense silence.

"Fuyuhiko-kun!" Mikan beamed brightly as she stepped towards him. "I'm so glad I got to see you!"

"Y-you are?" Fuyuhiko gaped at her, completely dumbfounded by her reaction.

"Hehe, of course!" Mikan's smile became more modest, though no less joyful. "You like the 'Yakuza Papers' series, right?"

"Er, yeah, why?" Fuyuhiko had absolutely no idea what was happening.

"Well, I heard that the library managed to get the series finale, so I thought, maybe we could watch it together...?" Mikan offered bashfully.

"I would be fine with that," Fuyuhiko stated, surprising himself with how steady his voice was. "But... are you sure you'll be okay?"

Mikan stared at him in confusion. "What are you talking about?"

"I mean..." Fuyuhiko hesitated, before forcing himself to ask. "Did I do anything weird to you last night?!!"

Mikan paused, before blushing a bright pink.

"I-I wouldn't say it was weird... it's just- I wouldn't expect you to say something like that!"

"What did I say?!" Fuyuhiko demanded, hoping to hell and back that it wasn't something awful-

"Ehehehe... it's a bit embarrassing, but..." Mikan smiled, right before hiding her blushing cheeks behind her hands. Her words were a bit muffled, but Fuyuhiko wouldn't be able to miss a word she said, not with how intently he was listening. "You told me that I was really important to you... and that you always wanted me to stay by your side. And even if you were drunk, I'm... I'm really happy....!"
Fuyuhiko froze, all his nervousness and energy bleeding out of him.

"I would say that even if I wasn't drunk," Fuyuhiko stated honestly.

"Thank you," Mikan uncovered her face, right before placing her hands on his shoulders, pressing a kiss to his forehead.

Fuyuhiko was sure that Mikan said something else after that, something about meeting up later and movies, but he really wasn't listening. He nodded along, but his stare was firmly locked on Mikan's soft lips, the same lips that she had willingly freaking kissed him with.

She turned around and walked off, though she waved energetically at Fuyuhiko as she left.

As Fuyuhiko waved back, he silently thanked himself for choosing to drink that much. He could have a million hangovers in one day, and it would all be worth it to see Mikan that happy.

"I love you too, Fuyuhiko-kun! You're very important to me," Mikan exclaimed with a smile. Fuyuhiko groaned in disappointment.

"You don't get it, do you? When I say 'love', that's not what I mean."

"'Love'?" Mikan echoed, slowly beginning to realize what he meant. Just to make sure, just to ensure that she wasn't blindly assuming things, she asked. "By love, do you mean platonic love, friendship love, romantic love or Hajime-kun love?"

"Why the hell does Hajime get his own category?!" Fuyuhiko demanded immediately.

"He's special to me," Mikan said simply, getting a weird look from Fuyuhiko. It was like someone was trying to feed him lemons dipped in milk.

"...you're not going after him, are you?" Fuyuhiko tried to keep the jealousy out of his voice, but at the same time, it was really tempting to go grab a baseball bat-

"What? No!" Mikan looked completely baffled by the idea. Fuyuhiko wasn't sure whether to laugh or sigh in relief at her quick reaction. "Isn't he dating your sister?"

"Which one?"

"...one of them? I-I think...?" Mikan hesitated, before adding, "I'm not really sure, actually..."

"Argh, I know," Fuyuhiko grumbled in annoyance. "I can't even fucking tell what's going between him and Natsumi anymore."

"There was this time she broke into the hospital to kill one of my patients since she heard that he was Hajime-kun's boyfriend," Mikan offered. "Actually, Pekoyama-san was there too, but it was only for Ku- er, Natsumi's sake."

"Hold on," Fuyuhiko eyed Mikan in suspicion, though he was more suspicious of Natsumi than Mikan. "When did you get on first-name basis with Natsumi?"

"She kind of... went off on a tangent about me meeting your parents and calling everyone 'Kuzuryuu-san' and told me to call her that," Mikan confessed.

Fuyuhiko sighed. "I'll yell at her tomorrow for you then."
"Y-you don't have to go that far!"

"Hey, at least I'm not trying to beat her to death," Fuyuhiko joked, a small smile on his face.

Mikan grinned in return, though she stayed silent.

Fuyuhiko was the one who broke the silence.

"You really don't get it, do you? When I say 'I love you', I don't mean it as between two friends. I mean I want to-"

Kuzuryuu Fuyuhiko was not smitten. (He was.)

He had complete control of his own mental facilities. (Except for the fact that he would bring the moon down for Mikan if she ever asked, logic, physics, and environmental damage be damned.)

There was absolutely nothing weird about the way he was acting. (Unless you counted the fact that he had fallen, and he had fallen hard enough to feel his teeth clatter around in his mouth as vibrations echoed around his skull.)

But could you really blame him? The first and so far, only, person he had ever been in love with was clinging to his arm, smiling down at him so brightly that Fuyuhiko was beginning to see stars around her face. Even though he was far too preoccupied to listen, her voice was hypnotic, enchanting the world around them to make everything feel so much more beautiful.

Fuyuhiko usually hated snow, citing everything from how wet and cold it was as reasons to detest it. But somehow, the snow seemed to become a glowing pathway, or something stupid like that. The cold was an excuse, the reason he would hide behind if asked why he was so red. (But then Mikan would probably just get worried about him, and that would be another issue entirely.) The cold also managed to make Mikan's warmth much more prominent, though Fuyuhiko doubted he could ignore it in the first place. He didn't really know if he could ignore her at all at this point.

He couldn't remember the trip to the library, if only because right after, Mikan pressed another kiss to his cheek, taking his hand as they left the building.

Honestly, if Mikan was trying to destroy his memory with the power of happiness and embarrassment... it was working. The trip to the hotel room was a complete blank in his mind. If he had to guess, then he probably spent that time nodding along to Mikan's words absentmindedly while wondering if he was in heaven.

The hotel room Mikan and her friends were staying in was obviously used. A messy kitchen was next to the door, separated from the bedroom by a half-wall. Two beds sat side-by-side, one covered in clothes, pillows, and messy sheets. Luggage sat on the cream-coloured carpet around that bed. The other bed was practically untouched, nothing but Mikan's black bag resting on it. A TV on a drawer rested in front of the beds, and Mikan quickly took the DVD out from the case, trying to set it up.

Unwilling to sit on either of the beds, Fuyuhiko took a seat on the floor, glad that the carpet was mostly spared from the clutter on the other side of the room. With an exclamation of triumph, Mikan managed to get the movie to play. She sat next to Fuyuhiko, close enough that, if he really wanted to, he could reach out and grab her hand.

Even if he did manage to fight the embarrassment long enough to work up the courage necessary to do that, Fuyuhiko didn't even have to move. Mikan leaned over, resting her head on his right
It was absurd, really. Fuyuhiko could ignore anything as long as he was completely absorbed in something. Natsumi's antics could be dismissed the moment Fuyuhiko found a good movie, and any one of the 'Yakuza Papers' series had jumped beyond good and into 'unforgettable' in Fuyuhiko's mind. Yet the moment Mikan touched him, he managed to forget the protagonist's name and even what was going on at several points.

Mikan watched Fuyuhiko's attempts to remain calm and stoic with a small frown on her face. He kept trying to fix his gaze on the TV, only to find his eye drawn to Mikan. Every time Fuyuhiko seemed like he would turn his head and discover the conflict obvious in Mikan's frown, she trailed her fingers on his arm, making the Yakuza heir tense up and try even harder to look unaffected.

Mikan almost felt horrified by how easily she could manipulate him, now that she knew. She could give him joy in a moment, take it away the next...

She was awful. Even if she was using it to give Fuyuhiko happiness, she was still manipulating Fuyuhiko, wasn't she? It was wrong, right?

It was wrong how, despite the fact that Mikan felt guilty and horrible about it, she enjoyed giving Fuyuhiko affection. It was just... it was just luck that they enjoyed the same things, so... Mikan wasn't manipulating him to give herself joy, right?

Which one was it? Making him happy or stringing him along for her own selfishness? Was she acting for his sake or hers?

Mikan pushed herself off of him, unable to continue for another moment.

"Is something wrong, Mikan?" Fuyuhiko turned towards her, becoming concerned.

"Ngh, I-I, uh..." Mikan sighed. "I'm sorry..."

"What are you apologizing for?"

"...you won't hate me, even if I'm selfish, right?"

"Wha- of course not!" Fuyuhiko rebuked the idea of hating Mikan automatically, before noticing the rest of the sentence. "What do you mean by 'being selfish'?"

Mikan froze.

"I-I lied to you..." Mikan admitted miserably. "The night of Hajime-kun's party, you got drunk. And you did say t-that I was important to you and that you loved me very much, but..." Mikan hesitated, pinching her fingers nervously. "When I tried to say that I loved you too... You got annoyed with me."

"I did?" Fuyuhiko's face must have been a perfect cocktail of shock, horror, and grief.

"Yeah, but then... You said; 'You really don't get it, do you? When I say 'I love you', I don't mean it as between two friends. I mean I want to f-ing date you.'"

"E-er, did I really do that?" Fuyuhiko turned bright red in an instant.

"Yes, but y-you were drunk!" Mikan supplemented, forcing an awkward grin on her face."Ha, I-I was just being silly, wasn't I?! O-of course you didn't m-mean it!"
"That's not... Ugh, I was being serious, okay!?! Fuyuhiko confessed, earning a gasp of shock from
Mikan. "I guess... I guess I'm in love with you."

He could practically see the buffering symbol hovering over Mikan's head as she stared at him
blankly. Her eyes widened, only for her to purse her lips and scrunch her eyebrows together, before
returning to a blank stare. Mikan kept moving her lips wordlessly, trying to find the right words to
say and coming up short. Fuyuhiko was completely unable to discern her true emotions from the
various faces she was making... which didn't really help with the nervousness at all.

Just before Fuyuhiko said something along the lines of 'Forget it already, it's not important',
Mikan began muttering to herself.

"I don't want him to hate me, he said he won't but he still doesn't know, what if he's wrong, this
might-"

"I could never hate you," Fuyuhiko stated, staring into Mikan's eyes resolutely.

"Even if I'm selfish? Even if I just..." Mikan grimaced, forcing herself to say the words. "I wanted
to make you happy!"

"Huh?" Fuyuhiko was completely blindsided by her words, not seeing it at all.

"I-I..." Mikan trailed off, remembering.

"Fuyuhiko-kun... you're drunk."

"If you don't believe me now, then try it out tomorrow," Fuyuhiko shrugged, taking another sip.
"Even if it's just a kiss on the cheek, I'll be happy. That should be enough proof for you."

"I know that... you like it when I kiss you or when I hold your hand... but... it feels selfish," Mikan
sighed once again. "I know it's for you, but... I like it too! A-and, it feels like I'm taking advantage
of you and your love! Like I'm tricking you!"

"Mikan, that's not it!" Fuyuhiko interjected, or tried his best to.

"I just... I'm just so selfish when it comes to you," Mikan grimaced, continuing anyways. "I'm
supposed to be happy with friendship, right?! I'm supposed to be happy just being able to be
around you! But... I'm selfish, and I just-I just want to be special to you...!"

"If that's what you call selfish, then I'm just as selfish as you are!" Fuyuhiko exclaimed suddenly.

"What?!"

"I'm in love with you," Fuyuhiko reiterated, equally annoyed and flustered. "Of course I want to be
special to you!"

"H-hold on, you-you w-w-w-what?!" Mikan stammered, gaping at Fuyuhiko in shock.

Fuyuhiko then realized that he might have fucked up. He only had two words in response. "Aw
crap."

"Fu-Fuyuhiko-kun, you really-you really...?!" Mikan seemed like she was on the verge of
hyperventilating, almost screaming her words.

"I love you," Fuyuhiko confirmed, because if he fucked up, well, he might as well keep going.
Mikan immediately stopped whimpering and blubbering. She turned even redder than a firetruck, staring at Fuyuhiko in stunned silence.

"Forget it, it's not-"

"Is that what this is?" Mikan asked, interrupting Fuyuhiko's attempt to brush it off without even noticing. "Am I... am I in love with you?"

"How the fuck should I know?" Fuyuhiko snapped, making Mikan flinch. He immediately tried to backtrack, his voice less harsh as he added, "I can't read your mind or anything. I have no idea how you feel about me."

"Ungh... I'm sorry," Mikan mumbled.

"What the hell are you even apologizing for?"

Mikan hesitated, fear and doubt and panic creeping around at the forefront of her mind. Her gaze wandered, resting on Fuyuhiko's intact eye.

He had seen her crying and sobbing with that eye. Fuyuhiko had seen Mikan at some of her lowest points and still supported her wholeheartedly. She had trusted him with her innermost secrets and he accepted it. That was why he was one of the most precious people in Mikan's life, and why she couldn't bear to lose him.

But in return... what was she to him? At best, she was equal to family members.

"His family had probably seen him at his lowest points," The thought made a sigh emerge from Mikan's parted lips.

All Mikan really had was the time he trusted her with his doubts about being the leader. It just... It wasn't fair.

Even if he reassured her that he would never leave for something like that, even if she trusted him... Mikan still wanted to repay him. Not out of fear of abandonment... but because Mikan wanted to be just as important to him as he was to her.

"Mikan..."

Apparently she had been saying everything out loud. Because... why else would that happen?

Why else would Fuyuhiko's hand reach towards her, cupping the back of her head as he closed the distance between them?

Fuyuhiko pulled away quickly, ending the chaste kiss just as soon as it started. He looked horrified by what he just did, sitting up with a bright red face.

"Shit- er, sorry-"

Mikan grabbed at his hand before he could flee.

"May I?" She smiled at him, her other hand reaching out to brush against his cheek.

"S-sure."

Mikan wrapped her arms around Fuyuhiko's shoulders, pressing their lips together once again. Her eyes squeezed shut as she gently coaxed Fuyuhiko into opening his mouth. Fuyuhiko was hesitant
at first, both with his tongue and with his hands. He awkwardly placed his hands on her hips, panting slightly as he pulled away.

The smile on her face was even brighter than before, encouraging Fuyuhiko to try again. He was determined to get it right, despite his lack of experience.

It felt kind of ironic, actually. Shy, timid Mikan was the one leading their dance. But Fuyuhiko had never had a crush on anyone before Mikan, let alone a kiss, and he needed room to try out the steps. Even if Mikan wasn't much more experienced than him, and even if the source of her experience was a horrible human being in general, Enoshima was an amazing kisser.

Mikan immediately felt like kicking herself. She was kissing the man she loved enough to die for, and she was thinking of a despair-obsessed maniac? What did that say about her character?

Well, whatever it said about her, Mikan couldn't care less, especially when Fuyuhiko became more and more confident. He had practically pulled the nurse onto his lap, wrapping his arms around her hips to complete the hug. Every time they separated, it only lasted for a few seconds before one of them leaned in for more.

By the time they had separated for good, they were both out of breath, staring at each other with half-lidded eyes.

"Was... was that good?" Fuyuhiko asked uncertainly, bright pink.

"As long as it's with you, anything would be amazing," Mikan answered, earning a groan from Fuyuhiko.

"That's not reassuring," Fuyuhiko huffed.

"Well, I meant it," Mikan said with a glowing smile.

"Seriously, I want to know whether I'm a good kisser or not."

"You are!" Mikan exclaimed.

"That's great," Fuyuhiko sighed in relief.

The two lapsed into a comfortable silence as they calmed their breathing. But still, the quiet was broken a few seconds in.

"Are you sure about this? Someone like me...?"

"What are you talking about? Of course I am. Shouldn't I be the one asking that?"

"Not at all! Don't doubt yourself!"

"You were just doubting yourself, weren't you?!"

"That's different!"

"No, it's not!"

The movie ended up being completely forgotten.

"Don't you just hate those love stories where the story ends right after the main couple get
together?" Ibuki asked, taking a sip from her smoothie. "I mean, if we spent an entire hour watching those guys get together, shouldn't we at least get to see how they are as a couple?"

"Love stories are boring as fuck," Hiyoko retorted, eyeing the concoction with disgust. "I'm more concerned with how you can drink that thing without puking everywhere."

"Hiyo-chan! Don't insult my drink!" Ibuki whined. "And besides, you ruined my moment! I was going to be all suave and sneak in reassurances that 'this story isn't over yet!' and stuff, but you ruined it!"

"What the fuck are you talking about," Hiyoko demanded flatly, before noticing something from the corner of her eye. "Hey, isn't that Mikan and Kuzuryuu?"

"Woah, you're right!" Ibuki grinned as she watched the couple take a seat at the cafe table.

"God, they're like a new couple," Hiyoko sighed in exasperation at the sight of the two laughing and talking with each other. "When will those lovebirds hook up? It's freaking annoying."

"Hm... they need a bit of a push, huh?" Ibuki smirked as deviously as she could (translation: not very devious). "It's now or never! Before the third act, they have to get together!"

"What the fuck are you talking about, you insane harpy," Hiyoko demanded flatly.

"How do you feel about having a beach episode?"

"..." Hiyoko stared at Ibuki blankly, before contorting her face into an expression of disgust. "Please, never speak again."

Chapter End Notes

Bonus

'Oh, there's Mikan and Fuyu-chan!' Ibuki smiled as she noted the two from her corner of the party. She considered approaching them and striking up a conversation, before deciding to only choose one. Silently, (well, it didn't matter if she was quiet or not, not when there was a four-way brawl in the room), she crept over to them, listening in.

"Fuyuhiko-kun, don't you think you've had a bit too much?" Mikan asked, reaching a hand out for the bottle in his hand. "You can give it to me."

"Like hell I'm giving you alcohol," Fuyuhiko spat back, cradling his bottle protectively.

'He knows about Mikan's low tolerance, so he's not letting her drink!' Ibuki began cheering Fuyuhiko on mentally, glad that Mikan had such a considerate person in her life-

"I insist! Give it to me!" Mikan ordered, though the effect was ruined by how obviously flustered she was by raising her voice. "You'll die of alcohol poisoning at this rate!"

'And Mikan's concerned about him, so she keeps trying to grab his bottle-'
"Like hell," Fuyuhiko glared at the nurse, before tilting his head back and beginning to drink the entire thing.

'Fuyu-chan drinks to keep Mikan from getting his drink, Mikan tries to get his drink to stop him from drinking too much-?!' Ibuki's head ended up spinning in an endless loop, even though she didn't have any alcohol.

'So many problems would be solved if one of you two just decided to be honest!'
First-Name Basis

If it weren't a habit that formed the day Nanami reappeared, Hiyoko would have been met with a carefree laugh when she asked to bathe with Mioda. Mioda would have made a joke about something or other while agreeing, and Hiyoko would have obviously screamed an insult at her in response. Instead, their bath became a daily ritual, where they made conversation and played with soap bubbles.

Hiyoko was glad for the fact that the hotel's shower was big enough for the two of them. It was more of a tiled chamber with a shower head installed. The two sat comfortably on the floor, Ibuki crossing her legs as she grabbed the soap.

Hiyoko didn't even have legs to cross, instead leaning back, supporting her body weight with her arms. It always felt surreal to see herself below the waist, without long skirts or kimonos to cover everything up. The device made to replace her bladder and intestines was so obvious. It didn't even match her fucking skin! It looked more like someone had sawed off her lower half, and then fused a bowl to her hips.

She wouldn't be able to bathe on her own, not without a lot of struggling, so shower time was sacred to Hiyoko. She never let her grandparents or her mother help her, so if someone she trusted like Mikan or Mahiru was unavailable, she would forgo baths entirely.

What did that make Mioda then?

'I guess... she's okay,' Hiyoko settled for that in her mind, not wanting to go through that mental discussion when the woman in question was in the room.

Ibuki hummed as she scrubbed Hiyoko's back, absentmindedly admiring the other woman's long hair. Or, well, examining it, since Hiyoko's hair was just weird! It was completely straight, until the end, where it curled up, but instead of doing normal curls, her hair literally curled up. As in, Hiyoko's hair had somehow managed to defy the laws of gravity and point up, but not only that, it turned into spikes. Sharp enough to poke your eye out! And it was completely natural too! How did that even-

"Is that a new song of yours?" Hiyoko asked casually, cutting off Ibuki's strange train of thought.

"I think it might be!" Ibuki announced with a grin. That grin quickly fell off her face as she pouted. "But the lyrics are totally weird. I'm imagining a screamo song, but all I can think of is cheesy love song stuff."

"What kind of song would that even be?" Hiyoko snorted in amusement, before screaming exaggeratedly. "'Aaaaah! I love you! I'll scream it out, nice and loud!'"

"Hehe, not bad!" Ibuki nodded. "But it needs a little... PASSION! 'Passionate love! Screams from above!'"

A sudden spark of inspiration struck Hiyoko, putting a grin on her face as she sang, "The words on my tongue! Forever unsung!"

"'Spit it out while we're still young!'" Ibuki was hurriedly writing down the words, the notes, the tune in her mind. Maybe it needed some tweaking, but she liked the tune Hiyoko was singing!

"'Shout it out with me!'" Hiyoko called out, turning to Ibuki with an excited smile on her face.
"Shout it out with me!" Ibuki echoed, mirroring Hiyoko's enthusiasm.

"Sharp-edged words-"

"-and a messed-up melody!"

"Shout it out with me! Shout it out with me!" The pair sang in unison, before laughing. Ibuki wasn't sure who started giggling first, but eventually, they ended up a cackling mess on the shower's tiles.

"That was incredible!" Ibuki cheered, almost almost tossing her loofah in the air from throwing her hands up too quickly.

"It was kinda fun," Hiyoko admitted.

"It's not that easy to just feel that sort of music spark with anyone! Oh man, I'm missing it already!" Ibuki exclaimed, before sighing. "It would be nice if my old band had that sort of connection..."

"You're famous on your own though," Hiyoko pointed out. "Do you even need a band at this point?"

"You're missing the point!" Ibuki whined. "It can feel lonely to always perform by yourself! That's why I always, always, always send lots of flowers and love to people who collaborate with me!"

"That's overkill!"

"Nuh-uh! It's completely normal to send flowers in showbiz!"

"Creepy, creepy, you're flirting with everyone, aren't you, you perv!?!"

"What sort of conclusions are you jumping to?! You're the pervert here if that's the first thing on your mind!"

"Am not!"

"Are too!"

The shower became a shouting match, ending only when the person in the adjacent room yelled at them to shut up.

"For the last fucking time, Mioda," Hiyoko sighed in exasperation as she dried her hair with a towel. "She wasn't kidnapped by penguins!"

"What if she was kidnapped in general!?" Mioda screamed back, fidgeting with her glitter-covered phone nervously.

"You're freaking out over nothing."

"The only time you can say that is on the ninth anniversary of Chi-chan's abduction!" Mioda snapped, glaring at the blonde.

'Oh. Right,' Hiyoko almost felt guilty for her lapse in memory. Almost. "...sorry."

If Mioda heard the apology, she didn't react. Instead, she made indescribable sounds of anguish and confusion at her phone. Just before Hiyoko could ask what could have possibly put Mioda in such a state, the rock star began wailing.
"Self-defence lessons with Fuyu-chan!? The *entire* day!? Why couldn't you have just gotten a gym membership!?"

Mikan... wasn't sure if she was supposed to be shocked or not by the fact that there was a dojo in the Kuzuryuu home. Tatami mats lined the floor, feeling strange under Mikan's feet. The room smelled like blood, sweat, and tears, and Mikan was sure that the dojo had seen the three substances in abundance.

Fuyuhiko sat on top of a large black box, looking up at her. He simply wore a black t-shirt and sweatpants. A trio of onlookers watched, all in pyjamas.

"So, I was thinking of just doing some weight lifting together. Build some muscle before going right to the techniques. Is that-

"Before you jump straight to the workout," Hajime interjected, cutting Fuyuhiko off. "Wouldn't it be best to get a sense of how skilled Mikan is? So you know how long to train her, the weights you should use, stuff like that."

"That *is* a good idea," Fuyuhiko admitted, turning from his girlfriend to the trio of bystanders. "How do you think we should do that?"

"Peko, do you want to fight Mikan?"

"What!?" Mikan stared at the other brunette in shock, looking horrified. "I'll die!"

"It's a friendly match, just to get an idea of things, you know?" Hajime said reassuringly.

"Peko will crush her," Natsumi stated. "Are you *really* sure about that?"

"I thought it would make things easier for Fuyuhiko, but if you don't want to..." Hajime trailed off, trying to make it clear that Mikan was in complete control and that she could back out at any time. 

"If it's for Fuyuhiko-kun, then I guess I have to try!" Milan declared instantly.

'What happened to her cowardice!?' Natsumi was stunned into silence, staring at the scene in horror as Mikan and Peko got into position.

"You know you don't have to do this, right?" Fuyuhiko asked, moving to stand next to Hajime and Natsumi on the sidelines.

Mikan nodded, before smiling at Fuyuhiko. "I want to."

"Are you ready?" Peko asked.

"Yes!" Mikan nodded energetically, preparing herself for-

Peko immediately rushed towards Mikan, slamming the nurse to the ground before she could even say the word *'cat'*. Even though it probably wasn't necessary, Peko placed a foot on top of Mikan's throat, not putting enough pressure to choke her, but enough to ensure that the nurse wouldn't be moving unless Peko allowed it.

"She won in less than five seconds...!" Fuyuhiko gasped in awe.

"Wouldn't expect anything less from Pekoyama-sensei," Hajime smiled. "Thanks for the fight."
"Of course," Peko released the nurse, letting her recover. "You did well, Taumiki-san."

'There is no way that losing in five seconds can be called 'doing well!'" Mikan would have retorted, if she wasn't too busy enjoying the ability to breathe freely.

Fuyuhiko went to her side, rubbing her back as she sucked in air.

"Well, maybe we shouldn't have started off with Peko," Hajime observed, mentally taking note of the loss. "Someone less... decisive."

"Decisive, huh..." Natsumi grinned, getting an idea. She pointed at the taller man excitedly. "You fight Miss Medicine next!"

"No one is fighting Mikan!" Fuyuhiko declared, just before Hajime shrugged and removed his shirt, leaving him in just striped pyjama pants.

"...uh...?" Mikan wasn't sure if she should speak up or not, but seriously, why-

"Why the hell did you take off your shirt?" Fuyuhiko asked, unintentionally verbalizing Mikan's thoughts.

"It's a distraction tactic," Peko explained on Hajime's behalf. "He frequently employed it in spars against me."

"It loses the effectiveness if you explain it..." Hajime muttered bashfully.

"No one cares about your weird, perverted distraction tactics!" Natsumi exclaimed hurriedly. "Hurry up and fight already! I want to record this!"

"If you say so," Hajime shrugged, before turning towards Mikan. "I'm ready whenever you are."

"Put your shirt back on first," Fuyuhiko huffed.

"I won't be distracted by something like that!" Mikan exclaimed passionately as she stood up. "I saw you shirtless too many times for that to affect me!"

"Hey, what the hell have you two been through!?" Fuyuhiko demanded, half-glaring at Hajime, half-staring at the pair in shock.

"Your jealousy is showing," Peko observed calmly, earning a stammered denial from Fuyuhiko. The swordswoman got a high-five from Natsumi, making Fuyuhiko swear at them in response.

"Did you hear about how the cafe had a new strawberry shortcake deal?" Hajime asked, not moving from his spot.

"Really? Maybe we should try it out!" Mikan exclaimed excitedly, clasping her hands together.

"Aren't you allergic to strawberries?"

"No, no, you're thinking of Ibuki-san," Mikan waved her hand dismissively.

"They're not even fighting," Natsumi noted, almost bored.

"The only reason you can say that is because you've never fought against Hajime," Peko stated.

"What the hell does that even mean-" Fuyuhiko's words were cut off by Hajime attacking.
He circled around Mikan while the nurse was still talking, shoving her to the ground and restraining her hands behind her back.


"To be fair, you were going against two experienced fighters," Fuyuhiko offered.

"You didn't even try to fight him!" Natsumi exclaimed, glaring at Mikan. "I can understand how you lost against Peko, but Hajime's way easier! He even gave you an opportunity to attack before-

"-Natsumi, why don't you fight her next!" Hajime offered hurriedly, trying to stop Natsumi before she could make Mikan cry.

"Never. There is no way in fucking hell I will ever-"

"I can't believe I let you talk me into this," Natsumi groaned.

"It's two years worth of merchandise, but if you don't want it..." Hajime trailed off temptingly, grinning at Natsumi.

"You're giving her even more posters?" Fuyuhiko scowled at the thought. "She doesn't even have walls anymore! Where is she going to put them?!"

"Natsumi leaves the excess in my room," Peko stated.

"Are you fucking serious!?"

"Quit blabbering already!" Natsumi snapped. "Let's get this over with."

Without waiting for even an 'I'm ready' from Mikan, Natsumi rushed forward. She quickly threw a punch at the brunette, and Mikan tripped over her own feet in her attempt to jump back.

"Unnngh..." Mikan moaned from the floor.

"How the hell do you fall and end up like that!?!" Natsumi demanded in disbelief.

Mikan's shirt had ridden up, exposing her stomach and showing off a peek of her bra. Apparently, Mikan had the ability to blush on command, since that was the only possible explanation for how her cheeks flushed and half-lidded eyes could have possibly happened. A towel had appeared out of nowhere to cover up her shorts, just to give off the impression that she wasn't wearing shorts.

"That's actually a lot tamer than you would expect from Mikan," Hajime noted, completely unaffected by the sight.

"Again, what the hell have you two been doing together?!" Fuyuhiko demanded.

"E-er, do you need help?" Natsumi offered, her cheeks slowly turning red at the sight-

Mikan threw the towel at her face, taking advantage of the distraction to pounce on Natsumi.

"Gah-!" Natsumi had to take a moment to process the situation. The reason why she was on the floor, her hands tied behind her back... None of those things came to mind immediately.

"Mikan wins!" Hajime announced, pride in his voice. He was like a doting mother.
"What-"

"I can't believe that worked!" Mikan exclaimed in awe.

"Yeah, you did great," Fuyuhiko smiled at her warmly as Peko applauded the nurse's victory.

"That so does not count!" Natsumi whined, struggling against her restraints. "Cheat! I could've beat her if she didn't cheat!"

"When you're fighting for your life, there are no rules," Peko reasoned, earning grumbling from Natsumi.

"I'm still going to give you the merchandise," Hajime offered, trying to placate Natsumi. That attempt somewhat worked, in that she simply began pouting.

"Alright, the fight's over," Fuyuhiko declared. "So you can untie her now, Mikan."

"Right!" Mikan exclaimed, still cheerful from her win.

"Your fight against Fuyuhiko better be awesome," Natsumi huffed as Mikan helped her up.

"What? No, I'm not fighting her!" Fuyuhiko glared at Natsumi.

"Everyone else fought her," Hajime stated.

"That doesn't mean I have to!"

"What, can't raise a hand against her?" Natsumi laughed mockingly.

"That's not fucking it!" (It may have been part of the reason.)

"The choice is between Tsumiki-san and Fuyuhiko," Peko said simply, cutting through the potential argument in a single sentence.

"...I don't really want to fight you..." Mikan muttered.

"And I don't either, so-"

"But can I please have a request?!" Mikan forced herself to say the words, not caring about her volume or the fact that she had cut Fuyuhiko off. Her cheeks were bright red as she stared at Fuyuhiko pleadingly. "Please, just one, small request!"

"Sure," Fuyuhiko nodded, curious as to what it was.

"I mean, you don't have to if you don't want to, but this means a lot to me! If I had to choose between a million years of happiness and getting this wish granted, I would choose the wish! I don't mean to pressure you into it, but-

"Get to the fucking point already!" Natsumi snapped.

"Fuyuhiko-kun! Can I please see you shirtless?!" Mikan screamed, clasping her hands together.

There was a moment of silence where the four Yakuza members simply stared at Mikan in shock, not believing that she would ever say such a thing.

"A-are you serious?!" Fuyuhiko demanded, breaking the silence with a bright blush on his cheeks.
"Yes! I'll do anything you want in return! Absolutely anything!"

Hajime was the first to fully recover, only chuckling in amusement. He got a glare from Natsumi for that.

"Don't just- Urgh, fine!" Just to make sure Mikan didn't get into detail about what she was willing to do in exchange, Fuyuhiko began stripping off his shirt. Even though he was red enough to be mistaken for a bucket of paint.

Peko immediately covered her eyes with one hand. Hajime quickly did the same, the two reaching out for Natsumi in unison to protect her... innocence wasn't the right word. More like 'helping make sure she doesn't see something she really didn't want to see'.

"Aaaaaah...! Amazing...!" Mikan gasped in delight, hiding an excited grin behind her hands.

"Honestly, what's with you...?" Fuyuhiko huffed, trying to act annoyed to cover up his embarrassment.

Mikan was as elated and jumpy as a kid on Christmas Eve, waiting to open their presents. She wasn't sure where to stare first, but she was determined to burn the image into her retinas while she had the chance!

Fuyuhiko was a lot more muscular than one would expect. He wasn't completely bulked up like a bodybuilder, but more lean and deft. His strength could be hidden by the suit or the huge hoodies he always wore, and Mikan cursed herself for not getting something more formfitting for him. Wisps of ink could be seen trailing around his shoulder and stomach, remnants of a tattoo on his back. Mikan was extremely curious about the tattoo, but wouldn't asking to see that be overstepping the limit?!

"A-are you done yet?!" Fuyuhiko snapped, trying very hard to resist the urge to cover his chest from Mikan's intense gaze.

"A few more seconds! Please!" Mikan begged.

"Good fucking hell, she's going to soak the floor," Natsumi grumbled, before getting shushed by both Hajime and Peko.

"O-okay, I'm done," Mikan sighed dreamily, trying to calm her breathing. "I'm ready."

"Ready for what- Mikan, what are you doing-?!"

"I'm repaying the favour!" Mikan declared as she grabbed the hem of her shirt, before bashfully adding, "I know I'm not as athletic as you, but I hope that you'll appreciate my body!"

"What, no-" Fuyuhiko covered his eye, even turning the other way. He did not see a lacy, frilly, pastel pink bra. He didn't see anything, got it?!

When Hajime, Peko, and Natsumi uncovered their eyes, they saw a shirtless Fuyuhiko being restrained with a bone-crushing hug by an equally-shirtless Mikan. Both of them seemed like they would spontaneously burst into flames at any moment with how red they were.

"I guess... that counts as a victory for Mikan...?" Hajime said uncertainly.

"Gosh... why aren't there any good apartments for three around here?" Ibuki whined, sighing at her
phone in disappointment.

"For three?" Hiyoko raised an eyebrow at the rock star in confusion. "Wasn't it for you and Mikan?"

"You're coming with us too," Ibuki stated.

"What, are you looking down on me?" Hiyoko glared at the other woman, almost like a cat bristling up in response to a threat. "Think I can't find a good place to live on my own?"

"Of course not," Ibuki replied simply, managing to make some of the tension in the room disappear simply by ignoring it. "Mikan will miss you if you leave, plus, who will be my bathing buddy?"

"Uh, Mikan?" Hiyoko offered.

"Nah, she's probably the type to try to save herself for the person she loved or something," Ibuki smiled at the thought.

"Mioda, I've seen her naked before," Hiyoko retorted, earning an odd look from Ibuki.

"Um. Ignoring that. Sweeping it under the rug and pretending it never happened. Forgetting it. Never-"

"Mioda, shut up already!"

"Hey, why do you keep calling me Mioda?" Ibuki asked suddenly, switching gears so fast that Hiyoko got whiplash. "We're friends! Call me Ibuki-chan!"

She only got a weird, half-sneer in response.

"...we are friends, right?" Ibuki's voice dropped, uncertainty filling her expression.

"I guess?"

"I'm not sure what I expected, but it certainly wasn't that!" Ibuki declared, a bright smile suddenly on her face.

"Quit trying to act cheerful, dumbass!" Hiyoko rolled her eyes. "We're friends, idiot. Don't go moping around because you think I said we weren't."

"Really? Are we really friends?" Ibuki grinned excitedly as she leaned towards Hiyoko.

"Ibuki, shut up."

"Gasp! You called me Ibuki for the first time, but it was paired with rude words, so minus five points!"

"There's so much wrong with what you just said, I'm not sure where to start! For one, who the hell says 'gasp' out loud?!"

"Are you going to react like that every time I take off my shirt?!" Fuyuhiko demanded as he pulled out the chair for Mikan.

"Every...?" Mikan gasped as Fuyuhiko took the seat across from her, smiling at the blonde excitedly. "So there's going to be more times?!!"
"What if I take you to the pool or something?! I'm not going to wear a wetsuit!"

"I didn't even consider that!" Mikan sighed giddily, holding her face in her hands as she giggled. "That would be incredible...!"

"Do you react like this every time you see a shirtless guy?!" Fuyuhiko gritted his teeth together, irritated as he curled his hand into a fist.

"No," Mikan answered immediately.

"What about Hajime? You both said something about seeing him shirtless," Fuyuhiko grumbled, not even bothering to keep the bitterness out of his voice.

"Oh, that was because I was in charge of physical examinations in high school," Mikan said simply. "I can't really be affected by his body after all that."

"So I don't really have anything to worry about..." Fuyuhiko whispered the conclusion to himself, sighing in relief.

"But, Fuyuhiko-kun! I'm the one who needs to be worried about you being snatched away, not the other way around!" Mikan declared.

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm like a dog, I'm so loyal that you'll never get rid of me!" Mikan exclaimed, a proud smile on her face.

"That's not what I meant! What the hell do you mean by me 'getting snatched away'?!"

"You're surrounded by people so enamored by you that they'll harass you for years for a marriage-

"Mikan, that was one person."

"-people constantly are trying to set you up with their sons and daughters-

"I rejected all of them, though."

"-and you have Hajime-kun!" Mikan finished, letting out an anguished groan as she held her head in her hands. "It's nerve-wracking! If only..." Her face darkened as she muttered to herself. "If only there was a way to make sure it was just the two of us, forever and ever."

"Mikan, it's just the two of us right now," Fuyuhiko pointed out, immediately poking a hole in Mikan's argument.

"Ah-! I forgot!" Mikan smiled as she looked back up at Fuyuhiko.

"How the hell did you forget?! You're the one who suggested we come here in the first place!" Fuyuhiko slapped a hand to his forehead with an exasperated sigh.

"But it still feels like every other time we were out alone..." Mikan mumbled to herself. "It's hard to make the transition from 'friends' to 'lovers' so fast..."

"We can go as slow as you want, you know," Fuyuhiko offered.

"Ungh, but going too slow would basically just be being friends again! There needs to be at least a little romantic atmosphere here!" Mikan exclaimed, before getting an idea. "If it's a nickname,
would you like 'darling', 'sweetheart', 'be-' Mikan quickly cut herself off. '"Fuyu-chan', or 'my love' best?"

"No," Fuyuhiko looked completely disgusted by the idea.

"I mean, 'no' is a bit of a weird nickname, but-"

"That's not it!" Fuyuhiko interrupted, staring at Mikan in disbelief. "I mean, just call me Fuyuhiko like you usually do!"

"But then we're back where we started!"

"...I won't accept any stupid nicknames," Fuyuhiko stated. Mikan was about to protest, before Fuyuhiko continued, bright red as he silenced her words. "But... if you can call me 'Fuyuhiko', without an honorific or anything... I guess that would be okay."

"F-Fuyuhiko-kun...?" Mikan stared at him uncertainly, her cheeks slowly beginning to match Fuyuhiko's shade of crimson. "Am I... Am I really allowed to do that?"

"I said you could, didn't I?" Fuyuhiko said simply. "Besides, I've been calling you 'Mikan' for months, and you've never stopped me."

"I mean... um... er..." Mikan paused, trying to muster up the courage. "...okay... F-F-Fuyuhiko!"

"A-ah..." Fuyuhiko managed to turn an even brighter red, somehow. "Maybe... maybe you should stick with the honorific for now."

"Do you not like it?" Mikan asked uncertainly.

"I think it's the opposite, actually," Fuyuhiko muttered to himself, trying to calm down his stammering heart.

"Hey, Peko, got a minute?" Hajime asked as he stepped into the swordswoman's room.

"Of course. What do you need?"

"A favour," Hajime said simply. Peko was silent, letting him elaborate. "I know someone. Someone who feels like she isn't worthy of being called human. I have no idea how to help her, so I was thinking... could you talk to her?"

"I'll see what I can do," Peko answered.
Mikan was completely out of breath, panting as she finally finished her squats. She wiped sweat off her forehead as Fuyuhiko passed her the water bottle. Mikan would have greedily gulped down the cool water, if not for Fuyuhiko's reminder that she would only get thirstier by doing that.

"Come on, fifteen sit-ups and then you'll be done," Fuyuhiko said encouragingly.

Mikan found it a bit too easy to flop to the floor, almost fainting right then and there. Her heart was racing, sweat was stinging at her eyes, Mikan was sure she would be sore all over later, but at the same time, Mikan felt alive. And also a bit dead.

Fuyuhiko helpfully pressed her feet to the ground, stabilizing Mikan as she began the last leg of the race.

"O-One...!" Mikan counted, almost smacking her head against her knees.

A kiss was pressed to her forehead, making Mikan freeze. She stared at Fuyuhiko in shock, her jaw dropping.

"Did I say you could stop?" Fuyuhiko grumbled, turning away with a blush. "Keep going."

"Right!" Mikan continued, her energy restored in an instant. She could finish the workout! She could make Fuyuhiko proud!

...and maybe get some more kisses! (hopefully!)

"Stop moving your legs," Fuyuhiko ordered.

"Okay!" Mikan immediately stiffened her legs, making sure that they wouldn't move!

"And let go of your neck. Just have your hands barely touching your ears instead."

"Alright!" Mikan paused, adjusting her grip to follow Fuyuhiko's instructions.

"You're not doing bad," Fuyuhiko noted, grinning at Mikan. She sped up in response, managing to finish her workout quickly.

'Using stuff like kisses and compliments as encouragement works for her,' Fuyuhiko noted, trying very hard to leave out the part where he found Mikan's reaction adorable.

"Hello! I'm Mioda-"

The door was slammed in her face, making Hiyoko start cackling.

"Man, what the hell did you do to make them hate you so much?!"

"This is the first time I've been here!" Ibuki shot back, beginning to fret. "Am I banned from this place without a fair trial?!"

On the other side of the door, Natsumi was beginning to panic, almost screaming as she tugged at her hair.
"Holy fuck, Mioda Ibuki is on our doorstep, holy shit, holy shit, Hajime, what do we do?!"

"Well, ideally you would let her inside," Hajime quipped, earned a scream of anguish from Natsumi.

"Does she like tea or juice?! Oh god, I left her outside in the cold, fuck!"

"Natsumi, you're freaking out."

"Of fucking course I am! My idol is on the doorstep! How would you react in my situation!?"

"I would let her inside," Hajime repeated, not-so-subtly trying to drop hints for Natsumi.

Instead, Natsumi rushed for the kitchen, hurriedly trying to prepare any beverage she could think of. With a sigh, Hajime moved to open the door.

---

"Mikan, you can take a bath here if you want," Fuyuhiko offered as Mikan stretched out her leg.

"Really?" Mikan perked up excitedly, before realizing something. "I didn't bring any clothes..."

"I'll ask Peko if she can lend you some," Fuyuhiko stated. "But you should really start bringing clothes over. It's really disgusting to walk around with a sweaty t-shirt."

"I-I will!" Mikan declared. "I don't want to disgust you!"

"That's not what I meant!" Fuyuhiko retorted immediately. "I meant, it feels gross and sticky! You don't want to walk around like that, right?!"

"You don't have to be so worried about me," Mikan stated as she switched legs. "I'll be fine."

"Mikan."

"You know... you're actually a doting boyfriend, aren't you?" Mikan smiled up at the blonde. "It's really sweet!"

"Shut the hell up and take a bath before I strangle your roommates."

"...why are you threatening Ibuki-san and Hiyoko-chan instead of me?"

"I said shut up already!" Fuyuhiko snapped, bright red. He tossed a towel at her face, before storming out of the room.

"He's so adorable!" Mikan grinned brightly as she grabbed the towel.

---

"So, uh, there's tea, blood, and juice if you want!" Natsumi offered, simultaneously freaking out and excited. Her smile was both forced and entirely genuine at the same time. "Please, ask me for anything!"

"...blood?" Hiyoko stared at Natsumi in disbelief. Natsumi flinched, before looking to Hajime for help.

"Haha, Natsumi's such a joker, right?" Hajime was an excellent actor, but that wouldn't mean anything if Natsumi didn't join in. To help Natsumi get the point, he elbowed her in the ribs.
"Y-yeah! That's it! Ignore everything weird I say!"

Ibuki laughed, smiling brightly at Natsumi's words. "Don't worry, Natsumi-chan. We won't be staying long enough to need drinks! We're just here to pick Mikan up."

"You... you know my name?" Natsumi gasped, completely starstruck. She felt like she was in heaven!

"It's because she was at the New Year's party," Hiyoko snickered sadistically, forcefully dragging Natsumi back to earth. As if that weren't enough, Hiyoko added more, with more than a few mocking undertones in her voice. "She saw all of your embarrassing moments! Especially when you challenged that big-boobed, brain-dead idiot and got your ass handed to you!"

"Are you s-serious!?" Natsumi went from delighted to mortified in an instant, wanting to move to Antarctica and live with no one but snow! She couldn't have seriously embarrassed herself that much in front of Mioda Ibuki, right?!

"I thought it was pretty cool, actually!" Ibuki grinned at Natsumi, grabbing the Yakuza daughter's hands to pull her close. "You were all like 'Oh, I'm full of fighting spirit!' and the two of you were so determined to win! Even though you passed out after a few seconds, it was really impressive!

"A-a-a-aaaaah-ahahahaha!" Natsumi managed to recover enough to pretend her sound of shock was actually a laugh, even though she was bright, bright, bright, bright pink.

"Honestly, what an idiot," Hiyoko sneered at the scene.

"I'm going to check on Peko," Hajime stated, pulling out his phone. "I'll leave the three of you to your own devices, so make sure no one dies."

"Don't abandon me!" Hiyoko wailed as Hajime walked off.

"You're Nanami Chiaki, right?" Peko inquired.

"Yes," Chiaki replied simply, not bothering to look up from her game. "What is your business with me?"

"A friend informed me that you needed help with issues concerning your humanity," Peko answered.

"If it's Hajime saying that I feel inhuman, you don't need to worry about that," Chiaki continued before Peko could express her relief, absolutely crushing that relief in a few words. "I am inhuman."

"This will be harder than I thought..." Peko muttered to herself, reaching for the sword on her back.

"Is there a reason why you're armed?" Chiaki lifted her eyes from her game for the first time since Peko approached her, though she still sounded bored and unaffected.

"I simply thought a friendly spar would help us get along," Peko stated, grinning as she unsheathed her sword, though her grin looked more murderous than anything.

"I don't see why you would want to fight an opponent you'll lose against," Chiaki said apathetically, before jumping away from one of Peko's attacks.

"Interesting..." Peko's smile only grew as she began taking the (sort of) fight more seriously, her
phone call completely ignored in the chaos.

"Mikan's getting ready, she'll be out soon," Fuyuhiko stated as he stepped into the waiting ro-

"What the fuck are you fucking doing?"

"Natsumi-chan is sleeping!" Ibuki shushed the Yakuza heir, glaring at him as she stroked 
Natsumi's hair. Ibuki was sitting on the floor, letting Natsumi rest her head on her lap. Natsumi was 
blushing, completely unable to form coherent sentences, and may or may not have been drooling.

"Your sister is the biggest pervert to ever walk this earth," Hiyoko declared in disgust.

"I know," Fuyuhiko replied, mirroring Hiyoko's expression perfectly.

"Hey! She's happy, you know! Don't call her perverted for enjoying something!" Ibuki huffed, 
looking disappointed in Hiyoko and Fuyuhiko.

"Do you even... urgh, never mind," Fuyuhiko really did not want to think about Natsumi's weird 
idol crush on the rock star, especially when he couldn't walk into Natsumi's room without seeing 
the faces of various idols plastered all over her walls.

"It's fine..." Natsumi moaned, smiling joyfully as Ibuki ran her fingers through her hair. "I can't be 
affected by their words at all...! I'm in heaven right now!"

"That's creepy as hell!" Hiyoko screamed, grimacing at the sight. "Get off her already, you huge 
weirdo!"

"Hiyo-chan, it's my duty to provide happiness for my fans! This counts!"

"Do you do this for every perv that wants something out of you?!"

"Natsumi-chan is a special case!"

"What the hell makes her special then?! Her tits?! 'Cuz I sure as hell know it's not her brain!"

"That's still my sister you're talking about there! She might be a pervert, but she's not stupid!"

"Shut it, shorty! You have no right to talk about perverted things when we all know what-"

"E-excuse me...?" Mikan called out, interrupting the strange argument. "I'm ready to go now."

Both Ibuki and Fuyuhiko stared at her in shock.

Mikan's hair was still a bit damp, though it was quickly drying. She wore a cerulean hoodie, the 
solid shape of a crown printed on the chest in baby blue. It was a bit loose on her, the sweater 
unzipped to the point that you could see the tight dress shirt clinging to her body. The only parts of 
her outfit that didn't belong to Fuyuhiko were a pleated skirt and a pair of tights, both similar 
shades of grey and black respectively.

"You look ridiculous," Hiyoko stated, not realizing what was going on.

"It's really warm though," Mikan smiled, clasping her hands together, though the overly-large 
sweater sleeves hid the gesture.

"Oh my god," Fuyuhiko immediately slapped a hand over his face, trying to hide his blushing.
"E-e-e-eh...?!” Ibuki stared at Mikan in shock. The only thing that stopped Ibuki from actually screaming was the fact that Natsumi was still resting on her lap and she really didn't want to disturb her fan. "It feels like you've skipped several steps here! How come this sort of thing happens even before the huge plan?!”

"I have no idea what idiotic things Mioda is spouting now, but can we go now?” Hiyoko asked, trying to act innocent.

"Please just give me a moment," Mikan requested, waiting until Hiyoko nodded at her before pulling the still-blushing Fuyuhiko to the hallway.

"What the hell are you doing?” Fuyuhiko demanded, though he was more embarrassed than truly angry.

"I'm sorry..." Mikan muttered quietly. She pinched at her fingers nervously, looking down at the floor. "I know I should have asked you first... If you're mad, you can-"

"Why the fucking hell are you assuming that I'm mad?” Fuyuhiko's voice became quieter. He turned away from Mikan slightly, trying to hide his blush.

"D-does that mean you like it!” Mikan asked excitedly, pressing her fingers over her delighted grin. "I hoped you would! I know that if it was you wearing my clothes, I would be happy beyond words, so-"

"Don't say stuff like that out loud!” Fuyuhiko snapped, even redder than before.

"But...! I want to know if this made you happy!"

"I'm happy just by spending time with you! You don't need to do shit like this!" Fuyuhiko exclaimed... before slowly realizing what he just said. His cheeks burned so bright that you would be able to use him like a lamp.

Mikan gasped gleefully, beaming to the point that you could use her as a lamp too.

(The two of them were so absorbed in their conversation that Hajime was completely unnoticed a few steps away (though, to be fair, he was hiding behind a door). The only thing he could think of during the scene was how Natsumi would have loved to be in his position, eavesdropping on her brother.)

Mikan was overjoyed, no, she was joyful, no, she was ecstatic-

The only way she could think of to make everything better was-

"Can I kiss you?” The words left her mouth in a rush, her heart twisting nervously as she waiting for Fuyuhiko's-

"You don't have to ask every time,” Fuyuhiko stated, right before grabbing a fistful of the cerulean hoodie, pulling Mikan down to press a kiss against her lips.

(Hajime immediately shut the door quietly, swearing that he would never tell a soul of what he saw, lest Fuyuhiko start chasing after him with a pair of pliers.)

The two luminescent lovers were completely unnoticed by the bickering trio in the waiting room, allowing the pair to enjoy their small moment of solitude before parting ways.
"Amazing. You're not even out of breath!" Peko exclaimed in awe as she slashed at the gamer once again, conveniently forgetting the fact that she wasn't winded either.

"I told you," Chiaki replied apathetically, dodging the attack easily. "I'm inhuman, even in the way I don't need to breathe."

"If you were inhuman, why would you dodge my attacks?" Peko asked, speeding up her strikes until she was almost invisible to the naked eye. "A fear of pain is a very human thing to feel, is it not?"

"I like these clothes," Chiaki retorted, jumping back from Peko's barrage of attacks. "And I would rather not see them torn to shreds."

"So you aren't afraid," Peko summarized, staring at the gamer in disbelief as she pointed her sword at the other woman's throat.

"You need to be human to feel fear," Chiaki said simply, her expression almost bored as she returned Peko's gaze without flinching.

"Why do you insist on saying that...?"

"I told you, I'm not human. Want me to prove it?" Chiaki reached up towards her neck.

'Could it be... a vampire bite...?!' Peko quickly dismissed the idea. That was absurd. They were out in daylight, so how could Chiaki possibly be a vampire?

"How are you so calm, even when you're facing death?" Peko asked instead, narrowing her eyes at the gamer.

"You wouldn't kill me to prove I'm human," Chiaki reasoned. "That would be against the point."

"I've killed for worse reasons," Peko admitted. "How do you know I wouldn't kill you for something as trivial as angering me?"

"You're not mad," Chiaki pointed out. "You're completely calm and logical."

"I could be hiding my rage underneath a facade of indifference."

"I would already be dead, if that were the case," Chiaki smiled slightly, gently pushing the sword away from her throat with her index finger. "I have a feeling that you would be terrifying when you got angry."

Peko didn't respond. She was too busy staring in shock as Chiaki pressed her finger into razor sharp metal, yet didn't bleed at all.

"I don't know anymore!" Ibuki whined, clutching at her head. "Is it seriously happening?! Was I wrong this whole time?! What if we're being tricked?!"

"Calm down, would you?" Hiyoko rolled her eyes at the rock star. "You're obviously doing the right thing."
"Am I?! Because the atmosphere was super lovey-dovey back there! What if they're already dating and this is all for nothing?!"

"Trust me, there is no way in hell that is what happened," Hiyoko huffed. "Those two morons would never get together without help! Hell, if those lame romantic comedies of yours have taught me anything, it's that two idiots in love will literally do anything but talk their feelings out. Do you seriously think those two would be able to get their lovesick heads out of their asses long enough to actually talk to each other?"

"First of all, why are you insulting Mikan and Fuyu-chan so much?!" Ibuki demanded, gaping at Hiyoko in shock. "What happened to trying to be nice?! And second, my romcoms are not lame!"

"First; polite rules don't apply to people I can't stand and Mikan, second, yes, they are lame."

"Polite rules especially apply to Mikan! Not being nice to her is what broke your friendship up in the first place! And no, they're not!"

"...good point," Hiyoko admitted, frowning slightly. That frown was quickly turned upside down as she added, "And yes, they are."

"No, they're not!"

"Aaaaaah... Hah... F-Fuyu..." Milan panted, gratefully accepting the towel passed to her.

"You did a great job today," Fuyuhiko smiled at the nurse.

"I... I did...?" Mikan asked uncertainly as she wiped at her face with the cloth.

"You're getting a lot faster with the disarming technique," Fuyuhiko noted with pride.

"Really?!!" Mikan gasped in shock, pressing her fingers over a delighted grin. "Do you really, really mean that?!!"

"Why are you so surprised?! It's only normal that you would get better after working so hard!"

"R-right!" Mikan stammered, nodding along to Fuyuhiko's words.

"Jeez... do I have to time your attempts or something to get you to believe me?" Fuyuhiko grumbled, more to himself than anything.

"No! I believe you! I really, really do!"

"Then act like it the first time, would you?!"

"Ungh, but I wanted you to praise me again!"

"You don't have to fish for compliments! Just fucking ask next time!"

"But then you would only praise me because I asked for it!"

"So what?! I think you're beautiful and incredible, but there's no way in hell I'd tell you that without you asking for it!"

Mikan froze, her eyes slowly widening with shock as she gaped at Fuyuhiko. Fuyuhiko suddenly realized what he just said, immediately turning red.
"...I'm not taking it back," Fuyuhiko stated, almost glaring at Mikan in his embarrassment.

"Aaaaah...!" Mikan's cheeks began to match her boyfriend's in colour. She slapped her hands over her blushing face, thanking the world for Fuyuhiko's existence.

"Example number eighty-six of why your movies are lame!" Hiyoko called out, balling her hands into fists as she yelled. "What kind of idiots would spend *that* much time worrying about whether the status of friend is enough for them or not?! If you want to date them, just ask for a fucking date! It's not that hard, you morons!"

"Hey! That's a pure feeling, you know! Friendships are fragile and easily ruined, so it's easy to see why they would worry!"

"Why the *fuck* do you sound like you're talking from experience," Hiyoko demanded flatly.

"...no reason."

"Mioda."

"It's not important! Just keep saying why you hate romcoms so I can object to them dramatically!"

Hiyoko rolled her eyes, before complying. She didn't feel like forcing Ibuki to tell her, not when she was having so much fun dissing her films.

(It wasn't her wanting to spare Ibuki's feelings, okay?! That was definitely, definitely, *definitely* not the fucking reason!)

"D-Do you want to go to the movie theater after this?" Mikan asked timidly, smiling slightly at Fuyuhiko.

"The movie theater?" Fuyuhiko echoed, raising an eyebrow at the brunette.

"Yeah! I-I thought really hard about this, and movie dates are probably the best way to go!" Mikan exclaimed excitedly, more than a little pride shining through in her voice. "With the dark room and heart-pounding environment, it'll be the perfect atmosphere for a date!"

"Mikan..." Fuyuhiko felt guilty about crushing her dreams, but at the same time... "The only movie theater in town got flooded. It's being demolished and being turned into a jewelry store. *It's where you got held hostage.*"

"Ah...!" Mikan's eyes widened with horror, her hands coming up to pull at her hair in her panic. "I d-didn't consider that! I was so-so focused on the mood that I forgot about it! Aaaaah, I'm a failure as a girlfriend!"

"Mikan, calm down, we can just go somewhere else!" Fuyuhiko offered hurriedly.

"I-I'm sorry!" Mikan wailed. "I'll try to not be such a failure next time!"

"Don't you *dare* say that," Fuyuhiko snapped, glaring at her. Before Fuyuhiko could continue, Mikan cut him off, nearly sobbing.

"Do you *really* want to date someone like m-"

Mikan trusted Fuyuhiko. She believed that he would never hurt her. That was exactly was she was
so taken aback when Fuyuhiko lunged at her. She didn't even try to fight him off, too shocked by
the blonde's sudden attack. His hands darted towards her, and-

"Nooohooooo! F-F-F-Fu-Ahahahahaha- stooop!" Mikan screamed pleadingly between gasps of
uncontrollable laughter. Her legs kicked at the air as she laughed and screamed and cried, but she
never hit Fuyuhiko.

"Not until you take it back!" Fuyuhiko declared, attacking without mercy. He leaned over her
body, making it easier for him to tickle her. "Say that you're not a failure as a girlfriend and I'll
stop."

"I-I-I-! Not a- aahahahaha! Not a failure as-as-a-as-aahahahahaha, as a girlfriend!"

"Good," Fuyuhiko let his hands rest on the floor on either side of Mikan's head, ceasing his assault.
Mikan breathed heavily, gratefully accepting the chance to catch her breath.

Mikan was laying back against the floor, Fuyuhiko directly above her, almost pinning her down.
Her hair fell around her face, mussed up from her workout. She stared up at Fuyuhiko with half-
lidded eyes and pink cheeks, one hand resting on top of her chest.

The two of them came to the same conclusion at the same time, Fuyuhiko's eye widening at the
realization.

He wanted to kiss her.

No, no, more than that. Way more than that. He wanted to touch her, to make her scream his name
and-

For a man who hadn't been sexually attracted to anyone before, period, it was a bit overwhelming.

Fuyuhiko slowly began moving to get off of Mikan, about to spout off a line like 'Oh, sorry to get
carried away there, something something, can we never talk about this again?' before being
stopped. Mikan reached up to caress his face gently, her half-lidded eyes clouded over with love
and lust.

"Can I?" Mikan smiled at him, and Fuyuhiko gulped.

Without another word, he pressed their lips together, before gasping in shock. Mikan quickly
pulled him closer, catching him off-guard as she wrapped her arms around his shoulders to keep
him close. Normally, Mikan held herself back, letting Fuyuhiko take the lead. Her kisses were
always gentle and soft, encouraging and warm.

But this time, Fuyuhiko felt like he might have been burnt by the fire behind Mikan's kiss. Her kiss
was passionate and greedy, almost desperate as she yanked him towards her. Mikan wanted him
just as much as he wanted her, Fuyuhiko realized, doing his best to keep up with the nurse's
movements.

Fuyuhiko pulled away, slightly winded as he pushed himself up. Mikan grabbed fistfuls of his t-
shirt, not letting him get too far away.

"Please," Mikan stared at him pleadingly, almost begging for him. Fuyuhiko's eye widened as she
made her request.

He never liked disappointing people. Mikan was no... okay, maybe she was a bit of an exception. It
wasn't that Fuyuhiko wanted to disappoint her, the exact opposite, really, but... he wasn't going to
blindly grant her every request.

No, he could do better than that. Fuyuhiko wasn't about to let their first time be on the floor of the family dojo of all places.

"Go take a bath first," Fuyuhiko ordered, pressing a chaste kiss to Mikan's lips before pushing himself up. A bit more hesitantly, he added, "I'll be waiting for you in my room."

A dazed smile made its way on Mikan's face as she nodded in understanding.

"Excuse me?!" Hiyoko gasped dramatically, pretending to be far more offended than she actually was. She had to fight to keep an amused grin off her face, forcing herself to glare at the rock star. "No one is stupid enough to still insist that their feelings are platonic after having sex."

"Friends with benefits are a thing, you know!" Ibuki shot back.

"There's a difference between casual sex and lying to yourself!" Hiyoko retorted, countering Ibuki's counter-attack.

"Uh huh, uh huh, except for the fact that that is completely unrelated!" Ibuki smirked smugly as she made her argument. She crossed her arms over her chest as she beamed at Hiyoko. "It's true that the two are separate, but they're similar enough to have one mistaken for the other! So, example eighty-nine is disproved!"

"What?! No, it's not! You can't just suddenly declare it disproved!"

"I just did!"

"I will fucking throttle you, you bitch!"

"Why are you jumping straight to violence?! Are you secretly a murderous psychopath or something?!"

"I'm not, but I'll fucking become one if you keep this up!"

Fuyuhiko knew what he was doing. He spent enough time with a vagina to semi-confidently say that he could get Mikan off. If worst came to worst, he could fall back on his memories of sex ed classes, overheard discussions about sex, and porn.

(Except the classes were more about the importance of abstinence than actual sex, and with the latter two, Fuyuhiko usually lost interest and stopped paying attention five seconds in.)

Okay, he... he really didn't. In all honesty, he was still getting used to having a girlfriend. To learning what was okay, what wasn't, how to make their relationship work.

But even if it was moving a bit too fast for him... that was okay. Fuyuhiko wanted to see Mikan happy, more than anything, and he was fine with getting a little uncomfortable for her sake.

The door opened and Mikan stepped into his bedroom. She quickly shut the door behind her, slowly moving to Fuyuhiko. She had borrowed one of his shirts again, and only that shirt. Even though the dress shirt was tight on her, and it barely covered her purple underwear, she didn't have anything else on.

Fuyuhiko was glad for the fact that he was sitting on his futon, because he was sure that he
wouldn't be able to keep standing after that sight. Mikan knelt before him wordlessly, crawling towards him. She brought a hand up to his face, silently asking for permission.

The look of hesitation on his face before pressing their lips together must have been too obvious, because Mikan immediately pulled away, staring at Fuyuhiko in concern.

"Are you okay?"

"I...I'm fine," Fuyuhiko cursed himself for wavering, reaching out to pull Mikan back to make up for his delay. He ended up placing his hand on Mikan's shoulder, looking more like a proud father than anything.

"Fuyuhiko," Mikan was worried, frowning as she examined his expression for signs and clues as to why he was upset.

"Look, I'm just..." Fuyuhiko sighed, his hand falling to his side. The guilt and shame in his voice became more obvious as he forced himself to say the words. He hated the idea of refusing Mikan's request, but...

Disappointing her would be even worse.

"I'm sorry," Fuyuhiko can't even bring himself to look at her, too humiliated to even think of doing so. But still, he forced himself to continue, because he knew that if he left it at just that, Mikan would assume it was her fault. "It's not that you're unattractive, or that I don't want to, but... this is just... I don't think I can do this."

"I'm sorry," Mikan muttered despondently.

"It's not your fault!" Fuyuhiko retorted automatically. "I should have told you from the start instead of leading you on like this!"

"No, no, I should have thought about how you felt instead of getting carried away!"

"It's not your fault," Fuyuhiko repeated, but before he can take the blame, Mikan steps in.

"But it's not your fault!"

"Argh, we're going to get stuck, aren't we?" Fuyuhiko almost threw his hands in the air from the realization. "You won't let me say it's my fault and I won't let you say it either."

"A truce?" Mikan offered, and he gladly took the chance to get out of the endless loop.

"But still, even if it's not now, I can probably-" Fuyuhiko's attempt to regain some face, to prove that, even if he was a disappointment now, he wouldn't be one later, was quickly cut off by Mikan's interjection.

"It's fine, Fuyuhiko," Mikan said with a smile. "Even if you're never ready for it, I'll be okay with that."

He's genuinely shocked by her words, unable to say anything in response.

"Just being able to be with you, just being able to spend time with you... that's enough to make me happy," Mikan stated.

Fuyuhiko suddenly forgot why he was worrying in the first place. Of course Mikan wouldn't be disappointed by him.
"Of course..." He grinned wryly, not sure why he expected anything else. The smile became a lot more sincere and fond as he took her hand, lacing their fingers together. "What in the world did I do to deserve someone like you?"

"Some sort of horrible crime?" Mikan offered. He almost took it seriously, right before Mikan laughed, clasping her hands around Fuyuhiko's. "But really, I should be the one saying that."

It was ridiculous, really. The fact that both of them thought the other was too good for them, the bumps and bruises in their relationship, the fact that they had a relationship at all...

But really, neither of them would have it any other way.

"Fuyuhiko, your-" Hajime paused in opening the door, squinting at the sight.

Mikan and Fuyuhiko had fallen asleep together, holding hands.

Silently, Hajime shut the door, deciding to tell Fuyuhiko's parents that the Yakuza heir was a bit too busy to answer their summons at the moment.
"IBUKI!" Nagisa roared, scowling at the voice on the other end of his call. "That-that's immoral! That's illegal, it's just wrong!"

"No! No, that is not an excuse!" He stomped his foot on the floor, gritting his teeth together.

"...okay, that is a slightly better excuse," Nagisa admitted, before letting his voice become scolding once again. "But it does not justify your actions."

"Ibuki, don't even think- WHAT DO YOU MEAN YOU'RE ALREADY AT THE AIRPORT?!!"

"I can't believe this!" Nagisa screamed, nearly hurling his phone straight at the floor.

"What's wrong?" Kotoko asked, staring at Nagisa in concern from his various outbursts.

"Ibuki, she decided to hold a raffle. A ticket for a chance to go on vacation with her," Nagisa explained, grumbling his words. "Except she decided to just give the winning tickets to her friends! It's just a scam!"

"Oh, I did that all the time when I was an actress," Kotoko replied casually. "It saved me from dates with a lot of creepy weirdos."

"...how creepy were they?" Nagisa inquired warily.

"Creepy enough to try to take pictures of the sacred land underneath my skirt," Kotoko sighed, her voice filling with bitterness at the memory. "It's really for the best that your sister doesn't have to deal with that."

"I'm inclined to agree," Nagisa nodded, before offering, "Do you need to scream about it? I'll grab the pillows."

"You know me so well," Kotoko grinned excitedly, clapping her hands together. "I'll do my best to immolate your sister!"

"The word you're looking for is emulate!" Nagisa interjected quickly, his eyes widening with horror at the thought. "You are not burning Ibuki to death!"

"I don't know, I think it's a..." Kotoko winked at Nagisa, pointing finger guns at him. "Pretty hot idea."

Nagisa groaned. "That was terrible."

"Again with your impenetrable lack of a sense of humour!"

"H-Hey, I have a sense of humour!"

"You really have one?" Kotoko gasped very convincingly in mock disbelief. "Wow! The possibility is even rarer than the chance of catching necrotizing fasciitis without being infected from an outside source! That's like one in a hundred thousand! But it happened!"

"How do you know that off the top of your head?! Most people wouldn't even know the name of the disease, let alone the chances of catching it!"
"Well, I'm not most people!" Kotoko declared, puffing her chest out with pride. She grinned as she placed her hands on her hips, right before her phone rang.

She scrambled towards her cell phone, flipping it open hurriedly.

"Hajime! How's the flight?!"

"...we got delayed," Hajime stated, the disappointment obvious in his tone.

"Do you want me to-"

"-No, don't even think about it," Hajime interjected automatically, making Kotoko groan in disappointment.

"You didn't even wait for me to finish!"

"I know your only suggestions are completely illegal, so no."

"You're part of the Yakuza!" Kotoko exclaimed in exasperation. "Don't be afraid of-"

"-if refusing to stick bubble gum in the engines of all the other planes to make things equal makes me afraid of taking risks, then I am the biggest coward on earth."

"Of course you are, big bro Hajime!" Kotoko laughed, earning a chuckle from Hajime.

"Look, I'm not going to try to tell you to not hold a party at the apartment or anything, since there's no way anything can stop you if you feel like it," Hajime said with a hint of wryness to it, earning more laughter from Kotoko. "Just... if you do, make sure to clean it up." His voice was tired and weary, and Kotoko frowned.

"...big bro Hajime? Are you getting your headaches again?" Kotoko dropped her voice to a whisper, slowly realizing that maybe her loud volume wasn't helping him. "Did you remember your medicine?"

"I did, but..." Hajime trailed off with a sigh. "I'll be fine, Kotoko. Don't worry about me and have fun."

"Big bro Hajime-"

"I need to break up one of Natsumi and Mahiru's fights again. I'll call you after the flight."

"Haji-!" Kotoko cut herself off as Hajime hung up, staring at her phone in offended shock. "How dare you! I was still worrying about you, idiot!"

"Kotoko, he's survived being hit by a taxi and flying into a telephone pole," Nagisa reminded the twin-tailed teen. "If he can withstand that, he can obviously withstand this."

"But still... it's like how you felt when your sister was crying onstage," Kotoko huffed, before pouting. "Seriously, are we the 'Sensible and Adorable Little Siblings Club'?! Because my big brother and your big sister are idiots!"

"Absolute morons," Nagisa supplemented, before the pair laughed together.

"We have to work hard to protect our idiot big siblings!" Kotoko exclaimed.

"I hereby declare that this here shall be our first, last, and only mission as the 'Sensible and
"Adorable Little Siblings Club,'" Nagisa made his voice sound as stiff and formal and regal as possible.

"Oh, there's your non-existent sense of humour!" Kotoko gasped in awe, before Nagisa blushed and told her to shut up.

"Why the hell is someone like her coming along?!
Natsumi demanded, angrily pointing a finger at Mahiru. "She'll just suck all the fun out of it, with her disgusting attitude and awful-"

"That's my girlfriend you're talking about," Hajime reminded the blonde, narrowing his eyes at Natsumi dangerously.

"Are you seriously betraying me for her?!"

"I'm not betraying anyone!" Hajime shot back. "You two are both important to me, so I just want to make sure you two get along!"

"Hajime, it's fine!" Mahiru tried to reassure the brunette, tugging him away from Natsumi. "I'll just stay away from her, does that sound good?"

"That sounds amazing," Natsumi declared, earning her a glare from Hajime.

Mikan sighed as she watched the spectacle from her spot at the seats with Fuyuhiko and the luggage. Hiyoko and Ibuki wanted to get food, Mikan had no idea where Chiaki was, and Peko had been detained by security for trying to bring a sword across the border, leaving just Mikan and Fuyuhiko to guard the luggage as the volatile trio argued.

Mikan tried to save her friends some seats, fully extending her body over some chairs. She rested her head on Fuyuhiko's lap, staring up at the ceiling and at Fuyuhiko's face as he played with her hair.

"I'm very lucky," Mikan noted, getting a look of confusion from Fuyuhiko. "I'm so glad I don't have to deal with a messy love triangle like that."

"Does it really count as a love triangle if two of them are already in a relationship?" Fuyuhiko asked as he continued braiding Mikan's hair.

"I mean, there are three of them, so... I think so?" Mikan offered uncertainly.

"I'm still not sure what's going on between Natsumi and Hajime," Fuyuhiko grumbled, glancing at the bickering trio. Hajime was barely holding Natsumi back from hitting Mahiru, and security was beginning to get a bit concerned... "Let's just hope that we manage to make it to the plane without another person getting detained by security."

"Do you think that they let go of Pekoyama-san yet?" Mikan asked.

Fuyuhiko shrugged in response, before saying, "Even if they didn't, we can probably just bribe them until they let Peko go."

"But that's-" Mikan cut herself off, immediately realizing the problem with her next words.

"You forgot I was a Yakuza again, didn't you."

"Yes..." Mikan frowned guiltily, before getting a flick to the forehead.
"It's not that big a deal," Fuyuhiko stated. "Don't go moping about it."

"O-Okay!" Mikan stammered, settling on a small smile. She was grateful for the fact that Fuyuhiko and his family had accepted Ibuki's invitation. It was a great chance to spend time with everyone and-

Wait.

"...Fuyuhiko, you don't like spending time with Ibuki-san, right?"

"That's an understatement."

"What about Hiyoko-chan?"

"She annoys the fuck out of me."

"And Chiaki-san?"

"Can't stand her."

"...so why would you agree to this trip when you have to interact with them nearly everyday?" Mikan asked, staring up at Fuyuhiko in confusion. "Won't you just get irritated?"

"T-that's not important!" Fuyuhiko blushed, before semi-glaring at Mikan. "Quit asking questions already!"

"Alright," Mikan nodded, dropping the subject. Just as she was about to say something, the pair noticed something.

Peko walked towards them, looking completely untouched, even after being detained by security guards. She held her sheathed sword in her hand. Not a hair was out of place, her clothes in perfect order as she strode towards the pair.

"Peko! You didn't get arrested!" Fuyuhiko exclaimed in relief, both from Peko's release and the chance to avoid the embarrassing topic.

"...they let you keep your sword?" Mikan sat up, staring at the blade in the silver-haired woman's hand.

"I avoided arrest by pretending to be a cosplayer," Peko explained. "So they allowed me to keep the sword."

Fuyuhiko and Mikan exchanged a look of incredulity.

"It's a real sword," Mikan noted.

"It's so sharp, you bleed after poking it," Fuyuhiko added.

"And they just let you keep it?" The pair demanded in unison, staring at Peko in disbelief.

"Yes," Peko nodded simply.

Mikan and Fuyuhiko decided to drop their line of questioning, not wanting to know how Peko managed to do that anymore.
Mikan made room for Peko on the seats, shifting closer to Fuyuhiko. Peko silently took the seat on Fuyuhiko's other side, making Mikan's attempt to be polite and kind completely useless.

At the cafe on the other end of the hallway, Ibuki sighed.

"What the hell's up with you?" Hiyoko asked harshly as she took sips of her juice.

"I'm beginning to think that matchmaking is harder than I thought," Ibuki grumbled.

"Well, it might have had something to do that you, for some reason, decided to organize a vacation for nine people just to get two couples together."

"Shush you!" Ibuki huffed. "This will totally work! The sandy beaches, the swimsuits, the heat... it'll all come together to make a super lovey-dovey atmosphere! Heh heh, and the view will be amazing!"

"You just want to see hot girls in bikinis, don't you?!"

"I'm really excited!" Mikan smiled, nearly pressing her face against the window as she impatiently waited for the plane to take off. "I haven't been on many trips outside the country!"

"I can tell," Fuyuhiko managed to grin just from the sight of seeing Mikan so delighted. "You're like a kid in a toy store."

"Have you been on-" Mikan cut herself off, narrowing her eyes at a figure on the runway.

A woman with pale brown, almost pinkish hair stood underneath the wing of another plane. Despite the cold and snow, she wore a yellow skirt that fell to her knees, along with a blue hoodie. She held a plastic bag in her hands.

"Is that... Chiaki-san?"

"Where?" Fuyuhiko leaned over, trying to see. His eye widened with realization. "It is!"

"Why isn't she getting on a plane?" Mikan wondered to herself, just as Chiaki stripped off her hoodie and stuffed it into the plastic bag.

"Better question: Why the fuck is she stripping?!" Fuyuhiko demanded as a security guard began approaching Chiaki. Chiaki ignored the guard's order to get away from the plane, only pulling off her skirt too, leaving her in a t-shirt.

The guard moved to grab at her, only for Chiaki to dodge, large metal wings bursting out from her shoulder blade, ripping her shirt into shreds. A jetback emerged from a slot in her back, letting Chiaki take flight!

Fuyuhiko and Mikan watched in stunned silence as Chiaki soared higher and higher, the flames emitted from her jetback slowly burning her t-shirt to ashes.

"Your roommate is a flying streaker," Fuyuhiko said flatly, unable to even be sarcastic about the situation.

Mikan nodded slowly in response, trying her absolute best to understand what just happened.

Fuyuhiko decided to pull the shade over the window after that.
"What. The fuck. Are you doing?" Hiyoko scowled at the rock star, watching as Ibuki pulled a pair of binoculars out of her pocket.

"Making sure that Plan 'Give the Couples Some Alone Time on the Plane' is working," Ibuki replied simply, gazing through the binoculars.

Her plan was simple. She sat in the back of the plane, to the right side, with Hiyoko, Natsumi, and Peko. Hajime and Mahiru got a pair of seats together at the front of the plane, while Mikan and Fuyuhiko got seats together on the left side of the plane. (Ibuki was pretty sure that Chiaki was flying there on a private jet or something. That was the only reason why Chiaki would have refused her ticket.)

"...I miscalculated," Ibuki stated, unable to see anything but the back of Hajime and Mahiru's heads. Before Hiyoko could grumble something about Ibuki being an idiot, Ibuki switched her gaze over to Fuyuhiko and Mikan.

"Seriously, put those away before the plane takes off!" Hiyoko ordered.

"Sh! They're looking out the window together!" Ibuki exclaimed excitedly. "He's leaning over her to see-"

Ibuki's words died in her throat as Fuyuhiko pulled the shade over the window, blocking out the view.

"Was it that bad...?"

"What the hell were you thinking?!" Hiyoko demanded, her eye twitching as she pointed at Chiaki angrily. "You almost got arrested for indecent exposure!"

"I didn't want to make Ibuki pay for another plane ticket," Chiaki answered, showing no amount of guilt or shame over the fact.

"You know, it would cost more to bail you out of jail," Ibuki noted, sitting on the edge of the hotel bed as she unpacked her luggage. "You're really lucky I was able to pretend it was a gimmick."

"Ah. I'll try not to get arrested then."

"Correction: Don't get arrested, period!" Hiyoko screamed, glaring at Chiaki so hard that the android might burst into flame.

"Alright," Chiaki nodded.

"Okay, that should settle it!" Ibuki grinned as she slammed her suitcase shut. "I'm headed out now, you two have fun!"

"What?! No, don't you fucking dare leave me with her!" Hiyoko turned her glare towards Ibuki, her hands balling into fists. "Take me with you, idiot!"

"Eh?! But I'm going to visit family!"

"Don't care, just bring me with you!"

Chiaki quietly left the two to their... was bickering the right word? Chiaki really didn't know whether the relationship between those two was good or bad, but her opinion didn't matter either way.
She wasn't really all that shocked to find the swordswoman in the hallway, leaning against the wall as she waited for something. Or someone.

But Chiaki wasn't so self-important as to assume it was her. Without even a second glance, she passed by the swordswoman.

"Are you leaving?" The silver-haired woman asked, prompting Chiaki to turn around to face her. "There are many places that might interest you."

"I'm only here because Ibuki asked me to," Chiaki answered. "I have no interest in leaving this hotel."

"I see..." The woman sighed as she pushed herself off the wall. "I will stay with you."

"Why?" Chiaki stared at the red-eyed woman in shock and confusion. "Don't waste your time on something like me. Go out and enjoy the sights."

"You are not a thing, and you are not a waste of time," Miss Sword rebutted, glaring at Chiaki harshly with those intense, cherry-red eyes of hers...

(Chiaki, no, focus, you can't have a crush on her, you're inhuman, you're incapable of it-)

"Suit yourself," Chiaki turned around, walking away from the swordswoman.

She wasn't sure whether to be glad or upset about the footsteps following her.

"Fuyuhiko..." Mikan shifted nervously, glancing at a woman carrying groceries across the street warily as they walked down the sidewalk together. "Why does that woman have a gun on her back?"

"Maybe she's going hunting," Fuyuhiko offered.

"But she's carrying groceries!"

"She went shopping after hunting," Fuyuhiko amended.

"Is...is that how Americans get food?" Mikan asked uncertainly. "Go hunting and then buy the rest at the nearest L-mart?"

"How the hell should I know? I'm not American."

"Have you ever gone hunting?"

"For food, no," Fuyuhiko left out the 'for humans? Yes', not wanting to scare Mikan.

"Have you ever hunted for fun?" Mikan asked, forgetting about the scary Californian woman with a rifle in favour of talking to Fuyuhiko.

"Not unless you count this game me, Natsumi, and Peko played when we were kids," Fuyuhiko stated. "We would all run around a forest by my house and try to find each other, before trying to beat the first person we saw in a fight."

"That's dangerous!" Mikan exclaimed. "What if you got caught by a serial killer?!"

"Mikan. We were born to the Kuzuryuu name," Fuyuhiko reminded the brunette. "We could kill
any serial killer that comes our way.

"But you were kids!" Mikan protested.

"Well, none of us are dead. That ought to prove something."

"That only proves that all of you are lucky to be alive!"

"That isn't the right answer!"

---

"So who are you visiting?" Hiyoko asked as Ibuki wheeled her away from the luxurious hotel.

"My dad," Ibuki answered simply, grinning widely. "He always wanted to visit California, with the beaches and the sun and the music, so I decided to grant his wish!"

"You gave your dad a house?!" Hiyoko gaped at Ibuki in disbelief.

"Eheheh, something like that," Ibuki chuckled to herself. "But you know, you don't have to go with me. You're already far enough from Chi-chan, so maybe you can enjoy the sights...?"

"Nah. I feel like going out with you," Hiyoko stated, before turning bright red and stammering as she tried to recover. "Only because I feel like messing with you, a-alright?! There's no special reason behind it!"

"If you say so!" Ibuki forced her voice to sound cheerful as she turned away from the busy streets and shops.

"Mioda, where are we-"

"We're going to meet my dad," Ibuki stated as she rolled Hiyoko towards the cemetery.

---

Chiaki didn't try to start a conversation as she leaned on the balcony railing. She crossed her arms together, staring up at the silver-haired woman as the swordswoman tried to think of a good topic of discussion.

The view would have been breathtaking, if Chiaki actually had to breathe. A garden laid beneath their feet, flowers of all colours blooming behind a wire fence. Beyond that, a shining pool full of people could be seen, and even beyond that, Chiaki could see the city, buildings and towers of all shapes and sizes.

There were a few deal-breakers though. The first one being that she could hear the blonde girl's snoring, even through the closed door. The second was the fact that Chiaki had the ability to search for any picture she wanted, and she would probably be able to see a million sights more wonderful than the view in front of her eyes.

It was a lot like what gaming was to her, now. Before, it was easy to enjoy a game, simply by immersing herself in the world of the virtual reality set before her. But... after her death, she could see the lines of code, the strings controlling every action and word in the game, and it just wasn't possible to see the game as anything but a construct.

It was like that, except backwards. Chiaki could control the volume her ears functioned at, turn on night-vision if she wished, little functions that made it seem like she was living in a game of her own. She couldn't get lost, not with a computer serving as her brain, answers and maps and
anything she wanted at the tips of her fingers. It was obvious that she was a construct, that she was inhuman, simply from the abilities she had.

(Some would call it superhuman. She called it subhuman. Either way, she wasn't quite the same mortal, living, breathing person she once was.)

If she wanted, she could live in isolation, doing nothing but play games and waste time on the internet for the rest of her inhumanly long life.

But she wouldn't be of use to anyone if she did that. Chiaki would be an awful excuse for a robot if she didn't even bother trying to help the people who had created her. She owed everything to Kazuichi, Chihiro, and Mikan. As long as they lived, she would have a purpose.

('And then what,' a small voice in the back of her head whispered, hissing into her ear. 'They'll die and you won't, and who will you help then?)

"Would you feel remorse if you killed a human being?" The swordswoman asked, breaking the silence.

After a quick search on the internet, Chiaki answered, "The first law of robotics is that a robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm. I can't hurt someone, let alone kill them."

"That was not the question," The red-eyed woman said sharply. "I did not ask whether you could kill or not. I asked if you would feel remorse if you did so."

"I suppose so," Chiaki shrugged, almost expecting the woman's next words.

"Then that remorse is proof of your humanity. It is only human to feel remorse after causing the death of another."

"What about you?" Chiaki tore her eyes from the uninteresting view, despite knowing that she wouldn't be able to look away once she glanced at the swordswoman. Her voice was surprisingly steady as she spoke, even as she admired eyes redder than jewels and hair as metallic as a sword pointed at her throat. "You said you killed before. Do you feel guilt?"

"I..." The swordswoman faltered, her face falling away from its usual blank expression. She sighed. "I feel remorse. Of course I do."

"Then why do you kill?"

"Because it is my duty to eliminate all enemies of the Kuzuryuu family."

"Do you ever wish that you had a different life?"

"...I did," The silver-haired woman confessed. "But at the same time... I am thankful," A warm smile appeared on her face, and Chiaki froze. "For being born with two wonderful siblings, for being able to meet them, and Hajime too... I can kill, as long as it's to protect those I love."

Chiaki simply stared at her quietly, before adding a small, "I see."

"Seriously! The nerve of that girl!" Mahiru growled, nearly crushing her camera in her rage. "She's just as awful as she was in middle school!"

"Mahiru, calm down," Hajime patted the redhead on the back, trying to be soothing.
"I am calm!" Mahiru snapped. "It's just that I can't understand why you would even want her around!"

"Because she's my friend," Hajime answered.

"How are you even-" Mahiru cut herself off, her eyes narrowing at the brunette. The brunette that had managed to befriend pretty much all of Hope's Peak. The same Hinata Hajime that had dozens of students (and teachers) throwing themselves at his feet for a chance at his love. She sighed, realizing exactly why he was friends with the blonde.

Because Natsumi was drawn to the same traits that attracted Mahiru to him. Honesty, kindness, understanding, patience... those qualities were what drew everyone to Hajime.

"You're too friendly for your own good," Mahiru huffed, placing her hands on her hips. "Honestly! I bet that if some psycho tried to stab you in a dark alley, you would just end up talking about their childhood trauma!"

"Is that a bad thing...?" Hajime asked hesitantly.

"Yes!" Mahiru rolled her eyes, realizing that she had to explain exactly what was wrong with that. "There are some people who will just manipulate you, you know! And hurt you! That's exactly why I worry so much about you! You're the kind of guy who has people lining up for a chance to kiss you, and I have to fight off unwanted suitors because you're too friendly!"

"So you worry about me because you think I might be stolen away?" Hajime grinned at her, and suddenly, Mahiru wanted the old Hajime back. The one who didn't understand the meaning behind her blushing and stammering, because, as irritating as his denseness was, it was much better than having him know exactly how to turn her into a blushing mess.

"I-it's not important!"

"Don't worry. I'm not going anywhere," Hajime pressed a kiss to Mahiru's cheek, and Mahiru wasn't sure whether to A) punch him or B) kiss him back.

She settled on C) melt into a blushing mess.

Ibuki knelt in front of the plain tombstone, grinning. Hiyoko leaned over as best as she could without falling out of her wheelchair.

The words 'Here lies Mioda Ryuuichi. A lover, not a fighter,' were carved into the stone.

"Meet my new friend, Dad!" Ibuki stood up, gesturing to Hiyoko excitedly, like a little kid. "Her name's Saionji Hiyoko! She might be rude, but she's a good person, deep, deep down!"

Hiyoko couldn't be offended by that, not when she was too busy gaping at the stone like it had slapped her to hell and back. She was too gobsmacked to say anything but a small, quiet, "What happened?"

Ibuki's smile faltered for a second, before she forced it back on, twice as bright.

"We were a super happy family!" Ibuki exclaimed. "My mom taught me how to play guitar, and that started me off on the path of music! We were a family of geniuses, you know!" Ibuki's voice was full of pride as she elaborated. "Nagisa was the smartest kid in his entire grade, and even in the grades above him! I was the musical prodigy of the year! I could learn to play any instrument you
threw at me! My mom was an opera singer, so I obviously got my singing genes from her!"

"And... my dad..." Ibuki’s face fell, and she gulped. "He... he loved the ocean. He knew so much about coral reefs and currents and... a-and... he wanted to live in California, so he could research it. The ocean and beaches around there."

"I-I... I was going to be famous. I was going to be a rock star, and I was going to buy him a house, a huge mansion, with beachfront propriety and butlers and everything!" Ibuki sobbed, her voice speeding up as tears ran down her cheeks. "It was- I had everything all planned out! Everyone would have been happy! It would have been-"

Without another word, Hiyoko took Ibuki’s hand. She knew how much it hurt to lose a father.

Ibuki threw her arms around the blonde instead, hugging Hiyoko's head to her chest as she wailed.

"He... he disappeared," Ibuki confessed. "He was gone, f-for an entire week, before the police managed to find... they f-found his head. Just his head."

Hiyoko nodded silently, rubbing Ibuki's back as the rock star continued.

"They found the woman who did it. S-she looked like a grandma, like someone who wouldn't ever hurt anyone."

"Uh-huh," Hiyoko ran her fingers through Ibuki’s hair.

"We didn't let Nagisa go to the trial. I... I asked why she did it, w-why she took dad from us..." A sharp sob emerged from Ibuki's throat as she remembered the painful memory. "She said that we were happy, and she wanted to... she wanted to see us suffer."

"Oh god..." Hiyoko's eyes widened with horror.

"I...I couldn't... I couldn't let her see that. I couldn't give her that. So I smiled. A-and I told her that I forgave her," Ibuki tightened her grip on Hiyoko, gritting her teeth together. "I-I can't let her win. Never... I'm never letting her see that!"

"It's okay to be upset, mor-" Hiyoko cut herself off. She might have been rude and standoffish, but she wasn't the type of jerk who insulted a crying person. (Excluding her high school years.) "Mioda. Mioda Ibuki. Ibuki."

"I just..."

"Ibuki. Ibuki, it's over," Hiyoko called out to the rock star. "That woman already lost."

She didn't force a smile on her face, or try to pretend that she was okay. She let herself scream and cry and sob, all while Hiyoko held her.

'She really is a good person,' Ibuki realized as she hugged the blonde. 'She... she really is a good person.'

"Alright, so I have about a thousand dollars," Fuyuhiko turned away from the bank machine, facing Mikan. He gestured to the gift shop. "Feel free to pick anything you want. I'll pay."

"O-Okay!" Mikan nodded. She turned away from Fuyuhiko, taking a few moments to wander around the store. Eventually she returned, holding wind chimes with a crystal hanging from each pipe, reflecting light all around her.
"Can you pay for this?" Mikan asked simply.

"Of course," Fuyuhiko grinned, before pausing as Mikan held the wind chimes out to him. "You want me to hold it for you?"

"No. It's for you," Mikan smiled as Fuyuhiko took her gift.

"...so... I'm paying. For something you want to give to me," Fuyuhiko summarized, staring at Mikan in incredulity.

"Er... yes...?" Mikan offered him an endearingly awkward smile, pinch ing at her fingers.

'She's adorable.'

Fuyuhiko's eye darted around the store, trying to spot anyone nearby. Upon realizing that they were in a relatively secluded corner of the store, he pulled Mikan down to press a kiss against her cheek.
"Trust me, this is the best place around!" Ibuki declared, taking her seat at the dining table. Well, tables. Their group was so large that the restaurant had to push two tables together for them. The only reason they didn't need three was because of the fact that Chiaki had skipped, saying that she didn't need to eat food.

"That doesn't say much," Hiyoko joked as she sat at the edge of the table, right next to Ibuki.

"Hiyoko-chan, I trust Ibuki-chan's sense of taste," Mahiru patted the ex-dancer on the shoulder, sitting opposite Ibuki. "So please don't pick fights..."

"It's called banter, Mahiru-chan," Hiyoko replied.

"Sounds more like you being a piece of shit to Mioda-sama," Natsumi retorted, glaring at Hiyoko from her spot on Ibuki's other side.

"Awwww... you're so sweet!" Ibuki tossed an arm over Natsumi's shoulders, pulling the Kuzuryuu daughter close. Natsumi blushed, giddy that she was so close to her idol.

Natsumi was so ecstatic that she barely noticed her siblings (+ Hiyoko's) judging stares.

"Seriously. Ew," Hiyoko sneered at the pair.

"Just let her enjoy it," Hajime said, earning a strange stare from the redhead on his left side.

"A-are you sure...?" Mikan turned to the man on her left, looking up at the other brunette. "She seems... strange."

"Trust me," Fuyuhiko groaned from his spot on the end of the table, on Mikan's right side. "She's always like this when Mioda's involved."

"Really? Is that why you don't like being with Ibuki-san?" Mikan asked, staring at Fuyuhiko in confusion.

"Nah, she's just annoying," Fuyuhiko answered, earning mad cackling from Hiyoko and a yell of protest from Ibuki.

"Please, at least try to be polite," Pekoyama requested, turning to her brother.

"Our food's coming soon, right?" Natsumi asked, slowly gathering up the courage to wrap an arm around Ibuki's waist..

"Be patient!" Mahiru ordered, pointing a finger at the blonde. "You can't go around, acting like a pig!"

"It's rude to point at people!" Natsumi shot back, balling her hands into fists. "Get that finger out of my face, before I slice it off!"

"Both of you, calm down," Hajime tried his best to be as calm and soothing as possible. "Let's all get along and-"

Key word: Tried.
"Hajime, let's just go somewhere else!" Mahiru exclaimed. "That way, we don't have to put up with her!"

"Oh, I see how it is!" Natsumi glared at the redhead, like she was trying to saw Mahiru's head off with the power of the mind. "Go right ahead! No one will miss your bitch ass!"

"Excuse me?!"

"God, both of you shut up!" Hiyoko scowled. "We're here to eat, not fight! Keep it in your pants, would you?!

"Fuck off." Natsumi's words were quickly cut off by Ibuki pulling her even closer.

"Minus the 'shut up' bit and the pants, I agree completely!" Ibuki declared, before her voice turned pleading. "So, can we please have a nice dinner atmosphere?"

"...fine," Mahiru huffed, earning a smile from her boyfriend as a reward. She turned red, just as Natsumi groaned in disgust.

A sort-of peace fell over the table. Natsumi and Pekoyama opened the menu, looking over their options together. Hiyoko and Ibuki began discussing something about a plan and tv shows, while Hajime and Mahiru began talking about what sort of pictures Mahiru could take while on vacation. With that, Mikan decided to start a conversation of her own.

"So, what are you ordering?" Mikan turned to the Yakuza heir, staring at him curiously.

"Me, Peko, and Natsumi are probably just going to have yakisoba," Fuyuhiko answered, completely certain of his answer, even though he didn't consult his sisters.

"You're all going to have the same thing?" Mikan asked.

"Natsumi's probably going to get curious and decide to try it out," Fuyuhiko predicted. "Peko will order the same thing so that she can have more if Natsumi runs out, and I just feel like having yakisoba."

As soon as he finished his sentence, Natsumi spoke up. Even though she was addressing her sister, Natsumi wasn't the best at lowering her volume, so the entire table could hear her words. Or maybe it was the fact that Mikan was focusing on Natsumi's words.

"...hey, this stuff looks nice," Natsumi stated, staring intently at a picture of fried noodles with small pieces of pork and vegetables spread throughout.

"Do you want to order it?" Peko inquired, turning towards her sister.

"Sure," Natsumi shrugged, right before Peko declared that she would be ordering the same thing.

"...incredible...!" Mikan gasped in awe.

"It's not that big of a deal," Fuyuhiko said casually. A satisfied smirk appeared on his face as he leaned back, resting an elbow on the back of his chair to act cool. "It's only natural that I would get to know them a lot after being stuck with them since birth."

"But still...! It's really impressive!" Mikan grinned excitedly, leaning towards Fuyuhiko as she clasped her hands together.

"If you really say so..." Fuyuhiko muttered, his smile becoming more bashful as he blushed.
"I do!" Mikan declared.

"Oh god, they're going to give me a fucking headache," Hiyoko groaned, slapping a hand to her forehead.

"That's a good thing!" Ibuki exclaimed with a bright smile, eliciting another groan from Hiyoko. "We've succeeded in creating a super lovey-dovey atmosphere with this seating arrangement! They'll be together in three days, M-A-X-I-mum!"

Hajime stared at the pair, silent wondering whether he should tell them or not. He elected not to, not wanting to provoke Fuyuhiko into chasing him around with pliers.

Surprisingly enough, the group was completely calm by the time their food arrived. Hiyoko and Mahiru shared beef dishes and a plate of tempura shrimp. Mikan and Hajime ate their tempura soba in peace. Ibuki stole from Hiyoko's plate now and then, but the ex-dancer wasn't nearly as upset by that as you would expect. Natsumi grumbled as she ate, the noodles nowhere near as good as they looked.

But... Even with the good food, Mikan was sulking. Not obviously enough to draw attention to herself, but she had to fight to not start crying at the dining table.

Even though she tried to tell herself it wasn't a big deal, that she could ignore it, Mikan's eyes kept going back to them.

Everyone could see it. The aura of an old married couple practically radiated from the two! The patrons around them probably thought that they were a couple instead of siblings!

Pekoyama would grab the soy sauce for Fuyuhiko before the Yakuza heir could even mention wanting it. She let him have her pork and took his vegetables in return. It was obvious that they were close, probably closer than Mikan had ever been to Fuyuhiko...

If it was a competition, there was no way for Mikan to win. Pekoyama had been with Fuyuhiko for years! He trusted the swordswoman with all his heart! In that category, Mikan lost instantly.

Why in the world would Fuyuhiko want a timid, stuttering nurse over a cool, calm, confident swordswoman? Pekoyama probably never started panicking and crying in public before, or started sobbing at the emotional moments in a film.

...even in looks, Mikan lost. Pekoyama was an otherworldly beauty, looking so dazzling that people were too intimidated to get close. How... how in the world could Mikan compare to that...?

Mikan would have started crying, just a little bit, if not for the fact that she noticed something. Something that completely shattered her doubts, even if it was just for a second.

Natsumi slurped up some of Pekoyama's noodles, not even waiting for permission. Pekoyama didn't protest, simply staring at her sister silently, almost expectantly. Equally wordless, Natsumi reached over to pluck a piece of tempura off of Hiyoko's plate, offering it to the swordswoman.

'Huh?' Mikan's look of confusion quickly became a stare of complete bafflement as Peko ate the shrimp off of Natsumi's chopsticks. 'Huaaaaawhaaaaa?!'

Hajime glanced at the nurse on his right, completely misinterpreting her look of shock at the scene. He elbowed the other brunette, getting her attention.
"If you wanted more tempura, you could have just asked, you know," Hajime grinned jokingly, before plucking a piece of tempura from his bowl and holding it out to her. "Here, have some of mine."

Mikan stared at the offered shrimp for a few seconds, before suddenly realizing what was happening. She would have gratefully accepted it, if not for the sudden cold glare directed at her. Unbeknownst to her, Hajime felt the exact same chill run down his spine.

'M-M-M-Mahiru-chan's glaring at me!' Mikan wailed mentally, freezing when she caught sight of the redhead. An aura of darkness seemed to appear around Mahiru's face, not-so-subtly sending death threats to Mikan. 'What d-d-did I d-do wrooooooo0000000000ong?!'

'Crap, Fuyuhiko looks like he's about to kill me!' Hajime gulped, paling as the Yakuza heir continued staring him down. For a man with one eye, he was very good at giving someone the evil eye.

'Is it the s-shrimp?!' Mikan gasped as she realized it. 'That's it! The tempura is so good that s-she's jealous Hajime-kun is c-choosing to feed me instead of her!'

'He's thinking something like T'm the one who's dating her! I should be the one feeding her like some stupid cliche couple!', isn't he?!) Hajime concluded.

"E-e-er, I'm sorry, Hajime-kun!" Mikan exclaimed. "I can't accept it! I-I really, really can't!"

"N-no, don't apologize, it's f-fine-"

"Please, g-give it to Mahiru-chan i-in my place-!"

"Seriously, it's fine! Let's just drop the subject entirely-!"

"...I think the romantic atmosphere got shattered," Ibuki noted, incredibly disappointed. That disappointment lasted for about five seconds before she slapped a smile on her face. "At least we have the shared hotel rooms to make up for it!"

"How the f-fucking hell are you so damn cheerful after crying your eyes out for like an hour," Hiyoko demanded flatly, her voice quiet so no one overheard.

"I've got to make up for that lapse in cheerfulness somehow!" Ibuki exclaimed with a wink, earning a groan from Hiyoko.

Mikan completely ignored Ibuki's explanation on how the rooms were split up, too lost in thought to listen. It was only thanks to Fuyuhiko grabbing her and leading her to their room that she went to the right place.

"You know, Fuyuhiko..." Mikan mumbled as Fuyuhiko shut the door, taking a seat on one of the two beds before continuing. "There are people who believe that adopted siblings can date each other, because they're 'not really siblings'."

"What the fuck?" Fuyuhiko stared at her in disbelief, completely dumbfounded by the words leaving Mikan's mouth.

"A-and, even though I'm not one of those people, if you decide to go after Pekoyama-san, I will support you with all my heart!" Mikan declared, earning a look of incredulity from Fuyuhiko.
"What the hell are you talking about?!" Fuyuhiko demanded. "I'm not going to leave you to go after my sister!"

"Why?! S-she's definitely a better match for you!" Mikan all but shrieked, tears beginning to well up in her eyes. "I could never... I could never compare to her!"

"That's not true!" Fuyuhiko rebutted, almost glaring at Mikan as he moved closer to her. "And even if it was, I would still choose you!"

"Why?!" Mikan sobbed, before letting her voice drop to a quiet, trembling whisper. "Why would you choose me...?"

"Because I love you, Mikan," Fuyuhiko stated, pulling Mikan into a hug.

"Why?" Mikan repeated softly, smushing her face against his chest.

"I can relax around you, you know," Fuyuhiko hesitated, trying to find the best and least-embarrassing way to put his thoughts into words. "No one else can calm me down like you do."

"Even Pekoyama-san...?" Mikan asked uncertainly.

"Even Peko," Fuyuhiko nodded, before continuing. "You're the only one I can watch movies with until midnight, or go to the cafe with, and other things like that."

"...really...?"

"Yeah," Fuyuhiko was turning pink, but did that really matter? Mikan was upset.

Even if it was embarrassing... He wanted Mikan to know how important she was to him. Fuyuhiko wanted Mikan to know how much he loved her.

"I love how excited you get over movies, and medicine, and even going on dates with me."

Mikan whimpered against his chest, the nails digging at his back prompting Fuyuhiko to keep going.

"I can't believe you even want to spend time with me," Fuyuhiko said earnestly, smiling fondly at his girlfriend. "I love that I can trust you with everything, and you'll do the same with me."

"Uh-huh..."

Fuyuhiko kept going, listing things that left both of them red. Her smile. The sound of her laugh. Her silly 'I'm home!' texts. Small details that he was embarrassed to admit he noticed, but... he was glad that he was able to learn about her. He was thankful that they met and were able to grow close, to be friends and then lovers.

Even if it was embarrassing, Fuyuhiko made sure to tell her that.

He loved how she accepted him, no matter how much blood was in his hands. He loved how she laughed at every gory death in every movie they watched. Her insistence on taking pictures of every dog or cat she saw. How she got worried over the smallest scrape and insisted on treating it.

"...you really love me?" Mikan asked, pulling away from Fuyuhiko's chest to look up at him hopefully.

"I do," Fuyuhiko answered immediately. He hesitated, before asking a question of his own, his
voice uncertain as he spoke. "...what about you?"

"Huh?"

"Do you... Do you love me?" Fuyuhiko wasn't about to admit it, but... He was a bit too aware of the fact that he was the only one who had said the words in their relationship. Even if it was stupid... he still had his doubts.

"Yeah," Mikan smiled at him affectionately, absolute adoration obvious in her eyes. "I do. I love you."

Fuyuhiko pressed their lips together, not about to admit how happy and relieved Mikan's words made him feel.

"You're seriously not going to listen in?" Hiyoko stared at Ibuki in disbelief. "I thought you would be all over the chance to hear them get together."

"Nope!" Ibuki answered with a bright grin. Her smile became more subdued, but no less joyful, as she continued. "As long as they're happy together, my work is done! There's no need for me to invade their privacy."

"That's... surprisingly noble of you."

"Quit acting like I'm just a super cheerful girl! I can be noble and sad too!" Ibuki pouted.

"Well, obviously. I just didn't expect you to be above eavesdropping."

"Wow, rude!" Ibuki shot back, though there was a smile on both of their faces.

Fuyuhiko pulled away, listening for voices.

"Is... is something wrong?" Mikan asked.

"I think your roommates are listening in," Fuyuhiko stated, before grinning mischievously. "Want to mess with your roommates?"

"KYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!" A sudden scream emerged from Mikan's room, startling both Hiyoko and Ibuki. "F-Fuyu- No! Don't do that!"

"Um...?"

"Fuyuhiko-! No! You're going to die!"

"WHO THE FUCKING HELL PUTS A SHARK ON THE NINTH FLOOR OF A HOTEL?!"

"You were supposed to keep the sword girl's affection high! That's why you died!"

"...what the hell are they doing in there?!" Hiyoko demanded.

"Oh, and I was supposed to predict the fucking shark that came out of nowhere. What's next, ice-skating goblins?"

"That actually sounds a bit believable... Goblins would be really dangerous if they could shoot
ice..."

"I said ice-skating goblins, not ice-shooting goblins."

"Maybe the goblins learned how to skate...?"

"So... ice-skating, ice-shooting goblins."

"That kinda sounds redundant."

"Ice-skating and ice-shooting are two different things."

"Then it just sounds repetitive."

"What am I supposed to call them then? Ice-skating-and-shooting goblins?"

"Okay, it just sounds silly when you say it like that..."

"See my point?"

'Again, what the hell are they doing in there?!' Hiyoko gaped at the closed door.
While Ibuki was doing her best, her plans were always focused on the romantic, leaving out factors that had nothing to do with the mood or atmosphere. Unfortunately, this led to one massive oversight.

Ibuki never considered that she might have... accidentally grouped the morning birds and the night owls together.

This fact never made itself more clear than when Hiyoko started throwing pillows at her, the ex-dancer yelling at her to shut up and let her sleep.

"Mahiru, wake up."

"Go away... stupid idiot," Mahiru squeezed her eyes shut, not wanting to let go of her dreams. Her eyes immediately shot open when she felt a kiss pressed against her cheek.

"What the-"

"Come on, it's time to wake up," Hajime said, right before pressing another kiss to her forehead.

"G-g-gah! W-w-what d-do you think y-you're doing?!" Mahiru stammered, her cheeks redder than her hair.

"Waking you up," Hajime answered, grinning wryly at her.

"Quit acting like a dog! You're getting your slobber all over me!" Mahiru screamed, 100% awake. Hajime smiled triumphantly, right before Mahiru threw a pillow at his face.

Peko wasn't really a morning person. Really, it was more like she forgot to sleep sometimes. Either way, she was awake that morning, and Natsumi wasn't.

She had already tried all of the usual methods: loud noises, blunt force trauma, bribery... but to no avail.

With a sigh, Peko decided to take a break from trying to wake her sister up. She had been trying for a few hours now, but Peko doubted that any of her attempts would be successful.

The door closed behind her, leaving a napping Natsumi alone in the bedroom.

"Shut uuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuup!" Hiyoko wailed, scowling at Ibuki. "I don't care about your dumbass plan! Let me sleep before I slam your head into the wall!"

"But Hiyoko-chan! It's a super important day today! Like, 'you would have to be memory-wiped to forget how important this day is' levels of important!"

"Your only plan was to go to the pool! That's not important enough for me to lose sleep over!"
"You got your ten hours! That's enough, isn't it!"

"No! I'm going for twelve, and I'm going to kill you if you stop me!"

"Why?! You already got your growth spurt! You don't need another one!"

"I'm going to fucking murder you!"

Ibuki's attempts to wake her roommate up only led to a screaming match.

"Ah," Peko wasn't sure how to react when she saw Nanami in the lobby, playing games on her game console.

"Good morning," Nanami said quietly, not lifting her eyes from the game. "Did you sleep well?"

"I did," Peko lied. "And you?"

"I can't sleep," Nanami answered.

"Insomnia?"

"No. I meant that literally. I'm incapable of sleeping," Nanami explained flatly.

"What were you doing all night then?"

"Playing games."

Peko's eyes widened in horror as she realized it.

"Have... have you been here all night?"

Nanami nodded.

"I've been trying to beat my high score for seven hours, fifty-six minutes, and twenty-eight seconds now."

Peko stared at Nanami in shock and concern, unable to say a word.

"Mikan, get off," Fuyuhiko rolled his eye, trying to dissuade the nurse with feigned annoyance and words instead of shoving her off.

"Don't wanna..." Mikan groaned, tightening her hold on Fuyuhiko's midsection.

"We're going to be late for breakfast!"

"Five more minutes then?" Mikan asked pleadingly.

"That's what you said an hour ago!" Fuyuhiko retorted. "We can't spend the entire day like this!"

"...I don't want the day to start yet," Mikan mumbled, averting her eyes from Fuyuhiko's face as she blushed. "Getting up would mean having to let go of you..."

Fuyuhiko froze, his face slowly heating up as he stared at Mikan in disbelief. Finally, he sighed, grumbling, "Five more minutes."
Mikan smiled at him, resting her head on top of his chest and listening to his racing heart.

They ended up staying like that for at least another hour.

"Seriously!" Ibuki threw her hands into the air in exasperation. "Where is everyone!?!"

"Getting a decent amount of sleep," Hiyoko shot back, before grabbing her coffee mug and raising it to her lips. She tilted her head back, drinking the entire thing in one go. She didn't give a damn if it burned her tongue, because Saionji Hiyoko was not a morning person.

"Good morning," Hajime called out, leading a blushing Mahiru to Ibuki and Hiyoko's table by the hand.

"Y-yes! Good morning!" Mahiru echoed, too flustered to think straight.

"Have you seen the others?" Ibuki asked, grinning at the sight of romantic couple number one. "I've been waiting for them! Especially Mahiru-chan and Mikan-chan!"

"Er, me?" Mahiru blinked herself out of her trance, staring at Ibuki in surprise.

"She has a gift for you two," Hiyoko explained, cutting Ibuki off before she could even begin.

"You ruined the surprise!" Ibuki wailed.

"Well, I saw Peko and Chiaki in the lobby," Hajime stated. "They don't seem like they're going to eat any time soon..."

"Really? What were they doing?" Mahiru turned to the brunette, staring at him curiously.

"...discussing things," Hajime answered vaguely. He shook his head, quickly changing the subject. "But Natsumi's not going to wake up until noon. Maybe even after that."

"Whaaaaaaaaaat?!" Ibuki gasped, slapping her hands to her cheeks in shock. "How come!?!"

"She's sleeping," Hajime said simply.

"How come the pervert gets her sleep and I don't?!" Hiyoko demanded furiously.

"I woke you up because you're actually important to my plan!" Ibuki exclaimed.

"Plan...?" Mahiru stared at the pair in confusion.

"Don't worry, they probably mean well," Hajime reassured the redhead.

"Probably?!"

It didn't work.

Peko had no idea how to word her question without sounding weird, so she asked her question in its plainest form, not caring how it came off to the other woman.

"Would you like me to teach you something?"

"What sort of thing is it?" Nanami replied without missing a beat, as if she didn't care that the question sounded weird.
"...Sometimes, I find myself unable to sleep," Peko confessed, crossing her arms over her chest as she frowned mournfully. "Whenever the weight of the lives I've taken is too heavy for me to bear... I have ways of passing the time."

"And you want to... teach me how to pass time?" Nanami stared at the swordswoman in confusion, looking away from her game for the first time since the conversation started. In fact, Nanami didn't just look away, she put her console in her pocket, signalling that Peko had her full attention. "Why would you do that?"

"Because..." Peko hesitated. That was actually a good question. Why was she going so far for Nanami's sake?

At first, it was because Hajime asked, but...

Seeing firsthand how Nanami kept clinging to the idea of being 'inhuman'... it felt almost nostalgic to Peko.

When she saw Nanami, Peko saw herself. The version of herself before she met Hajime, who kept thinking that she was a tool. Who was so steadfast in maintaining that belief that she blinded herself to how much she hurt those she loved with that mindset.

Peko wasn't about to let history repeat. Not when she had the power to change it.

"I want to help you," Peko stated, her voice filling with resolution. "Because thinking that you're inhuman will only lead to people getting hurt," A small, almost amused smile managed to make its way on her face. "And I'm sure you wouldn't want that."

"...I see," Nanami nodded, her expression completely unreadable as she stared Peko in the eyes.

Fuyuhiko and Mikan were the last ones to reach the breakfast table, a fact that did not go unnoticed by an ecstatic Ibuki.

"But... can we go back to sleep soon...?" Mikan asked, groaning as she slumped down on the table. "I'm still not ready for the day to start yet..."

"After," Fuyuhiko replied simply, before moving to stand up. "Want sugar in your coffee?"

"I'm fine without sugar," Mikan answered, waving Fuyuhiko away as he left for the self-serve coffee machine.

"My, oh my! What's this...!?" Ibuki gasped dramatically, before whispering conspiratorially to Hiyoko. "An aura of an old married couple seems to be surrounding them...!"

"I'm more concerned with how Mikan said 'can we go back to sleep’ instead of 'can I go back to sleep'!" Hiyoko hissed back, almost glaring at Ibuki. "It's like they're sleeping together!"

"What if they are...?!"

Hajime cleared his throat, getting both Ibuki and Hiyoko's attention.

"Ibuki, you said you had a surprise for Mikan and Mahiru?" Hajime asked, trying to go for a diversion. If the pair's theories got too out-of-hand... well, he didn't want to think about what Fuyuhiko would do to them then.
"Oh! Right, right, Hiyoko-chan, gimme the thing!" Ibuki held out her hand expectantly.

"At least say 'please', you fucking moron," Hiyoko grumbled as she reached for a bag taped to the bottom of her wheelchair, hidden from sight.

"You wouldn't be polite to me if your life depended on it, so I'm returning the favour!" Ibuki declared with a grin.

"More like you're too stupid to understand proper manners," Hiyoko retorted, smirking.

"What does that say about you then? You're never polite to anyone!"

"I totally am! When they're not annoying idiots like you!"

"Ibuki-chan, what about the surprise?" Mahiru interjected, breaking up the sort-of argument.

"Y-yes!" Mikan nodded with Mahiru. "I really want to know!"

"Hehe, why don't you check for yourself?" Ibuki went from snarky to cheerful in less than a second, pulling pieces of fabric from the bag and passing it to Mahiru and Mikan. Mahiru, Hajime, and Mikan stared at the gifts curiously.

Mikan smoothed out the clothing on the table, her eyes widening as she recognized the shape.

"...swimsuits?"

"Wow! They look really great, Ibuki-chan!" Mahiru declared in admiration. "You have a good eye!"

"Heheheh! They do more than just look good! They're tailored to your exact measurements!" Ibuki puffed out her chest with pride, practically glowing from the praise.

"She kept badgering me to be her model or something like that," Hiyoko huffed, rolling her eyes. Though Ibuki didn't notice it, Hiyoko smiled a bit at the rock star.

"Wait, so you know Mikan's measurements?" Hajime was thoughtful for a second, before asking, "Can you tell me?"

"What."

The occupants of the table turned around to see a seething Fuyuhiko, the harshness of his glare not at all affected by the pair of coffee mugs he held in his hands.

"Did you seriously just ask for another girl's sizes in front of your girlfriend?!" Mahiru demanded, staring at Hajime in disbelief.

"A pervert! A super pervert!" Ibuki exclaimed in horror.

"He's going to run around, snatching panties!" Hiyoko added.

"I-it's not like-"

"I am so fucking close to ripping out your goddamn tongue," Fuyuhiko growled as he set one coffee mug in front of Mikan.

"Thank you!" Mikan grinned as she took the mug, too busy being tired and caffeine-deprived to care about the fact that one of her friends just asked for her measurements.
Fuyuhiko smiled as he nodded at her, saying that it was the least he could do.

...and then he turned towards Hajime, glaring at the other man over the rim of his mug. Hajime gulped, shuddering in Fuyuhiko's stare. Again, for a man with one eye, he was eerily good at giving someone the evil eye.

"You better be careful with your next words, or else you might find something extra added to your next drink."

Wisely, Hajime chose to keep his mouth shut. Even if it meant going down as a pervert in the eyes of his friends.

Peko smiled as she walked through the garden, appreciating the sights. The gamer walking next to her seemed a lot less appreciative and a lot more bored.

"So... we're taking a walk," Nanami noted apathetically, a small frown in her face.

"Yes and no," Peko replied, turning to face the gamer. "This time is about more than simply seeing what there is to see."

"What do you mean?" Nanami stared at her curiously.

"For me, a moment of peace is a luxury," Peko explained. "Even when I'm not fighting for my life, the house is rarely quiet, so I've learned to be thankful for every chance I get."

"Thankful for the chance to relax, huh..." Nanami trailed off, thinking.

The two passed by a misshapen hedge, and suddenly, Peko got an idea. She stopped before the hedge, removing her sword from the sheath hanging from her hip.

"The fact that I have lived to see this moment!"

An overhead slice came down on the shrub.

"The fact that the people I care for are alive!"

She stepped to the side, dodging an imaginary axe swinging down at her, slicing at the hedge in retribution.

(Though, deep down, she wondered if it was actually a fragment of a memory, a long-ago battle coming back to haunt her in this innocuous moment.)

"Every piece of beauty in this world and every bit of kindness I've received! Every time I've ever been happy! Every time I've seen them smile!"

Peko made one last slash, before turning back to Nanami, returning her sword to its sheath.

"That is what I am grateful for," Peko concluded, just as a gust of wind came along. The hedge's leaves blew past them in a flurry, leaving behind a perfectly cubed shrub.

Nanami stared in silence as the leaves blew past, before turning to stare at Peko. Her expression was as blank as always, her tone almost completely devoid of emotion when she spoke.

"You have leaves in your hair," Nanami pointed out, eliciting an amused chuckle from Peko.
"I suppose I do."

"Wooooooohhhah!" Ibuki gasped as Mahiru emerged from the change room, before grinning brightly. She gave the redhead two thumbs-ups to show her appreciation. "You're really rocking that swimsuit, Mahiru-chan!"

"D-don't say it that loud..." Mahiru mumbled, tugging her top down like she was trying to stretch it out, blushing bashfully.

Ibuki had made a two-piece swimsuit for her, a camisole paired with a modest bottom. Both pieces had a simple pattern, small white spots on a black background. Black string tied into bows decorated the sides of the swimsuit bottom, as well as the top's straps. She was cuter than a kitten wearing a button hat, and Ibuki wanted to make sure she knew it!

"Don't act like a pervert, Ibuki," Hiyoko called out, glaring up at the rock star from her wheelchair.

"Don't get mad because I didn't make you a swimsuit," Ibuki retorted instantly, somehow making that innocent phrase sound like a mix between a death threat and an insult.

"Shut up!" Hiyoko shot back angrily. It had absolutely nothing to do with the fact that she was stuck in a skirted swimsuit with a floral print ripped off someone's grandmother's wallpaper, got it?!

As the two bickered, Hajime turned to Mahiru, whispering, "Can we go to the pool now?"

"Without the others?" Mahiru replied, lowering her voice.

"Fuyuhiko's still mad at me for asking for Mikan's sizes," Hajime jerked a thumb at the scowling Yakuza heir, who had been waiting impatiently with his arms crossed over his chest, a bag hanging from his right hand. "It's probably better if we're not around when she finishes changing."

"I'm still mad at you too," Mahiru huffed.

"Look, it wasn't for anything weird, okay?" Hajime sighed. "It's just... she's basically a part of the Yakuza already, so why not make it official?"

"What?"

"I'll explain it to you on the way to the pool," Hajime declared, managing to pull Mahiru away from the scene.

"Being thankful for what I have... that's all I have to do?" Nanami asked for clarification.

"It might sound small, but yes," Peko nodded, feeling a bit like a teacher. "Let's start off with the simple things. Your family, for example."

Nanami's face darkened, a fact that did not go unnoticed by Peko as they walked through the garden. Just before Peko could suggest using her friends, Nanami spoke up.

"It doesn't matter."

That... that wasn't the answer Peko expected. She would understand if Nanami were to say 'I don't want to talk about them' or 'I can't be thankful for that', but 'it doesn't matter'?
"How does it not matter?"

"Don't," Nanami said softly, almost like a warning. Peko decided not to press her for an explanation.

"Then, are you grateful for your friends?"

"Of course."

"Are you grateful for the chance to spend time with them?"

"Yes."

'Then why were you avoiding them at dinner...?/ Peko didn't ask that question. She was trying to teach Nanami to see beauty in the simple things, not question her on every detail.

"Are you grateful for the fact that you're alive?" Peko asked instead.

Nanami paused, staring at Peko in quiet shock. She looked away from the swordswoman, frowning.

"I... I don't know," Nanami said uncertainly, wavering for the first time since Peko had met her.

"It is because you're alive that you can spend time with your friends," Peko reminded the pink-eyed woman. "Dying would mean losing that. It would mean losing everything."

"I know that," Nanami huffed, her eyes almost furious as she looked up at the silver-haired woman. Then she sighed, all of her anger draining out of her, being replaced by simple mournfulness instead. "But I'm not sure if this is much better."

"How is it not better?" Peko inquired.

"Because... I'm going to..." Nanami shook her head, scowling. "It doesn't matter."

"I'm inclined to think otherwise," Peko replied. "Please, continue."

"Why do you even care?" Nanami shot back, beginning to bristle up like a cat sensing danger.

"Because I care about you," Peko said simply.

"You don't have to care about something like me! Just stop!" Nanami screamed suddenly, clenching her hands into fists. Her voice was more distressed and panicked than truly angry.

"You're not a thing," Peko answered calmly. "And of course I would care for a friend."

"Friend...?" Nanami gritted her teeth together, and Peko would've sworn she saw tears falling from the other woman's eyes. "I'm not even... Why would you care about something like me...?"

"You are not a thing," Peko repeated. "You've proven your humanity time and time again."

Nanami remained silent, her head downcast as tears fell on the dirt.

Peko wasn't going to give Nanami her bloody sword-cleaning cloth, but she didn't have much else, except...

Peko quickly removed her suit tie, holding it out to Nanami. The gamer looked up at her, in
confusion, in anguish, whichever one, prompting Peko to smile at her. She did her best to look comforting and welcoming.

Seeing as Nanami gingerly accepted the tie, shoving it in her pocket before wiping her face with her sleeve, Peko assumed she had succeeded.

"S-sorry to keep you waiting...!" Mikan called out as she dashed towards the trio.

If it weren't for the fact that they were at the pool, and the fact that the skirt was so short that you could see peeks of the modest bikini bottom underneath, you would think that she was wearing a sundress.

The pastel purple one-piece was a snug fit, though it was plenty comfortable for Mikan. Deeper purple frills made a skirt over the bottom, a ribbon the exact same shade tied into a bow on the chest, sitting right between Mikan's breasts. The neckline was low enough to provide a very good view of her chest. Another royal purple ribbon looped around Mikan's neck, the knot holding up the top of the swimsuit. The swimsuit was nearly completely backless, another pair of ribbons crossing over each other to form a zigzag pattern over the exposed skin.

Both Hiyoko and Fuyuhiko were completely speechless when Mikan joined them, too busy staring at the nurse in shock.

Mikan shifted nervously, her knees pinching together as she felt fear well up in her stomach. It wasn't that she was uncomfortable with Fuyuhiko and Hiyoko's attention, no, she actually liked it a lot, but... she felt like they weren't the only ones staring. Like there was someone watching her every move, waiting for the chance to do... something.

Ibuki broke the silence with a loud cheer.

"Yahoo! Mikan-chan, you look totally hot!" Ibuki declared, proud of her work. "Hehehe, I'm so excited!"

"Excited for what exactly?" Fuyuhiko asked warily.

"Spreading sunscreen all over her back, fingers reaching for every nook and cranny, diving into the pool headfirst and then, dramatic development, she loses her swimsuit and-"

A bottle of sunblock slammed into Ibuki's skull, just as Hiyoko shoved her elbow into Ibuki's stomach. The rock star fell to the ground, clutching at both of her new wounds.

"I-Ibuki-san!" Mikan wailed, running to Ibuki's side immediately.

"Just leave her alone, Mikan!" Hiyoko screamed. "She's a huge pervert who doesn't deserve your help!"

"I'll kill her myself if I have to!" Fuyuhiko exclaimed, cracking his knuckles.

"I'm okay...!" Ibuki groaned from the ground, forcing a smile on her face.

'We haven't even reached the pool yet, and there's already a casualty!' Mikan wailed mentally as she helped Ibuki up.

"Hiyoko-chaaaaaaaaaaaaaan!" Ibuki sang, having fully recovered from her injuries. She held an
"Ibuki, I don't have any legs," Hiyoko pointed out, glaring at the rock star.

"So? There are a bunch of swimmers without legs," Ibuki shot back. "Isn't there an entire section of the paralympics dedicated to swimming?"

"I'm not a professional swimmer, Ibuki," Hiyoko retorted, crossing her arms over her chest. "Just go and swim already."

"No way!" Ibuki smiled as she plopped herself down next to Hiyoko, even though that meant sitting on hot concrete and leaning her head against the side of Hiyoko's wheelchair. "I'm gonna stick with you, Hiyo-chan!"

"Don't be an idiot!" Hiyoko huffed. "You were so excited that you bought a fucking pool toy! Just go and enjoy it!"

"Nope! I'm staying with you!" Ibuki declared. "You're gonna be so bored if you're just watching me play around! That's why I'm gonna play with you!"

"Well, it's not like watching you have fun would be that bad..." Hiyoko mumbled to herself, not wanting Ibuki to hear. Of course, Ibuki heard anyways, because even in a busy pool, Ibuki had better hearing than a bat.

"Heh, if you say something like that, then I'll end up thinking that you're in love with me!"

"Maybe in a million years," Hiyoko joked instantly, not about to admit how happy she got when she saw Ibuki's smile.

"Fuyuhiko, please let me put sunscreen on you," Mikan asked pleadingly, clasping her hands together. She looked down at her boyfriend desperately, her cheeks already burning. "You might get burned! I'll do a good job, I swear!"

"I can do it myself!" Fuyuhiko exclaimed. "And besides, don't you need it more than me? You're already starting to turn red."

A strangled cry emerged from Mikan's lips as he leaned closer to inspect her face. A hand came up to check her forehead, and Mikan almost fainted.

"God, you're burning up," Fuyuhiko withdrew his hand, his gaze softening. "Want me to get you some water?"

"I should be fine, a-as long as I get some sunscreen!" Mikan yelled hurriedly. "But I can't reach all the way to my back, so please do it for me!"

"Hold on, is this just an excuse for me to feel you up?!" Fuyuhiko realized suddenly, staring at Mikan in shock.

"...maybe...?"

"I can't fucking believe this...!" Fuyuhiko groaned, slapping a hand to his forehead.

"Couples do it all the time, right?!" Mikan offered in her defence, gesturing to the outdoor pool around them. Sure enough, on the chairs spread around the area, there were people laying on their stomachs, their partners spreading lotion in their back. "S-so I didn't want to waste the chance..."
"And it has nothing to do with the fact that I'm shirtless," Fuyuhiko said flatly.

"T-that might... have a little bit... to do with it..." Mikan confessed, her face turning even redder. "I just w-wanted to t-touch you! I'm sorry!" Mikan wailed, slapping her hands over her blushing face. "I ruined, didn't I!? I made you uncomfortable and now you hat-"

"That is obviously not what happened here!" Fuyuhiko exclaimed quickly, cutting off Mikan's sobbing before she could get too upset. "As long as we're not in public, you're allowed to touch me as much as you want! But now isn't the time!"

"Really...? As much as I want...?" Mikan stared at him hesitantly, almost hopefully.

"Really," Fuyuhiko reassured the brunette.

"Can we go back inside then?"

"After swimming."

"O-okay!" Mikan grinned excitedly. "Let's go!"

"Hold on, you don't even have sunscreen on yet."

"Huh...?"

Fuyuhiko blushed before continuing, almost grumbling. "I'll help you put on your damn lotion or whatever."

Mikan was nothing short of ecstatic as she hurriedly grabbed the bag, rummaging around for-

Nothing.

"You threw it at Ibuki-san..." Mikan muttered despondently as the realization hit her.

"Fuck," Fuyuhiko said simply, before turning to leave. "Stay here, I'll go look for it."

"Okay!" Mikan nodded, continuing to hold the bag.

A few minutes passed as she waited patiently for Fuyuhiko's return. She watched children play in the pool, wincing at one violent game of Marco Polo dodgeball. But, despite the peace, she felt like she was being watched... Mikan did her best to ignore that feeling, brushing it off as paranoia. She had felt the stare on her since she left the change room, but it was unlikely that anything would happen...

And then a man in a speedo walked up to her. Despite the speedo, he hooked his thumbs at the waistband of his swimsuit, leaning forward towards Mikan. It felt like he was leering at her, his eyes full of twisted desire. Mikan moved away instinctively, wanting to run, but her legs felt rooted in place. She shuddered, the horrible gut instinct shrieking at her to get away. Her stomach twisted, and she wanted to scream. Anything to get away from this man and his unsettling stare.

The man spoke, but Mikan had no idea what he was saying. All she really knew was that it sounded European-ish. He winked at her, making Mikan pale. She did her best to explain, no, she wasn't single, she was there with her boyfriend, but the language barrier was muddling things up, something that was not helped by Mikan's stammering and panic. Either that, or the man was persistent, ignoring her refusals. In fact, he got even bolder, reaching out for her hand and-

Before he could touch her, a bottle of sunscreen slammed into his skull, knocking the man to the
Fuyuhiko swore at the guy on the ground in another language, before going up to Mikan.

"You're okay, right?" He asked, concern obvious in his eye.

"I am," Mikan smiled, before noticing something. "What did you say to him?"

"Something along the lines of 'get the hell away from my fucking girlfriend'."

"Wow! I didn't know you spoke French!" Mikan exclaimed in awe.

"It was Italian," Fuyuhiko stated, staring at Mikan strangely. "Did you... did you have any idea what he was saying?"

"No, I didn't."

"Maybe it's best if you don't know..." Fuyuhiko trailed off, before noticing the unnerving man getting up. He immediately pushed Mikan behind him, glaring at the other man.

Mikan watched as the two... arguing felt too tame as a word. There was something furious, something protective in Fuyuhiko's voice as he growled, while the other man just seemed, well, a little bit too mad at being denied his chance to... um, Mikan didn't even want to think about what he wanted. The other man raised a hand, barking harsh words at the Yakuza heir, and suddenly, Mikan was on the ground.

"I tripped-!" Mikan wailed, the bag flying into the creepy guy's skull.

Fuyuhiko didn't even bother looking for where the bag landed, instead picking Mikan off the ground, dragging her away from the scene. Half-formed curses and swears fell from his lips as he pulled Mikan away, his rage completely evident to anyone who glanced in his direction.

"Thank you so, so, so much, F-Fuyuhiko...!" Mikan sobbed.

"Just fucking scream next time!" Fuyuhiko snapped, more worried than actually angry. "People can ignore it if you just look uncomfortable, but the moment you start screaming and crying, someone will step in!"

Mikan nodded, wiping at her teary face. She couldn't express her relief and gratitude in words, so instead, she swore something to herself.

In return for always helping her when she was at her worst, Mikan would do the same for him. She would become someone Fuyuhiko relied and depended on, someone he could lean on in times of need. She would be the best girlfriend ever for him.

With that thought in mind, she tugged at his hand, bringing them both to a stop.

"Thank you, Fuyuhiko," Mikan smiled, right before pressing a kiss to his lips. It felt like it lasted for less than a second, Fuyuhiko practically jumping away with a bright red face.

"T-t-that's, uh, Mikan-"

"Don't worry, I'll give you more when we get back to the hotel room."

"...fine," Fuyuhiko huffed, his cheeks hotter than a furnace.
It was a really good thing that Hajime and Mahiru were the ones holding on to everyone's clothes, though Mikan and Fuyuhiko got an endless barrage of questions, the two mothers asking how the hell they managed to lose their bag in return.
Surprisingly enough, it was actually really easy for Fuyuhiko to extract himself from Mikan's grip the next morning. She only crawled over to the pillows, grabbing at one of the cushions desperately.

"Mikan, are you okay?" Fuyuhiko asked, raising an eyebrow at his girlfriend as she clung to a pillow in his absence.

"No," Mikan groaned, burying her face in the cushion. She hugged it more to her stomach than to her chest, moaning in pain. "It hurts."

Fuyuhiko's eyes widened with realization, before softening with sympathy. "You're on your period, aren't you?"

Mikan lifted her head to nod, then went back to smushing her face against the pillow.

"Got a hot compress somewhere?" Fuyuhiko asked casually, moving towards Mikan's luggage.

"In my first aid kit," Mikan answered, her voice muffled from the pillow. "The one with the tiny volcanoes all over it."

Fuyuhiko refrained from mentioning how adorable that was, knowing that Mikan wouldn't appreciate it at the moment. He quickly located the hot compress, before moving towards the door.

"I'm just going to heat this and get us some food," Fuyuhiko called out. "I shouldn't take long."

Mikan nodded into her pillow, thanking the universe for Fuyuhiko's existence.

"Oh, by the way," Fuyuhiko remembered something, his voice completely casual as he continued. "There's a switchblade under the other pillow if you need it. Make sure not to cut yourself though."

"WHAT?!"

It was sort of ironic, actually. Before Fuyuhiko learned that he wasn't actually interested, he used to dream of a loving boyfriend who pampered him whenever he was on his period. It was more for the pampering part than actually having a boyfriend though...

He never really imagined that he would be the boyfriend in this scenario.

Heh, it was almost laughable when he stopped to think about it. There was no way Fuyuhiko could have predicted how his life had turned out.

Just having a friend outside the family was unthinkable to him. It was basically an unspoken rule that everyone aware of his family name would avoid him. Even if someone didn't know, they would start fearing him the moment they learned he was a Yakuza. Fuyuhiko sort of expected it to stay that way for the rest of his life.

And then he met Mikan.
He didn't even know how the nurse went from 'absolutely terrified of him' to 'trusting him with her darkest secrets'. But she trusted him, and he trusted her. When Fuyuhiko couldn't go to anyone in his family about his weakness, she was there. Even when Mikan saw firsthand how much blood was shed because of Fuyuhiko's Yakuza origins, she didn't stop trusting him. She wasn't afraid of him.

Honestly, how did someone like her even exist? Normal people were supposed to be afraid of him, but then she came along. She even brought her equally-fearless friends into the picture.

It was unbelievable. The past few months felt ... unreal to Fuyuhiko. Did they really kidnap Saionji? Or learn that Nanami was a robot? Or anything else that happened since the moment he met her?

Were... were they actually dating? Did they seriously fall in love and kiss and stuff like that?

He didn't even know he could fall in love. Barely a year ago, he thought he was going to go down in history as the Kuzuryuu boss who never had any romantic or sexual relations to speak of, just devotion to the family. He never expected to love someone so much that he agree to go to-

Um. Never mind.

(Fuyuhiko knew exactly why he agreed with Mioda's sudden proposal to go to America, but it was so embarrassing that he couldn't admit it. Even to himself.)

A few tables away, Natsumi stared at the scene in disbelief.

"Why the fuck is my brother staring at the microwave like an idiot?"

"He said something about watching movies with Mikan all day," Hiyoko answered, before chomping on the last bite of her pancake as she scoffed. "Like hell. He's probably just trying to get laid!"

"Don't talk with your mouth full," Mahiru reminded the ex-dancer, earning a groan in return.

"What are you doing?" Chiaki stared blankly as the swordswoman hid behind a corner. Chiaki, on the other hand, made absolutely no effort to conceal herself, not caring if she blew the silver-haired woman's cover.

The red-eyed woman almost jumped. She didn't notice Chiaki approaching. She quickly recovered her composure, pointing a finger at a man down the hallway.

He had his hands in his hoodie's pockets as he paced up and down a portion of the hallway. Chiaki watched, noting that he only walked in front of four doors, turning around the moment he reached the one on the end. He was almost like a prison guard or a sentry. Every few seconds, he would stop to glance at one of the doors with a sneer, before returning to his routine.

Chiaki frankly wouldn't care about the man and his weird pacing at all if it weren't for her noticing something.

Hiyoko and Ibuki's approaching voices.

The man immediately pulled his hood over his head, moving towards a door on the other side of the hallway. He jiggled the door handle, looking like an unfortunate guest who had door problems to the pair. Ibuki and Hiyoko paid him no heed as they passed by, entering their room without fuss.
The man continued for a few seconds, before glancing at their door. Assuming that they would not be emerging for a while, the man returned to his pacing.

"I couldn't sleep, so I decided to take a walk," The bespectacled woman whispered to Chiaki. "But then I noticed him lurking around our bedrooms. He's been doing this all night, but he hasn't done anything yet."

Chiaki froze, concern and fear in her eyes. Not for her own life, of course. She was worried about her friends.

"He has a gun under his clothes," Chiaki whispered, switching from normal view to thermal vision. "He also has a knife and a bundle of rope in his pockets."

"I see," The silver-haired woman nodded, reaching for her sword. "I'll confront him-"

Chiaki shook her head, reaching up for her ear. As easily as pressing a button, she switched from Japanese to English, dialling the phone number.

"I'd like to report a suspicious individual," Chiaki said hurriedly. She added a tone of panic and fear to her words, trying to play the part of a distressed victim. "He's been hanging around my hotel room all night! I-I think he has a gun too...!"

Peko watched as Nanami spoke to thin air. She knew enough English to guess that Nanami had managed to reach the police, but she didn't quite understand all of the other woman's words.

She didn't even consider calling the police. Peko was used to bloodshed and death being the solution to her problems. So used to it that she didn't consider a peaceful method.

Chiaki listed off various details, such as the location, the man's clothes, what room she was in, the swordswoman's testimony... finally, the operator told her to stay where she was, and to stay safe. Officers were coming soon, the operator promised. Chiaki nodded, reaching up to her earlobe to hang up.

"We should be fine," Chiaki stated, just as Kuzuyuu rounded the corner, holding a bowl of popcorn and a hot coppress. He nearly dropped both when he spotted the man.

The swordswoman immediately rushed over, trying to make sure Kuzuryuu didn't shoot anyone. Chiaki stared at the scene blankly, not really interested in intervening.

It was incredibly easy for her to understand the language Kuzuryuu and the other man were speaking. Switching to Italian was just as simple as switching from Japanese to English.

"When are you going to stop bothering us?" Fuyuhiko scowled. His voice was steady, no threats or swears in sight, but that didn't mean he wasn't furious. In fact, it was probably a sign that he was absolutely livid, instead of simply annoyed or irritated.

"Young Master...?" Peko switched from Japanese to Italian as well, staring at her brother in shock. "Has he been bothering you?"

"He's the creep who was harassing Mikan yesterday!" Fuyuhiko growled, glaring at the other man.

"Ah, so that's her name..." The other man said with a creepy grin.

Peko's eyes widened in realization, remembering the story Fuyuhiko had told her the day before. Her hand inched towards her blade, preparing for a fight if necessary.
"She's not interested! She has a boyfriend, you bastard!" Fuyuhiko exclaimed, brandishing his hot compress at the other man dangerously. He was beginning to lose his temper, and Nanami could see the veins popping out in his forehead.

"How would you know that?! You're just a kid! Keep your nose out of the adult's affairs!"

"I'm her fucking boyfriend!" Fuyuhiko screamed.

"You're delusional!" The creepy guy shot back, stepping towards the blond to get in his face.

"You're the bastard who's fucking stalking her!" Fuyuhiko didn't back down, and Peko had to pull him back to keep him from getting into a fight.

'O. They're dating,' Chiaki noted, almost bored.

"Hajime! Over here! I'll be able to get a good picture!" Mahiru waved her boyfriend over, grinning excitedly.

"God, what a lovey-dovey couple," Natsumi huffed, rolling her eyes. She pouted, a bit pissed off that she was a third-wheel... actually, she was more of a ninth-wheel than anything.

It was obvious to everyone but the lovebirds themselves! Seriously, was Natsumi the only one with some damn sense in the group?! Honestly, good fucking hell! It was like the world itself was trying to punish her for some nonexistent crime she had committed! Natsumi's method of execution: Being stuck in a group of dumbasses and their unresolved sexual/romantic tension. She could practically hear her tormentors betting on how long it would take for her to give herself a fatal concussion from this infuriating mess.

Urgh, seriously! Natsumi was going to die if this kept up any longer! She just wanted to shove all of those morons together already! Or else she would be dead and bleeding, cause of death: idiots and their refusal to confess!

Minus Mioda Ibuki of course. She wasn't an idiot.

And... Natsumi supposed that Mahiru and Hajime were a little smarter than the others... since they were the only ones in the group who had actually dealt with their romantic issues and just started dating.

But that didn't mean that she enjoyed being the goddamn-

Natsumi froze as she spotted something.

"The arcade!" Natsumi was practically bouncing in excitement, almost knocking Mahiru over as she latched onto Hajime's arm. She pointed at the building, her scowl immediately replaced by a grin. "I want to go there! Hajime, Hajime, come on!"

"Are you a little kid...?" Mahiru huffed, though she smiled slightly, almost amused by the blonde's excitement.

"Nah, she just loves playing video games," Hajime beamed at Mahiru, looking like a father/mother bragging about their kid.

"I'll be able to take some good pictures in there, so let's go."

"Hajime, you better let me pay this time, okay?" Natsumi said hurriedly as she all but dragged him
inside the arcade. Mahiru followed after them, holding her camera in case she saw an opportunity for a good photo.

"You pay all the time," Hajime shot back.

"That's because I'm rich and I can afford it! You have three jobs and a kid to feed!"

"Wait. She goes with you to the arcade all the time...?" Mahiru repeated, staring at Hajime and Natsumi in suspicion.

"Don't worry your pretty red head off, I'm not fucking interested," Natsumi rolled her eyes. Mahiru didn't look convinced.

"I'm not worried about that!" Mahiru snapped, glaring at Natsumi. "You-you're just-

"Mahiru!" Hajime called out, snapping his girlfriend out of her anger. He stared at her pleadingly as he continued. "You and Natsumi are both important to me, and I want to make sure you get along."

"I'm trying to be civil!"

"Thank you for that," Hajime smiled at her, before turning to Natsumi expectantly. Natsumi glared at him in return. A few seconds passed before the two managed to come to a silent understanding, Natsumi sighing dramatically.

"...fine," Natsumi huffed begrudgingly. "I guess I can try to be nicer."

"Thank you," Hajime's grin widened as the trio finally began to get along.

Fuyuhiko groaned as he finally got back inside the hotel room. He was endlessly thankful for the fact that Peko and Nanami convinced him to check on Mikan instead of fighting the stalker. Thanks to that, he wasn't considered suspicious and he wouldn't have to be interviewed by the police. There was no way he was letting Mikan think he abandoned her for the duration of a police interview.

"Fuyuhiko..." Mikan groaned, lifting her head to look up at him.

"Sorry for taking so long," He said as he moved over to her. He placed the hot compress on her back, and put the bowl of popcorn on the bedside table. "Got caught up in dealing with someone."

"You didn't shoot someone, right?" Mikan asked, concern in her voice.

"What kind of person do you think I am? Of course I didn't shoot someone," Fuyuhiko gaped at Mikan, almost offended by her words.

Mikan stared at him in silence as he sat down on the bed, his hand reaching for the remote. Fuyuhiko gave absolutely no indication that he noticed her stare, flipping through channels in search of a good movie.

"Oh, there's a sequel to the Carry movie!" Mikan gasped as she spotted the name on the TV schedule.

Fuyuhiko immediately switched to that channel, smiling as Mikan was immediately entranced by the creepy atmosphere and promise of blood.
He removed the knife from under the pillow, making a pile of cushions before leaning back against it. Mikan practically crawled over to him, wrapping an arm around his waist. She laid down on her side, resting her head on Fuyuhiko's lap as she stared at the screen. Fuyuhiko rested an arm on her back, his other hand grabbing the popcorn bowl. He placed it on his legs, making sure not to block Mikan's view. The nurse's other hand reached for the bowl, both for popcorn and to complete the hug.

The movie marathon had officially begun.

"Wanna go shopping?" Ibuki offered, drying her hair with a towel.

"No," Hiyoko said immediately, shooting that idea down faster than a coyote colliding with a cliff.

"Woah! A cute girl rejected my proposal!" Ibuki exclaimed.

"Why the hell are you so excited about that!? You some sort of masochist or something, fucker?!"

"Of course not! I'm just amazed that I'm witnessing your development into a shut-in with my very own eyes!" Ibuki grinned, winking at Hiyoko. She even threw in a peace sign for good measure.

"Oh shut up," Hiyoko grumbled, rolling her eyes. She pretended to be annoyed, even with the small, slightly-amused smile on her face. "Just go shopping on your own, idiot."

"But it would so boring for you if I just let you rot away watching infomercials all day!" Ibuki shot back, before adding a quiet, "Again."

"Is this pity? Are you trying to pity-date me?!" Hiyoko raised her voice, glaring at Ibuki.

She wasn't weak, she wasn't someone to be pitied and-

"No!" Ibuki declared quickly, her voice surprisingly serious in response to Hiyoko's words. That brief moment of seriousness was promptly ruined by Ibuki pulling an exaggerated pout. "Geez, can't I want to spend time with you? I happen to like doing that, you know."

Hiyoko froze, her face slowly red as she stared at Ibuki in shock. She turned away, ignoring her heated cheeks as she tried to keep up a mask of irritation. It sounded more like denial than anything.

"...do whatever you want."

"Well then, I'm staying with you!" Ibuki smiled, flopping down on the bed with Hiyoko. The blonde bounced a bit from the motion, managing to laugh.

(Though it was only because Ibuki looked so stupid with her hair down, loose from its usual horns.)

"Gah, you're such a moron," Hiyoko huffed, crossing her arms over her chest. "What do you even want to do?"

"What do you usually do when you're home alone?" Ibuki asked in return.

"Hey, don't they teach you not to answer a question with a question?! I asked you first, so tell me!"

"Wow, wow, r-u-d-e!" Ibuki spelled out the word, winking at Hiyoko when she had finished. She gave the ex-dancer a cheery grin, her expression and her tone out-of-sync with the words that came
out of her mouth. "Weren't you the one who told me to say 'please' when I talk?"

"There was an exemption clause, and that stated that polite rules don't apply to idiots and annoying dumbasses!" Hiyoko shot back.

"Is an exemption clause even a thing?" Ibuki wondered, pursing her lips together as she thought.

"Do I look like a search engine to you?" Hiyoko rolled her eyes. "Go look it up."

"Got it," Ibuki nodded as she went over to her luggage, pulling out a laptop. It was completely covered in sparkly stickers, to the point that Hiyoko had trouble seeing a single speck of the original colour.

She hopped back on the bed, sitting next to Hiyoko. Ibuki placed her glittery laptop on her lap, quickly opening up an internet browser. But before Ibuki could make the search like she was told, Hiyoko noticed something.

Among the various cat videos and music sites that made up Ibuki's bookmarks, there was one that immediately stuck out. The odd one out, the ugly duckling, whatever you wanted to call it.

"Dress-up doll games?" Hiyoko read aloud, not believing her eyes.

"Ahaha..." Ibuki laughed awkwardly, her cheeks turning pink as she muttered a quiet, "...they're good inspiration for clothes."

It took Hiyoko a few seconds to realize, oh, Ibuki was embarrassed.

Hiyoko had finally found Ibuki's weakness.

With a grin, she took control of the touchpad, tapping on the icon. A pastel yellow and pink site opened up. A menu of dress-up games and their icons in baby blue boxes loaded, Hiyoko impatiently clicking on the first one she saw.

"I didn't know you were interested in this!" Ibuki exclaimed, a smile on her face.

"The only thing I'm interested in is how horrible these games turn out to be," Hiyoko retorted instantly.

"They're not horrible!" Ibuki declared defensively, stealing Hiyoko's spot on the touchpad. She stuck her tongue out at the blonde, getting a glare in return.

"Right," Hiyoko rolled her eyes, giggling to herself.

"Seriously! Try it!" Ibuki shoved the laptop towards Hiyoko, guiding the blonde's hand towards the touchpad.

Hiyoko hesitated, staring at the screen like the pictures might bite her. A bald, grey-skinned doll stared back, the borders of the game cutting off everything below the shoulders.

With lots of encouragement from Ibuki, Hiyoko warily began clicking around at the options. Her doll slowly began looking more and more human. Pink eyes and a bright smile beamed at her from the screen, but it still didn't look right...

"Argh, why isn't there an option for hair dye!?" Hiyoko grumbled in frustration, finally discovering what the oddity nagging at her was. The doll's smile turned mocking, her straight black hair taunting Hiyoko and the blonde's inability to get it right.
"If you want hair dye, then try this one," Ibuki went back to the menu, clicking at a rock star dress-up game. She grinned at Hiyoko, glad that her friend was understanding the appeal of dress-up games.

Hiyoko froze as she realized something. The person she was envisioning, the person she tried to recreate...

Was sitting right in front of her.

"You okay there, Hiyoko-chan?" Ibuki asked, completely oblivious to Hiyoko's sudden revelation.

"Yeah, I'm fine," Hiyoko said immediately, gulping as she began playing the game.

Mikan was in *heaven*.

Just hugging her boyfriend was enough to make her happy, but a horror movie and curry-flavoured popcorn on top of that?

Oh, even with the horrible, terrible pain in her abdomen, she was happier than she could ever remember in her entire life.

Mikan couldn't possibly express how grateful she was to Fuyuhiko for creating that joy for her, but she wanted to try.

"Thank you *so* much," Mikan moaned, pulling herself closer to him.

He had done *so much* for her! She was in pain, and Fuyuhiko had went out of his way to make sure she was comfortable and fed and content. It was only natural that Mikan would be grateful, that she would want to repay him-

"It's nothing much," Fuyuhiko said casually.

"Huh...? Is it really that simple for you...?" Tears began welling up in Mikan's eyes as she turned to look up at Fuyuhiko. "You don't care about this at all...?"

It felt absolutely *crushing*. Mikan loved spending time with Fuyuhiko, of course she did, but apparently, that didn't matter to Fuyuhiko at all-

"That's not what I fucking meant!" Fuyuhiko snapped automatically. He hesitated, turning pink and bashful as he went on. "There are just some things a guy can't say without looking stupid, okay?"

"You don't want to look stupid?" Mikan asked, blinking away her tears to stare at Fuyuhiko curiously.

"What sort of person would want to look like an idiot?" Fuyuhiko shot back. He turned even pinker as he added, "Especially in front of their girlfriend..."

"Ah, but I would want to see that," Mikan stated, earning a weird look from Fuyuhiko. She let out a wistful sigh before continuing. "I want to learn everything about you, even the things you try to hide. Things you wouldn't want to say to anyone else, your fears, your insecurities... because..."

Mikan giggled to herself as she trailed her fingers down to Fuyuhiko's hand. "If I were the only person you could trust with that... I would be the happiest person alive."

Fuyuhiko froze, almost dropping the remote into the popcorn bowl. He stared at Mikan in disbelief, turning even pinker.
"How the hell can you say stuff like that without dying of embarrassment...?" Fuyuhiko huffed.

"...that was something embarrassing?"

"Are you fucking kidding me?! You can say some really fucking romantic things out of nowhere, but you don't even realize it?!"

"T-t-that was considered romantic?!!"

The movie ended up being completely forgotten.

Chapter End Notes

listen i know that transitioning is a lot more complicated than 'magic plastic surgery' but one of the side effects of hormone treatment is boosted sex drive and if i went in detail about it, then logically i would have to show the effects and i cant do that because the effects would lead to a sex scene and i cant write sex scenes because a) im underage, b) im uncomfortable with writing that, and c) i swore to myself and tara that i would never write a sex scene unless i managed to find a way to fit a communist regime into it.
i just want every non-trump supporter in the usa to know that they are loved and that they will be ok and happy and safe

Technically, Chiaki didn't have to wait. Her police interview was already over, so she was free to leave. But she still stood by the door, playing Tetris in her head (literally) as she waited for the swordswoman to emerge from the building.

Chiaki almost jumped when she heard the ringing in her ear. She hurriedly paused her game, a hand coming up to answer the call.

"Hello?" She called out, pinching at her earlobe.

"It's been a while, Chiaki," Chihiro's warm voice greeted her on the other end of the call.

"Father!" Chiaki grinned excitedly, her happiness overflowing into her voice. "How have you been lately?"

"...you don't have to call me father, you know. Just 'Chihiro' is fine."

"Did Dad tell you about me feeling inhuman?" Chiaki asked, trying her best to act casual and unconcerned, even with annoyance gnawing at her. First Hajime, then the swordswoman, then Kazuichi? Why was everyone trying so hard to get her to change? She was inhuman, and she accepted that already. "You know how he's always blowing things out of proportion."

"I don't think that's what's happening!" Chihiro exclaimed suddenly. His voice quickly became quieter, more mournful as he went on. "I... we didn't know that we were hurting you. We thought that it was how our friendship worked, but we didn't realize that we made you feel like... like you nothing but our creation."

"You never hurt me!" Chiaki retorted. "You've never done anything to hurt me! You saved my life! That's not something to be sorry for!"

"That's not what I was talking about! I meant... we made you feel inhuman, and I'm so sorry for that. I want to make up for it-"

"That's not something you have to atone for! I am inhuman! That's just a simple fact!" Chiaki sighed, before trying to calm herself down. "Look, it's not a bad thing, okay?"

"How is it not a bad thing?!"

"Because it's true! Why can't any of you accept this?!"

"It's not true! You're as human as I am! All we did was give you a prosthetic!"
"There's a difference between a prosthetic and an entire body," Chiaki stated.

"The concept is the same, Chiaki!" Chihiro sobbed, tears straining his voice. "I don't want you to think of yourself like that! You're human and-and-!

'I made Father cry...' Chiaki realized, guilt dragging her nonexistent heart down to her knees.

"I understand, Father. I'll try not to think of myself as inhuman anymore," Chiaki lied.

"You promise...?"

"I swear," Chiaki smiled, trying to comfort her creator, even though he couldn't see her. "So why were you calling again?"

"...um... Me and Kazuichi got accused of murder and conspiracy and... I think fraud too...?" Chihiro said uncertainly.

"What."

"Yeah," Chihiro sighed, before trying to inject a bit of cheeriness into his voice. "But don't worry, we should be able to clear this up."

"Chihiro, wait-"

"This misunderstanding should be cleared up by the time you get back, so have fun on your vacation!"

"Father-!"

"I told you not to call me that."

"When's the trial?!" Chiaki demanded frantically. Her head was spinning, jumping back and forth between ideas, anything to save her fathers from their predicament.

"Don't do anything rash, Chiaki!" Chihiro ordered, almost paternal concern entering his voice.

"Tell me when your trial is!" Chiaki barked, almost growling at the programmer.

"T-two weeks from now!" Chihiro squeaked. He paused when he heard the call go dead, his eyes going wide with shock. "Chiaki...?"

No one answered.

'Nanami-san, y-you need to eat,' Tsumiki held the tray of food out to the gamer.

'What's the point?' Chiaki huffed apathetically, keeping her attention on the game console in her hands. 'It's going to come back up anyways.'

'It's very painful to vomit on an empty stomach,' Tsumiki stated, before smiling at the pink-eyed girl encouragingly. 'Please?'

'Fine...' Chiaki pouted, setting her game down on the bed. Her hands reached out for the tray, light purple fingers wrapping around the edges of the plastic.

'I heard that Souda-san is going to finish your prosthetic soon!' Tsumiki declared with a grin,
taking a seat on Chiaki’s hospital bed. She made sure not to jostle the mattress too much, something that Chiaki was grateful for.

‘I need more than just a foot,’ Chiaki said simply, gesturing at her swollen, rapidly-decaying legs. Tsumiki paused, before going to grab a sanitizing wipe, gloved hands wiping away the pus from Nanami’s legs.

’Souda-san said he was working on legs for you too…’ Tsumiki tried her best to reassure her patient. So don’t worry, okay?’

‘…okay,’ Nanami nodded, before beginning to eat her food.

Tsumiki silently examined Nanami’s body as the other girl ate. Her upper body was affected the least, light purple dusted all over her arms. It looked more like she was bruised than anything else, possibly as a result of falling down the stairs.

A single glance at her swollen legs completely destroyed that idea.

Disease had eaten at her skin, leaving a ravaged battleground, darkened shades of purple and red and sick yellows and near-blackish browns warring for dominance. Her dead skin peeled away from the darkened spots, crumbling and folding like wings ripped off a moth's corpse. Disgusting and ugly and hideous.

That’s what Chiaki thought every time she saw herself.

Unlucky. That's what Nanami really was.

She was a normal girl who had the bad luck of being the one in a hundred thousand who suffered from necrotizing fasciitis.

Peko emerged from the interview room, immediately spotting Nanami. The gamer had discarded her blue hoodie on the floor, leaving her in a white button-up shirt and her pink shorts. Nanami was facing the wall, so Peko couldn't see what the other woman was doing, but apparently, it was a source of great frustration for the brunette.

"What are you doing?" Peko asked cautiously. She remembered all too well how Nanami had almost gotten arrested the moment the plane landed in America. Peko was prepared to take extreme measures to keep that from happening again, especially since they were in a police station.

"Leaving," Nanami said, her voice a bit too aggressive as she struggled with one of her shirt buttons.

"Where are you going?"

"Japan," Nanami answered curtly.

"Without telling the others?" Peko furrowed her brows at the brunette, trying her best not to sound suspicious of the other woman's intentions.

"They don't need to know."

"They would get incredibly worried about you and your well-being," Peko stated.

Nanami paused in her movements, before scowling. "...don't think that's going to stop me."
Peko sighed. Nanami wasn't about to let herself be dissuaded, but the fact that she hadn't tried to escape was a good sign...probably.

"Why are you deciding to return to Japan just now?" Peko inquired, carefully prodding at Nanami’s defenses, trying to find a way past her guard without triggering a violent outburst.

"Why do you even care?" Nanami bristled up, gritting her teeth together. Peko hurriedly made a note to herself to not press Nanami for answers anymore.

"Because I care about you," Peko said, making her voice calming and soothing, like she was trying to beckon an anxious cat to her.

"You don't have to care about something like me!" Nanami snapped, rounding on Peko. She glared at the swordswoman, though the fact that her eyes were tearing up ruined her attempts at being intimidating.

"You're not a thing," Peko frowned, saddened by the fact that she had to say the words once again. "You're my fri-

Her words were cut off by a sharp cry of anguish.

"I don't have time for this!" Nanami sobbed. She kept her glower on her face, trying to look angry. It was obvious that she was upset instead.

"Nanami-"

"I-I have to protect people important to me," Nanami looked up at Peko, desperation in her pink eyes. "Don't you understand? You said that you were willing to do anything for people you loved. Isn't it the same for me?"

"What are you going to do?" Peko asked, narrowing her eyes at the crying brunette.

(She wanted to scold the other woman, she wanted to tell her to keep her hands free of blood and not to throw the word 'anything' around so lightly, not when 'anything' could mean death and murder and regret, but was it really the time for that?)

"I... I don't know," Nanami admitted hesitantly. Her hands curled into fists at her sides, her voice becoming filled with resolution as she declared, "But I'm going to save them."

"Calm down," Peko advised, reaching out to place a hand on Nanami's shoulder like she had seen some supportive figures in Natsumi's movies do. "You're rushing into this. Take time to think about what you're doing before taking action."

Nanami froze, her eyes widening with shock at the gesture. She sighed, all of the tension in her body, all of her panic and worry and fear ebbing away.

The silver-haired swordswoman had a calming air about her. Maybe it was the serene way she carried herself, or her attempts to get Chiaki to slow down and appreciate the good in her life. Maybe it was Chiaki's stupid, doomed, hopeless crush on her.

Either way, Chiaki's lips curled up into a small smile as she silently nodded, trusting that everything would be fine.

Chiaki couldn't stop staring.
The difference between her right foot and her left foot was obvious. One was a nearly-dead mass decaying flesh, an ugly mess of deep purples, invasive reds, and black. The other was a milky-pale imitation of a foot. Plastics and metallic bones coming together to form a construction completely free of disease. If you didn't know that it was robotic, then you'd guess that it was completely natural. She could wiggle the toes without pain, move it around without getting pus everywhere, and it probably smelled like a foot too.

Wasn't it strange how the fake was more human than Chiaki's entire body? Everything but the falsified foot looked like an overblown attempt at creating a real-life zombie. It was so, so, so weird...

Didn't that mean that, somewhere along the line, she became something less than human? If a robotic replacement could be more human than she was...

Chiaki's brief philosophical journey came to an end as she lurched to the side, acidic bile spilling onto the floor.

Humans breathed. Humans ate. Humans lived and died.

Chiaki had no use for the first two functions.

She didn't die, either.

Chiaki started suspecting it a few months after her miraculous full recovery.

She had been a bit too close to one of the SHSL Inventor's 'science projects' when it exploded. While the SHSL Inventor was safe from harm thanks to the power of bomb shelters, Chiaki didn't have that protection.

But somehow, even though the wall had collapsed around her and fire and debris rained everywhere, she was completely unharmed. Even when her clothes had burned off, she barely even noticed the heat.

The only way to test a hypothesis was to experiment. So Chiaki did exactly that. She stalked Komaeda, always intervening when he was about to die. The SHSL Archer's arrow nearly stabbed him in the chest, right before Chiaki leaped from the shadows and jumped in front of him.

The projectile didn't even leave a mark on her skin.

A bookshelf nearly collapsed on Komaeda. Chiaki was there to shove him out of the way.

She wasn't even bruised.

Komaeda started joking about Chiaki being his guardian angel, always being around to save him. Chiaki told him to believe whatever he wanted, since she didn't have the heart to tell him that she was saving him because she wanted to test her mortality.

And because he was her classmate. But mostly to test her mortality.

...did it really count as living if she couldn't die?

Did she even count as human if she couldn't die?

Chiaki was living off of borrowed time. More like stolen time, really, since there was no way for her to give back the chance at life Souda and Fujisaki had given her.
(Unless you counted murdering them and making them robot bodies. But there was no way Chiaki could do that.)

...would she continue existing... forever?

Would her family die before her, her friends' withered and aged bodies lowered into the ground, all while she watched from her undying body? How many times would that happen? Once? Twice? A hundred? Forever?

"No...! No, no, no..."

Chiaki froze, her false hand coming up to her face.

Water was running down her cheeks.

Huh. She didn't even know she could cry.

...you needed to be human to cry. You needed to be human to feel grief and sorrow and pain.

Chiaki found a small smile coming to her face as she realized her salvation.

She wasn't human anymore. Even if she lived forever, even if she lived to see the end of time, Chiaki wouldn't cry if she saw people die around her. She wouldn't cry, even if it was her mother and her father and the people who saved her life.

"Do you believe in reincarnation?" Mikan asked as her hand reached out for another handful of popcorn. On the screen, an ax murderer chased his victim, because apparently, no good serial killer invested in long-range weaponry.

Fuyuhiko paused for a few seconds, pinching a bit of Mikan's hair between his fingers as he thought.

"I haven't really thought about it much," Fuyuhiko shrugged, before staring at Mikan curiously. "Why?"

"It's embarrassing..." Mikan mumbled, cheeks red as she hid her face against Fuyuhiko's stomach. A puff of air escaped from her lips, tickling Fuyuhiko a bit.

"It can't be that embarrassing," Fuyuhiko offered. An amused grin came onto his face as he shot Mikan's words back at her. "Besides, I want to hear the things you wouldn't want to say to anyone else."

"Unfair..." Mikan pouted, before looking up at Fuyuhiko. "I just... I just thought, if people were together 'until death do us part'... it would be nice if we could be together after that too..."

Fuyuhiko's eye widened, right before his face burst into flames. Figuratively, of course.

"You're too damn sappy..." Fuyuhiko mumbled, slapping a hand over his bright-red face.

"Do you like it?" Mikan asked, grinning excitedly as she stared up at Fuyuhiko.

"E-er... I guess so," Fuyuhiko turned away from Mikan, trying his best to hide his embarrassment.

"Hey, Fuyuhiko," Mikan stretched out her boyfriend's name, her smile almost mischievous as moved to wrap her arms around his shoulders. She pressed herself against him, her face only a
centimetre away from Fuyuhiko's. Of course, this only made him blush harder.

"Mikan, what are you-"

"I want to see your face," Mikan stated, her grin growing brighter as she placed her hand on top of his. "Can I?"

Fuyuhiko let out a huff of air, slowly lowering his hand. His eyebrows furrowed together, more in a last-ditch attempt to look annoyed instead of embarrassed. But his pink face betrayed his true feelings...

Mikan almost giggled at the sight. He was too cute!

"You're the best boyfriend ever," Mikan said earnestly. Fuyuhiko immediately flinched, before trying his best to recover. His attempts to look calm and collected were somewhat mitigated by the fact that he couldn't even look Mikan in the eyes. He was more of a shy cat than anything else.

"Am I really?"

"Of course!" Mikan smiled as she pressed a kiss against his cheek, before freezing. Her eyes widened with horror as she pulled away. "A-ah! Sorry, I-I-I got too carried away! Doing that without y-your permission...!"

"Seriously Mikan," Fuyuhiko rolled his eye. "You don't have to ask for permission every time."

"Really...?" Mikan stared at him hesitantly.

"As long as we're not in front of someone we know, I'm fine with it," Fuyuhiko smiled at Mikan encouragingly. It sort of felt like he was coaxing a shy puppy towards him as he waited for Mikan to inch towards him.

Mikan practically jumped away from the blond when her phone rang, knocking the popcorn over and nearly falling off of the bed. Fuyuhiko only groaned in disappointment.

"Fuyuhiko!" Mikan whined as her boyfriend wrapped his arms around her, unwilling to let her escape. "I have to answer the phone!"

"They're bound to give up if you just ignore it," Fuyuhiko stated, pressing a kiss to her neck. He followed his own advice, barely even noticing the noise.

Mikan froze, before relaxing in his arms. Fuyuhiko grinned as he planted another kiss on her cheek.

The phone kept ringing, the pair slowly beginning to realize that the caller was not about to give up. With a sigh, Fuyuhiko released Mikan. Mikan thanked him before scrambling towards her ringing phone.

"Mikan-chan!" Ibuki cried out from the other end of the call. Her voice was so loud that Mikan flinched, holding the cell phone at arm's length. She was still perfectly capable of hearing the musician. Even Fuyuhiko could hear Ibuki's distressed words. "Pack your bags! Right now! We have to go back to Japan!"

"Oh, you have got to be fucking kidding me," Fuyuhiko scowled. Mikan pressed a kiss to his forehead, hoping to calm him down.

Judging from the way Fuyuhiko blushed and stammered, it worked.
"You're freaking out," Hiyoko pointed out, watching as Mikan fiddled with her fingers and hair in the seat next to her.

"I-I'm not...!" Mikan protested lamely, avoiding Hiyoko's gaze. Her eyes darted around the airplane, trying to find something to stare at that wasn't Hiyoko. All she really found were travel magazines and safety guides, so she stuck to looking at her feet.

"Mikan, you know you can't lie to me, right? You can't lie at all," Hiyoko huffed, leaning over to poke Mikan in the elbow.

"I'm n-not freaking o-o-out..." Mikan repeated, even feebler than before.

"I get it," Hiyoko slumped against Mikan's arm, letting out a puff of air. "Anyone would be shocked if we were suddenly forced to go from vacations and fun to murder trials."

Mikan frowned, her face darkening at the blonde's words.

"Hiyoko-san... d-do you think Chiaki-san will be okay?" Mikan asked hesitantly, looking to her childhood friend for support. "I'm just... I'm just worried about her."

"Who knows what's going through her head," Hiyoko answered flippantly, shrugging. "I can't even guess what it must be like to be her right now."

"Huh?" Mikan stared at Hiyoko blankly, almost shocked by her words.

"What?" Hiyoko retorted defensively. "She's in a tough situation! Her friends have been accused of murder! And I'm pretty she's the victim... somehow," Hiyoko shook her head, shaking the thought away. Best not to question that just yet. "Any of that would take a toll on someone, so isn't it only natural that I'd feel bad for her? I-in a pity way, I mean."

"...um, I mean that too, but..." Mikan's eyes went to the window, a sigh of relief emerging from her lips when she didn't spot a familiar friend flying outside. "I was more worried about Chiaki-san g-getting arrested again..."

Hiyoko's eyes widened in horror as she realized something.

"Did you actually see her get on the plane this time?!" Hiyoko asked hurriedly.

"N-no, I didn't! That's w-why I was worrying i-in the first place!"

"Oh crap, oh crap, fuck!"

A few seats away, Chiaki watched the two panic, wondering why it was such a big deal. It didn't matter how she got back to Towa as long as she got there before the trial, right?

"Don't even fucking think about it," Kuzuryuu grumbled, glaring at Chiaki. "It's just going to get more complicated if you get arrested the moment you get back to Japan."

"Are you mad at me?" Chiaki inquired, staring at Kuzuryuu blankly.

"No," Kuzuryuu huffed, crossing his arms over his chest.
"You're irritated, at least."

"I am not."

"Denial."

"Shut up."

Chiaki nodded, not saying a word.

Fuyuhiko didn't actually expect her to listen, but he was grateful nonetheless. He didn't want to deal with the gamer's interrogation, and he was sure that she had better things to think about than why he was pissed off. The two lapsed into a not-quite-calm, not-quite-relaxed silence, neither one bothering to start a conversation.

At least until Chiaki lifted a hand, poking out her left pinky. The blond watched in a mix of exasperation and caution as Chiaki began twisting her finger in ways that would have broken a few bones if it were anyone else.

"What the fuck are you doing?"

"Yakuza take fingers as apologies... at least, that's what I remember from the movies," Chiaki paused, struggling with completely detaching the finger for a few seconds. With a pop, she tugged the digit off, holding it out to the Yakuza heir. "So take this."

"That's not how it fucking works!" Fuyuhiko snapped. "If you're going to do yubitsume, do it properly! Put that back on and try again!"

"Okay."

Peko stared at the pair quietly, wondering whether she needed to intervene or not. That thought was soon interrupted by a gentle tap on her shoulder, bringing her attention to the musician seated next to her.

"I'm really sorry that your vacation got messed up because of all this," Mioda mumbled with a dejected frown. Even her hair horns seemed to deflate a bit from her sullen mood.

"It's fine," Peko said simply. "Fuyuhiko and Natsumi decided that they wanted to go back, so there was no reason for me to stay."

"Huuuuuuuuuh?!" Mioda gaped at the swordswoman in shock, her jaw dropping. "You're telling me that the only reason you came here was because Fuyu-chan and Natsu-chan came?!"

"Er, no-"

"That really, really, seriously won't do! The entire point of this trip was to get everyone to get along and."

"You, Saionji, Tsumiki-san, Nanami-san, Hajime, and Koizumi need to go back to Japan," Peko stated, cutting through Mioda's words instantly. "That leaves me, Fuyuhiko, and Natsumi. However, the twins have already decided to return, so I would be completely alone if I decided to stay."

"...oh," Mioda paused, her frown returning. "Sorry."

"Don't apologize."
Peko couldn't just let Mioda feel upset. She smiled in what she hoped was a comforting manner, hoping that her words would reach the musician. "You organized an entire trip for the sake of strengthening our bonds with each other. That's very admirable of you. You have shown great leadership and organizational skills."

That was good, right? That was reassuring and helpful, right?

Judging from the way Mioda faltered and blushed, the answer was yes.

"Ahaha, it's nothing much, you know!" Mioda declared. Her voice was overly-cheerful and exuberant to hide her embarrassment. "It's pretty much my job to make sure everyone's happy and having fun! You could hire me as a professional friendship-matchmaker!"

"That sounds like a profession uniquely suited to your skills," Peko smiled.

"Oh stop it, you're gonna make me explode into stars and sunshine!" Mioda squealed, before adding, "But I don't mind! In fact, keep going, keep going! I love being complimented by a super cute girl!"

"I find your cheerfulness and enthusiasm enviable," Peko confessed, her grin becoming... well, more than a little bittersweet. "You are someone that people can relax and smile around. 'And I scare those around me, I end up making everything awkward and tense.'"

"I think... I aspire to be like you in those respects," Peko said with a sigh, her smile collapsing into a frown.

"You know, Pekopeko-chan, you're amazing too," Mioda beamed up at the silver-haired swordswoman, shocking Peko out of her thoughts. "You're so cool! Incredibly calm and awesome! I wish I could be more like you sometimes!" Mioda's grin became more subdued, but no less warm as she continued. "So don't worry about it, okay? Lots of people love you for who you are, and I'm one of them!"

"You're very observant," Peko noted, muttering to herself under her breath. A small, grateful smile made its way onto Peko's face as she addressed the rockstar. "Thank you for the kind words, Mioda-san."

"They're more than just kind words, they're the truth!" Mioda huffed.

"Of course, of course."

"This should be a good shot...!" Mahiru muttered to herself, focusing her camera on the musician/swordswoman pair from her spot a few seats away.

"How the hell can your girlfriend focus on pictures when there's a fucking murder trial going on?!" Natsumi demanded, moving to nudge Hajime into answering... only for her to belatedly realize that Hajime was sitting next to Mahiru. Dammit.

"It's because of this situation that I have to focus on taking pictures," Mahiru rebutted from the seat in front of Natsumi. "Everyone's feeling tense and nervous, so I have to take pictures of the good moments," Mahiru sighed before going on, her face downcast. "Maybe then, we can smile and laugh about this incident when everything is all over..."

"Disgustingly noble...!" Natsumi gasped. "I expected a stupid answer from the stupid redhead, but instead-"
"Natsumi, be nice," Hajime reminded the blonde.

"Shut up," Natsumi growled back.

'A disrespectful daughter and her mom...' Mahiru giggled at the thought, before realizing something. 'Does that make me the dad?'

Mahiru almost dropped her camera at the thought. Hajime in an apron with the words 'World's Number 1 Mom' written on it, one arm supporting a blonde baby as he cooked a meal with the other hand, his stupid, adorably dumb stare as she takes a picture of the sight-

"Is she okay?" Natsumi asked skeptically, kicking the back of Mahiru's chair. She didn't get a response, but the redhead kept babbling and stammering under her breath.

"She thought of something embarrassing," Hajime reassured the blonde, patting Mahiru's shoulder. "She'll be fine."

"I wasn't worried."

"Of course you weren't," Hajime replied cheekily.

He was glad for the moment of peace before everything went to hell, figuratively and/or literally.

"Miss Koizumi?" The blonde, bespectacled detective called out, resting one hand on the door handle. The other hand was holding a clipboard, her foot tapping against the tiled floor in a rhythmic pattern as she waited. "May I interrogate you now?"

Mahiru gulped as she stood. It was just the tense air, she told herself. It was the fact that one of her old classmates was accused of murder.

"Don't worry!" Ibuki reassured the redhead with a bright grin. "Ms. Gumshoe is really nice!"

"She had tea for me," Hiyoko added from her spot next to Ibuki. "It was actually really good."

"You'll be fine," Hajime stated, reaching out for her hand and giving it a squeeze. "Trust me."

"I-I wasn't nervous!" Mahiru proclaimed, before blushing a bit. "But... thank you, everyone."

"Do not fear," Ms. Gumshoe smiled warmly at Mahiru. "I only wish to ask a few questions."

"Okay..." Mahiru nodded, hesitantly stepping towards the door. The group watched as she went inside the interrogation room.

"How long d'you think her questioning will be?" Ibuki asked.

"Five minutes at most," Hiyoko declared. "My session was like, three minutes long."

"Hey, have either of you seen Mikan or Chiaki?" Hajime stared at the pair, a bit of concern leaking into his voice.

"Mikan said that she didn't get called for an interrogation," Hiyoko answered.

"Maybe it's tomorrow?" Ibuki offered, before shrugging. "Who knows? But she didn't come today."
"...have either of you seen Chiaki?"

Both Ibuki and Hiyoko paused, thinking.

"Hiyoko-chan, do you think that girl by the fountain was her?"

"Her boobs were too small, there's no way that was her."

"Why were you focusing on her boobs?!"

"B-because I wanted to see if they were bigger than yours and laugh if they were! Obviously, moron!"

"It sounds more like you're a pervert!"

"I'm just going to... uh, look for her," Hajime said awkwardly. The bickering pair waved goodbye to him, right before returning to their squabbling.

"How the hell am I the pervert when you're the one who keeps trying to take baths with me?!!" Hiyoko demanded.

"You're the one who started it!" Ibuki protested.

Hajime pulled out his phone as he walked away from the waiting room, dialing Chiaki's phone number.

No one answered, forcing Hajime to run out of the building with an annoyed scowl on his face.

'You better not be doing something stupid, Chiaki!'

Sure enough, Hajime found her near a fountain. Three blocks away from the police station. He was so lucky that Mikan and Fuyuhiko were at the park, just in time to see Chiaki pass by and reply to his text with her whereabouts.

(He felt a bit bad about interrupting their date, but Chiaki's safety was of utmost importance.)

She stood in front of the rushing water, watching the people around go about their normal lives quietly. Her back was turned towards Hajime, the gamer barely noticing his presence.

"Chiaki!" He called out, rushing to reach her. "I'm so glad I managed to find you-"

She whirled around, her eyes widened when she spotted him. Almost immediately, she spun away and ran, shoving passerby out of her way in her haste.

"What the- Chiaki!" Hajime was only stunned for a second before giving chase. He was too used to badgering Akane to go to class for the hunt to tire him. "Where are you going?!"

"Does it even matter?!" Chiaki spat out, rounding on Hajime with a glare on her face. Even though she was seething, it was obvious that there were tears in her eyes.

"Of course it does!" Hajime retorted automatically, coming to a stop in front of the aggressive gamer. "If you're thinking of doing anything stupid, then-"

"You don't have to care about something like me," Chiaki hissed, trying to restrain her anger.
"You're not a thing, Chiaki! No one thinks of you as anything but human!" Hajime shot back.

"That's not important!" Chiaki snapped, almost snarling at Hajime. "Why are you-"

"It's important, and you know it, Chiaki!" Hajime had to remind himself to take a few deep breaths. He had to be calm, he had to think things through logically. Hajime had to be the calm one in this scenario. His voice was a lot quieter when he asked, "Why do you keep insisting that everything isn't important? That it doesn't matter?"

"Because it doesn't matter. Not to you."

"It does matter to me," Hajime stated. "We're friends, and I worry about you."

Chiaki's eyes widened, before her expression darkened. She curled her hands into fists, clutching them so tightly that she would crush a barbell into pieces if she were holding one.

"I already told you, you don't have to care about something like me!"

"Why are you so determined to push me away?" Hajime asked, before realizing something. He frowned sorrowfully, pain coming into his voice, stabbing Chiaki with guilt. "Is it something you can't trust me with?"

"No, that's not it!" Chiaki screamed. She lashed out like a wounded animal, desperation seeping into her voice. "Just stop! Stop it already!"

'Stop it, stop it, stop being so nice to me, I don't want to care about you, it's going to be painful, shut up, I'll see your death, it'll be nothing but painful in the end, stop it.\'-

She choked on the words she couldn't say, forcing them down. Chiaki wanted nothing more than to tell him, to spill her heart out to him, to trust him, but that would be irreversible.

The moment she let her guard down, the moment she let him get close enough to see her crack, she would be forced to admit it. Chiaki would be forced to accept that she could feel, that she was human, the truth she knew but had to deny with every fiber of her being.

She would have to accept the fact that she was human but at the same time, she wasn't. Her body felt no pain and shed no blood. Her metallic shell endured things that no human would, it hadn't aged a day since her operation, and it never would-

Nanami Chiaki would be forced to accept that she cared about people she would surely outlive.

"I'm not going to stop," Hajime declared, his eyes softening as he stepped towards the pink-eyed android. Chiaki's eyes widened as Hajime pulled her into a hug. "No matter what, we're friends, aren't we?"

"Stop..." Chiaki pleaded, her voice cracking in her despair. Tears began blurring her vision. "Stop... just stop... b-being so nice to me...!"

"I can't."

"Why... why are you doing this...?" Chiaki sobbed. "It's worthless... it's all p-pointless...!"

"Your feelings aren't worthless," Hajime answered.

"It doesn't matter."
"It does."

"This... all of this... all your effort, all of the time you spend on trying to change my mind and figure out what's wrong... It's all going to be worthless when you..." Chiaki cut herself off, hesitant to even say the word. "What's the point of even trying...? You... What's the point of spending time with you if I'll end up seeing you die...?"

Saying it out loud made it seem so much more real. The fear, the anxiety that followed her every day, the worries, the murmurs of how her life would be meaningless without them-

"That's wrong." Hajime rebutted her words with a gentle voice. "The time you spend with someone doesn't lose its worth when they die. In fact... it probably has even more worth that way," He smiled at her, his hand coming up to rest on the back of her head. "No one lives forever. That's why, while you still have the chance, you have to spend time with your friends. Don't shut us out. Let us help you."

"It's scary..." Chiaki whimpered, metallic fingers grabbing at the taller man's clothes.

"We'll be here to help you," Hajime promised. "Me and Peko and Ibuki and Mikan and Mahiru and Fuyuhiko... even Natsumi and Hiyoko would support you if you trusted them. We'll all be here to support you."

"What about... when you're gone...?" Chiaki asked tearfully.

"Even then, we'll be with you," Hajime stated, a grin as bright and comforting as the sun coming onto his face. "Even if it's only in spirit."

A cracked, choked breath emerged from Chiaki's throat, before tears began flowing once again. She let herself break down bawling in Hajime's warm arms.

There was a name for it, right? A name for the mix of fear, excitement, happiness, confidence, and nervousness bursting from within her body? A name for the feeling that made her feel that, no matter what happened, everything would be alright in the end?

'Ah... that's right...' Chiaki smiled slightly as she pressed her wet face against Hajime's chest. 'It's hope, isn't it?'

How fitting.
"Be more careful next time, dammit!" Fuyuhiko swears as he wraps the bandage around Peko's wrist, almost growling at the sight. "What the hell would you do if you ended up breaking your wrist or something!??"

"I apologize," Peko says formally, bowing her head. "I won't take soccer as seriously any more."

"That's not the problem," Fuyuhiko states, just as the door opens.

"Pekoyama- oh," Mikan's face falls as spots Fuyuhiko bandaging Peko's arm. She moves to put away the first aid kit in her hands with a sigh. "I guess I'm not needed then..."

"Er, Mikan!" Fuyuhiko calls out to the nurse, beckoning the brunette towards them. "Actually, can you check my bandage? I'm not sure if I did it right..."

Mikan's face brightens as she nods, moving towards them with a bright grin on her face. Fuyuhiko can barely keep the fond smile off his face as Mikan examines the bandaging, the nurse glad that she was needed.

"Wow, you're really good at this!" Mikan beams at Fuyuhiko, and suddenly, his cheeks feel redder than Koizumi's hair. "You could become a doctor if you wanted, Fuyuhiko-kun!"

"You're flattering me way too much..." Fuyuhiko left out the 'but feel free to keep going,' because A) that made him sound desperate, B) only an idiot would say something like that, and C) he really didn't want Mikan to think of him as a desperate idiot.

Peko stares at the blond, watching silently as Fuyuhiko did his best to keep his cool and not dissolve into a blushing mess. She slowly realizes what was happening, but she doesn't say a word.

(Fuyuhiko had fallen in love for the first time in his life, and boy did he fall hard.)

It wasn't like he wanted to hang around the infirmary. His feet just brought him to that hallway after class ended. He didn't do it on purpose.

Except he wasn't leaving either. Unable to decide whether to enter the infirmary or not, he simply stayed near the door, trying to convince himself that he wasn't nervous. He didn't even have a reason to be nervous!

With a groan, Fuyuhiko pushes the door open, figuring that it would be empty, he would go back to his room, and never do this again.

Step one blows up in his face.
"A-ah!" Mikan gasps, before her face brightens. She would have waved at Fuyuhiko, if not for the huge box in her arms. "Hello, Fuyuhiko-kun!"

Automatically, Fuyuhiko moves to help her, grabbing the box from her hands. He almost drops it, surprised by how heavy it was. He can hear pills rolling around inside the box, though he doesn't feel anything inside shift at the motion. "Where do you need this?"

"Oh, I was just bringing it to the cabinet over there..." Mikan smiles at him gratefully, and Fuyuhiko finds himself turning pink. Slowly, he blinks himself out of his trance, forcing himself to look away and focus on his task.

Mikan unlocks the cabinet with a key from her apron, grinning to herself as she opened the box. The box was full of rectangular bottles packed tightly together, holding both liquid and pills. They end up sorting the medicine bottles together. Fuyuhiko grabs a bottle from the box and passes it to Mikan, who puts the medicine in its proper place.

"It's really amazing, isn't it?" Mikan asks, waving a hand at the cabinet as her other hand reached up to put away a bottle. Fuyuhiko nods, watching as Mikan gestures expressively, talking with her hands as well as her mouth. "Kimura-senpai made all of this in less than a year! She's really worthy of being called the Super High School Level Chemist, isn't she?"

"She really is," Fuyuhiko echoes, too busy admiring Mikan's beaming smile to think of anything meaningful to add to the conversation.

It happened a lot, actually. Mikan would start talking about something she loved, excited and flustered and adorable, all while Fuyuhiko just stopped and stared. He would start noticing how she always clasped her hands together when she smiled, his ears hanging onto every laugh and every word that escaped from her lips.

Fuyuhiko wasn't even aware of it at first. He just had moments where he couldn't pay attention to anything but the sound of her voice and the smell of antiseptics. His eyes kept seeking her out, and something just felt off if he didn't find her face in a crowd. Fuyuhiko was happy every time she was around, and missed her when she left, but he didn't really understand that it wasn't because Mikan was his first friend outside the family.

Peko had to sit him down and actually tell him outright for him to get it.

'Fuyuhiko, you're in love with her, and if you want, I can try to help you two get together.'

(Okay, her actual words were a lot more formal and clear about what she would do to get them together, but hey, broad strokes, right?)

"Hey, Fuyuhiko-kun," Mikan calls out, and suddenly, all his attention is on her.

She seems almost nervous in his stare. Fuyuhiko hurriedly tries to make sure he doesn't look like a creep or intimidating or fuck knows what else.

(The code was to look cool, calm, and collected. Kind of like Peko, if Peko were less intimidating to anyone not in the Kuzuryuu family.)

He also tries to crush any hope that it's her being embarrassed or flustered because of him, because the thing about crushes is, there's a ninety-nine point nine percent chance that they're unrequited. It's better to just enjoy every bit of happiness you get than to get your hopes up for something more.
"Was there a reason you came here?" Mikan asks, her face falling as she pinches at her fingers. "I hope I didn't ruin something by getting you to help me..."

"N-no! You didn't ruin anything, I swear," Fuyuhiko almost slaps himself for getting so damn agitated. Calm down, idiot, you could talk your way out of this one. "But there was a reason why I came here..."

"If it's first aid, I can definitely help!" Mikan exclaims. "Are you hurt anywhere!?"

"No, no, it's not that," Fuyuhiko says, surprising himself with how steady his voice was. He could do this. He could talk to her without looking stupid. He might even be able to impress her if he played his cards right. "I just wanted to..."

There is absolutely no way in hell that Fuyuhiko is about to say 'ask you out in a date,' no matter how true that was. His eyes search for a valid excuse, his gaze falling on Mikan's bandaged arm.

"Got any extra bandages?"

Mikan stares at him in confusion, but that's fine, because Fuyuhiko is already weaving a tale out of thin air, making it up as he goes along. Inwardly, he thanks his parents for being so strict. It taught him how to lie convincingly, even without a pre-prepared story.

"Y'know, how Halloween is coming up? I was thinking of adding bandages to my costume, just to complete the look."

"You're not thinking of using compression bandages, right?" Mikan stares at him warily, and Fuyuhiko has to stop himself from laughing at the sight. Wouldn't want to look like a jerk.

"Of course not," He answers simply.

"Hm, well..." Mikan frowns thoughtfully, trying to figure out a solution. "It wouldn't be a good idea to use the school's bandages for that... but I do know a good trick to make cool-looking bandages!" She grins at him, pride emanating from her smile. "You just have to cut up some cloth and put them in boiling water, then dump tea bags in with them!"

"Hey, why don't you just make them with me instead?" Fuyuhiko suggests, acting as casual as possible.

(Read: his slightly-flushed cheeks were the only indication that he was just using the costume making as an excuse to spend time with her. If you didn't notice that, you'd think that the only thing he wanted was a convincing mummy costume.)

"Alright!" Mikan clasps her hands together as she smiles, before going to grab her things.

Fuyuhiko smiles back, but even with better acting skills than most of the class, he can't fully hide the fondness in his eyes as he looks up at her.

(When Halloween came around, the class decided to have a competition to see who had the best costume. Chaos promptly ensued when Fuyuhiko pointed out that nothing in the rules explicitly disallowed voting for oneself. But... even though he said that, his vote ended up going to Mikan instead. It had absolutely nothing to do with how he almost walked into a wall when he saw her nurse costume, got it?!)"Thank you very much, Nidai-san!" Mikan bows gratefully to the team manager, before returning
to the bench, taking her seat next to Fuyuhiko.

"What was that about?" Fuyuhiko asks, almost glaring at Nidai's retreating back. As stupid as it was... he was sort of possessive of his time with Mikan. He really didn't like the idea of someone stealing that away from him, but he wasn't going to turn to violence or anything.

"Oh, he's giving me private training," Mikan answers casually, opening her lunch as she spoke.

"What?" He almost kicks himself, trying to put on a facade of cool indifference. "What's the training for?"

"I'm trying to get my lifeguard license," Mikan sighs, a frown marring her face. "I can treat people and I already have emergency response training, but I don't think I'll be able to pass the swimming portion of the test... not without help at least."

"Heh, I guess you're lucky to have him in the class," Fuyuhiko grins, even though inwardly, he's wondering if it would be immoral to threaten Nidai with a knife. He knows it's considered rude, but it wouldn't count as breaking a vow if Fuyuhiko didn't hurt him, right...?

"I really am!" Mikan agrees, before smiling at him. "I'm very lucky to have reliable people like you and Nidai-san in the class."

"Reliable...? Me?" Fuyuhiko stares at her in shock.

"Yes! Of course you are! You're always trying to help me!" Mikan exclaims immediately. "Whether it's emotional support or heavy things, you're always there for me."

"I-it's nothing much," Fuyuhiko mumbles, slowly turning pink as he begins eating his food.

"Even if you say that... It's really important to me," Mikan confesses, before gathering up all her courage to proclaim; "So, um, if there's anything you need, ever, please let me know! I'll do my best to help you!"

He doesn't say 'then date me', because that would be creepy. He doesn't crack a joke either.

Ideally, Fuyuhiko would say something suave and cool and impressive that would make Mikan's heart flutter, but he's not operating at ideal conditions. His brain is too busy dwelling on Mikan's words, his heartbeat drowning out all other noises. Fuyuhiko can't even act his way out of it, his smile genuinely bashful as he answers with a simple "Sure."

He has no way of knowing it, but Mikan's heart races faster in that moment than it would have if he put on an act, no matter how suave his words were.

(It's just a coincidence that he happens to be passing by the pool the day of the lifeguard exam. He's just in time to see Mikan get her license, so Fuyuhiko offers to treat her to lunch as a reward. Mikan is too busy drowning in euphoria to question his excuse, and the two manage to have lunch together in peace, Fuyuhiko's heart hammering away at the walls of his rib cage the entire time.)

Their class was doing a haunted house for the school festival.

It was Nevermind's idea. True, Fuyuhiko isn't all that excited for the idea, but it was better than Hanamura's suggestion. And Souda's. And Saionji's. And Owari's. And Mioda's. And Tanaka's.

Surprisingly enough, their haunted house is really good at scaring people shitless. Or maybe he
They had a screaming musician more than willing to use her talents to cause fear, a pet weirdo with a fuckton of ominous symbols on curtains, a mechanic who built a number of contraptions in an attempt to impress Nevermind, an ex-dancer who knew a bit too much about making things look bloodstained, a swordswoman willing to slash things up to make them look creepy, a gamer who knew all the horror game cliches, a gluttonous gymnast who could move faster than the eye could see, an animator completely capable of creating fake footage of creepy creatures, Mr. Hope Rambling, a pervert who had a fuckton of experience with knives, a loud coach with an intimidating frame, a nagging photographer to take pictures of everyone's fear, a weird princess with a serial killer fetish, a spikey-haired brunette who actually managed to lead them all effectively, and Mikan.

Mikan was probably the one who loved Nevermind's idea the most, aside from Souda trying to suck up to her. The nurse was so excited when Hajime assigned her to be the one behind the control board... she giggled with glee when she realized that the customers would be at her mercy, clasping her hands together under a bright grin...

Er. What was Fuyuhiko talking about again?

Oh. Right. Haunted house.

He was a ghost in a bloodstained costume for the event. He found it hysterical to pop out of nowhere to scare the crap out of people, which was probably the second-best part about the whole thing.

(The best part was obviously not how Souda had made earpieces for everyone, and how, whenever Fuyuhiko made a successful scare, he would hear Mikan's voice in his ear, congratulating him for a good job. Or how he could hear how delighted she was, muttering to herself under her breath about the best ways to frighten people, because she was so excited that she forgot to turn off her earpiece-)

But, as much as he loved his job, they were all on break at the moment, the students taking the chance to wander around and see what the other classes had prepared.

He walks around the upperclassmen's imitation of a New Year's festival, though he has to shove a lot of people out of the way to get to his destination. It was pretty understandable that people would be excited to see what the ultimate students had created, friends, family, and reporters alike, but that didn't mean that Fuyuhiko had to like it.

His irritation immediately dissipates the moment the sugary snack enters his mouth. The Super High School Level Confectioner really is as good as they say. He wonders if it would be worth it to go back in line for some more, just as he spots Mikan.

Fuyuhiko rushes away from the nurse, hoping to hell and back that she didn't see him. He shoves the candy in his mouth, unable to savour the taste in his haste.

He couldn't let Mikan see him seeing sweets at a festival like a little kid! It was already bad enough that he had the face and height of a kid, and that was without adding the fact that the highest he got in the masculinity scale was 'androgynous'!

Fuyuhiko already had experience with people saying that they couldn't believe he was a Yakuza with his babyface. That he was too cute to lead. They couldn't take him seriously. And he hated it. He just wanted to be taken seriously as a man, except he even had people questioning his gender
His teeth chomp down on the candy with way too much force, syrup bursting from the core. Strawberry-flavoured.

He raises another sweet to his lips as he walks, the sugar helping with his mood.

Mikan didn't see him as a little girl taking up her parents' position. She didn't see him as cute, either.

That fact alone brought a smile to his face. That was enough, right? Even if everyone else saw him like that, his sisters and Mikan didn't.

That was... supposed to be enough. It was enough when it came to Natsumi and Peko. But for Mikan...

Fuyuhiko just wanted Mikan to acknowledge him as a man. Well. More than that, actually. He wanted to impress her, to be someone admirable in her eyes. He wanted to be someone she could fall in love with.

(He knows that he already succeeded on the first and thire counts. He knows that Mikan already considers him a good friend, someone she can trust, and all that... but he still wants to impress her. What sort of guy wouldn't want to look cool and tough in front of his crush?)

"Fuyuhiko-kun, wait!" A voice calls out, and he almost drops his bag of candy. Fuyuhiko quickly hides the bag behind his back, swallowing the vanilla candy as he turns to face her. Mikan dashes towards him, before taking a moment to catch her breath. He does his best to look as casual as possible, carefully concealing any sign that he had been thinking about her.

"Oh, hey Mikan. Fancy seeing you here," He says breathlessly, and really, it's unfair. It's unfair how his heart twists and turns in his chest, it's unfair how his stomach feels light enough to float, and most of all, it's unfair how the nurse can affect him this much just by showing up, even though the brunette looks completely unaffected by him.

Even though she was the puppeteer controlling the various functions of the house, Nevermind insisted on dressing her up in costume. Mikan's wrapped up in even more bandages than usual, half her face covered by the cloth. Fake blood is splattered all over her face and clothes, staining her patient's gown. Her hair is frazzled, sticking up at weird angles to better resemble Nevermind's ghost films. But despite all the altercations to her appearance, it's not fear that makes Fuyuhiko's heart race in his chest.

"I...I was looking for you," Mikan admits, her breathing finally beginning to calm down. She smiles at him through bandages and locks of hair, and she's so earnestly adorable that Fuyuhiko has to stop himself from gaping uselessly at the sight. "I just wanted to see you. Is that okay?"

"Er. Um. Yeah... yeah, that's fine."

It takes all of Fuyuhiko's self-control and mental strength to stop himself from melting into a blushing mess right then and there.

Fuyuhiko is very aware of the fact that, to the outside observer, his situation looks like... well, it looks like a date. Hell, it took a lot for him to remember that, no, he hadn't managed to work up the courage to ask, and Mikan didn't magically turn out to be in love with him the entire time, either. It was entirely platonic and friendly and junk.
The hand-holding was misleading, though. And distracting.

It was her idea, okay? The crowd around them was impatient and rough, and after nearly getting separated for the fifth time, Mikan came up with an idea. Hand-holding. And if Fuyuhiko was a bit too eager, or a bit too loud with his response... well, fuck off.

It was crowded, sweaty, and loud. The din of conversations was inescapable, practically swamping the area. It was almost impossible to talk to someone right next to you without screaming. Every few seconds, someone would bump into you, or you would bump into them. The smell was some weird mixture of various foods, sweat, and firewood.

But Fuyuhiko didn't care about any of that. As far as he was concerned, everything around him might as well be nonexistent.

Mikan is smiling, completely entranced by the sight of colourful booths around them. Fuyuhiko is just as entranced... just not by the things she's grinning at.

Her smile was brighter than any of the lights around them. It seems like the world around her dims, just to let her shine even brighter. The sound of his heartbeat in his ears drowns out every other noise., and really? If Fuyuhiko was completely, totally honest? He didn't even care about the school festival anymore. He would probably forget about everything but her later on. The taste of delicious sweets is nothing but a distant fog in his head. The warmth of her smile and their intertwined fingers was enough to make him happy.

Oh god. He's totally smitten.

And the scariest thing is, he doesn't give a fuck, as long as he gets to be with her.

"Fuyuhiko-kun, look!" Mikan turns away from him, pointing excitedly at another booth.

An older blond stands in front of three targets, flipping a knife between nimble fingers. There weren't many marks in the painted boards, but the ones that were there were always off the centre by a wide margin. The upperclassman's blue-eyed assistant plays with the plush prizes, almost bored.

Fuyuhiko is mentally thanking the pair for choosing to use knives of all things in a throwing game. If it were darts or balls, he wouldn't have stood a chance. But Fuyuhiko's been around knives longer than he could walk, and it's this fact that lets him drag Mikan to the stall with confidence in his step.

The blond silently passes him three blades. The blue-eyed assistant raises his head from the green teddy bear on his lap, watching Fuyuhiko's attempt with slight curiosity. Mikan stares at him, excitedly, anxiously, Fuyuhiko isn't really sure.

He takes a moment to admire the craftsmanship of the metal. They're (obviously) high-quality. It feels perfectly balanced in his hand as he tosses the first knife.

"A bullseye!" Mikan gasps in awe, but Fuyuhiko isn't done yet.

The second knife hits its target, and the blue-eyed assistant nearly drops his plushie in shock. When the third blade hit, the blond upperclassman nodded at him respectfully.

"H-here!" The assistant scrambles for an acceptable prize, handing Fuyuhiko a gigantic plush turtle. The pair walk off together, even as Fuyuhiko struggles with the size of the plush.
How did it go in Natsumi's movies again...

"Mikan, take it," Fuyuhiko says, because he honestly doesn't remember if he's supposed to say something charming or not.

"Are your arms tired?" Mikan asks as she wraps her arms around the turtle, holding the plush up by its neck.

"Nah, it's yours," Fuyuhiko shrugs, trying to act cool and casual. His eyes settle on a spot just behind Mikan's head, because if he stared at her too long, he would end up blushing like an idiot.

"Really...?" Mikan stares at him in awe, admiration seeping into her voice. "You're giving it to me?"

"Yeah," Fuyuhiko nods, a grin coming onto his face. He just can't help it, okay? She looks so adorable with that huge plush and really, there's no way he can take the prize. "Don't try to argue it, okay? You're taking it, and that's that."

"You're a-amazing...!" Mikan gasps, almost teary-eyed. "You were incredible enough to get three bullseyes in a row, and now you're generous enough to give the prize to me?"

"Y-you think it was incredible?"

"Yeah! It really was!" Mikan confirms with a bright grin.

A blush comes onto his face. His body seems to forget that he chopped off the waist-length hair he used to be so proud of, a hand coming up to pinch at it in embarrassment. His fingers meet air, so he rubs the back of his neck instead, managing to make the movement seem natural and fluid. Again, thank goodness for his acting skills. Especially the part where he was so experienced that he did it without thinking, since there were way too many times when he wasn't able to think clearly around her.

"If you say so," Fuyuhiko smiles bashfully.

But maybe being able to act without thinking is a double-edged sword, since he doesn't think for a second before letting the words escape his mouth.

"You know what would make this moment even better? A kiss from the princess."

What the fuck.

Did he seriously just call her a-

"I think I saw Nevermind-san back at the haunted house," Mikan muses.

"I meant you!" Fuyuhiko snaps immediately. He freezes.

But before he can get himself out of that mess, before he can say something like 'it was a joke! Please don't take it seriously, please don't be disgusted by me'-

Mikan nods in understanding, shifting the turtle to one arm. A hand is placed on his shoulder as she leans over to press a kiss against his forehead.

His mouth flops open uselessly, a blush brighter than all the lights in the area combined coming on his cheeks. He can't say a word, not when his tongue feels like lead in his mouth, and-
The moment of embarrassment is short-lived, coming to an end when he trips over his own feet and falls face-first into a goldfish-scooping tank.

Another pair watches, just a few meters away as Mikan tries her best to fish Fuyuhiko out of the water tank.

"So, they're definitely together now!" Ibuki cheers, tossing a fist into the air.

"Nah, there's no way Mikan thinks it's anything but platonic," Hiyoko states simply, taking a bite out of her candied apple.

"Huh?! But she's the one who gave him the kiss!" Ibuki gapes at the blonde in shock. "How the hell can she misinterpret that?!"

"I... might have told her that skin kisses were for absolute best friends," Hiyoko admits, her face turning red.

The first word out of Ibuki's mouth is a small, "Wow."

Then, "You've been cockblocking him since before you met him."

Fuyuhiko's swim in the tub leaves him with a cold the next day. On one hand, he's grateful, because there's no way he would be able to face the class with their jeers and laughter after something so mortifying.

On the other hand, it gives him way too much free time, his mind replaying how he made himself look like a complete idiot. Especially the part where he did something so humiliating right in front of Mikan. The memories of warm lips and intertwined fingers were ruined by the persistent fear that she hated him now. She wouldn't want to spend time with such a dumbass, she wouldn't smile at him or laugh with him anymore, not when there were obviously better people in the class, people worthy of her attention.

There's a knock on his door, and he's not sure if it's sickness or dread that weighs down his stomach at the noise. He turns away from the door, grumbling something about not wanting to see anyone. Fuyuhiko waits for the sound to go away, except-

Suddenly, the banging on his door is even louder than before. It's like the person is trying to break down the wood. Fuyuhiko hurriedly tosses the blankets off, scrambling to answer the door.

"Told ya that would work," Owari says as the door swings open, smiling at the other girl smugly.

"T-thank you, Owari-san," Mikan nods at her gratefully.

"Here you go, Baby Gangsta!" Before he could say a word, Owari shoves a hot thermos into his hands. "Hanamura made it for you! That delicious, warm..." Owari wipes drool off her chin, trying to recover. "Anyways, the class is waiting for you to get better. So you better not die, got it?"

"Yeah, I understand," Fuyuhiko mumbles stiffly, feeling so ashamed that he could barely look at either of them.

"I gotta get to class now," Owari states, spinning away on her heel. She runs off so fast that, even though her reply comes just a few seconds later, it sounds like she's half a corridor away. "See ya!"

"Can I come in?" Mikan requests, pinching at her fingers timidly, and Fuyuhiko wonders if he
ruined something forever yesterday.

"Shouldn't you be going with her? You're going to miss class."

"I want to take care of you," Mikan smiles at him slightly, before quickly adding, "If that's okay with you, of course!"

"I guess... I guess that's fine," Fuyuhiko answers.

Mikan guides him back to his bed, even though he's nowhere near that disoriented. He's fine with it though, but that has nothing to do with how warm and comforting her grip was.

"Are you sure you're fine with this?" Fuyuhiko leaves out the 'are you sure you're fine being with me? Even though I'm an idiot and a moron and everything else?'

"Yes! I want to do this, Fuyuhiko-kun!" Mikan declares, before quickly settling into a businesslike persona. "Have you eaten anything yet?"

"Already had breakfast. Took some medicine too."

"What kind?"

"One of Kimura's cold cures."

"That's good," Mikan says, before sighing a bit. "But that means that you'll be recovering soon..."

"Is that a bad thing?" Fuyuhiko raises an eyebrow at the oddly-disappointed nurse. Did he really mess up to the point that she wished sickness on him?

"No, but..." Mikan squeezes her eyes shut, the words coming out in a rush. "I sort of wanted you to be sick a little longer! I wanted to take care of you!"

"You... what?" He asks stupidly, unable to comprehend anything she was saying.

"Nggggh... it's awful of me, but... I was glad for the chance to do something for you," Mikan confesses with a frown. "You're always doing things for me, so..."

"So you're trying to repay me with this?"

"Yeah..." Mikan sighs again, averting her eyes from Fuyuhiko's face. "I guess I just wanted our positions to be reversed for a while."

Uh.

His cheeks slowly begin turning red, and Mikan presses the back of her hand against his forehead.

"I'll go get a cloth," Mikan states, smiling at him warmly, and he's not sure if the sudden lurch in his stomach is a good thing or a bad thing. "I'll be right back."

"Okay."

Later, Mikan mumbles something about how it's nice to be the one relied on for a change. Fuyuhiko finds himself nodding along, wondering whether the heat coursing throughout his body is because of her or because of illness.
Just in case, Mikan takes care of him for the next three days. Even after he stopped showing signs of sickness, she insisted on taking his temperature every couple of hours.

But aside from that, they mostly just watched movies together and talked about anything that came to mind. Just like they usually did.

Fuyuhiko manages to smile as he makes his way towards the classroom, glad to know that Mikan still thought of him as a friend.

He's insanely early. The only other person in the room is Nanami, and Fuyuhiko's pretty sure that, somewhere along the line, Nanami stopped sleeping altogether. She probably operated on video games and sugar alone.

Fuyuhiko's good mood is obvious to everyone who enters. Souda screams about a doppleganger, Mitarai looks anxious, Koizumi tries to take a picture of him without him noticing, Owari and Nidai wonder if that means that he's more receptive to their offers of training... but really, aside from Peko smiling at him as she greeted him, Fuyuhiko couldn't care about any of his classmates' reactions.

His grin widens slightly when Mikan rushes into the room, frantic, panicked, and out-of-breath. She practically collapses into her seat, trying to catch her breath.

Fuyuhiko leans forward without thinking, his hand coming up to prod at Mikan's back. She turns to face him, her flushed cheeks and half-lidded eyes bringing colour to Fuyuhiko's face.

"Congrats on making it into class without tripping over your own feet," He jokes, before suddenly realizing, oh, he sounds like a jerk. Hurriedly, he adds, "You must be getting really coordinated now. Light on your feet, y'know?"

Fuyuhiko watches her face carefully, hoping that he didn't insult her.

"Ahahaha..." Mikan smiles fondly at the memories, and the sound of her laugh makes his heart swell. "Well, the only reason I tripped was because i didn't want anyone to ignore me... but now, everyone pays attention to me! I never feel neglected or abandoned here."

"Well, of course. We're all friends, right?" Fuyuhiko offers.

"Right!" Mikan nods, before considering something. Her grin becomes bashful as she adds, "But if you wanted to see me like that, I wouldn't mind."

"What-"

"I would enjoy that very much!" Hanamura interjects, and Fuyuhiko almost flinches at the sound of the cook's voice. He sort of kind of forgot that the world wasn't comprised of just him and Mikan the moment he saw her smile.

"Of course, Hanamura-san!"

"Don't even fucking think about it!" Fuyuhiko snaps immediately, right before Mikan slams into the ground.

Her leg is propped up on her chair, her bag falling on her lap to make sure no one saw anything under her skirt. Mikan's hands somehow manage to get tangled in string that wasn't anywhere near her a second ago. Hanamura squeals with delight, right before Koizumi throws a pencil case at his head.
"Say something erotic, Mikan-chan!" Mioda calls out.

"O-oh, um, like this...?" Mikan pauses for a second, before magically making a blush appear on her cheeks. She grins seductively, her voice taking on a lewd tone as she went on. "Can you help me up? Or would you like me to help you up instead~?"

Mioda cheers, just as the gym teacher walks in. The gym teacher then turns around and walks straight out of the classroom. Owari immediately runs to chase after the teacher, the resulting chaos making it possible for Fuyuhiko to hide his bright red face without looking suspicious.

"I think Pekoyama-san has a crush on you," Mikan states out-of-nowhere, her biology homework already completed.

"What," Fuyuhiko says flatly, almost stabbing a hole in the pulmonary system with his pencil.

"I mean, she's always praising you a lot," Mikan continues, humming as she tried to think of examples. "She talks about how you're an 'exemplary student', and-

"Woah, woah, woah, wait. You two talk... about me?" Fuyuhiko asks, cutting Mikan off to uncover the answer to that very important question.

"It's usually Pekoyama-san who starts it," Mikan answers, and Fuyuhiko has to suppress a groan. Peko, haven't you ever heard of subtlety?! "Like last night, at the girls only sleepover. Hiyoko-chan brought you up, and then Pekoyama-san was suddenly complimenting you a lot."

"Hold on. You were there. With Saionji," Fuyuhiko restates, continuing at Mikan's nod. "She didn't insult you or anything, right?"

"No, no, Mioda-san is really good at keeping her under control!" Mikan exclaimed, almost dismissive of the idea.

"Mioda wouldn't be able to stop her from calling you a lame person, let alone the other names she's called you," Fuyuhiko points out.

"Um, wouldn't you rather hear the story?!" Mikan exclaims, almost frantic in her attempt to not cast doubt on Mioda's effectiveness as Saionji's verbal restraint.

"N-

"So! Truth and dare! And Mahiru-chan asked if I had my first kiss before!" Mikan screams, squeezing her eyes shut as she hurriedly told the story.

"You've kissed someone before?"

"Hiyoko-chan was afraid of earthquakes, so I had to give her kisses to calm her down," Mikan explains. "But Hiyoko-chan got so embarrassed that she started threatening me to make sure I didn't say it!"

"What," Fuyuhiko growls, and the fact that Mikan is treating the ordeal like a pleasant evening is not helping his mood.

"It's fine, Fuyuhiko-kun!" Mikan reassures him, reaching out for his hand. Her thumb traces stars and spirals on the back of his hand, and Fuyuhiko's anger dissipates as soon as it came.
"Just keep going," Fuyuhiko huffs, trying not to look too pink.

"Hiyoko-chan keeps trying to make me not tell, so she tries to threaten you," Mikan hesitates, probably trying to remember the exact events that happened.

Fuyuhiko has absolutely no idea that Mikan pauses for another reason entirely, because he wasn't there to hear Saionji's words.

But Mikan wouldn't be able to forget the declaration of 'S-s-shut up! Don't s-say anything! Or I'll- I'll break Kuzuryuu's heart! I'll tell him that you don't return his huge-ass crush on you!' if she tried.

With that in mind, Mikan steels herself. She had to figure out if it was true!

"Pekoyama-san started complimenting you a lot... saying things like how you were kind and sweet and admirable..." Mikan smiles at him, her cheeks a little pink as she went on. "And she's right! You're really incredible, Fuyuhiko-kun!"

Fuyuhiko freezes up for a brief second, recovering so quickly that Mikan didn't even notice that he messed up in the first place. She thinks the blush on his cheeks must be from being praised, not realizing that she might have been the cause.

"...thanks."

Mikan almost pouts. That answer didn't really give her anything...

"You know... I'm beginning to see why Pekoyama-san would be in love with you," Mikan tries again, wanting to gauge his reaction. "Hehe, you're so amazing that I might fall in love with you too!"

Fuyuhiko almost snaps his pencil in half.

"Don't say stuff like that!" Fuyuhiko snaps immediately, turning his head away from Mikan. His face feels hotter than the heat of all the stars in the universe combined, and really, it's a miracle he doesn't burst into flames, right then and there. "Seriously, quit messing around."

"O-oh, okay..." Mikan mumbles dejectedly, coming to a conclusion.

'He's not interested...' 

Needless to say, she was wrong. Mikan didn't know that, but she would soon.

But you already know how the story ends, don't you?
"You what?" Chiaki gaped at the mechanic in shock.

"I'm... I'm going to plead guilty," Kazuichi repeated with a gulp.

"Why?!") Ibuki demanded.

"Are you an idiot?!" Hiyoko added, pointing an accusatory finger at Kazuichi. "You're being accused of killing someone who is still alive! There's no way you can be convicted!"

"Um... I'm pretty sure it's more complicated than that, Hiyoko-san..." Mikan muttered, pinching at her fingers.

"I gave a confession already," Kazuichi confessed, tearing up as he remembered the intimidating investigator and disbelief and wanting it all to end- "It's over. It hasn't even started, but it's over."

"I knew I should have kidnapped you two!" Chiaki screamed, stomping at the floor in frustration. Both Mikan and Hajime moved to calm her down, the pair patting her on the back and whispering soothing things into her ears.

"Chiaki, no!" Ibuki retorted. "Kidnapping won't solve any of your problems!"

Chiaki froze, looking at Ibuki blankly. Then, with the most judgemental, scathing stare she could give, Chiaki waved an arm at Hiyoko.

"...what?" Ibuki stared at the gamer in confusion.

"N-nothing!" Mikan stammered immediately. "It's nothing!"

"Yeah, Mikan's right!" Hiyoko nodded fervently. "Nanami's being weird and paranoid!"

"Do you really want to know?" Hajime raised an eyebrow at the musician.

"Hajime!" Hiyoko hissed, glaring at the man. "Don't even think about-"

"I mean, it's obvious that Hiyo-chan isn't a kidnapper or a kidnap-ee," Ibuki reasoned. "I'm pretty sure the police would be a lot more suspicious of a missing woman showing up to their interview. And the fact that there aren't any missing posters up for her! So no!" Ibuki made a giant 'X' with her forearms as she concluded with, "So I have no idea what Chi-chan's talking about!"

Hiyoko could only say a quiet, "Um," in response.

Thankfully, before someone could explain to Ibuki and an extremely confused Kazuichi, someone called out to them

"Excuse me, is Souda Kazuichi present?" A voice asked, prompting the group to turn around and face the newcomer.

A tall woman stepped towards them with a confident gait. She wore a bright red suit over a black dress shirt, a cool smile on her face. A pair of sunglasses sat on her nose, obscuring her eyes from
Her short brown hair was tied into twin ponytails, one falling over each shoulder.

"E-er, yeah, that's me," Kazuichi mumbled, still absorbing the strange woman's appearance.

"Then I've got the right man," The crimson-clad woman smirked, before dramatically whipping off her sunglasses with one hand. The other hand reached out towards the mechanic, her hair flipping in ways unseen out of hair commercials. "Legal name, Odoroki-Garyu Miki. But you can call me..." She paused to wink at Kazuichi, a dazzling grin coming onto her face, "Your saviour."

Hajime froze, trying to process exactly what was going on. Chiaki was analyzing the woman suspiciously, trying to see if she would do anything weird. Mikan gaped at the newcomer, trying how the hell the newcomer had managed to make sparkles and flowers manifest in the air around her. Hiyoko wondered if she would get away with screaming and calling the guards, since a weird, possibly-dangerous, definitely-ugly person just walked up to them. Kazuichi had no idea what the fuck was going on. He just wanted to cry.

And Ibuki?

"You still do the flashy intros, Miki-chan?" Ibuki asked casually, completely shattering the atmosphere.

"G-gah!" The sunglasses flew into the air, the woman's face as red as her suit. She pouted at the rock star, her cool facade ruined by Ibuki's nonchalance. "Quit doing that! I was so close to actually looking cool that time!"

"You know her?" Hiyoko asked, turning towards Ibuki curiously.

"She was an old bandmate in middle school, at least until she decided to become a lawyer," Ibuki answered flippantly.

"It was my destiny, calling out for me!" The lawyer exclaimed defensively. "Being a defense attorney was in my blood!"

"Please don't tell me that she's your defense attorney..." Hajime muttered, more to himself than anything.

"Anyways!" Odoroki-Garyu Miki turned towards Kazuichi, slapping a confident smile on her face as she grabbed his hand in a one-sided handshake. "I'll be working to clear your name from now on! Please place your trust in me!"

Hajime swore under his breath.

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**Turnabout Robotics**

"Souda Kazuichi, you are charged with first-degree murder, conspiracy, and fraud," The aged judge read the words formally, before looking up at the mechanic. "How do you plead?"

"N-not guilty!" The mechanic stammered, trembling in his place at the center podium. He tried to shrink away from the spotlight, from everyone's watching eyes, but that was pretty hard, considering that he was the center of attention.

He jumped at the sound of a fist slamming into wood, the prosecution giving him a glare that would haunt his nightmares and plague his eyes for the rest of his life.
It was almost comical, really. Miss Georgia Beryl was a petite woman, barely tall enough to reach up to the midpoint of Kazuichi's chest, and that was when she was on her tippy-toes. Bright blonde ringlets framed a youthful face. When her height and her cute face were combined with her frilly pink dress, she seemed more like a pissed-off middle school student than the intimidating demon Kazuichi saw.

Except for the part where her fist left cracks in the wood. And how colourful birds and monkeys and even an adult lion suddenly appeared out of nowhere. The animals stayed by Miss Beryl's side, only staring Kazuichi down with her.

The lion licked its lips, making Kazuichi gulp.

"Are you aware of what... consequences your choices will bring?" Miss Beryl asked quietly, her voice carrying many, many threatening undertones. Kazuichi paled, struggling to answer coherently.

"Of course he is!" Miki interjected, slamming her hands on her desk. "Souda Kazuichi is choosing to plead not guilty and that's that!"

"Nonsense!" Miss Beryl shrieked, attacking the wood with her fist once again. Her entourage of pets freaked out at the sound. The lion snarled, the monkeys screamed, the birds revealed their claws and swooped towards Kazuichi-

"That is enough, Miss Beryl!" The judge bellowed, pounding his gavel against his sound block, the noise ringing throughout the courtroom. His voice was firm and commanding. He was not about to let the trial dissolve into chaos and antics. "Get your pets under control this instant!"

Kazuichi whimpered from his hiding place behind the witness's bench. His entire body was trembling from the close brush with death.

Miss Beryl blinked, before reverting to a business-like posture. Her miniature circus act immediately fell silent, the flock of birds returning to perch on her somewhat-ruined desk. The lion curled up to go to sleep, the swarm of monkeys moving to brush its mane with their fingers. "Of course, Your Honour. I apologize for my misconduct."

"Good," The judge nodded. "Court is now in session for Souda Kazuichi."

"The prosecution is ready, Your Honor," Miss Beryl stated. "The defense is ready to rock!" The crimson-clad woman declared, a confident (arrogant) smirk on her face.

"Not that you'll be rocking for long," The blonde prosecutor retorted, her grin becoming more amused. She slapped a hand onto her desk, a monkey popping up from behind her desk to give her the document she sought. "Your defendant has already given a confession of his guilt. There isn't much point in a trial, is there?"

"Bzt! Incorrect!" Miki made a giant 'X' with her arms, even though, inwardly, she was cooing over the appearance of her favourite animal. She loved monkeys! "You'll have to try harder than that, Miss Beryl!"

She took a deep breath, remembering her father's advice. Be cool, calm, and composed! And remember to wink! Her papa's mental voice chimed in to add, 'You only resort to improvising when things go off the rails!'
"There's no way my client's confession will be admissible in court after we watch this!" Miki presented the plastic case with pride obvious in her grin. Her dads would be so proud! "Behold, all eleven minutes of Souda Kazuichi's interrogation! AKA, false confessions in the making!"

"How did you get that?!" Miss Beryl demanded, glaring at Miki with a mix of rage and shock. "I thought that she got rid of-"

The blonde quickly cut herself off, slamming a fist onto her desk. "I hope that you remember that evidence obtained through illegal means is inadmissible in court, rookie."

"Hey, just because this is my first case doesn't mean that I'm an idiot!" Miki shot back immediately, before clearing her throat in an attempt to recover. "Everyday, the police station saves the footage of all interrogations, arrests, etcetera to their database, just in case. However, even if the video file is deleted, it's not quite gone! The space the file occupied is just marked to be saved over by new data!"

"What?!" Miss Beryl gasped in horror.

("They're getting awfully worked up over a video we haven't seen yet..." Hiyoko huffed, rolling her eyes.

"Hiyoko-chan, hush!" Ibuki reprimanded the blonde, chomping on fistfuls of popcorn.

"Ibuki-san, is that really appropriate?!" Mikan asked hurriedly.)

"Any computer forensics analyst would know that," Miki said smugly, crossing her arms over her flat chest. "That's why it was so easy to get this footage and put it on this CD!"

"That footage was obtained legally, right?" Miss Beryl inquired skeptically.

"Of course!" Miki nodded, unwilling to admit that she only got the data since one of the detectives was dating her aunt. (Thanks, Aunt Harumi!) Her mind flitted between options, before settling on the one she felt was right.

What was she talking about? Why would you even have to ask? It was her dramatically witty one-liner, of course!

"Open your eyes and feast your heart on the truth of what happened!" Miki proclaimed with a flourish.

("...she got it backwards," Ibuki muttered to herself dejectedly.

"I-I still think it sounds good!" Mikan stammered, trying to defend the defence attorney's honour.

"If by 'good', you mean 'so lame it hurts to listen to this'," Hiyoko grinned derisively, rolling her eyes.

"Hiyo-chan," Ibuki said halfheartedly, before sighing and slumping her head. "Okay, I can't even argue with you over that one.")

Eleven minutes of crying, screaming, and sobbing later, the CD was removed from the DVD player.

"See to it that the investigator who conducted this interview be detained after the trial," The judge commanded. He sighed before continuing with a solemn voice. "The court sees Souda Kazuichi's
confession as a result of police brutality and is thereby seen as invalid. We apologize for the miscarriage of justice, defendant."

"N-no problem..." Kazuichi muttered from his spot in the defendant's chair.

"The correct response is 'I humbly accept your apologies, Your Honour, though it is wasted on someone as lowly and pathetic as I'."

"That is enough, Prosecutor Beryl," The judge interrupted with an exasperated sigh. He seemed like a tired grandfather scolding an overly-enthusiastic granddaughter. "Please, continue with the proceedings while refraining from disparaging the defendant."

"Of course, Your Honour," Miss Beryl nodded, snapping back into her business persona. "The prosecution believes that the accused and his accomplices, Fujisaki Chihiro and an unknown individual, infected the victim, Nanami Chiaki, with a rare disease known as necrotizing fasciitis. She succumbed to her disease April 22nd, ten years ago. After her death, the accused and Fujisaki Chihiro used their talents as the Super High School Level Mechanic and the Super High School Level Programmer to create a robotic version of the victim to cover up their crime."

"...that... that theory is so darn ridiculous...!" Miki hissed under her breath. "How did you even come up with something so needlessly convoluted...?!"

"There is evidence behind it, of course," Miss Beryl stated, snapping her fingers. A bird carrying a manila envelope in its talons flew towards the crimson-clad defense attorney, dropping the evidence onto the defense's bench. Unfortunately, the envelope overshot a bit, papers spilling onto the floor. Miki scrambled to pick up the contents of the envelope while Miss Beryl went on.

"A series of blueprints made by the accused, all depicting a robotic girl bearing a startling resemblance to the victim. The measurements match the victim's proportions exactly. All of the legal records claiming that Nanami Chiaki is dead, along with records that show an individual named 'Nanami Chiaki' working and paying bills after her legal death. A recorded interview with all of Nanami Chiaki's classmates, save for the victim herself and the accused, of course. Each one claimed that she continued to attend class after an extended hospital stay."

("Everyone...?" Mikan mumbled to herself, a bit confused. "But what about...?")

("That's a huge list...!") Miki gaped at the prosecutor in shock. (But, there's got to be a contradiction I can exploit somewhere-)

"And, last but not least, a witness's sincere testimony," Miss Beryl grinned, unknowingly cutting off Miki's inner monologue. The blonde gave a small curtsy, before dramatically gesturing to the courtroom's doors. "Please welcome... our dear guest!"

(In the seat next to Hajime, a pair of pink eyes widened with horror at the sight.)

A short, stocky, mid-aged man shuffled up to the witness's stand. His light-brown hair was combed neatly, not a single hair falling over his wrinkled face. A small golden chain looped around his neck, dipping underneath his dress shirt. Over his dark grey dress shirt, he wore a black suit. Soft pink eyes looked ahead blankly, his lips pulled into a small frown.

"Witness, your name and occupation, if you please," Miss Beryl asked politely.

"I am a graphic designer at a video game company," The witness said slowly, trying to keep his voice calm and steady. "And my name is Nanami Yuichiro."
(T-the victim's grandfather?!) Miki thought, before mentally slapping herself. (No, don't think that! You can't be rude to the victim's grandpappy!)

Nanami Yuichiro turned his stony stare towards Miki, making the defense attorney flinch. Did that man have psychic powers?!

"The victim...?" Mr Yuichiro repeated softly, before he exploded. "How dare you!? Her name was Chiaki! My beautiful, darling baby girl! Don't you dare refer to her like some footnote on a legal document, you-you-" Mr Yuichiro seethed, though the tears in his eyes were obviously visible, even from half a courtroom away. "You walking, talking, blatant disregard for the rules and conventions of fashion!"

"A red suit is the Odoroki traditional garment!" Miki exclaimed defensively. "Going without it would be like stripping a teddy bear from a child and unleashing zombies in Europe! A crime that breaks all laws of compassion and human nature! Who cares if it's ugly!? I don't-!"

"The defense will refrain from rambling at length about their questionable fashion choices!" The judge declared, slamming his gavel into his soundblock.

"Er, sorry..." Miki muttered dejectedly, her passion bleeding away.

Miss Beryl snickered a bit, before returning to her air of cold professionalism.

"Nanami Yuichiro, will you please testify about the events of ten years ago? Specifically, your daughter's funeral," Miss Beryl requested courtly.

"Of course," Mr Yuichiro nodded, an angry, no-determined fire coming into his eyes. "Anything to bring my dear heroine's killer to justice."

Cross-Examination!

"I remember it as clearly as the water in a fairy fountain..." Mr Yuichiro started off wistfully.

"Hold it!" Miki interjected, pointing a finger at the witness. "What does that even mean?!"

"A fairy fountain," Mr Yuichiro repeated, his voice immediately becoming detached and cold. "A key feature of the 'Linked Mythos' series. It allows you to summon fairy companions that fight by your side with spears made of magic and sparkles."

(...seriously?) Miki stared at the witness skeptically. (It sounds more like a bad doll line than a game feature...)

"The fairy fountains are renowned for their perfectly clear water," Mr Yuichiro explained, before sighing mournfully. "But, in reality, it's just that the game developers were lazy and made the water completely transparent..."

("WHAT?!" Ibuki shrieked in disbelief, almost dropping her popcorn. Her hands couldn't do anything but hold the popcorn, not since Chiaki's dad showed up.

"How the hell did you not notice?" Hiyoko huffed in exasperation, reaching for Ibuki's popcorn. If Ibuki wasn't eating it, she would. "No pool of water is that still!"

"You play those games, Hiyoko-san?" Mikan asked carefully.
"W-wha- no! O-of course not!" Hiyoko stammered in a furious denial. "Who would ever play those lame games!?"

"She's totally a fangirl," Ibuki nodded to herself with a grin.

"Shut up, shut up, shut up!"

"She always loved marching around with an army of bloodthirsty fairies behind her..." Mr Yuichiro muttered to himself.

"Please continue with your testimony, sir," Miss Beryl requested formally.

"Of course," Mr Yuichiro nodded.

(I can't just press him nonstop...) Miki hummed, trying to think of a proper solution. (I'll do my best to find any contradictions in his words.)

"After months of bad news, after learning that her condition was worsening every single day... we heard of her death in May," Mr Yuichiro reported mournfully.

"Witness, can you please specify the date?" Miki asked.

"Mid-May," Mr Yuichiro said simply. His eyes darkened as he went on with his testimony. He seemed to crumble in on himself, cracks beginning to form in his calm demeanor as he brought up the painful memories. "We... we buried her body... She was so, so discoloured, I almost couldn't recognize her... but, I-we knew it was her...!" He hugged himself, trying to calm himself down. "It was my darling little heroine...! She must have suffered so much from it... She must have felt so much pain..."

Mr Yuichiro slammed a trembling fist into the witness's podium, tears running down his face. "That's why...! That's why, no matter what, I can't forgive that murderer!"

"That's wrong!"

All eyes in the courtroom turned towards the loud voice.

A woman in a blue hoodie stood up in the gallery, moving towards the railing. Her antenna-haired companion tried to stop her, to pull her back, but she dodged his lunges, leaping on top of the railing.

Before someone could stop her, the woman jumped down, falling behind the defense's desk. She landed on her feet, completely unharmed as she stood up straight.

"Souda Kazuichi can't be a murderer!" The woman declared. She slapped a hand to her chest, projecting her voice to the entire courtroom. "He can't be a murderer, because I'm still alive!"

"What?!" Miki gaped at the woman at her side, before noticing something. The woman had soft pink eyes and light brown hair, just like-

"C-Chiaki?!" Mr Yuichiro stammered, immediately moving towards the woman. He barely got a step away from the witness's stand before Miss Beryl's voice rang out.

"Stay back!" The blonde commanded. "Stay away from that woman! She might be dangerous! An unknown assailant or something like that!"
"My name is Nanami Chiaki!" The woman exclaimed, balling her hands into fists at her sides. Only Miki could see how her fingers were trembling.

"Is... is it really you...?" Her father asked hesitantly, his eyes filling with tears once again.

"I'm..." Chiaki gulped down her nervousness, forcing herself to nod. "Yeah. It's me."

"Miss Nanami Chiaki!" The judge slammed his gavel down onto the soundblock, trying to look stern and imposing. "There will be no leaping down from the gallery! Bailiff, go to check her for any injuries!"

"I'm fine!" Chiaki screamed. "I'm not hurt at all!"

(Things have definitely gone off the rails...) Miki realized, before slapping an excited grin on her face. (That means that it's time to start bluffing and pressing as I please!)

"Witness, your name and occupation, if you please," Miss Beryl huffed, crossing her arms over her chest.

"Nanami Chiaki," The pink-eyed woman said curtly. "I work as a nurse at the Towa Prefecture Hospital."

"They allow robots to work at the hospital...?" Miss Beryl stared at Chiaki curiously. "Strange."

"Objection!" Miki snapped, before pointing dramatically at the prosecutor. There was a suave (in her mind) grin on her face as she spoke. "Who ever said the witness was a robot? Got sci-fi on the brain or something?"

("Uuuuuuurgh, that was awful," Hiyoko groaned, smacking a hand to her forehead."

"That burn scores a 'below glacial' level on the temperature readings," Ibuki said simply.

"Cold enough to give you frostbite in seconds!" Hiyoko declared, turning to grin mischievously at Ibuki.

Ibuki paused, before suddenly understanding. A bright smile stretched across her face as she joined in.

"Cold enough to freeze the very air around her!" Ibuki added.

"Colder than Pluto in an ice age!"

"Why do you two like making fun of the defense attorney so much...?" Mikan asked, looking at the pair strangely.

"It's fun!" Ibuki exclaimed.

"You should try it, Mikan," Hiyoko offered. "It's hilarious."

"Um... no thanks..." Mikan mumbled quietly.)

"Objection!" Miss Beryl yelled in return. Her hand sliced through the air in front of her like a blade to punctuate her words. She rested her hand on her hip as a smug smirk came onto her face. Her face practically screamed 'You messed up, and I will make sure you know it.' "Did you forget? In the gift I oh-so-generously gave you, there were a set of blueprints. All of which depicted a
robotic girl who resembles the victim to a frightening degree."

"Urk...!" Miki flinched, realizing that she did forget that fact.

Miss Beryl slapped her palm down on her already-ruined desk, smiling dangerously. "Well, defense? Is it not possible that the one standing before us is that replica?"

"Well, isn't it also possible that she's the real deal?!" Miki shot back, her voice more than a little desperate.

"I am the real deal!" Chiaki huffed, puffing out her cheeks as she glared.

"Prove it!" Miss Beryl challenged, before turning to the judge. "The prosecution requests that Nanami Yuichiro be summoned again to verify her testimony!"

"Of course, Miss Beryl," The judge nodded. "Bailiff! Please bring Nanami Yuichiro to the courtroom immediately!"

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**Cross-Examination**

"My name is Nanami Chiaki," The woman on the stand repeated once again. "I was the Super High School Level Gamer in high school. Class 77-B."

"There was one genre that you could never get right," Mr. Yuichiro stated, staring at the woman on the witness stand warily. "Which was it?"

"Dating sims," The witness answered immediately.

Mr Yuichiro nodded.

"That information may have been gleaned from whatever gaming videos the victim created before her death," Miss Beryl offered as an explanation.

"Shush you," Miki rolled her eyes.

"What-?!"

"Witness, please continue with your testimony," The judge requested, cutting off the blonde prosecutor before she could threaten Miki. The woman in the blue hoodie nodded.

"Towards the end of my first year, I got sick. Well... The pink-eyed woman sighed. "It was more serious than that. Necrotizing fasciitis. My skin peeled off and became-"

"Do we really need the description?!" Miki screamed without thinking. After a short pause, she cleared her throat, trying to recover. "Er, sorry. Please continue."

"Well... I was dying. And Mikan and Kazuichi saved me," The witness said simply.

"'Mikan'...?" Miss Beryl repeated, staring at the woman strangely. "Who is that, exactly?"

"One of my classmates. Tsumiki Mikan, the Super High School Level Nurse."

"I-I see..." Miss Beryl nodded. "Please continue then, witness."
Miki could feel her eyes being drawn towards the prosecutor, the miniature twitches of Miss Beryl's lips as obvious as the difference between hope and despair, love and apathy, day and night to the defense attorney. Miss Beryl was tense, clenching her teeth together behind a mask of business-like calmness. For what reasons, Miki couldn't guess, so she set the idea aside to focus on the witness's testimony.

"There wasn't much hope for me..." The woman sighed, her pink eyes downcast. "I was diagnosed way too late. Normally, the regular cure would be amputation, but... the disease had already spread to my chest. Since you can't just cut off my chest, I thought I was bound to die..."

"But then the school had a crazy idea," She smiled, gratitude and pride and joy obvious in her voice. "I was classmates with the SHSL Mechanic and the SHSL Neurologist, plus the fact that there was a SHSL Programmer in the first-year class. They thought that, if anyone could make a miracle prosthetic for me, it would be those three."

"So those blueprints were..." Miki trailed off, eyes widening as she realized the answer. "Your body was too badly affected by the disease, so the three of them made a robot body for you!"

"Correct," The witness said with a tiny, almost amused grin on her face.

"Then that means that Souda Kazuichi is innocent!" Miki concluded, beaming triumphantly.

"...if this is the genuine Nanami Chiaki speaking," Miss Beryl added, crossing her arms over her chest. "Don't forget the fact that you haven't proved her reliability yet."

All eyes in the courtroom turned towards Mr Nanami Yuichiro. The man stood from his seat, staring at the witness carefully.

"What's your favourite game of all time?" Mr Yuichiro inquired.

"The 'Harpist of Space and Lore', seventh game in the 'Linked Mythos' series, released on my fifth birthday. The game is celebrating its twentieth anniversary this year," The woman spouted off the incredibly detailed trivia as easily as she would say her own name. Mr Yuichiro still didn't look convinced.

"Why was it your favourite?"

"Because Mom was the one who made the bosses. She made them fun to fight and colourful and memorable," She smiled, her hand resting on her chest, right over her heart. "My favourite boss was Gorala, the giant ice storm bird that terrorized the forest."

"How would you defeat Gorola?" Mr Yuichiro asked, sounding like an interrogator asking for bits of information that didn't make it onto her resume.

It was like he flipped a switch in her head. Almost immediately, the woman's pink eyes brightened with delight, her joy palpable in her voice. The woman leaned forward, using the witness's stand to support herself as she rambled on excitedly.

"You can use the magic shield given to you by the twin witch guardians of the desert in order to absorb Gorola's ice blasts and shoot them back, but you could also destroy the roof in order to shorten the distance that Gorola could fly. This makes it easier for you to strike it with your sword and arrows, but on the downside, you have less space to dodge the ice blasts. If you wanted to face Gorola before dispelling the spirits possessing the twin witch guardians, you could always just use the old-fashioned way, aka sword and arrows, but then there's a high chance of running out of arrows before you can actually do any real damage. I recommend using the harp song 'Serenade of..."
Stillness' to petrify Gorola for a bit if you have bad aim. There-

She cut herself off when something slipped out of her pocket, clattering to the floor. The witness snatched it up quickly, cradling the object to her chest protectively. A thin silver chain hung around her wrist, lopping back to the object in her hand.

"Show me that!" Mr Yuichiro shouted suddenly, his hand flying up towards his neck.

Silently, the witness pinched the chain, letting the charm dangle from the necklace. Mr Yuichiro's eyes widened at the sight of an 8-bit heart, painted in shades of red and pink. On top was an elaborate logo painted in golden ink, depicting a phoenix rising from a pile of ashes, wings spread wide. On the fiery bird's back was a feminine figure holding a harp over her head.

The necklace completely identical to the one hanging around Nanami Yuichiro's neck.

"We all had one," Mr Yuichiro muttered quietly.

"A family of heroes," The pink-eyed woman added with a small smile.

"The legendary trio..." Mr Yuichiro nodded, a wistful smile appearing on his face. He raised his voice, addressing the court with his verdict. "This is, without a doubt, my daughter."

"Ha! In your face, Miss Beryl!" Miki laughed, before suddenly freezing. A sheepish smile appeared on her face as she tried to recover. "Er. Sorry."

"Why are you so arrogant?" The blonde asked with a sigh. "All you've proven is that it's possible that the accused knew the victim well enough to make a convincing imitation of her, in appearance and in personality."

"Convincing enough to fool her own father?!" Miki shot back. "Un-freaking-likely! I doubt that even your best friend would be able to pull off something like that!"

"Those charms were specially made for the team creating the 'Harpist of Space and Lore'," Mr Yuichiro added. "There aren't many in existence."

"Grk...!" The prosecutor sneered, before slamming a fist into her desk, nearly destroying the poor thing with her inhuman strength. The impact startled the birds resting on the desk, the flock moving to rest on Miss Beryl's shoulders instead. Miss Beryl glared at the defense attorney, trying to regain some ground. "W-well, isn't it possible for the accused to have bought a replica or something?!"

Mr Yuichiro shook his head. "The sentimental value far outweighs the amount of money you would get for it. No one in our team would ever give up their necklace."

"Then how would your child be considered part of the team?!!" Miss Beryl retorted. "She would be five or even younger at the time! How would she be considered a designer?!!"

Mr Yuichiro smiled as he reached into his suit pocket, pulling out a folded piece of paper. He unfolded it carefully, like he was afraid of tearing the sheet.

It was a lined paper torn straight from a notebook. Childish crayon depicted a crimson-clad princess fighting off an eight-eyed spider with a sword. An army of bright blue spheres fought with her, holding pure white spears... despite the fact that they didn't have ams.

"This is what inspired the game in the first place," Mr Yuichiro declared with pride in his voice.
"My daughter was the inspiration behind a world-famous game. She isn't just part of the team, she was our leader."

"Dad..." Chiaki muttered quietly, tears coming to her eyes. Her fingers wrapped around the charm in her hand, holding it close to her heart.

"She's as real as real can get," Miki proclaimed, crossing her arms over her chest. There was a confident grin on her face as she addressed the prosecution. "Or are you going to say that this father-daughter bond is a complete fake?"

"Urgh, well... Even if she is the real Nanami Chiaki... There's still a chance that her testimony is unreliable, isn't there?!" Miss Beryl screamed in desperation.

"Then prove it, Miss Beryl!" Miki challenged. "How could she be unreliable if she's the genuine article?"

"Well... AIs are generally loyal to their creators, aren't they?" Miss Beryl offered, her composure returning. "It's possible that Nanami Chiaki has some artificial loyalty to the accused and his accomplice implanted in her!"

"That's a theory ripped straight out of a bad sci-fi novel, Miss Beryl!" Miki slammed a hand on her desk.

"Then show me the evidence saying it's not possible!" Miss Beryl shot back. "Definite, solid proof!"

"...er," Miki paused, going through her evidence folder once again. Then again.

It was on her third attempt that she realized... nothing in her dossier actually disproved the prosecution's theory.

(Crap! What am I supposed to do-!) Her eyes widened as an idea came to mind.

"The defendant!" Miki said suddenly, clapping her hands together. "Or Fujisaki Chihiro, whichever one! Just call them to the stand and get them to testify about their prosthetic!"

"No," Miss Beryl snarled, glaring at the defense attorney. "There's no way their testimonies would be admissible! They'll just lie to save their own pathetic hides!"

"Argh, fine!" Miki pouted, before pausing thoughtfully. (The other people involved in the situation were... what was his name again?) "Something about a neurologist! What's-his-name! Something-something brains and surgeries!"

"You're suddenly spouting more nonsense than usual," Miss Beryl quipped with an amused grin.

"You mean... Matsuda Yasuke? The SHSL Neurologist?" Chiaki offered.

"Yeah!" Miki nodded with a huge, dorky grin. "That guy!"

"Er... he's sort of... dead," Chiaki mumbled.

"What," Miki said flatly, her smile falling away in an instant. In lieu of the bright smile was confusion and bafflement, and nothing but confusion and bafflement.
"The victim of the world's most explosive and literal breakup," Chiaki added under her breath.

"Um... then... the other one! The nurse!" Miki floundered, trying to recover quickly. "Her name was... Oranges?"


"We. Are. Not. Calling. Her," Miss Beryl growled through gritted teeth.

("U-um, I-I'm already... I'm already here...!" Mikan squeaked. No one heard her but the pair next to her.

"Mikan?" Ibuki turned towards her, poking her in the side. "Need some help?"

Mikan nodded gratefully, before-)

"SHE'S RIGHT HERE!" A deafeningly loud shriek emerged from the gallery, bringing the argument to a standstill. A pair of women stood, one with brightly-dyed hair, the other with short brown locks. The woman with brightly-dyed hair gestured to her companion, who trembled in the spotlight.

In the chaos, one would be forgiven for letting their mind focus on the strange duo. But Miki couldn't help but notice how Miss Beryl twitched at the arrival of the new witness...

Oh well. It was time to prove Souda Kazuichi and Fujisaki Chihiro innocent!

"Witness," Miss Beryl said stiffly, giving the timid brunnette a stony glare. "Name. Occupation. Now."

"U-um, right!" The woman yelped, clasping her hands to her chest in an attempt to steel herself for a great and monumental task: raising her voice when the entire room was watching her carefully.

She took a deep breath, thinking of white dragons on black eyepatches and the smell of gunpowder and sugar. Then she thought of bright blue and pink and white hair dye, sunset orange kimonos, pink cat-themed backpacks, bright-red eyes, cameras, and a green tie. There might have been strangers watching... but her friends were there too! They were cheering her on, so she could do it!

The thought calmed her down a bit, letting her project her voice to the audience.

"My name is Tsumiki Mikan. I work as a nurse at the Towa Prefecture Hospital," Mikan smiled as she said the words, bringing a flush to Miki's cheeks.

"U-uh, asking for... court-related reasons..." Miki mumbled quietly. "But... your phone numb-

ARGH!"

The last bit was because of the fact that a bird flew at her, hovering by her face to peck at her forehead.

"This is a court of law, not a dating service!" Miss Beryl reprimanded the defense attorney. "Do that on your own time!"

(It was worth a shot...) Miki sighed in disappointment. She let out another sigh when the bird returned to Miss Beryl, though that time, it was of relief.

"Testify about your experience with the defendant and her robot body," Miss Beryl ordered.
"Of course!" Mikan nodded, keeping her bright smile on her face as she thought up ways to cover up the fact that she wasn't involved in the surgery that gave Chiaki her new body. Hell, she didn't even know about the robot body a few months ago.

A rule that has been repeated numerous times is that Tsumiki Mikan couldn't lie. At all.

For the most part, that phrase rang true. However...

If it were for someone she loved, Tsumiki Mikan would be capable of anything. Be it superhuman strength, desire to kill, or the skills of manipulation and deception, she could summon courage and rage and strength from her very soul should the need arise.

And for the sake of saving someone important to Chiaki, she would lie and bluff as much as she needed to.

Cross-Examination!

"I was the nurse taking care of Chiaki-san when she was hospitalized. Souda-san was in charge of building prosthetic limbs for her, but..." She sighed, frowning mournfully. "The disease was progressing too quickly. He had to keep remaking his designs to try to keep up."

(So that's why...) Miki hummed to herself as she went over the sheets of blueprints. She could almost see the progression of the disease through them. The victim's feet were the first things to go, so the first blueprint was of her feet. Then it spread to her knees, then her hips, and the mechanic began struggling to find ways to replace the damaged tissue while leaving internal organs intact. Then he began to plan out how to create functional versions of her organs, mapping out how to connect the replacements to her brain and nerves.

"Did the victim show any strange behaviour after her surgery?" Miss Beryl asked gruffly.

Mikan paused, pretending to think. It didn't count as strange if Chiaki had always been quiet and anti-social, right?

With that thought in mind, Mikan shook her head.

"What about her relationship with the defendant? Did that change at all?" Miki pressed the nurse, hoping for more information.

"They did become closer..." Mikan admitted.

"How would you describe their relationship?" Miki inquired. "Did the defendant show control over her?"

"Uh... they... um..." Mikan hesitated. She couldn't outright say yes, but... "They kind of... she sort of started calling him her dad..."

Both Miki and Miss Beryl made a weird face at that, grimacing at the thought.

"I... see..." Miki huffed awkwardly.

("Ew, ew, ew! I so didn't need to know that!" Hiyoko screamed, clutching at her ears.

"Are you okay?" Ibuki stared at the blonde in concern.
"Oh, of course I'm just fine hearing about that lovely bit of information," Hiyoko rolled her eyes, her voice not at all sarcastic. "I just loooove hearing incredibly disgusting things about their lives, no big deal."

"How's it disgusting?" Ibuki asked, confused.

"You seriously don't know," Hiyoko asked flatly.

"I mean, it's kinda weird to call a friend a dad, but it's fine, right?" Ibuki mumbled, trying to cover up the fact that she actually didn't know.

"You're completely hopeless," Hiyoko declared.

"Hey! I'm not! Just tell me!" Ibuki whined.

"No!" Hiyoko shot back. "I'm not going to traumatize you like that! Just shut up and enjoy your stupidity!"

"Enlighten me! Show me the awful truth of the world!"

"Hell no! There's a reason why it's called awful truth!"

"Moving on," Miss Beryl pointedly ignored the elephant in the room.

"Um... a quick question..." Mikan pinched at her fingers.

"No," Miss Beryl snapped immediately.

"Don't be rude!" Miki glared at the prosecutor, before turning to Mikan. She tried to put a friendly smile on her face for the nurse. "Sorry about her jerkassery. What did you want to ask?"

"U-um... if it's already been established that the robotic body was made to save Chiaki-san's life, w-why is the trial still going...?" Mikan asked hesitantly, carefully watching Miss Beryl for a reaction. "It can't be murder if it's for her health..."

"It hasn't been proven that that was the purpose behind the robotic body," Miss Beryl countered. "There are too many gaps in our knowledge of the case. Your testimony is supposed to fill those gaps."

"Oh..." Mikan paused, thinking. She had to fill in a part of the picture she had never seen before. But she didn't have to do it perfectly, she just had to do it well enough that the attorneys and judge couldn't see any flaws in it. Yes, she could do it-

"If you're done, you can leave," Miss Beryl snarled, making Mikan yelp.

("I'm going to fucking kill her, I'm going to fucking kill her...!" Hiyoko grumbled under her breath.

"I'll help you hide the body, I'll help you hide the body...!" Ibuki added in the same tone of voice.)

"What's with you?!" Miki demanded furiously, slamming a fist onto her desk. Thankfully, she didn't leave any cracks in the wood. "You were so polite to Mr Nanami and Nanami Chiaki! Why the hell are you so hostile to the cutie-pie?!"

"I am not hostile to the witness! Stop asking!" Miss Beryl screamed in denial, startling her miniature circus act away. The lion let out a tired yawn/roar. The birds moved to sit on the railings of the gallery, while the monkeys hurriedly began petting the lion to try to coax it back to sleep.
"Miss Beryl!" The judge smacked his gavel onto his soundblock. The loud sound demanded everyone's attention. Miss Beryl paled when he fixed her with a stern stare. "Tell us the truth."

"T-the truth?! I'm being truthful! I'm not lying!" Miss Beryl shrieked desperately.

"It's fine!" Mikan declared, covering for the blonde prosecutor. "I can handle it!" Her mind scrambled for a subject change, before landing on the issue that bothered her so much earlier. "I wasn't interviewed about Chiaki-san... but I can assure you! Her leave from school was entirely because of medical reasons!"

"You weren't interviewed...?" Miki's eyes widened, before turning to Miss Beryl with a suspicious stare. "Miss Beryl! What's with this sloppy investigation!? Aren't you the 'Sharp-Eyed Prosecutor'? What happened to your legendary attention to details!?"

"It's-it's not... no, it's...!" Miss Beryl bit her lip, her eyes widening with horror. Sweat rolled down her pale face before she cracked. "No, i-it's-it's... it's not my fault!" Fat tears began to roll down her cheeks as she sobbed.

The judge pounded his gavel onto his soundblock, calling for the attention of the court. "Recess! We will have a forty-five-minute re-

His frantic orders were cut off by Miss Beryl finding her voice once again.

"T-they... they came into the police station when I was visiting..." Miss Beryl whimpered quietly, hugging herself in an attempt to shield herself. The action didn't stop her body from trembling. "The day Nanami Chiaki reappeared... A b-blond woman and a-a woman with piercing red eyes... b-both covered in blood... They said... they said they were part of the Kuzuryuu f-family, and that we-wwe would be killed i-if we investigated T-T-Tsumiki Mikan or the Nanami Chiaki d-disappearance case..."

Mikan's eyes widened with recognition at the descriptions. Pekoyama and Fuyuhiko's scary sister! The prosecutor was scared of them...!

'If the prosecutor is scared of the Kuzuryuu family...' Mikan paused, trying to figure out the best and most efficient way to reach her goal. 'Then she would probably be really grateful to someone who got them to stop threatening her. Maybe grateful enough to drop a case for that person...'

With a small, determined grin on her face, Mikan reached into her pocket, pulling out her phone.

The nurse was completely oblivious to the fact that, in the prosecutor's paranoia, her grin looked more like a sinister smirk.

"Hello, Fuyuhiko?" Mikan smiled when she heard her boyfriend's voice in response. "I need you to come to the courtroom-

"No!" Miss Beryl screamed. The flock of birds panicked, one of them flying towards Mikan with claws extended. Mikan let out a cry of pain when sharp talons swiped at her hand, dropping her phone to the floor.

"Order, order!" The judge declared, hammering away at the soundblock nonstop. "We will have order and calm in the court!"

"You... you h-have connections t-to the Yakuza...!" Miss Beryl stammered frantically, pointing a finger at the woman at the witness stand. She was shaking horribly, almost about to fall over in her fear. "C-calling someone t-t-to kill us...!"
"No!" Mikan retorted immediately, gingerly holding her bleeding hand. She switched to a pleading tone of voice, trying to reason with the prosecutor. "I swear, that wasn't what I was doing!"

"The court orders a recess for the witness to get that wound treated," The judge ordered, trying to regain his control over the panicked courtroom. "Court is adjourned!"

"Mikan, Mikan, what the hell's going on?!" Fuyuhiko demanded hurriedly, his unease obvious. His anxiety only grew with every second that the call remained silent, before he shut off his phone, gritting his teeth together as he stood.

"You're leaving the game?" Natsumi looked up at him, almost bored as she passed one of the Go pieces from one hand to the other. She grinned in amusement, sneaking a glance at the completely-black dominated board. "Don't tell me you're chickening out because you're losing."

"I'm leaving," Fuyuhiko said simply, refusing to get mad at the taunting. Natsumi's eyes widened, freezing in place.

Fuyuhiko always got mad and determined to win every time she made fun of him. If he wasn't mad, then that meant... he was either broken or dead serious about something.

"I'm coming with you then," Natsumi pushed herself up, slapping a bright grin on her face. "It's my duty as your little sister to make sure you don't end up dead in an alleyway, after all!"

Fuyuhiko rolled his eye, before silently dragging Natsumi towards the door. He didn't even bother to change out of his pyjamas. Natsumi didn't really question it. She didn't really have any room to judge, since she killed in cosplay before.

(The cute girl turned out to be a Yakuza...) Miki mentally slapped herself. (Focus on the case, dammit!)

"Court is now in session," The judge declared. His voice became a bit gentler when he addressed the nurse. "Witness, will your hand be alright? Do you require additional care?"

"No, t-this is fine!" Mikan grinned, holding up her hands. Both of her hands were wrapped in bandages, though only her right hand was bloodied. Therefore, the asymmetrical aspect of her appearance was still present. Hooray!

"P-please don't k-k-kill us..." Miss Beryl begged, her voice cracking and crumbling in her desperation. "I swear... I d-didn't mean for you to g-get hurt...!"

"You're n-not going to die!" Mikan stammered back, flailing her hands about in a panicked attempt to calm the prosecutor down. It probably did more harm than good though. "I swear, I'm not going to let you d-die!"

"Please d-don't kill m-my family either!"

"No one is going to die!" Mikan proclaimed. "I swear on my life and my duty as a nurse!"

Mikan had no idea that she accidentally set up a death flag for the weak, fragile hope she offered to the blonde prosecutor. Actually... she was more of an unwitting instigator of doom than anything else, given that she was indirectly responsible for what happened just seconds after her promise.

"I SWEAR TO FUCKING HELL IF ANY OF YOU FUCKING BASTARDS LAID A
"GODDAMN HAND ON HER, I'LL MAUL YOU SO BADLY, YOU'LL FUCKING BEG FOR DEATH!"

("This... this isn't going to end well..." Hajime muttered under his breath.)

"Fuyuhiko...!?" Mikan gasped in shock, right before the doors slammed open. Two security guards scrambled to get away from the doors, trembling.

A pervasive noise attacked the ears of everyone in the room. The sound was impossible to shut out, impossible to ignore. It forced visions of bloodshed and hatred into your mind, unsettling, disturbing images that terrorized all.

The courtroom's fear only intensified when a demonic figure shrouded in darkness and bloodlust stepped over the threshold.

It was like staring at the manifestation of the shadow of the world, all of humanity's rage and wrath and fury condensed into one vessel. The menacing creature seemed to drain the colour and life out of the air around him. A chill settled over the room, maybe even the entire building, at the sight of the monstrous beast. The people of the court froze in terror as his eye swept over them, the fiery crimson glow striking the fear of death into their hearts.

And then he spotted the nurse at the witness stand. The whispers of death and carnage immediately fell silent. The gallery gasped in horror and anticipation when the monster rushed towards her, a pair of hands reaching out for her-

"Oh god, Mikan, are you okay?!" He demanded frantically, holding her left hand in his. He checked her arm for injuries, before belatedly realizing that the bandage on Mikan's left arm was for concealing her scars.

Suddenly, all of the fear and panic in the gallery's hearts disappeared, and they saw Fuyuhiko for what he was; a tiny blond guy in pinstriped pyjamas.

"Fuyuhiko, I'm fine!" Mikan declared quickly, trying to console the Yakuza heir. "It's not important right now!"

"'Not important'? I thought you were dead or kidnapped or-" Fuyuhiko cut himself off as he spotted Mikan's bloodied hand, his hands curling up into fists. "Mikan. Who did that to you?" His voice was slow and deliberate. Fuyuhiko was trying to restrain his anger until he knew exactly who to take it out on.

"Fuyuhiko, Fuyuhiko, please calm down!" Mikan pleaded.

"I'll calm down when I'm standing on that bastard's grave-!"

Fuyuhiko's eye widened as Mikan wrapped her arms around his shoulders, pulling him close.

"I'm fine now, okay?" Mikan said reassuringly. "You don't have to get mad."

"I'm not mad..." Fuyuhiko grumbled in denial.

"If you say so," Mikan giggled in return.

"Don't scare me like that ever again, got it?" Fuyuhiko huffed, his arms coming up to hug Mikan back. "I was worried about you."
"Of course," Mikan promised, a bright smile on her face.

*(What a touching mother-son relationship...!)* Miki wiped away a tear at the tender scene.

("They need to get a fucking room," Hiyoko scowled.

"But they're so cute!" Ibuki squealed, grinning excitedly. "They're making my heart beat so fast, you could use me as a two-twenty metronome!"

"What the hell does that even mean?!")

"So, the prosecutor is supposed to ask you for your name and profession and then you talk about whatever they ask you to..." Mikan explained, moving to stand next to Fuyuhiko at the witness stand.

"Man, what a pain..." Fuyuhiko groaned, rolling his eye. "Whatever. Let's get this over with. Where's the damn prosecutor?"

"She's right over there," Mikan pointed to the-

-completely empty desk?

She blinked, trying to see if she was hallucinating. Nope, still gone. No sign of blonde ringlets anywhere. Even her animals seemed to have disappeared into thin air.

Miki slammed a hand on her desk. "Miss Beryl!"

"N-n-n-n-no one's h-h-h-here...!" A shaking voice came from under the desk.

"Miss Beryl, do your damn job!" Miki ordered, glaring at the prosecutor's bench.

"T-there is n-no Miss Beryl... s-she has suddenly b-b-been wiped from existence..."

"Argh, fine, I'll do it myself!" Miki huffed, turning to the witness stand. She paused, realizing something. "Wait, are you actually allowed to testify together? I mean, I know some kids get anxious if they're separated from their parents, but-"

"Are you fucking messing with me?!" Fuyuhiko demanded, all but *snarling* at the defense attorney. Mikan had to wrap her arms around his shoulders to keep him from charging at the lawyer.

"Fuyuhiko, you can't kill anyone!" Mikan screamed, pulling him towards her, AKA *away* from the crimson-clad brunette. "Please, calm down!"

"Perhaps it's for the best if the two stay together..." The judge sighed to himself upon seeing the scene. "And if the defense refrained from saying anything to aggravate the witness."

"H-hey, it was a valid question!" Miki shot back defensively.

"Fuyuhiko, *please* calm down," Mikan begged softly.

"Argh, *fine*!" Fuyuhiko sighed, crossing his arms over his chest. Even when he relaxed into Mikan's hold, he was pretty much pouting, still mad at the attorney. "You're lucky I love you."

"Yeah, I am," Mikan smiled.
"G-gah!" Fuyuhiko flinched away, his face bright red. "You weren't supposed to actually fucking agree with me!"

("I honestly can't tell if they're a couple or if they're just being weird..." Hiyoko grumbled under her breath.

"Somehow, I feel like the answer will be B no matter what," Ibuki added. "The only difference is if it's a mix of A and B or just B.")

(Okay, I can't deny it anymore. They're definitely a couple.) Miki concluded, sighing in disappointment. The universe couldn't just let her have the fantasy of meeting a cute single mother for even an hour, couldn't it? "Your name and occupation, please."

"Huh-" The pair jumped, having forgotten that they didn't actually have a room to themselves. Fuyuhiko turned his attention to the lawyer. There wasn't a scowl on his face, not at all. "Kuzuryuu Fuyuhiko. Heir to the Kuzuryuu family."

(I-I was making fun of a Yakuza heir?!) Miki paled in horror, before making a mental connection. The Yakuza family that threatened Miss Beryl was the Kuzuryuu family, right?

A frightened yelp came from underneath the prosecutor's bench, confirming Miki's suspicions.

"Um, Fuyuhiko..." Mikan whispered into the blond's ear. "Please promise that you won't kill anyone."

She got a bit distracted, fine, she admitted that, but she was determined to see her mission through!

"I don't have a reason to kill anyone," Fuyuhiko huffed, rolling his eye. Mikan grinned excitedly, right as Fuyuhiko added, "Except the bastard who hurt you. That asshole's skull is going to be hanging off a hook soon."

A shrill shriek came from underneath the prosecutor's bench, right before a loud THUMP.

Miss Beryl's pale and unconscious body was fished out from the prosecutor's banged-up desk. Court was adjourned, again.

After a lot of begging and bribery and kisses, Fuyuhiko finally gave in, promising to not kill the person who hurt Mikan. Just in case, she made sure that he agreed to refrain from physical and emotional harm too. She trusted her boyfriend, but he was crafty! If anyone could find a loophole in her words, it would be him!

(Okay, maybe, just maybe Mikan just wanted an excuse to give him more kisses. Maybe.)

For the sake of safety, she insisted on staying with him in the waiting room. She sat right next to him on the bench, her arms wrapped around his chest. Mikan's head rested on his shoulder and Fuyuhiko placed an arm over her shoulders in return. It was really comfortable.

But... y'know. It was just so she could hold him back in case someone got him mad. It wasn't an excuse to be near him or anything. It wasn't like he calmed her down or made her really happy just by doing that. Mikan was just being careful. Obviously. That was totally the reason.

It wasn't because he was really cuddly, or how he let her play with his fingers, or how he tried so
hard to seem unaffected even when Mikan could see the blush on his cheeks and how adorable he was. That definitely wasn't the reason she wanted to hug him at all!

Alright, Mikan couldn't deny it forever. Yes, she loved hugging Fuyuhiko. Yes, she loved holding his hands and playing with his fingers. Yes, she loved how adorable he was when he tried to pretend he wasn't embarrassed. And yes, she loved the way he fit perfectly in her arms.

But first and foremost, Mikan had a mission. Her goal was to get Souda and Fujisaki a 'Not Guilty' verdict, no matter what. And Fuyuhiko was the perfect person to help her do that! Not only was he cuddly and cute, he was resourceful, insightful, and quick on both his literal and metaphorical feet! Fuyuhiko was the perfect partner, in crime and in love!

"Mikan, your internal monologue is getting too damn mushy," Fuyuhiko grumbled, even though he was bright red. His voice was quiet, so that Mikan was the only one in the crowded waiting room who heard his voice.

"Ah, sorry," Mikan said quickly, trying to find a way to turn off her thoughts.

(She couldn't just not think about him, okay?! Fuyuhiko was soft and he smelled like candy and when he was with her, Mikan couldn't stop smiling!)

Her eyes looked around the waiting room, hoping to find something interesting enough to distract her from embarrassing thoughts.

Ibuki and Hiyoko were bickering again on the other end of the room. The crimson-clad attorney was discussing something with Souda. The rest of the crowd was made up of the members of the gallery that Mikan didn't know. She let her eyes wander from person to person, before she spotted Hajime... holding a familiar blue sweater.

Mikan's eyes widened as she hurriedly scanned the crowd for the pink-eyed gamer, but to no avail.

"I think Chiaki-san might be naked again," Mikan whispered to the one-eyed man next to her.

"What the- again?!" Fuyuhiko groaned in exasperation.

"They've got to be here somewhere..." Chiaki muttered to herself as she rummaged through the hotel room.

She was working on a time limit. Chiaki had to work without being caught, since... well, she was kind of breaking a couple laws in her pursuit of justice. First was the fact that she was technically trespassing (though Chiaki was sure that if she took the time to ask, Mikan, Saionji, and Ibuki would be fine with it). Then there was her technical theft (she would probably be fine with it. Probably)... and the fact that she was completely nude.

Add her sort-of law-breaking vigilantism to the fact that she had no idea when the prosecutor would wake up and when the trial would resume again...

Well, Chiaki had always been good at stealth games. She could probably find her target and get back to the courtroom in less than five minutes.

If she could actually fucking find her target.

Chiaki pouted as she turned away from the suitcases, trying to think. Where would she put it...?
Her mind made the connection so suddenly that Chiaki nearly fell over from the power of logic. Of course!

She whirled around, all but jumping at the area underneath the neatly-made bed, fishing out several colourful notebooks.

"Diary, daydream journal, to-do list, explicit daydream journal..." Chiaki read the names off the covers, discarding each of those notebooks. Her eyes brightened with joy and delight when they came upon a green, spiral-bound notebook. "Here it is...!"

Chiaki hurriedly tucked the book under her arm, not bothering to clean up before heading towards the window. Wings emerged from her back as she leaped out the broken window.

She was going to save Kazuichi and Chihiro. Chiaki had to do at least that much for the people who had saved her life. She owed her friends that much. And she intended to repay her debt.

Hajime rushed over to her the moment she landed, hurriedly tossing her clothes at her.

"Court started already!" Hajime hissed. "They're in the middle of questioning Mikan and Fuyuhiko again!"

"Then let's go!" Chiaki declared with a determined gleam in her eyes-

"Put your clothes on first!" Hajime ordered, though the effect was ruined a bit by the way he couldn't look at her and the pink in his cheeks.

"Oh, right," Chiaki nodded. She handed the notebook to Hajime as she grabbed her clothes off the ground, hastily pulling them on.

"Did you steal this?" Hajime asked, staring at the green cover blankly.

"I'm sure that she would let me borrow it for a good cause."

"Chiaki, this is illegal." Hajime was cut off by Chiaki snatching the journal out of his hands, dashing towards the entrance.

Hajime froze, staring at the empty space in shock, before glaring at the door as he began running.

"NANAMI CHIAKI, GET THE HELL BACK HERE!"

"Do you remember when the surgery took place, sweetheart?" The crimson-clad attorney asked, her voice sugary sweet.

Mikan hesitated, trying to find a proper date in her heart. She... guessed it would be around... March-ish...? Maybe?

"Sweetheart?!" Fuyuhiko glared at the defense attorney, curling his hands into fists. "Are you fucking hitting on her?!"

Mikan was practically giggling as she held Fuyuhiko back from smacking Miki into a wall. He noticed that she was struggling and helped her out with a distraction! Fuyuhiko was really amazing!

(No, Fuyuhiko was just really possessive. But Mikan would probably think that was amazing too.)
"E-er... no...?" Miki offered lamely.

"There are crimes I can't forgive, and then there's being a creep towards Mikan," Fuyuhiko seethed. He tried his best to look intimidating and threatening, but... his girlfriend had her arms wrapped around his chest, a huge, dorky grin on her face as she rested her chin on top of his head. Fuyuhiko just looked... well, more than a little bit silly.

"Right..." Miki nodded, trying to keep the awkward, forced grin off her face. She failed. M-I-S-E-R-A-B-L-Y. "Well, er, do you remember, Cuti- Um, Tsumiki!"

"No, I'm sorry..." Mikan mumbled under her breath.

"It's been ten years since then," Fuyuhiko stated. "Of course she wouldn't remember."

(That would be a lot more convincing if it weren't the fifth time the two of you used that excuse...) Miki paused, a possibility coming to mind. What if... what if Mikan wasn't there that day?

Before the defense attorney could put her theory into words, the courtroom's doors slammed open. Again.

"Hold it!"

Chiaki stepped through the doorway, brandishing a pale green notebook like a sword.

Mikan froze, her eyes widening at the sight. Her arms fell to her side, her hands curling into fists.

"I've got evidence proving Kazuichi's innocence!" Chiaki declared, waving the journal about in the air.

Mikan could feel her throat closing up, her legs locking into place. It felt like she was buried in a cave, watching a monitor showing the scene in front of her; cold invaded her body, turning her stomach into ice. She struggled to breathe properly, instead hissing in air and letting out little puffs of air at random. Mikan couldn't do anything to stop the scene, not when her voice was dying in her throat and her body was as heavy as lead and-

"Mikan?" Fuyuhiko asked warily, staring at her in concern. "You okay?"

Mikan shook her head slightly, shutting her eyes to keep tears from spilling out. Fuyuhiko was with her.

The words looped around in Mikan's skull, slowly releasing the tension from Mikan's body. Not enough to let her move freely, but just enough to let her speak.

"That... that's mine..." Mikan exhaled, her voice almost silent. "That's mine..."

"Nanami Chiaki, you will present this evidence to the court immediately!" The judge ordered.

Chiaki nodded, her hands moving to open the notebook...

"No...!" Mikan paled, her voice raising to a hysterical shriek. "No! You can't! That's mine! Don't touch it! You can't read it! Give it back!"

Mikan couldn't let her read it. She had to get her notebook back. She had to, she had to, she had to, she had to, she had to she hadto shehadto she had to she hadto shhehadtoshehadtoshehadtoshehadtoshehadtoshehadto
"Mikan...!?" Chiaki gasped in shock, nearly dropping the book.

"Give it back!" Mikan echoed, her voice cracking under the weight of desperation and panic. Mikan needed her notebook. She needed it so badly that she had trouble putting it into words. Teary eyes stared at Chiaki as Mikan's voice became pleading. "Please...! I need it! Give it back!"

"I..." Chiaki hesitated, conflict obvious on her face. She... she had to save Kazuichi and Chihiro... but that would mean making Mikan upset...

It was obvious which choice was right, wasn't it? Kazuichi and Chihiro's freedom and safety versus Mikan's feelings... it was so one-sided that Chiaki didn't know why she was even thinking about it. She took a deep breath, muttering an apology to Mikan under her breath and-

"How many fucking times does she have to repeat it?" Fuyuhiko snarled, glaring at the pink-eyed gamer. "Give her the damn notebook already!"

"I'm so sorry," Chiaki mumbled.

"Nanami Chiaki!" The judge called out, fixing Chiaki with a stern scowl. "The court will not recognize stolen evidence! Return that to its proper owner immediately!"

"It's always a bad move to make a cute girl cry," Miki huffed. Miss Beryl nodded in agreement from the prosecutor's bench.

With a guilty sigh, Chiaki moved to the witness's stand, handing the notebook to Mikan. Mikan immediately snatched it out of the other woman's hands, inspecting it for any damage.

Her pale green notebook had been with her for many years, that much was obvious from the fact that the faded and scratched areas of the cover and the yellowed pages. But any rips and tears were carefully held together with clear tape. The front and back covers had the most tape, to the point where the back cover wasn't even attached to the spiral backing, it was just taped to the back of the last page. On the front cover was an illegible scrawl, written in faded pink marker. Just below that, in much neater script and black pen, were the words 'Medical Journal'.

Mikan hugged the journal to her chest, taking deep breaths and letting out sighs of relief. It was safe. She was okay, it was okay. No one read it. It was okay.

Fuyuhiko rubbed circles into Mikan's back, alternating between growling threats at Chiaki and whispering reassuring words to Mikan.

"Mikan..." Chiaki sighed once again, unable to even look the other woman in the eye. "I probably have no right to ask this... but that journal is the key to proving Kazuichi and Chihiro's innocence," Chiaki's voice cracked, her words becoming more of a desperate plea than a simple request. "You... You're the only one who can do it. You're the only one who can save them. Please-"

"Go back to your damn seat," Fuyuhiko scowled, glaring at Chiaki. Chiaki flinched away at his words, before turning her eyes towards Mikan.

"I... I," Mikan gulped, wiping her face with the back of her hand. She took a deep breath to steady herself before looking up at Chiaki. "Okay."

"Mikan?" Fuyuhiko turned his gaze towards Mikan, his eye full of concern. "Are you sure?"

Mikan nodded, sniffling a bit before a standing up, her posture tall and firm. She beamed at Fuyuhiko with a smile brighter and warmer than a bonfire. "It's a nurse's duty to save people, isn't
Fuyuhiko paused, before returning her smile with a fond grin. "Always the dutiful nurse, huh?"

"Please, present the evidence whenever you feel you are ready, witness," The judge offered, though, inwardly, he was sighing wistfully. Ah, the joys of young love...

"R-right," Mikan gulped, steeling herself. With a deep breath, she flipped the book open to the first page-

And froze at the sight of pink crayon, messy, childish writing and doodles covering the page.

'mom and dad got sik 2day. dad says its a cute vyrale naeso-sumthin. mom says thats just a sooper fansee name for a cold.'

Mikan couldn't stop herself from reading the words. Her mind relived times long gone, when they were all so happy together, when her family was whole and nothing was painful, and she couldn't stop herself from tearing up at the memories.

'dad's spesial cure for a cold! 1 warm food! 2 lots of luv! 3 medisin!'

Mikan remembered staying up until the late hours of the night, listening to her dad talk about illnesses and fatal diseases, ones that were cured before it was too late thanks to the power of medicine. She thought of him as a hero, eradicating the monstrous, untouchable viruses with his scientific remedies. Her mom would laugh and say that they were a couple of heroic lovers; Mom dealt with the people with bad inside them, and Dad dealt with the bad inside people. And Mikan would be whatever kind of hero she wanted, whether she wanted to be a pharmacist like her dad or a police officer like her mom or like anyone else. They used to be so happy-

Mikan paused at the feeling of a warm hand holding hers. She looked up from the old notebook full of memories and childhood dreams, staring blankly at the one-eyed man standing next to her. Fuyuhiko shut his eye, even turning his head away so he didn't accidentally get a peek at whatever was upsetting Mikan so much.

He... Fuyuhiko was with her. He was right next to her.

Mikan's eyes went to the gallery, going from one unknown face to another, until her eyes found Ibuki and Hiyoko. Ibuki gave her a thumbs-up when their eyes met, while Hiyoko smiled at her. Her gaze kept moving, coming upon a lightning-haired brunette and a pink-eyed gamer. Hajime smiled at her encouragingly, while Chiaki nodded in approval, in a signal to keep going.

Mikan took in a deep breath, giving Fuyuhiko's hand a squeeze before beginning to flip through the journal again. She skipped over pages of material, barely noticing how the crayon switched to pencil and how the words became less of a child's story and more like notes for a lecture, signs and symptoms listed down dutifully in the margins. The entries in the journal had matured, just as she had. But Mikan didn't really have time to dwell on childhood memories, painful or not. Her friends were supporting her, her friends were depending on her, and she intended on seeing her mission through.

There was a bright smile on her face when she found the right page. Mikan gave Fuyuhiko's hand one last squeeze as she cleared her throat, projecting her voice to the entire room.

"Nanami-san fell ill. Her skin is feverish and swollen. Her feet It looks similar to a bruise, though, no bruise can stay for an entire month... She also suffers from numerous vomiting fits, up to five times a day. I've never seen a disease like this. Souda-san has been trying his best to make
prosthetic limbs for her, but he's overworking himself. He refuses to sleep until he finishes. I had to give him sedatives disguised as a sports drink to get him to rest."

The court came to a pause, the audience stopping to process her words.

"Well? If he really were trying to kill her, why the hell would he try so hard to save her?" Miki asked with a smug grin. "Can you really say that the defendant is guilty after that, Miss Beryl?"

Before Miss Beryl could respond, Mikan jumped into the conversation.

"There's more, too," Mikan added, before curiously flipping ahead in the notebook. She came to a stop around forty pages after, a finger hovering over the last mention of Chiaki's name. "About... six months' worth, I think?"

"That won't be necessary," The judge proclaimed, ready to deliver his verdict. "This court finds the defendant, Souda Kazuichi, and his fellow suspect, Fujisaki Chihiro..."

**Not Guilty**

"In-cred-i-ble!" Ibuki cheered, wrapping an arm around the mechanic's shoulders. "Howzit feel to be acquitted by a total babe?! Was it exciting?! Was it heart-pounding?!"

"Y-yes, and yes..." Kazuichi mumbled, still recovering from the entire ordeal.

"We knew you were not capable of murder!" Kiyotaka declared, clapping a hand on Chihiro's back. He was careful not to hurt the smaller man, even though, thanks to Sakura and Mondo's exercise regimes, Chihiro was probably capable of bench-pressing him. Must have been a force of habit.


"That sounds great!" Chihiro declared, smiling brightly.

(My work here is done...) Miki beamed to herself, satisfied with her work. *(Man, it feels great to see them so happy and carefree!)*

She was practically skipping away from the waiting room, a cheery song on the tip of her tongue-

"What the fucking hell were you fucking thinking?!" Hiyoko snarled, pointing an accusatory finger at Chiaki. "There are lines you never cross, and making Mikan cry is one of them!"

"Do you fucking want to be dismantled and sold to the highest bidder?" Fuyuhiko growled, cracking his knuckles.

"U-um...!" Chiaki stepped back, distress obvious on her face.

"It's fine!" Mikan shrieked, trying to defend the gamer. "After all, it ended well, right? A happy ending for everyone!"

"*It can't be a good ending if this bitch doesn't get her divine retribution!*" The pair of blonds screamed in unison.

Miki decided to turn around, a complete 180. Wouldn't want to, um, disturb their... privacy... sorta...

"Gramps...! I can't believe I lost when you were watching...!" Miss Beryl's voice wailed from
around the corner, a far cry from her (mostly) professional demeanor in court.

Miki poked her head around the corner, spotting-

Miss Beryl being comforted by the judge?

"Isn't that a conflict of interest?!" Miki found herself screaming before she could stop herself.

She only realized her mistake when the pair turned towards her, a stern stare on both of their faces.

"It's rude to eavesdrop," Miss Beryl snapped, glaring at the defense attorney coldly.

"I cannot believe how little faith you have in me," The judge huffed, almost pouting. "I have always passed down fair verdicts, even in your fathers' time! I see no reason for that to change if my granddaughter is the one prosecuting!"

Miki froze, trying to process the new information. If he had presided over her fathers' cases... then he would be a judge since-

"You're over a hundred years old?!" Miki gaped at the old man in shock.

The aged judge refused to answer. Miki supposed that was probably for the best, even with the burning curiosity inside of her.

Chapter End Notes

Bonus

"Miss Medicine, are you fucking in here?!" Natsumi called out as she kicked the door open.

The occupants of the courtroom stared at her blankly, which Natsumi took as a 'no'.

"Fuck, where the hell could she be...?" Natsumi grumbled as she walked away, almost sulking in the face of her fifth failure.

She pushed the doors of another courtroom open, almost expecting it to be another disappointment-

Instead, Natsumi saw Miss Medicine hugging her brother, the taller nurse resting her chin on Fuyuhiko's head. Even from afar, Natsumi could see the joy obvious on Miss Medicine's face.

"...I think I'll leave them to their... whatever the hell this is..." Natsumi mumbled to herself as she turned away. Maybe she could visit the ice cream parlor or something while she was waiting for Fuyuhiko...!
"I can understand why you would want to celebrate your acquittal," Hajime started off, staring Kazuichi down. "I can understand why you want to drink for this occasion. What I can't understand, is why the fucking hell you thought it was a good idea to bring Mikan along."

"I-it seemed like a good idea...?" Kazuichi offered lamely, about to add how she had a huge part in his acquittal, plus, she wasn't that bad-looking... right before a loud crash and gleeful giggles came from the other side of the room. Hajime slapped his palm to his forehead, right before standing to stop Mikan from getting arrested for property damage. And murder.

Peko found her on the roof of the bar, overlooking passing cars and staring at the setting sun.

Nanami was standing right on the edge of the rooftop, completely unaffected by the daunting height. She was almost like a statue, her expression blank and emotionless, her body as still and calm as water in a glass. Nanami almost seemed... well, ethereal, like an angel descended from heaven to watch over the world... or something like that, anyways. Peko wasn't that good at metaphors.

"You're not joining the celebration?" Peko inquired, moving to stand closer to Nanami... but not too close. Peko couldn't fly like Nanami, so she couldn't afford to be as careless as the other woman was.

"I can't really get drunk, and I don't feel like helping Hajime keep everyone else in line,?" Nanami quipped, turning towards Peko with a small grin on her face. "Besides, sometimes it's best to take a moment to relax and calm down, you know?"

"I understand," Peko nodded. "Would you like some company?"

"I guess that would be nice," Nanami agreed.

Peko smiled as Nanami sat next to her legs, right before kneeling down to join her. The swordswoman folded her hands on her lap, the two watching the skyline together.

"Gyahaha, yikes! That's one way to leave a lasting impression on someone!" Ibuki snickered to herself as Mikan 'tripped and fell' on top of Fuyuhiko for the third time in ten minutes.

Or tried to, anyways. The Yakuza heir managed to actually catch her that time, holding her upright instead of letting Mikan sit on top of him again. Ibuki would have been glad to accept Mikan's affection in his place, but... she was sort of busy at the moment.

Namely, Ibuki had her hands full with a Kuzuryuu-chan of her own.

She hummed a cheery little tune to herself as she rested her hand on top of Natsumi's beautiful golden hair. The blonde was surprisingly quiet, not even saying a word when Ibuki began running her fingers through her blonde locks. A tiny frown was on Natsumi's face, her eyes looking at some far-off unknown in the distance. The other woman seemed lost in her thoughts... either that, or she was getting a headache.

"What's on your mind, Natsu-chan?" Ibuki asked, poking at Natsumi's cheek.
"It isn't really anything important..." Natsumi huffed.

"That means that there's something bothering you," Ibuki pointed out, before adding, "You can tell me if you want."

"I mean...It's more like I just realized something," Natsumi sighed. "All of this," She waved a hand up at Ibuki's face, "...it doesn't really mean anything does it? You're just doing this because I'm your fan. Because you're trying to make me happy. I mean..." Another sigh escaped from her lips, her expression darkening. "I don't know why I would expect anything else... but it's still kind of-OW!"

The last bit was because Ibuki flicked her in the forehead, a huge pout on the rock star's face as she did so.

"Completely false! Untrue! Lies! Slander and libel!" Ibuki declared loudly, before staring at Natsumi with puppy-dog eyes and an exaggerated frown. "Natsu-chan, your thinking is 100% B-A-C-K-W-A-R-D-S!"

"Huh?" Lime green eyes widened at Ibuki's words, staring at the musician in shock and confusion.

"Just 'cause I'm trying to make you happy doesn't mean it's meaningless," Ibuki stated. "Truth is..." She paused, turning a bit pink as she went on. The levity was dropped from her voice, leaving sincere embarrassment and... well, a little bit of worry, and a little bit of hope, too. "I sort of hoped that by doing this, you'd get used to me."

"Uh, what?" Natsumi asked eloquently.

Ibuki turned even redder as she tried to explain. "I mean, I'm not trying to do anything weird! I'm just t-trying to be your friend!"

"Y-y-you're serious?!" Natsumi all-but-shrieked, colour filling her cheeks.

"Uh-huh," Ibuki nodded. "I really, really want to be your friend. Not just a star and her fan, but a happy friendship. Y'know what I mean?"

"Yeah," Natsumi nodded, gulping down her nervousness. Her voice could barely be called a whisper as she went on, her face redder than a freshly-painted firetruck. "That... that would be... that would be nice..."

"Hehe, great!" Ibuki squealed in delight, a bright grin on her face.

Hiyoko groaned as she watched the scene a few tables away, downing another glass in wake of the irritating sight.

Those two lovey-dovey assholes were insufferable! How dare they be so aggravating in public?!
Why, Hiyoko was about to fucking strangle that damn Yakuza girl! Didn't they teach public decency back in whatever hell she was spawned in?! Or was she so arrogant that she thought she could get away with disgustingly-open displays of affection, right in front of Hiyoko's face?!
Gross, gross, gross!

...wait.

Why was all her anger focused on Kuzuryuu? Ibuki was the one who initiated all of it!

No, no, there was no way that was it. Hiyoko was pretty sure that Ibuki had no idea what the word
That Kuzuryuu bitch was probably manipulating Ibuki into doing it. Yes, it all made sense now! She would say things like 'it's a star's duty to make her fans happy' and 'you're the only one who can give me this' and Ibuki would be too sweet and innocent and pure to understand that she was being jerked around like a marionette and-

Wait. Sweet? Innocent? Pure?! Since fucking when did those words apply to Ibuki?! She went to the trouble of organizing a vacation for nine for the chance to see hot girls in bikinis!

...and to try to get her friends together... and to give her friends a fun break from work... and to visit her dad's grave...

Okay, Ibuki was sort of innocent. Kinda. But not like, super innocent. She like was a nine-year-old on the innocence scale. Maybe an eight-year-old if Hiyoko was feeling generous. Not that Hiyoko was feeling generous towards Ibuki or anything. If anything, she felt greedy towards Ibuki, so-

Woah, woah, that came out wrong! Er, came... in wrong? Since Hiyoko wasn't really saying anything out loud... er. Huh.

But anyways, Hiyoko didn't feel greedy towards Ibuki as in 'I wanna keep you to myself' sort of greedy. It was more 'being the opposite of generous just to spite you' sort of greedy. Of course that what it was. There was absolutely no way it could have possibly been anything else! Right?!

Hiyoko slammed her glass down on the table, suddenly feeling a whole lot more confused and irritated about life.

"You asked about my family before," Nanami muttered, not taking her eyes off the slowly-darkening landscape ahead of her.

"I did," Peko turned towards the pink-eyed gamer, staring at her blankly. "What of it?"

"I thought you'd be happy to know that I met them again. My parents," Nanami paused, trying to think of the best way to explain it to the red-eyed woman.

"You don't have to tell me," Peko stated. "I'm glad to know that you're still in contact with them."

"I just... I just figured that you deserved to know," Nanami mumbled. "Since you were trying so hard to help me."

"Alright," Peko nodded, trying to smile at Nanami encouragingly. Her voice took on a hint of motherly concern as she added, "Don't force yourself."

"I won't!" Nanami pouted, puffing her cheeks out before beginning her story. "Once upon a time, there were a couple of famous artists..."

"Oh god, have you seen Mikan anywhere?!" Hajime asked frantically, looking towards Mahiru in desperation.

"Don't worry, she's with Kuzuryuu," The redhead said reassuringly, before sighing. "But I couldn't keep Souda from messing with the jukebox..."

Hajime swore under his breath, before letting out a tired groan. Mahiru nodded in empathy, before
letting a chuckle fall from her lips.

"Did you suddenly snap under the pressure?" Hajime raised an eyebrow at the redhead, only half-joking.

"No, it's just," Mahiru accidentally cut herself off with another giggle, smiling up at Hajime. "When did we become babysitters for, well... our entire class?" She paused, before adding, "And Mikan-chan's sort-of boyfriend's family."

"Boyfriend," Hajime corrected.

Mahiru grinned excitedly. "So they actually got together?"

She would be glad to discuss love gossip with her boyfriend for the rest of the night (well, she would be fine doing pretty much anything with Hajime for the rest of the night- Of course she didn't mean it like that, you dirty-minded dummy!), if it weren't for the loud, booming cackling coming from the other room all of a sudden.

"I'll take care of it," Hajime grumbled, rolling his eyes in exasperation.

"No, it's my turn," Mahiru stated. "Sit down and rest."

"Mahiru, I'm fine."

"Don't be so pigheaded! I'm telling you to rest, so rest already!" Mahiru rolled her eyes, placing her hands on her hips as she reprimanded the brunette. "You're too stubborn for your own good! Learn how to take a break before you faint or-

"I AM THE UNCONQUERABLE EMPEROR OF THE DEMONIC FLAMES! ALL SHALL BOW DOWN TO MY RULE!"

"Get the fuck off the damn counter, you dumbass!" Fuyuhiko's voice rang out from the other room.

"I think we should just let him handle it..." Mahiru mumbled to herself.

"But if he takes his eyes- er, eye off Mikan, then-" Hajime was cut off by loud sobbing and a crash, probably from Mikan throwing herself at Fuyuhiko in a desperate, yet ultimately misguided attempt to keep him with her.

"Okay, he probably needs our help," Mahiru admitted.

The pair of moms took a moment to compose themselves before heading back to battle once more.

"...and thus, the wizards brought the young girl back to life. Unknowing of this, the couple thought they lost their only daughter, and refused to paint ever again," Nanami sighed mournfully. The sorrow in her voice was soon eradicated, replaced by melodramatics better suited to a certain pet store owner. "But not all was lost! They met their daughter once again! Not a zombie or a ghost or a time-traveler, but the real deal, living and breath-" Nanami cut herself off suddenly. "-uh, not really breathing. But you get what I mean, right?"

"I... think so," Peko said uncertainly. She knitted her eyebrows together as she tried to translate Nanami's tale into... well, understandable terms. "Your parents thought you died, but you were reunited...?"

"I mean, technically I did die," Nanami stated flippantly. Peko wasn't sure whether she was
supposed to be worried or not about the other woman's casual dismissal of fundamental concepts like life and death. "They even buried my body."

"But you're still alive."

"Thank the power of science for that," Nanami joked, giving Peko a toothy grin.

"So... you're a... magic stone golem...?" Peko asked, because she kind of got lost around the part where the two wizards and that one magic healing guy who got blown up by a bardancer got involved.

"Robot," Nanami corrected, her gaze falling to the palm of her hand. She stared at her fingers thoughtfully for a moment, before her eyes suddenly jumped back to Peko's face. Though neither one of them could see it in the darkness, Nanami's cheeks were a bit red as she frantically waved ehr hands about. "B-but, we shouldn't spend all this time talking about me! I mean, that's what all our conversations boil down to- I-I mean, I want to hear about you for a change!"

"Um... alright," Peko tensed up slightly, unused to being the center of attention. "What would you like to know?"

"...your name?" Nanami offered sheepishly. She turned redder, almost about to explain herself when the swordswoman gave her an answer.

(If so wasn't Chiaki's fault that the silver-haired woman never introduced herself before trying to kill her, but there's no way Chiaki could say that without sounding rude-)

"Pekoyama Peko."

"Pekoyama-san..." A smile stretched across Nanami's lips as she offered her hand to the silver-haired swordswoman. "Nice to properly meet you, Pekoyama-san."

Before she could start regretting, well... everything, Peko took ahold of her hand, a warm smile on the red-eyed woman's face. Her grip was firm and warm and fuck, Chiaki was a goddamn goner.

"It's nice to meet you as well," Peko nodded, before releasing the other woman's hand.

(Her hand was so warm and strong and Chiaki could still feel the calluses and-)

"Um..." The pink-eyed gamer hesitated, before slowly plucking up the courage to ask. "So... why do you have a different last name from Kuzuryuu-kun and Kuzuryuu-san if you're their sister? Er, if you don't mind me asking."

"I don't mind telling you," Peko stated, before grimacing. "But... it's not a happy story."

"Then, can I ask about..." The gamer paused, humming to herself as she thought. Suddenly, she got an idea. "Are you a dog person, or a cat person?"

"Cat," Peko answered instantly. "Though... I do like dogs, but..." A smile appeared on her face as she thought, her eyes staring somewhere far off. "I actually have three cats. One is a tiny, fearless kitten who loves to explore the world. The other two..." Her smile became more wistful as she went on. "They both have attitudes, often fight, and can be hostile towards strangers... but at the same time, they're both so docile and sweet with me and those they trust. I wouldn't give them up for anything."

"...you're still talking about cats, right?" Nanami asked carefully.
"Who knows?" Peko's smile became a joking grin, amusement filling her voice.

Chiaki didn't even have a heart, not anymore, but she swore that something in her body, the turning of gears, the churning of motors, anything began speeding up, the sound ringing around in her auditory systems. Or maybe she was more organic than she thought.

Either way, something in Chiaki's chest stammered at the happiness in the silver-haired swordswoman's voice as she continued their little Q and A session.

"Please stay with me...!" Mikan pleaded, clinging to Fuyuhiko's arm tightly. Hajime shot the tiny blond a look of pity. Fuyuhiko glared at him in return, since he didn't need Hajime's pity!

A loud sob from Mikan brought Fuyuhiko's attention back to his girlfriend.

"What if... what if you leave and never come back...?! I-I don't want that!" Mikan wailed, tears running down her face.

"Mikan, I'm not going to leave you!" Fuyuhiko exclaimed frantically, trying to calm her down.

"P-promise...?" Mikan whispered quietly, her lips trembling as she looked towards Fuyuhiko desperately.

"I swear," Fuyuhiko declared resolutely.

"Then seal it with a kiss."

Fuyuhiko practically jumped out of his skin, an undignified sound of shock escaping from his lips. His cheeks were as red as a fire engine as he protested.

"T-there's so many people- You're drunk, what if someone sees-" Mikan pouted, and suddenly, all of Fuyuhiko's arguments died away. Under his breath, he grumbled something about not being able to say no to her as he dragged her to a relatively secluded part of the bar.

His hand grabbed at the front of her sweater (so huge that the sleeves flopped over her hands, as per Tsumiki tradition) and pulled her down to press a kiss against her forehead. Mikan giggled, her arms coming up to loop around his waist.

"You're so cute!" Mikan squealed, a bright smile on her face.

"...shut up," Fuyuhiko huffed, hiding his blushing face in Mikan's neck. Mikan kissed the top of his head, which only made him blush harder.

The impromptu alcohol and chaos and almost murder/party for the group ended up being dragged out over several long hours. Several long, painful, possibly-traumatizing hours.

But the fun had to end eventually, and when numbers began to dwindle, Hajime ended up telling Ibuki to call Nagisa to pick up the few people that remained, AKA the people who were too drunk to move and those who forgot to make plans to get home. Namely, Hiyoko, Ibuki, and Souda. It was a good thing that Fuyuhiko and Peko had already dragged Natsumi back to their home, while Chiaki had taken Mikan back. Hajime and Mahiru's apartment building was close enough to walk, so they decided to go back together.

Unfortunately... they left before Nagisa came to pick up the drunk trio. Had they stayed, they
probably would have been able to stop what happened next.

"Oh great!" Hiyoko threw her hands up in the air in exasperation, before giving her best glare. "Another fuckass who keeps clinging to the hornhead bitch! Just what this party fucking needed!"

"E-excuse me?!" Nagisa's eye twitched as he gritted his teeth together, scowling at Hiyoko. "What sort of boorish, contemptible idiot are you?!

"Yeah, what he said!" Kotoko huffed, pointing an accusatory finger at the blonde ex-dancer. "What the hell are you doing, being so rude to a cute little kid?"

"You two are seventeen," Ibuki pointed out.

"Urgh, he's jailbait too!" Hiyoko gagged in disgust. "You sure know how to attract the worst of the worst of the worst, don't you?! You're a pervert magnet, and your polarity is turned up to maximum!"

"That's not what polarity means!" Nagisa screamed indignantly.

"Wow, wow, I can't believe we met an adult dumber than Nagisa-chan!" Kotoko sang innocently, before giggling. "Wait, yes I can! Because you're a moron!"

"I can't believe that you two are so young, yet so bitchy!" Hiyoko shot back, fully intent on fighting the pair, even if it was only verbally. "Haven't you ever heard of respecting your elders, or are kids getting worse by the generation?"

"Oh, I'm sure there is no possible way we could ever hope to outdo you in horribleness," Nagisa said, sarcasm drenching his voice. He got a high-five from Kotoko for that.

"Hey, Big Sis Ugly Face!" Kotoko called out with a bright grin that didn't match her words. "Teach us how to be as terrible as you are one day!"

"Oh, I'm gonna throttle you brats!" Hiyoko growled.

"Don't you dare touch my cute little brother!" Ibuki declared protectively.

A few tables away, Souda Kazuichi sat with his body slumped over a table. His cheek was smushed into the flat surface, his eyes staring at the group through a glass of water. He sort of wondered if the mermaid apocalypse was coming, or if that was just the distortion of the glass.

Seven AM in the Kuzuryuu household was a very tranquil time for Peko. Since no one else in the family woke up before ten and the workers took very great care to not disturb her, Peko was free to enjoy the moments of peace and quiet. Usually, she spent the time sharpening her blade as she thought, the repetitive motions lulling her into a meditative state.

It was a good thing too, since it meant she had her sword ready when she heard a bloodcurdling screech come from the bedrooms.

Peko threw the door open with one hand, her other hand already on her sword's handle. Fuyuhiko was right behind her, his pistol already drawn.

"Natsumi, what's wrong?!" The panicked pair demanded in unison.

Their sister turned around, her trembling fingers wrapped tightly around her cellphone. Her eyes
were wide with shock, her mouth gaping at whatever she had seen.

"I got... a text from Mioda Ibuki...!" Natsumi whispered in awe. She hugged her phone to her chest, a huge smile on her face. "Even if this is a dream, I'm so happy! I can't believe this!"

"Are you fucking kidding me?!"

Peko sighed as she dragged Fuyuhiko away from fighting his other sister. So much for peace and quiet.
SOS, Sunshine, and Stabbed Boxes

Scandals could be dragged out for weeks, months, maybe even years. If the person in question was lucky, then maybe it could be over with a few news channels talking about it and that was it, but if they weren't, well, then the incident would all that the media talked about for a long time. Constant discussions, articles, magazines, a never-ending barrage of reminders of what happened. In the eyes of the media, the incident may as well be a permanent scar on the person's reputation, a ghost that came up, again and again and again to haunt the person in question. The rest of the celebrity's life in the spotlight would be spent trying to make up for their mistakes, trying to avoid making another huge, dramatic screw-up, trying to hide their past from a world that would never forget.

And their life outside the spotlight?

Well, friends didn't have quite the same memory that the media did. While they remembered humiliating accidents when they were joking around and reminiscing on the past, they didn't obsess over every little slip-up or mistake. Friends moved on. Friends forgave and friends forgot.

That was why, a week after the trial, even when the controversy of the CEOs of the Fujisouda company being involved in human experimentation was still making headlines, still inspiring story after story on the pair's crimes against humanity and the possibility of immortality, their group of friends had mostly forgotten about the incident. An offhand mention here, a joking comment there was all the acknowledgment the incident got.

That was why, a mere week after the trial, Ibuki, Hiyoko, and Mikan finally finding their new apartment was more pressing and discussion-worthy to the group than the events on the minds of philosophers and scientists pretty much everywhere.

"Mahiru, where does this box go?" Hiyoko asked, holding a cardboard box in her lap.

"Just hold it for now," Mahiru stated as she helped Mikan carry a heavy box into the kitchen.

"Since when was Mahiru the boss of your moving operation?" Hajime turned towards Ibuki, looking to her for answers. He only got a shrug in return.

"She's really, um... responsible...?" Ibuki offered hesitantly.

"You've got that right," Hajime nodded, pride in his eyes as he watched the pair work-trio. Hiyoko was doing the very, very, incredibly important job of holding a box in her hands.

"Can you two assholes actually fucking help?!" Hiyoko barked, almost as if she sensed Hajime forgetting her. Somehow. Maybe everyone was just psychic. But even though Hajime was the one who had slighted her, Hiyoko's fiery glare was turned towards Ibuki. "I'll seriously throw this at your head if you don't shut up!"

"We're on break, Hiyo-chan," Ibuki huffed with a pout. She flopped her arms about like soggy noodles, making an exaggerated frown. "My arms are too tired for this! They'll end up falling off if I keep working!"

"You're just being a lazy bitch!" Hiyoko snapped.

"A-actually, Ibuki-san deserves her rest," Mikan called out from the kitchen. "She's been working really hard!"
"Yeah, see! Mikan is backing me up!" Ibuki grinned, winking at Hiyoko. The blonde grimaced, before sticking out her tongue as a show of her disgust.

"You wouldn't react like that if it were me or Mikan taking a break," Mahiru noted, letting out a sigh of relief as she and Mikan managed to set the box down on the floor with zero casualties.

"Because you two aren't Ibuki," Hiyoko shot back.

"Is it just me, or is Hiyoko meaner to you than anything else?" Hajime asked, turning his eyes towards Ibuki.

"It's because she's a grumpybutt," Ibuki answered simply, wearing a bright grin.

"Shut up before I make you bleed," Hiyoko growled, trying to look intimidating... though her expression was more 'slightly annoyed' than 'on the verge of homicide'. Which might have been due to her cute face. Or maybe she wasn't actually about to murder someone. Honestly, who knew? It was Saionji Hiyoko, the angriest tsundere to ever live.

As Hajime questioned the veracity of Hiyoko's threats, the soft sound of draconic roars came from Mikan's pocket. Mahiru gave the nurse a weird look as Mikan pulled out her phone.

"I-it's just the tone reserved for Fuyuhiko!" Mikan exclaimed defensively, cradling her phone to her chest.

"So..." Mahiru dropped her voice to a conspiratorial whisper, leaning closer with an excited smile on her face. Mahiru was like an old wife when it came to love gossip; a total sucker for it. "You guys really are dating, huh?"

"We've been dating since the New Year," Mikan proclaimed, a hint of pride in her voice as she opened her phone, checking her messages for whatever her boyfriend had sent-

The next thing Mahiru knew, there was a harsh wind in her face, strong enough to nearly knock her over. When she had recovered enough to look up, Mikan wasn't there.

Mahiru paused, trying to process what just happened.

She didn't actually have to look far to find Mikan. The nurse was at the door, hurriedly pulling on her shoes in plain view of the other three.

"Mikan, what the fuck are you doing?!" Hiyoko screamed. "Are you seriously thinking of going outside?!"

"There's a blizzard outside!" Ibuki added, horror obvious in her wide eyes.

"It's a nurse's duty to help those in need!" Mikan shot back, before slamming the door open and running out.

Ibuki and Hiyoko gaped at the door, unable to comprehend what the hell just happened.

"She's going to fucking die!" Hiyoko shrieked.

"What do we do?!" Ibuki wailed. "We can't let Mikan-chan freeze to death!"

"I'll get her," Hajime sighed. "You guys keep working, we'll be back soon."
Hajime let out a sigh as he settled into the bus seat, pulling out his phone. He quickly tapped out a message, intent on finding an answer to the pressing question of ‘why the goddamn fuck would Mikan run outside in her pyjamas?’

[natsumi, why would you do that]

The answer was immediate.

[Why the fuck are you assuming that it's me!?!]

[the fact that you knew that there's something to blame you for.]

(Natsumi cursed under her breath, regretting answering at all. Hajime's reasoning was too damn sharp! Sharper than Peko's sword! Sharper than his lightning antenna!)

[Your kusamochi was just too delicious, okay?! It wasn't my fault that I couldn't stop eating after one bite!]

[YOU WHAT]

Hajime immediately reminded himself to take deep breaths. He might have liked kusamochi, but Mikan was way more important. She ran into a fucking blizzard for fuck's sake. Murdering Natsumi could wait until after he managed to find Mikan, find answers, and most importantly, get Mikan in warm clothes before she froze to death.

[i'll yell at you for that later. right now, i want to know why mikan just ran into a snowstorm to go fuck knows where.]

(Hajime had a feeling he knew exactly where Mikan was trying to go, though. All roads led to home, or something like that.)

[Wait, you think that's me?]

[yes]

[99 percent of the time something weird happens in this family, it's you pulling some sort of prank]

[ Couldn't you have faith in that one percent?]

[It seriously wasn't me this time.]

[bullshit]

[I'm serious!]

[O fuck]

[what?]

[natsumi?]

[what happened?]

Hajime scowled as he pocketed his phone. There were only two things that could make Natsumi drop her autocorrect; pranks and life-threatening circumstances. And if it was the latter...
He had to hurry. If Mikan got to the Kuzuryuu house when it was being attacked...

The Kuzuryuu household was not under attack. Actually, aside from the bickering in the hallways, it was pretty quiet. Once you tuned out the argument, the atmosphere was perfect for drinking some hot tea and relaxing.

Which was exactly why Peko had invited Nanami over that day. The pink-eyed gamer needed some time to calm down after, well, everything, and was there any better way to unwind than drinking tea and talking about your day?

Peko smiled as she took sips of her tea, listening to Nanami recount her visit to her parents' home. "They were actually really... cry-y?" Nanami said uncertainly, waving her hands about to substitute a proper adjective. "Like, my mom hugged me and wouldn't let go for about twenty minutes. It was sort of weird."

"You have been legally dead for ten years," Peko reminded the other woman. "I mean, yeah, but..." Nanami hesitated, trying to think of the best way to put her thoughts and feelings into words. "I just got used to it... I think. I actually might have forgot about it," She paused, humming to herself thoughtfully. "It was just... strange, you know?"

Peko nodded, pouring another cup for herself as she listened to Nanami speak.

"It was strange to meet people who used to be such huge parts of your life and realize that you never really forgot them," Nanami sighed, before realizing that her words didn't really make a lot of sense. She hurriedly tried to tack an explanation onto the end, scrambling for the right words. "Like, there were times when I saw things and thought of them, but for the most part, I just lived normally? And it's weird to keep comparing them to my memories, because I'm not sure if they changed too much or if they haven't changed at all... at least, that's what I think."

"They changed too much and too little at the same time?" Peko repeated, trying to make sense of the given information.

"It's weird, isn't it?" Nanami didn't expect an answer, staring forlornly into the depths of her tea cup. She looked so small and tired, like she was crumpling in on herself in the pressuring situation.

It was starting to seem like, every time Peko saw the other woman, she was either stoic, furious, or... just exhausted. Like her life had taken such a huge toll on her that she couldn't even muster up the energy to be sad. Even the one smile Peko managed to see was marred by falling tears... That one small grin was more cracked and bittersweet than anything else.

Nanami had already been through enough, hadn't she? She deserved something to smile about. A genuinely joyful grin, one completely untouched by misery and pain.

Peko gulped, steeling herself for her self-imposed mission. Words weren't her strongest point. People weren't her strongest point. But, Peko was determined to overcome her shortcomings, even if only for a moment, because...

Well, she just wanted to see Nanami smile. Did things need to get more complicated than that?

A soft meow came from the door, and Peko's face brightened as an idea came to mind.

She beckoned the tiny, tiny cat towards her, grinning as Tangerine stepped towards her lazily. Her
hand scratched under his chin a bit, before she lifted him into her arms.

"This is Tangerine," Peko declared, holding up the tiny, tiny cat for Nanami to see. The orange kitten looked around curiously, before meowing at Nanami. "He seems happy to meet you."

"Nice to meet you too, Tangerine," Nanami said simply, lifting up a hand to stroke Tangerine behind the ear.

Peko carefully watched Nanami's face for a change in expression, even a slight twitch of her lips... but, the most emotion Nanami showed was a slight furrow in her brow.

"I thought you had three cats," Nanami muttered, sounding a bit... disappointed?

Peko adjusted her grip, hugging Tangerine to her chest with one arm. With her other hand, she waved at the open door, where you could see Fuyuhiko and Natsumi bickering in the hallway. Nanami watched blankly as the pair yelled at each other, her hand continuing to pet Tangerine while Fuyuhiko yelled yelled something about a phone thief.

"It wasn't me!" Natsumi shot back, trying to defend her honour.

"Who else would steal my phone just to send 'SOS' to someone?!" Fuyuhiko demanded, scrunching his face into a scowl.

Nanami Chiaki suddenly understood. The bristling back, the extended claws, the fangs... yup, those two were definitely angry cats.

"What is it with guys and thinking that I'm the root of all their problems?!" Natsumi screamed in frustration. "If I was the one who stole your phone, then trust me, 'SOS' isn't what I would send! That's nowhere near entertaining enough! If it were me, then all your contacts would be getting pick-up lines and memes!"

"For once, your sister isn't the one at fault," A woman's voice called out, amusement in her voice. The twins whirled around, freezing at the sight of their mother. Even Peko seemed to tense up at her sudden appearance, despite being half a room away.

Chiaki ignored that in favour of petting Tangerine.

"U-um, Mom...?" Natsumi mumbled uncertainly.

"Well, it was fun while it lasted, wasn't it?" A smile stretched out across Kuzuryuu Amaterasu's face, one that could almost be mistaken for innocent and friendly... if not for the steel edges lining her words. "I'm looking forward to meeting Miss Medicine."

"Mom, there's no way she would actually come over just because of one text-"

"FUYUHIKO!"

Fuyuhiko was cut off by a flying nurse barreling towards him, grabbing his hands as she checked for injuries. She was babbling faster than a supersonic motorcycle, but there were a few phrases that Nanami could pick out, even when no one else understood. Stuff like 'I got your text, I got so worried since it wasn't in capitals or perfect spelling like you usually do', 'Are you hurt anywhere?! Please tell me you're okay!', 'I ran as fast as I could', and 'I hope you're okay.'

"Your hands are freezing!" Fuyuhiko yelped as he snatched his hands away, before his eye
Mikan was wearing nothing but sneakers and a nightgown that went to her knees. Her entire body was dripping with water and her skin was chilled, and *holy shit, was there frost in her hair?!*

"What the fuck?! Why the hell are you soaking wet?!" Fuyuhiko gaped at Mikan, before hurriedly trying to shove her down the hallway. Mikan didn't resist, letting his warm, warm hands to guide her to... where were they going again?

(Did it really matter, when she was with him?)

"I sorta... ran..." Mikan confessed.

"Why?!" Fuyuhiko demanded in disbelief.

"I thought you were being attacked or kidnapped or something!" Mikan huffed defensively.

"So you *ran through a blizzard* to save me," Fuyuhiko reiterated.

"Er, yeah..."

"Mikan, you are fucking *insane*?!"

"I-is this a trick question?!"

"Why is that your first react- ARGH, who gives a damn?! Go take a bath before you die of hyperthermia!"

"Um, Fuyuhiko, do you mean hypothermia?"

"I don't care which one it is! Just don't fucking die!"

"Well, this ought to be interesting," Miss Kuzuryuu grinned deviously, watching the pair's retreating backs.

(Nanami turned back towards Peko, her pink eyes full of confusion and what *may* have been fear as she simply said, "Your family of cats is weird."

Peko couldn't object to that.)

"Why aren't Hajime and Mikan-chan back yet!?!" Mahiru huffed as she stabbed at an empty box with a box cutter. Irritation dripped from her voice, though there was a not-so-hidden edge of concern to her words...

"Maybe they got caught up in traffic," Hiyoko suggested, before shrugging. "Who knows?"

"Maybe I should go look for them..." Mahiru muttered to herself quietly... though, given that there were only two other people in the room, one with near-superhuman hearing, and neither of them doing anything noisy or obstructive, Mahiru's words were obviously overheard.

"But. Mahiru-chan, if you go out, you'll just get caught up in the storm!" Ibuki pointed out, though she kept her eyes trained on her work. Namely, the very important (and very difficult) task of assembling one of the bed frames. "Pretty please, just stay with us a little bit longer?"

"I can't just let those two go off and die of hypothermia...!" Mahiru exclaimed, before bringing the
blade down on the box once again. And again. And again and again and again. The box was beginning to look less like a box and more like a pincushion. Or paper mache.

"Seriously, you're going to end up stabbing yourself sooner or later if you keep that up," Hiyoko noted apathetically. It wasn't that she couldn't understand why Mahiru would be worried and upset, but... why would you get so worked up if you couldn't do anything about it? It was just a waste of time and energy.

"You're too cruel, Hiyo-chan!" Ibuki called out with a scandalous grin on her face. "Don't you understand the pure feelings of a maiden's heart?! Show some empathy! I wanna hear your encouraging voice, saying stuff like 'everything will be alright'!"

"There's no way some cliche line like that will do anything!" Hiyoko shot back. "We can't do anything but wait around for-"

"Oh, it's a text from Hajime!" Mahiru's joy and relief was palpable as she dropped the box cutter, a smile on her face as she checked her phone-

[so, apparently, mikan is somehow meeting with fuyuhiko's parents]

[not sure how that works, but i thought you would appreciate the news]

"The fated first meeting with your lover's parents...!" Mahiru gasped dramatically, all her anger forgotten in an instant. There was nothing but excitement in her voice as she thought of each and every soap opera-like possibility. "Will they welcome her with open arms?! Or will they threaten her with death and try to keep her away from their only son, because he's emotionally fragile after the death of his first and only previous lover...?!"

"What the hell is she going on about?" Hiyoko asked with an exasperated sigh, turning to Ibuki for answers.

She only got a shrug in return.

One warm bubble bath later, Mikan found a change of clothes at the door of the bathroom. It felt a bit small on her, but it was better than parading around in a towel.

"Good luck," Fuyuhiko's sister whispered to her before opening the dining room door for her. That really wasn't a good sign.

Fuyuhiko sat on one side of the table, his parents sitting opposite him. The room was completely silent, the heavy pressure in the room nearly crushing Mikan as she went over to sit next to Fuyuhiko.

"It is very nice to meet you," Mrs. Kuzuryuu said slowly, even when her eyes were stabbing holes into Mikan's body and Mikan swore she saw a knife in her hands and-

Mikan gulped, her body suddenly stiffening. She felt like she was being screened at an airport with the way she tensed up, even when she knew she didn't do anything wrong. Her breathing slowed, trying to stay as quiet as possible to avoid angering the older woman. Or maybe Mikan was in one of Chiaki's horror games, trying to stay as still as possible to avoid being attacked by a vicious beast.

Then Fuyuhiko took her hand in his. Her eyes went towards the one-eyed man next to her, spotting the warm grin on his face. They exchanged small smiles and silent encouragement, and Mikan
could breathe again. One breath, then another, then one huge sigh escaped from her lips.

The tension bled out of Mikan's shoulders as she looked up, staring Mrs. Kuzuryuu in the eye without flinching away.

She could do it.

Mikan... Mikan wasn't the same woman who trembled and panicked whenever Fuyuhiko was around anymore. She wasn't the same clumsy coward who fainted at the idea of her friend being a Yakuza. Mikan had changed and grew so much since then!

And it was all thanks to the man by her side.

She had grown, because he was with her. She had become someone stronger, someone braver, someone better, because Fuyuhiko was at her side, through the good and the bad. Mikan couldn't turn back to before she met Fuyuhiko, but then again, she didn't want to. Fuyuhiko... Mikan couldn't imagine life without him anymore. She didn't want to, either. Mikan wanted to stay with him, the man who accepted her, who loved her, who helped her become the person she was.

A bright smile appeared on Mikan's face as her mind drifted towards distant memories, remembering screaming and crying and fear. The woman she used to be would be horrified at the idea of being alone in a room with three high-ranking Yakuza members. But, as it was now, Mikan wasn't scared at all.

As long as Fuyuhiko was there with her, then...

Then Mikan would be able to do anything.

Kuzuryuu Atsushi looked nothing like the rest of his family. For one thing, he was actually pretty tall. He towered over Mikan, which, by extension, meant that he looked even bigger when compared to his son. And his daughter. And his wife. And Natsumi. Instead of silky blond locks, he had short black hair that was slowly turning grey. His green eyes felt as piercing as spears, ready to strike at any moment if Mikan did anything wrong. Either he hated her, or he just had a really angry resting face.

Mikan... really couldn't see how someone that intimidating was related to Fuyuhiko at all, at least until she looked over to his mom.

Kuzuryuu Amaterasu looked as youthful as her children with her cute face, flat chest, and (lack of) height. Only the grey streaking through her long golden hair hinted at her true age. On the back of her right hand was a spiraling dragon identical to the one on Fuyuhiko's eyepatch. Nails painted in reds and oranges and yellows like autumn leaves tapped against the wooden table in a hypnotizing rhythm.

You could almost see how it was supposed to go down. The threatening father would viciously interrogate Mikan, while his cute wife tried to calm him down and keep him from mauling the nurse. Mikan would be trembling in her seat, only remaining conscious thanks to the comforting aura of her boyfriend.

But, apparently, in the Kuzuryuu family, intimidation went hand-in-hand with cute faces and tiny bodies.

"Why are you interested in him?" Mrs. Kuzuryuu asked, her eyes as sharp as the knife in her hand as she leaned towards Mikan. Mikan stilled, carefully staring the older woman in the eyes with a
neutral expression. Mikan couldn't show weakness, not in front of a snake who would strike at any vulnerability she saw...! "Money? Power? Fame?"

"None of the above, ma'am," Mikan answered simply. Fuyuhiko gave her hand a squeeze, letting her know that it was a good answer.

"So, you wouldn't leave him, even if I offered you five billion yen?" Mrs. Kuzuryuu reached underneath the table, propping a briefcase on top of the wood. She undid the latch, causing the lid to fall open, countless bundles of money spilling out onto the table.

"Are you seriously trying to bribe my girlfriend into breaking up with me?!" Fuyuhiko demanded incredulously, staring at his mother in disbelief.

"Yes."

Mr. Kuzuryuu cleared his throat, finally choosing to enter the discussion. He had an air of authority around him, one that gave his every action enough weight to silence the room. Whenever he spoke, you listened. Whatever he asked, you would do. He inspired unquestionable, unwavering, unthinking loyalty and obedience in others, simply by existing...

"Rasu, you know it won't count if you bribe her, right?"

...which only made it even more ridiculous when his words turned out to not be incredibly important. It only got worse when the cutesy nickname for his wife was thrown into the mix.

"Wait, what doesn't count?" Fuyuhiko hissed, trying to grab his parents' attention and get some damn answers.

"I won't accept it!" Mrs. Kuzuryuu shot back, scowling at her husband. "I refuse to accept it!"

"Um...?" Mikan turned to Fuyuhiko, hoping to get an explanation for... well, everything. Unfortunately, Fuyuhiko was just as lost as she was.

"It's only five hundred yen," Mr. Kuzuryuu offered, trying to placate his wife.

"No! It's probably a fake girlfriend to cover up his dates with his real boyfriend!" Mrs. Kuzuryuu insisted with a huff. "There's still a chance that I'm right and he's gay!"

"Were you betting on this?!" Fuyuhiko screamed, gaping at his parents.

"Yes," Mr. Kuzuryuu nodded.

"I am not a fake girlfriend!" Mikan pouted, offended by the idea.

"Oh, shut it, fakey!" Mrs. Kuzuryuu snapped, pointing an accusatory finger at Mikan. "You're probably being paid a million a minute to keep up that act!"

"I am not bribing her!" Fuyuhiko proclaimed, right before Mikan leaned over, squeezing his hand.

Mikan's eyes were firmly fixed on Mrs. Kuzuryuu's face as she lifted her and Fuyuhiko's intertwined fingers for the older woman to see. She let their hands fall on top of the table, her right arm wrapping around Fuyuhiko's bicep.

Mrs. Kuzuryuu's eye began twitching as Mikan rested her chin on Fuyuhiko's shoulder.

Mikan grinned innocently in response, right before untangling their fingers, turning her attention
It was almost like Mikan was taunting Mrs. Kuzuryuu as she gently raised her right hand to Fuyuhiko's rapidly-reddening cheek. Her every move was slow and deliberate, making sure that Fuyuhiko's parents knew what she was doing.

"Mikan, what are you doing?" Fuyuhiko hissed quietly, trying to look intimidating. Even when his girlfriend was tracing hearts on his cheeks and staring at him adoringly. Yeah, it didn't work much.

"Proving my love for you, or something like that," Mikan said simply, before kissing his forehead. She gave him a bright smile, and, unlike the one she gave his parents, it was actually genuine.

"Why, do you not like it?"

"I-I didn't say that!" Fuyuhiko snapped, bright red.

Mikan giggled, before beaming at Fuyuhiko. "That's good. Stay still, okay?"

Fuyuhiko fell silent, letting Mikan place her hands on his face without protest. She held his head in place as she continued pressing kisses to his bright red face, her eyes always checking for a reaction from his parents.

Painted nails were clawing at the wooden table, while Mrs. Kuzuryuu's other hand twitched around the grip of her knife.

Mr. Kuzuryuu simply nodded in approval, which Mikan took as a sign to keep going.

"Fuyuhiko, I love you more than anything," Mikan smiled, pressing another kiss to his forehead. "You're so precious to me," His eyelashes fluttered a bit when Mikan kissed his remaining eye.

Mrs. Kuzuryuu was yanking at her hair roughly, scowling furiously at Mikan's brazen display. Her lips were trembling from the effort required to keep herself from screeching profanities at Mikan. She looked like she was on the verge of stabbing someone or having a villainous breakdown. Or both.

Mikan giggled a bit to herself, knowing that she was totally winning.

'It's time for the final blow!' Mikan thought to herself, trying to psych herself up.

"I-" Kiss.

"Love-" Kiss.

"You-" Kiss.

"So-" Kiss.

"Much!" Mikan wrapped her arms around Fuyuhiko's shoulders, pulling him as close as possible before pressing their lips together.

Mrs. Kuzuryuu screamed, stabbing her blade into the table. Her husband patted her on the shoulder in an attempt to calm her down.

It didn't work much.

"That's probably enough work for today..." Ibuki groaned tiredly, shoving the one-fourth-
assembled bed frame away from her.

"You barely did anything," Hiyoko stated.

"I don't want to hear that from you, Miss 'my job is to hold this box for forty minutes'!" Ibuki huffed in response.

"Oh shut the hell up, you asshole bitch daughter of a demon singer!"

"What does that even mean?!" Ibuki wailed in a mix of shock and confusion.

"It means that you should shut up and-"

"I should probably be getting back to my place," Mahiru declared, trying to break up the argument without actually butting in. Or maybe she was just trying to escape. She stood, dusting off her legs before facing the other two women. "Remember, I'm just down the hall if you need help."

"Got it," Hiyoko nodded, right before Mahiru shut the door behind her.

"I can't believe you fucking did that," Fuyuhiko whispered scandalously, his face redder than a bundle of tomatoes.

"Well, I had to get your mom to believe us somehow, right?" Mikan offered with a dorky grin.

"She could have stabbed you for pissing her off."

Mikan hesitated, before remembering that yes, Mrs. Kuzuryuu had been holding a knife, and yes, Mikan may or may not have been putting herself in danger with that stunt. Somehow, Mikan didn't really care much about that last fact.

Was that confidence or just stupidity? Why wouldn't she care about the fact that her life was in danger? What could have p-

Mikan suddenly remembered, the realization hitting her like a bucket of ice water to the head.

She... she was just so angry at the implications of Mrs. Kuzuryuu's words. Mikan hated the idea that her love could be bought, that her feelings for Fuyuhiko were fake, that she would be lying if she said she was in love with Fuyuhiko...

"I know she could have hurt me," Mikan answered calmly, giving Fuyuhiko a serene smile. "Maybe even kill me. But... that's not important."

"What the fuck," Fuyuhiko said flatly, before scowling at Mikan. "Put more value in your fucking life, Mikan!"

"T-that's not what I meant!" Mikan declared. She floundered a bit as she tried to put her feelings into words. "I just... wanted to prove that I really did love you. To you and to her."

Fuyuhiko froze, staring at Mikan with a wide eye. His cheeks darkened as he averted his gaze from Mikan's face.

"You don't have anything to prove to me," Fuyuhiko mumbled. "I already know that you love me."

"I know that you love me too, but..." A bashful smile appeared on Mikan's face as she turned a bit red. "It's nice to be reminded of that, right?"
"You're too damn embarrassing sometimes..." Fuyuhiko whispered under his breath.

"Is that a good thing or a bad thing?" Mikan asked carefully, staring at Fuyuhiko curiously.

Fuyuhiko paused, before grinning slightly at Mikan. "Definitely a good thing. After all, it's you."

Mikan gaped at Fuyuhiko, her jaw dropping from shock. Fuyuhiko tensed up, his face turning an even darker red.

"S-shut up!" Fuyuhiko snapped before Mikan could say anything. "It just slipped out, okay?!"

Mikan frowned thoughtfully, before beginning to make strange shapes with her hands. She was completely silent the entire time.

Fuyuhiko watched as Mikan pointed both her fingers towards her bright smile, then make a series of complicated hand signs that ended with her pushing her palms towards him, though she didn't make contact. Realization hit him upside the head like a baseball bat.

"Why are you playing charades?!" Fuyuhiko demanded incredulously.

Mikan pointed at him, then, with her other hand, pinched at the edge of her lips, making a quick zipping motion over her mouth.

"I wasn't serious when I told you to shut up!" Fuyuhiko retorted, easily understanding what Mikan was trying to convey.

Mikan just shrugged in return, before adding more weird, incomprehensible gestures.

"Seriously, what are you even trying to say?!"

Mikan paused in thought. She pointed her finger at herself, then made a heart shape with both her hands. There was a beaming smile on her face as she held her hands out to him, the message completely obvious.

"Oh my god..." Fuyuhiko covered his bright red face with his hands, unable to say anything in response.

"Hey, Hiyo-chaaaaaaaaan!" Ibuki skipped towards the blonde, leaning over Hiyoko's face. Hiyoko jumped away from the sudden movement, though Ibuki didn't notice. She was too busy pouting. "Are you mad at me or something?"

"Why the hell would you think that?" Hiyoko huffed, crossing her arms over her chest. "I'm not mad."

"Yup, you're totally mad," Ibuki sighed despondently, her pout growing even more exaggerated. "Your attitude is even worse than usual! Did I do something wrong, Hiyo-chan?"

"I'm not fucking mad!" Hiyoko snapped. Her glare was so intimidating that Ibuki would have withered away from fright... if she weren't completely unaffected by it. "Seriously, shut up! Your voice is annoying me!"

"It's as clear as the water in a fairy fountain!" Ibuki declared with a triumphant grin. "You're furious, enraged, completely infuriated!"

"Congrats on knowing how to use a thesaurus," Hiyoko rolled her eyes, unimpressed by Ibuki's
vocabulary. "What kind of loser adds references to their favourite games in everyday conversations anyways?"

"What kind of nerd pretends not to like stuff they love to look cool?" Ibuki shot back cheerfully. Her words, her bright smile, and her cheerful tone didn't match up at all.

"Look cool?!" Hiyoko repeated, staring at Ibuki in disbelief. "In front of you?! What would be the point?!"

"Yeah!" Ibuki nodded. "I'm so cool that I'm impossible to impress that way!"

"No! Never! Impossible!"

"You can't deny my coolness, Hiyo-chan!" Ibuki sang.

"I'm denying it!" Hiyoko screamed. "I'll deny it to my grave! I'll deny it until the end of fucking time!"

"But if you're in denial, then you're refusing to accept reality!" Ibuki laughed joyfully. "I'm the cool one! I win! Check and mate, Hiyo-chan!"

"Oh shut up," Hiyoko groaned, even when her cheeks were slowly turning red. "You're too annoying sometimes..."

"You're only saying that because I won and you didn't!" Ibuki exclaimed, puffing out her chest with pride. Another huge, beaming grin was plastered all over her face, one that made Hiyoko smile too.

It... it was really weird. Whenever Ibuki smiled, everyone else in the room did too. Whenever she laughed, everyone would just start feeling happy. Ibuki had such a huge effect on other people. She was like the shining sun, radiating warmth and joy everywhere she went.

So, why did that idea make Hiyoko's stomach twist and turn and tie itself into knots? She was obviously okay with just... being with Ibuki. Ibuki had such a huge effect on other people. She was like the shining sun, radiating warmth and joy everywhere she went.

Wait. Jealous?

"Hiyoko-chan, you okay there?" Ibuki waved her hand in front of Hiyoko's face, startling the blonde.

"Shut up," Hiyoko snapped automatically, gritting her teeth together.

Hiyoko didn't have a reason to be jealous. She wasn't jealous. No, there was no way!

Her mind chose the absolute worst time to bring up the incident from a week ago, when Hiyko didn't just mentally scream at that Kuzuryuu bitch, but she also tried to punch Ibuki's brother because she thought he was a stalker. But that wasn't proof that she was jealous. No, Hiyoko was just being protective of Ibuki! She was being a good friend! Actually, she was an exceptional friend! Saionji Hiyoko was the most incredible friend to walk the face of the earth!

(She was not in denial. Shut up.)

"You're still looking super grumpy," Ibuki noted. Hiyoko flinched. Wasn't Ibuki supposed to be
blind to her inner turmoil or something like that?!

Ibuki just giggled a bit, before giving the ex-dancer a bright grin. "Come on! Let's do something fun and erase that frowny-face!"

"You sound like a fucking kid," Hiyoko retorted, using annoyance to cover up the bubbly feelings in her stomach.

Ibuki was like the sun. Every smile, every laugh, every cheerful word made Hiyoko's face grow warm and her heart stammer.

Hiyoko hated it.

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**Bonus**

'Is it really that easy to trick Miss Medicine?' Natsumi wondered, staring at Fuyuhiko's phone. She typed out a message, snickering to herself before sending it.

[Want to see what I look like under this suit? ;)]

The reply was immediate.

[YOU ARE NOT FUYUHIKO]

[WHO ARE YOU]

Natsumi dropped the phone, staring at it in horror. She could sense the malevolence and bloodlust behind those words! How the hell did Miss Medicine do that?!

[AN SWERME IMPO STE R]

Natsumi hesitantly grabbed the phone off the floor, her fingers cautiously tapping at the letters.

[I'm Natsumi! It was just a prank!]

[Oh.]

[You really should return Fuyuhiko's phone. I was almost tricked for a second!]

[You were?]

The blonde grinned to herself. If she was so good at impersonating Fuyuhiko that his girlfriend was almost fooled, then a whole new world of possibilities opened up! She could flirt with everyone under Fuyuhiko's name convincingly! She could-

[Yeah, except for the part where I've already seen Fuyuhiko shirtless, so there's no reason for him to send that as a pick-up line. And he normally doesn't use smiley faces. And even if he did, he would never use a winking face, since blinking and winking are sort of the same thing for him. Plus, that's his right eye closed in the face, and he doesn't even HAVE a right eye to close anymore.]

'...doesn't that just mean I suck at impersonating Fuyuhiko?!' Natsumi gaped at the phone like she had just been slapped by a wet fish.
"And that's how you divide a really big number!" Ibuki beamed at the crowd of elementary students surrounding her. "Be sure to ask if you need any help, got it?"

She let the children start their work, wandering the math camp's classroom to see if anyone needed help. Her eyes skimmed over answers and equations as she passed by, absentmindedly wondering if there was anything else she needed to-

"Woah!" Ibuki gasped, her eyes widening at the blue-haired kid's sheet. It was already finished, even though the group started like a minute ago! "Wow, you must be great at math!"

"Any imbecile would be able to do this much," The young child snapped, glaring at her with icy blue eyes. "It's a trivial matter for me."

"Hey, hey, aren't'cha being an itty bitty witty bit mean?" Ibuki pouted, leaning over on the table to look the child in the eye. "Just cuz you get it doesn't mean the others will. You have to be a bit nicer!"

"Stop talking like a child," The kid ordered, sneering at the older girl in disgust. "I don't see how someone like you could ever be given authority over such a large group."

"To be fair, I'm a counselor-in-training," Ibuki explained, before grinning at the lil blueberry baby. "I'm just learning the ropes!"

" Couldn't they have found a more..." The baby blueberry- Ibuki's eyes flitted down to his name tag, reading the neat script- Nagisa paused, trying to find the right word. "...suitable authority figure?"

"Nope! You're stuck with me!" Ibuki smiled.

"How aggravating..." Nagisa grumbled under his breath. "I heard that, Mr. Grouchy-Pants!"

"Mr- What?!" Nagisa gaped at the counselor-in-training in shock, completely blindsided by the nickname.

"It's your new nickname!" Ibuki winked at the kid, a bright grin on her face.

"Never call me that again!" Nagisa screamed.

"Hey, Mr. Grouchy-Pants!" Ibuki called out, waving her arm back and forth as she skipped up to the reading child's corner. He sat away from where the others were playing with bright toys, stacks of books piled around him. It was almost like a fortress, protecting him from having to interact with the other children.

Nagisa shot her a scowl over the top of his book, but when he spoke, his voice didn't have nearly as much venom in it as he would like. "Are you ever going to stop calling me that?"

"Nope," Ibuki said the word with a pop, before kneeling in front of him. "Whatcha reading?"

"Frankenstein, by Mary Shelley," Nagisa stated.
“Because Halloween is coming up?” Ibuki asked curiously.

“No! It is a fascinating work that delves into the value put subtle themes in our society, the unwanted burden of-”

Ibuki leaned closer, gasping when she spotted it. “There’s a comic book hidden in there!”

“N-no, there isn’t!” Nagisa slammed the book shut, before tossing it to the side. His face was pale as he looked up to Ibuki, panic in his eyes. “You didn’t see anything!”

“You okay there, Nagi-chan?” Ibuki asked, staring at Nagisa in concern.

“Please don’t tell my parents…!” Nagisa begged tearfully, choking up at the thought. “If they find out that I was slacking in my studies…!”

“My lips are sealed,” Ibuki promised with a small smile. She grabbed at his hand, moving to stand up. Nagisa looked at her quizzically as she pulled him up with both hands.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m going to be the big bad witch who forces you to play until you smile!” Ibuki declared, placing her hands on her hips as she puffed her chest out. “Either that, or I’m going to read comic books with you. Whichever one works!”

“I prefer the comic books,” Nagisa huffed.

“Then I’ll race you to the comic book section!”

“H-hey!” Nagisa gaped as Ibuki suddenly took off, before chasing after her. “Don’t just leave me behind like that!”

“Haha, I won’t!” Ibuki called out as she ran. “But you better do your best to keep up, Nagi-chan!”

“Get back here!”

The pair were practically inseparable after that day, even after Ibuki’s voluntary work at the math tutoring camp ended.

Even though, legally, Nagisa wasn’t related to them at all, he just freeloaded at their house, even though there was no blood between them, they were a true brother-sister team.
Love at First Fight

Every time the pair passed by someone in the hallways, that someone would stop and stare. But even though Kotoko was A) amazingly popular, B) beautiful and lovely, and C) cute and cheerful, she wasn't the magnet drawing everyone's gaze to her. No, that was Nagisa's doing.

Maybe it was the fact that he sort of towered over his pink-haired companion, something that Kotoko pouted over a lot. She still remembered when they were kids, and how she would always rub her early growth spurts in his face, gloating about the extra centimeter or two she had gained. Even though Nagisa was relatively gracious about his height, that didn't mean that Kotoko liked being a head shorter than him! He was like a giraffe. Or the Burj Khalifa.

Oh, speaking of tall things, did you know that the phrase 'telling tall tales' came from the fact that they exaggerated the stories, like a drink too tall to swallow? Like, that one story about a giant who created the Great Lakes with his footsteps! There's no way that could be real, right? They made him larger than life! But, actually, the tallest guy ever was almost three meters tall, so maybe there was a shred of truth to it? Though, there's no way Nagisa would grow that tall, because if he did, Kotoko would punch him for making her neck hurt every time she tried to look up at him.

Still, as much as his height annoyed Kotoko sometimes, it was useful. He could reach the top of shelves for her, give her piggyback rides (Though that was only if Kotoko bugged him a lot, and it was easier to get Hajime to do it), and it was really fun to try to climb up his back and tug on his hair spikes. Plus, there was a certain aesthetic appeal when you saw a pair with a huge height difference, Kotoko could admit that... huh, maybe that was why people were staring.

Or maybe it was the huge, swollen bruise on Nagisa's right cheek.

A Somewhat Long, Segmented Flashback to Explain How The Current Situation Came About.

"What the fucking hell were you thinking?!!" Hiyoko demanded, glaring at Mikan furiously... even though it was obvious that she had been worried. "Why would you do something that stu-"

"Be polite, Hiyo-chan!" Ibuki kindly reminded the blonde, and by kindly reminded, we mean nudge her in the back of the wheelchair. A soft nudge, of course.

"Shut up for the rest of your life!" Hiyoko snapped back, almost hissing at the singer.

Ibuki ignored the harsh words, instead turning to Mikan, trying her best to put on an authoritative stare. Surprisingly enough, Ibuki was pretty good at being serious when she wanted to.

"Why did you do something that dangerous?" Ibuki asked pleadingly, her eyes watering a bit as she looked Mikan in the eye. "What if you didn't come back? We were really..." Ibuki sighed, a morose frown appearing on her face. "We were really worried about you."

"I'm fine now, so you don't have to worry!" Mikan exclaimed frantically. "It's alright!"

"What were you even doing?" Hiyoko sneered at the brunette, almost making Mikan flinch from the anger behind her eyes. It wasn't like Hiyoko was mad at her for getting Ibuki upset or anything.

"I thought Fuyuhiko was in trouble," Mikan answered, an awkward smile stretching across her lips as she remembered the rest. "But then it turned out to be a trick to meet his parents..."
An undignified sound of shock emerged from the other two as they gaped at Mikan with wide eyes.

"That's what Mahiru-chan was talking about!" Ibuki realized.

"Did you get stabbed anywhere?!" Hiyoko asked, already inspecting the nurse for injuries.

"Er... no, not really..." Mikan chuckled uncertainly, not wanting to lie, but also not wanting to make her friends worry. "His mom kinda... hates me?"

"What the hell did you do?! Did you stutter too mu- OW!" Hiyoko turned to glare at Ibuki, her mouth falling open in a silent 'why would you do that?!'.

Ibuki just gave Hiyoko an innocent smile and a wiggle-waggle of her index finger, like she was taking notes from elementary school teachers on how to chastise the blonde. Probably her way of saying, 'every time you're a jerk to someone who isn't me, I'll pinch your cheek. Really hard.'

"I might have... kissed Fuyuhiko in front of her. Just to prove that we were dating," Mikan confessed with a sheepish grin.

"...huh? HUH?!!" The look on Ibuki and Hiyoko's faces could best be described as the result of taking surprise, joy, confusion, excitement, bafflement, and consternation and putting them in a blender. Then, you would forget to put on the lid, switch it on, and create a mess of emotions splattered all over your walls and counters and probably stain everything.

"Kissing?! You two are dating?!" Ibuki screamed.

"Since when?!" Hiyoko demanded.

"Was it because of the beach?! Did my plan work?!"

"I told you the beach plan would work!" Hiyoko laughed triumphantly, grinning at Ibuki.

"No, you didn't!" Ibuki whined. "You told me to shut up when I suggested it and said I was an insane shrieking harpy!"

"You're always an insane shrieking harpy!" Hiyoko retorted.

"Rude! So rude that you'd get a book to the face if I weren't so forgiving and kind!"

"Forgiving?! Kind?! Since when?!" Hiyoko gaped at Ibuki, disbelief obvious in her face.

"Since the moment I was brought into this world!" Ibuki proclaimed, puffing her chest out with pride.

"Bullshit! Lies! TREACHERY!"

Mikan watched as the sudden barrage of questions derailed into another argument, belatedly realizing that she forgot to tell her friends of her relationship. And that her friends were weird.

Meanwhile, Fuyuhiko was facing his own interrogation... sort of.

"How did the meeting go?" Peko inquired carefully, staring at Fuyuhiko in concern. Nanami pushed her untouched tea cup towards him. If she wasn't drinking it, he could have it. He probably needed it too.
Fuyuhiko didn't touch the cup either. His elbows were propped up on the table, his hands covering up to cover his face. He couldn't look either of them in the eye, instead focusing his stare on the table. He was just inspecting the surface for cracks, alright?! It wasn't an excuse to avoid looking up and revealing his red cheeks, got it?!

"If Mom asks you to kill Mikan, you can't say yes," Fuyuhiko grumbled, his voice a bit muffled.

Nanami stared at the blond in a strange mix of worry, disappointment, and irritation. She addressed him with a quiet voice, though Fuyuhiko had a feeling that she may have been trying to threaten him.

"What did you do?"

"Why are you assuming it was my fault?!" Fuyuhiko snapped automatically, glaring at the pink-eyed woman.

"Are you saying that it's Mikan's fault?" Nanami shot back, narrowing her eyes at the Yakuza heir. Her expression might have retained her trademark emotionless stare, but she couldn't quite hide the accusatory tone to her words.

"Wha- no!" Fuyuhiko rebutted the idea without thinking, before faltering. "Sort of...?" He paused to think, then swore under his breath. "Shut up."

"It's complicated," Peko answered on her brother's behalf.

"No kidding," A sigh escaped from Fuyuhiko's lips as he scowled. "Mom and dad had a bet on whether I was gay or not."

"Who won?" Peko asked curiously.

"Dad did. Mom's pissed at Mikan because she lost," He blushed a bit when he quietly added, "It didn't really help when Mikan started kissing me in front of them just to piss them off..."

"So it wasn't your fault," Nanami hummed to herself, raising a hand to her chin as she thought. "Or maybe it was...?"

"Why do you keep blaming me?!" The blond demanded, slamming his fists on the table to properly glare at the pink-eyed gamer.

"It's kinda hard to imagine Mikan doing that sort of thing..." Nanami said simply. "She's always been shy, and she would do the weirdest things if you just asked her to... so it's not really a stretch to imagine you getting her to kiss you."

"...what?" Fuyuhiko stared at Nanami flatly, before the implications of her words suddenly smacked him in the head. "You think I- what?!"

"That is completely impossible," Peko declared resolutely. "Fuyuhiko is easily embarrassed. He wouldn't be able to ask Tsumiki to kiss him no matter how hard he tried."

"Then maybe he just... started kissing her?" Nanami suggested, before shrugging. "I mean, he does seem like the guy who does that sort of thing out of nowhere..."

"Is this seriously what you people think of me?!" Fuyuhiko screamed, his head turning from Nanami to Peko and back again.
"Pretty much, yeah," Nanami nodded, making Fuyuhiko groan and slap a hand to his forehead.

"We've been dating since... before the beach..." Mikan confessed, before bracing herself for the pair's reaction.

Ibuki froze in place. Her smile, her posture... everything was perfectly preserved by her petrification. A soft, dying whine emerged from her throat, like the sound of air escaping from a hole in a tire. She didn't move a single muscle, even when Hiyoko nudged her in the stomach.

"I think you broke her," Hiyoko noted as she poked and prodded at Ibuki's side. The rock star never responded, not even swatting Hiyoko's hands away like you might expect.

"What are we supposed to do...?" Mikan wondered, waving a hand in front of Ibuki's face. Ibuki didn't even blink.

"Got an instruction manual somewhere? We might need to replace her batteries..."

Fortunately, before Mikan and Hiyoko could start disassembling Ibuki, a knock rang out against their door. Ibuki immediately jolted back to life, like she wasn't a Medusa victim just five seconds before. Hiyoko and Mikan watched blankly as Ibuki bounced over to the door, opening it with a dramatic 'HELLO THERE!'

"Nice to see you too, Ibuki," Hajime said simply, completely unaffected by her energetic introduction. Years of dealing with his friends' bullshit had pretty much made him immune to antics. Unless he was annoyed, then he wouldn't be immune to antics and shenanigans.

"Ooooooooh! Whatdya have there, Hajime-chan?! A gift box?!" Ibuki asked excitedly, hopping from one leg to another in glee.

Hiyoko elbowed Mikan, getting her a confused look from the nurse. The blonde silently nudged her head towards the door, repeating the motion until Mikan's eyes widened with understanding.

Mikan nodded as she wheeled Hiyoko over to the door, the pair quietly listening to Ibuki and Hajime's conversation.

"I just thought this would be a good time to give this to Mikan," Hajime confessed, before reaching over and giving the box to Mikan. Ibuki and Hiyoko watched eagerly as Mikan opened the box, revealing a...

"A suit...?" Mikan looked at the clothing curiously. It was a simple black tuxedo, folded along with a white dress shirt. A deep purple tie was rolled up next to it.

"Well, you already met his parents, right?" Hajime offered with a small grin. "You're basically part of the family already, so I thought that we might as well make it official."

"So that's why you were asking for Mikan-chan's measurements!" Ibuki gasped, turning to Hiyoko.

"He wasn't being a creep after all!" Hiyoko added, giving Ibuki a gossipy grin. "He's just disgustingly sentimental!"

"I am so very deeply hurt by your words. Ouch," Hajime rolled his eyes, giving the pair a flat stare.

"Sarcasm!" Ibuki called out cheerfully. "That's always fun!"

"I legitimately can't tell if you're being sincere or not," Hiyoko stated, staring at Ibuki weirdly.
Ibuki just giggled in return.

"Thank you so much, Hajime-kun!" Mikan beamed at the taller brunette, hugging the gift to her chest, box and all. "I'm going to go try it on!"

"Oooooooh, that's totally gonna look G-R-E-A-T on you!" Ibuki cheered.

"You have to let me take pictures!" Hiyoko grinned excitedly, before snickering to herself. "Imagine how much cash your boyfriend would give me for pics of that!"

"Huh?" Mikan stared at Hiyoko in confusion. "Why would you need to give him pictures? I'm planning on showing my body to him anyways."

"What," Hajime said blankly, right before Mikan spun around on her heel, tossing the box over her shoulder. Hiyoko had to almost lean out of her wheelchair, but she still caught it.

The nurse hummed to herself as she practically skipped towards the bathroom, the confused gazes of her friends following her every step of the way.

Pekoyama Peko was not one for words. Really. She was blunt, depended on films for advice on dealing with emotional people, and had a resting You could die in front of me and I would not care’ face. But, out of all the social stumbles Peko had faced in her life so far, she was obviously facing the worst, most awful, terrible, heinous blunder yet.

It started with innocent intentions. Peko just wanted to take the chance to see Nanami smile, maybe cheer up her brother while she was at it. And, you know, break the somewhat awkward silence that had fallen over their tea party. That was all.

She vaguely remembered a mandatory reading book from her high school years say that the road to hell was paved with good intentions. That quote was pretty much all she bothered to remember, given that the rest of the story was bland and boring to Peko. She didn't even recall anything else about it, other than her begrudging attempts to read it and the quotation that came back to haunt her. The memory served no purpose in Peko's mind, other than to torment her in her well-meaning misstep.

And Peko really did mean well. She was going to propose a fun activity that both Nanami and Fuyuhiko could enjoy.

But then, she ran into a bit of a roadblock. While Peko knew what sort of things Fuyuhiko liked- sweets, reading history and mythology books, and watching movies, to name a few- Peko had nothing but a vague idea of what Nanami was interested in. Something about video games for eight hours and not sleeping.

Now, the safest option would be to step where she knew there was stable ground. Peko could easily suggest something that Fuyuhiko liked and leave it at that. But then, she risked accidentally excluding Nanami. And if Nanami was excluded, she would probably get bored and leave, and Peko would lose her chance to make her smile. Peko didn't want to sacrifice one's needs to please the other... so she decided to take a careful step into the uncharted territory of Nanami's interests.

Peko could easily ask what Nanami was interested in, but... if Peko had learned one thing about Nanami, it was that the pink-eyed woman was defensive. Nanami blocked most of the swordswoman's attempts to get to know her. The only significant thing that Peko had learned about her was divulged without prompting. Peko didn't want to make Nanami tense up and withdraw, but she didn't really have a way to get Nanami to talk about herself without prompting her to do so...
Which left what, exactly? Where was the middle ground between boring Nanami and accidentally agitating her? Peko couldn't just-

The idea hit her like a baseball bat to the head.

Peko was the middle ground. She could- She could introduce her interests to Fuyuhiko and Nanami!

Er, well, Fuyuhiko already knew what she was interested in, but it would be a good way to get Nanami involved while also not alienating Fuyuhiko. And that was great.

Except... Peko liked kendo, brewing tea, and cats. They already had tea, and the attempt to induce joy in Nanami with Tangerine's fluffiness failed. Somehow. Which left kendo.

How was one supposed to share kendo with a non-practitioner? It would probably be a bit weird to just whip out her sword and show it to Nanami... Peko would just end up looking like a weird cosplayer.

The only other way to share her love of her art with Nanami would be to show her firsthand how skilled she was. To prove herself as a worthy combatant.

The words escaped her lips before Peko could realize what a horrible idea it was, leaving Nanami and Fuyuhiko both staring at her in shock.

Yes, Pekoyama Peko, swordswoman extraordinaire, assassin for the Kuzuryuu family, and proud cat owner, somehow managed to accidentally challenge Nanami Chiaki to a duel.

The suit was way too comfortable. Mikan would have thought she was wearing pyjamas instead, if she suddenly started owning black and white onesies. Like a panda. She laughed a bit at the idea of looking like a panda in her suit, before the thought soured, making her stomach drop. She probably just looked silly. Mikan couldn't even tie the tie right, she just looked like a kid playing dress-up, she-!

"Whoa! You're really beautiful, Mikan!" Ibuki squealed, putting a small blush on Mikan's face.

"Damn," Hiyoko gaped at the sight, before smiling slightly. "You look incredible."

"U-um, thank you," Mikan stammered, trying her best to remain composed, even when her face felt redder than a bloodstained bucket of strawberries.

"Does it fit?" Hajime asked. "If it doesn't, I can just pay Ibuki to redo the work."

"HEY!" Ibuki gasped at the taller brunette in faux-offense. "Why would you need to pay me?! I would totally be glad to do that sort of stuff for free!"

"It's a good thing you don't need to do that," Mikan beamed at the trio, before doing a little twirl. She reveled in the feel of the soft fabric against her skin, a tiny giggle bubbling forth from her stomach. Her tie spun with her, the fabric loosely hanging from her neck like a coat hook. "It fits perfectly!"

"Here, let me tie that for you," Ibuki stepped forward, tugging the cloth off. Her nimble fingers worked quickly, deftly tying a fancy layered knot together- because, hey, Mikan deserved something pretty to show off, right?
She grinned proudly as she stepped away from her work, before pausing. Ibuki stared at Mikan's clothes blankly for a few seconds, before blurting out exactly what she was thinking.

"Hajime-chan, you should have waited a few months to give it to Mikan-chan!" Ibuki whined. "Then you could give it to her on her birthday and it would be a birthday suit!"

Another flat 'what' escaped from Hajime's lips, just as Hiyoko let out an ear-splitting shriek.

"NO! NO, YOU ARE NOT DOING THAT!" Hiyoko screamed, her voice getting even louder when Mikan tried to calm her down. Mikan, unsurprisingly enough, failed in her attempts.

"Why are you getting so mad?!" Ibuki threw her hands up defensively, her expression equal parts surprised, baffled, and confused.

"Do you really have no idea what you're talking about?!" Hiyoko demanded, her nails digging into the lid of the box. She looked like she was either on the verge of ripping it in half (somehow) or devouring it (somehow). Or both.

"Do you have something against puns?" Ibuki asked innocently, earning a wide-eyed stare from the other three.

"It...it's an innuendo," Hajime started, trying to explain to Ibuki. He hesitated at the look of bewilderment on the rock star's face, uncertainly adding, "You do know what an innuendo is, right?"

"Um... is it something you, uh, eat?" Ibuki offered awkwardly.

Hiyoko leaned over to Mikan, poking her in the stomach. The pair exchanged stares, managing to commune without words in a way that childhood and/or best friends or lovers could do.

Mikan turned towards Ibuki, leaning towards the rock star's face. Ibuki looked more confused than anything, especially when Mikan gave her a sultry grin.

"I love people with large..." Mikan paused, licking her lips. "Lexicons. Would you show me yours?"

"Flabbergasted, turmoil, tumult, discomfiture, euphoria, jubilation, joviality, vivacity, predilection, delirium..." Ibuki listed off, counting the words on her fingers. She grinned when she reached ten fingers, squeezing her hands into fists to start over with, "Oooooooooooooooh, and ardor!"

Hiyoko slapped her hand against her forehead with a groan.

In an apartment on the other side of town, Nagisa snapped his pencil in half, his eyes widening with horror.

"Nagisa? You okay there?" Kotoko inquired, turning from her homework-turned-sketch-page to her friend.

"Someone is trying to corrupt Ibuki's innocence," Nagisa declared solemnly.

"...you are way too overprotective," Kotoko stated, arching an eyebrow at Nagisa's antics.

"Enough!" Hiyoko screamed, her eye twitching at Ibuki's huge vocabulary. She pointed a finger at Hajime, a tired sigh leaving her lips. "You try!"
"Me?!" Hajime gaped at the blonde.

"Yes, you!" Hiyoko ordered, brandishing the box's lid at him like a weapon. "Before I bash you in the head!"

Kotoko's face fell, sensing the same mysterious, little sibling power that Nagisa possessed.

"They're trying to drag Big Bro Hajime into their weird corruption ritual!" Kotoko announced in a panic.

"What sort of depravity are they forcing upon our big siblings?!" Nagisa fretted at all the awful possibilities, each one more terrible than the last.

Because... Hajime wasn't like Ibuki. Unlike the rock star, Hajime most definitely knew what sex was, beyond the concept of 'lovers plus wet minus clothes equals baby' that existed in Ibuki's mind. So the villains weren't corrupting Ibuki by showing her porn or something... And if it was Ibuki and Hajime, then... oh no.

The... the only way for both Ibuki and Hajime to be ruined at the same time... would be to tell them. To tell them the truth about their cute little siblings.

Kotoko grabbed at Nagisa's arm, pulling him up with her as she stood. "We have to save our big siblings! It's our duty as the 'Super Cute Protective Little Sibling Squad'!"

Nagisa nodded along seriously, ready to do anything to protect the life he had made for himself with his new family.

Kotoko had the fortune of an older brother with connections to the Yakuza. Hajime probably wouldn't even think twice if he learned what Kotoko had done to join him. But Ibuki...

If the sinking feeling in Nagisa's stomach was right, and a horrible, horrible person was telling Ibuki of what he did...! She would hate him! She would throw him out on the streets! She would... she would...!

Nagisa couldn't let that happen, he couldn't, he couldn't, he couldn't! Ibuki was the one who had saved him, she had extended kindness to him when no one else would! She was safety and happiness and laughter in a sea of vicious, untrustworthy adults! Her family had given him a home! If Nagisa lost that, then all his guilt, all his regret, all the planning and plotting and poisoning would be for nothing! Nagisa threw away everything in his old life for his second chance, but if he lost that... he wouldn't have anything.

No, no, no, no, no, no, no nononononono-

The blue-haired teen was pulled from his hysteria by the feeling of a warm hand on top of his.

Kotoko gave him a warm grin, lacing their fingers together to tell him that he was wrong.

Even if Nagisa lost his family, he would still have Kotoko. And vice-versa, of course. They understood each other, and they both knew what it felt like to have blood on their hands. They were inseparable, no matter what. If one needed help, the other would be there to provide it. Nagisa even had a feeling that, if they had to, they could start over once again, a new life with each other.

But that didn't mean he was eager to let go of the family he had found, even if it was comforting to know that Kotoko would be there.
Nagisa liked his family the way it was. He loved his sister, his mother, his late father, and the cozy suburban house that was his home for the past five years. Nagisa loved playing video games and goofing off with Ibuki (though he would never say that out loud), he loved making breakfast with his mother and listening to her melodious voice, singing all sorts of songs, from her favourite jazz to metal songs that Ibuki had shown her. His mind held on to memories of mother and Ibuki singing together, creating a makeshift concert with hairbrushes and frying pans as their microphones. Father would encourage him to join in, only for Ibuki to drag them both into the singing. Even though Nagisa acted like he hated it with every fiber of his being... those memories were precious to him.

He missed father. And... he... he would miss mother and Ibuki... so, so much if he lost them...

Kotoko patted at his shoulder, softly drawing Nagisa out of his mourning.

That's right... he didn't lose Ibuki and mother. Not yet.

If he wanted to stay with them, he had to get going. He had to fight to stay with the family who had offered him love and kindness, the family he loved with all his heart in return.

Chiaki didn't have any right to refuse a request. If she wanted to get closer to the people who called her a friend, then it was practically her duty to make them happy.

She almost understood why Mikan kept accepting all those weird favours back then. Mikan wanted to please everyone, to make the people around her smile.

Well, Chiaki was about to one-up her friend in that regard. Chiaki's body was pretty much indestructible, so she had absolutely no need for self-preservation or hesitation. She didn't feel shame or embarrassment either. That left Chiaki free to accept as any dangerous requests as she liked.

"I accept," Chiaki stated, staring Pekoyama in the eye. The swordswoman's eyes widened with shock, like she didn't even expect that result.

"Are you fucking serious?!" Kuzuryuu demanded, staring at Chiaki in disbelief. He turned to look at the silver-haired swordswoman, his gaze a mix between disappointment and shock. "Why would you even ask that, anyways?! Why would you even want to fight Nanami anyways?!!"

"E-er..." Pekoyama stumbled about for an answer, obviously caught off-guard by the question.

"I should warn you," Chiaki spoke up, a thought popping into her head. "If you're trying to kill me, it's going to be really hard. You'd have better luck with a screwdriver than a machine gun-"

"No!" Pekoyama rebutted the idea instantly. "This isn't an assassination attempt! I'm just- I'm just trying to be friendly!"

"Peko, challenging someone to a duel is pretty much the opposite of friendly," Kuzuryuu huffed, rolling his eye.

"Peko, challenging someone to a duel is pretty much the opposite of friendly," Kuzuryuu huffed, rolling his eye.

"T-that's not necessarily true!" Pekoyama protested, her cheeks turning pink as she went on. She did her best to compose herself and remain calm and business-like, even when she was embarrassed. "Sparring might very well be the purest form of communication! T-there are no false words or misunderstandings!"

She puffed out her chest, trying to act proud and noble, even when she was making all of it up on
the spot. Fortunately for Peko, she was just regurgitating her thoughts on a subject she evidently spent a lot of time thinking about. Her voice grew more and more genuine as she went on, but she never lost her earnest charm.

"There is only the way you wield your blade, and that tells me all I need to know!" Pekoyama declared, placing her hands on her hips in an attempt to look bold. Chiaki thought it was pretty cute.

Chiaki couldn't help but snicker a bit behind her hand, which made Pekoyama flinch and deflate a bit. Kuzuryuu glared at the pink-eyed gamer in response.

"W-well?!" Pekoyama flushed, before raising her voice to sound braver. She ended up sounding more like a screechy cat though... "What say you to my challenge?!"

Chiaki's mind kept jumping to scenes from the various turn-based strategy games she had played, remembering friendships and love formed through fighting. True, that was usually fighting together, but the situations didn't have to be 100% similar for Chiaki to compare them, right? And besides, recruitment mechanics wouldn't exist if some of your potential allies weren't on the enemy's side first...

"Alright then, Pekoyama-san," Chiaki rested her hand on her chest, revealing an amused grin. "Let's have a rematch."

Peko froze, her eyes widening at the sight. She... she did want to see Nanami's smile... but she didn't expect it to be so dazzling. Light seemed to dance in Nanami's eyes, fragments of crystal floating in pale pink waters. There was warmth behind those eyes, not stony detachment or fiery anger. Warmth that made Peko's heart soar and her stomach weak, warmth that left Peko completely silent.

Nanami was expressing genuine fondness, which completely destroyed the 'emotionless robot' image she normally tried to project. Not that Peko had ever thought of Nanami as an emotionless robot, but... that smile, more than anything, proved Nanami's humanity. It was proof that she felt joy, along with rage and sorrow.

Peko couldn't stop staring. She wasn't even listening anymore, her mind too focused on committing the moment to memory to do anything else. Nanami was beautiful when she smiled. The curve of her soft lips, the crinkle at the edge of her eyes... Peko wanted to remember all of it.

'Oh shit, those two are actually serious about this fight,' Fuyuhiko's face fell as the realization hit him, horror in his eye as he watched the two stare each other down. 'Nanami's going to die.'

"No!" Hajime shook his head firmly, unwilling to put up with Hiyoko's bullshit. "I don't have time to teach Ibuki what an innuendo is! I have to actually get home!"

"Awww, you're leaving already?" Ibuki whined, before slapping a bright smile on her face. "Oh well! Say hi to Koto-chan for me!"

"Yeah, yeah," Hajime said with a a slight smile stretching across his lips. "If Nagisa is visiting, I'll tell him that you told him to have the bestest day ever."

"You took the words right out of my mouth, Hajime-chan!" Ibuki called out cheerfully, waving her arm back and forth in a huge arc to say goodbye.

"See ya, Hajime," Hiyoko waved too, though obviously not as... wildly as Ibuki.
"Goodbye! Thank you so much for the suit!" Mikan smiled as she sent Hajime off.

Hajime grinned as he left, before preparing himself to begin his trek to the other side of town. Hmm... what sort of dish would Kotoko (and probably Nagisa too, since Nagisa seemed to spend all his free time at their place) like for dinner?

Because life was cruel and irony hated Hajime, the pair of pastel-haired teenagers had already left by the time he departed. For extra heartbreak, their destination was his previous location. Poor, poor Hajime.

Kotoko didn't even notice him pass by when their paths crossed, but to be fair, she was in a car moving a teeny-tiny bit over the speed limit, and only saw him for like a second. Plus, he had pulled his coat's hood over his head, so Kotoko didn't spot the trademark lightning bolt hair sticking out of his head.

Nagisa had much better sibling-sensing skills though. It had been around a week since Ibuki had sent him her new address (along with a 'hope you visit soon, baby blueberry!'), but Nagisa didn't even need the half-faded memory to find his way around the city. He just followed his instincts, and his instincts led him straight to the fourth floor, third door to the right of the elevator of the Matsuoka Apartment Complex's rather complex interior.

(Ibuki would probably high-five him for that pun, and even add another joke to the pile. On the other hand, Kotoko would probably make a joke about his humour showing up once every fifty moons or something equally inane.)

He stared at the door warily, uncertainty gnawing at him as he wondered what he would find behind it. Big Sis Junko might have betrayed them... or maybe someone had found out, and they were telling their big siblings...?! How would Ibuki and Hajime react? Disbelief? Scorn? Mourning?

Kotoko, showing absolutely no trace of the apprehension that Nagisa was feeling, knocked on the door.

A second passed, then another, and then-

"Hello?" Ibuki's roommate, the one with dark brown hair and really good cookies, opened the door carefully. She blocked the room behind her with her body, making sure that the pair couldn't see anything but her.

(She had gotten a haircut and a suit since the last time Nagisa saw her. Maybe Ibuki dragged her into being a butler-for-a-day or something.)

The teens could hear loud bickering in the background. Ibuki screamed something indistinguishable, a feminine voice yelled something about the awful truth in return.

Without another moment of hesitation, Nagisa shoved past the sort-of butler, forcing his way into the apartment. Kotoko followed suit, silently complimenting the butler on her cute clothes.

Both Nagisa and Kotoko froze at the sight. That blonde, banana hair...! The pink kimono...! The fucking wheelchair!

"It's the bitch from the bar!" Kotoko screamed in realization.
With a reluctant Fuyuhiko supervising to make sure there were no accidental deaths, Peko carefully passed Nanami one of her old bamboo swords. Nanami wrapped her fingers around the handle of the curved blade, trying to remember how they held swords in video games.

Nanami weighed the sword in her hand, trying to hold it naturally. She ended up gripping it like a knife, her right folded over her left on top of the handle. It felt a bit... weird, but she just had to get used to it. Or maybe she was holding it backwards. She was probably holding it backwards.

"I can't believe you two are actually going through with this shitty idea," Fuyuhiko huffed, crossing his arms over his chest. He rolled his eye, trying to look bored and aloof. "But you guys can start whenever. Just don't kill each other."

"If you don't want to watch, then- Woah!" Nanami cut herself off, jumping back instinctively. She barely dodged a sudden sword swing. Nanami stared at Peko with wide eyes, wondering when the hell the other woman got her sword out.

"Impressive," Peko grinned, though it looked more like a murderous smirk than anything else. She lunged towards Nanami, only getting even more excited when the pink-eyed woman leaned out of the way of her attack.

Nanami leaped out of the way of every strike, every slash, every swing of Peko's sword. She never once tried to lift her blade in defense or strike back, instead relying on her quick reflexes to remain unharmed.

There was so much Peko could learn from that.

For one, Nanami had an aversion to taking the offensive. Perhaps it was her obvious inexperience with a blade. Perhaps it was reluctance to harm another human being. Either way, Nanami wasn't going to raise a hand against her. Which wasn't a much of a problem for Nanami, since she was fast enough to evade all of Peko's attacks.

But the panic on her face when she dodged... And the fact that she even bothered to avoid Peko's attacks, even though Peko was pretty sure she was invulnerable to... well, everything... that meant that she still had a self-preservation instinct. True, that was something all animals possessed, but it proved that Nanami wasn't the hollow, emotionless shell she wanted to pretend she was.

There was so much evidence against Nanami's insistence that she was inhuman that Peko didn't know how Nanami expected to convince anyone of it. Peko didn't even know if Nanami could fool herself into believing it.

But Peko had seen panic, anger, sorrow, and joy on Nanami's face. She had seen proof that Nanami was as human as Peko was.

Maybe, if she could just find a way to show Nanami...

"Are you afraid?" Peko asked without thinking, slashing down at Nanami's shoulder. The other woman jumped to the side, dodging once again.

"Not a chance!" Nanami retorted, gritting her teeth together as she glared at Peko.

"Then raise your blade," Peko ordered. "Show me how you fight!"

Nanami stared at her with wide eyes. She hesitated, before adjusting her grip on the handle, tension leaving her body. Nanami swung her blade overhead, grinning slightly when Peko blocked the strike with her sword. They pushed against each other, trying to win against the other in sheer
"Good," Peko nodded, before suddenly jerking back. Nanami stumbled forward, startled by the abrupt loss of Peko's resistance. She wasn't too disoriented to block off a side strike with her sword though.

Nanami shoved her back, before tossing her weapon away. Before Peko could question it, Nanami squared off, tossing two punches in her direction.

'So she does have experience fighting!' Peko realized delightedly as she dodged the blows.

(Well, she had experience with fighting games, which was apparently close enough.

"It was fun to have a handicap, but now it's time for me to get serious!" Nanami declared with a cocky smirk. "Get ready, Pekoyama-san! I'm going to give it all I've got!"

"I wouldn't have it any other way, Nanami!" Peko replied, practically beaming in her exhilaration. Killing was an unwanted burden, and fighting Natsumi, Hajime and Fuyuhiko could get boring after a while.

But now? Peko wasn't bored at all. Her heart soared in her chest as she avoided kicks and uppercuts, excitement flowing through her veins. Peko might have been laughing, but she really couldn't tell. Her eyes, her ears, every fiber of every muscle in her body was focused on the fight itself. Brief thoughts on how fun it was to fight Nanami flitted by, only to be interrupted by her instincts screaming 'MOVE!' just in time to block a punch with her sword. Peko wasn't even trying to win, just wanting the euphoria to last forever. Winning the match would be a small victory compared to seeing Nanami's smile.

Nanami was a challenge, Nanami was an unknown entity, and Peko wanted to make that known. To see everything, from her smiles to her fighting style to her bliss.

'What a weird way to make friends...' Fuyuhiko sighed to himself as he watched the fight.

"'Bitch from the bar...?'" Hiyoko repeated, staring at the two visitors in shock, before scoffing. "You've got to be kidding me."

"Nagisa! Kotoko!" Ibuki called out, trying to slap a smile over her surprised face as she helped Mikan off the floor. She ended up looking more awkward and uncomfortable than anything though. "I'm so happy to see you guys! Haha, why don't we all just calm down and maybe get something to drink-"

"Why the heck is she here?" Nagisa demanded, waving an arm at Hiyoko. Behind him, Kotoko snickered at his refusal to swear in front of his sister. Nagisa mentally told her to shut up.

"Because I fucking live here," Hiyoko huffed irritably.

"T-There's no way...!" Nagisa gasped in disbelief, before turning to Ibuki. "I thought you were living with your two precious friends! As in, her," He pointed at Mikan, "And the one with the hoodie!"

"Well, um, Chi-chan and Hiyo-chan are both my precious friends, but Kazuichi-chan ended up kicking us out so Hiyo-chan sort of became a precious friend?" Ibuki rambled on, her fingers fidgeting as she tried to explain.
"Maybe she's lying," Kotoko offered. "Like, there's no way that the bitch would be able to pay for rent for herself, your sister felt bad for her, and then they ended up living together."

"Ah... That does make sense," Nagisa nodded.

"Let me make one thing clear," Hiyoko whispered, barely restraining herself from exploding. She held her arms close to her body, her fingers shaking from the effort required to keep herself from screaming. "No one, not you, not Mikan, not my family, and especially not your bitch of a sister, looks down on me!"

The box's lid tore in half in her hands, her nails digging into the material. Hiyoko sneered, grinding her teeth together so hard that she hear the sound of her molars scraping against each other.

"Hiyo-chan, try to calm down!" Ibuki pleaded, but Hiyoko didn't listen.

Hiyoko was strong. She didn't depend on anyone! If she wanted, she could live all by herself! She just didn't want to, that was all!

'Denial,' A voice that sounded suspiciously like her grandmother's whispered into her ear. 'You've always been our weak little girl, always needing us to help you. You need us. You've always been depending on your dog of a father and that Tsumiki girl-

"No, no, no, no, no!" Hiyoko shrieked, her voice falling apart at the seams. "I don't need anyone! You just stop talking!"

She wasn't weak, she wasn't, shut up, shut up, shut up!

Hiyoko froze, belatedly realizing that her body had moved without thinking. Half a box lid sat in her lap, while the other half...

"Nagisa, are you okay?" Ibuki asked hurriedly, fretting over her little brother. The blue-eyed teen held a hand over his red cheek, feeling for cracks and/or blood.

"I'll go get the first aid kit!" Mikan declared, before heading off for the kitchen.

Huh...? Did Hiyoko do that...?

"Kotoko, Nagisa..." Ibuki said seriously, looking back and forth between the teenagers. "Go with Mikan-chan, okay? I just need to take care of something real quick."

Nagisa hesitated, before nodding. His sister pressed a kiss to his unharmed cheek before they left.

Ibuki rounded on Hiyoko, glaring at the blonde with furious eyes.

"What the hell is wrong with you?!" Ibuki demanded, her voice full of a rage Hiyoko had only seen once before.

"Wha- wrong with me?!" Hiyoko flinched, immediately on the defensive. "Your asshole of a brother's the one who barged in here and started insulting me!"

"So you hurl a box at him?!" Ibuki shot back, before switching to a mocking sneer. "Yeah, I can definitely see the logic in that."

"Shut up, you fucking bitch!"
"Or what, you'll throw a box at me too?!" Ibuki spat, before sighing. Her anger bled out of her body, leaving behind mournful eyes and a bitter frown. "I guess you don't need me to tell you that it's a bad idea, huh?" She looked Hiyoko in the eye, her voice cold and detached as she went on. "You don't need me at all."

Hiyoko's eyes widened as Ibuki turned away, stunned into silence as she left to join Mikan and the others.

Cold and emotionless and detached... that wasn't Ibuki at all. The Ibuki she knew was full of joy and energy. The Ibuki she knew was always so happy to see her, but now...

Her stomach dropped to the floor, sickness rising up in her chest when she realized it.

Hiyoko messed up. She... it was her fault that Ibuki was...

A familiar emotion settled into her limbs, coursing through every muscle and every nerve of her body. One that made her head spin and her heart race, one that made the sky fall upon her, one that made the floor collapse underneath her body. She laughed, even though she wasn't happy at all, because irony was so cruel that she had no other choice.

Just when she realized she needed others, she screwed up and made her friend hate her. Again.

What a joke.
I want to see you

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

'Ibuki was annoying,' Hiyoko told herself, trying to convince herself that those three words were the truth. 'I never liked spending time with her anyways, so why should I care if she hates me? I can live without her.'

There was no one in the store to respond. The silence was as heavy as debris falling over her head, concrete crushing her to death. The stillness of the store dragged on and on and on and on, until Hiyoko was ready to scream and tear her hair out, just to fill the emptiness. It was infuriating! It was maddening! Hiyoko couldn't work in these damn conditions!

Well, not that she was doing much working, but that was not the point. She was bored, and she needed a distraction from her thoughts already!

'Ha, if Ibuki were here, she'd probably have a concert in the middle of the store or something...' Hiyoko chuckled to herself, before mentally slapping herself in the face. Where was that damn distraction when she needed it?!

It was probably the quiet. Silence had a way of driving people insane. If she could just fill it...

Good thing Hiyoko brought her phone with her. Who cared if she 'wouldn't be able to answer to customer's demands' like that? There weren't any customers coming in anytime soon anyways. One earbud went in, then the other, Hiyoko mindlessly scrolling through her playlists before giving up and hitting the random selection option.

The first thing she heard was an ear-splitting shriek. Hiyoko flinched, almost dropping her phone. Bass and drums and guitar joined in, reminding Hiyoko that it was actually part of the song.

'The letter I sent you expressing my rage

confessing my love on the back of the page

has disappeared, never to reach your hands'

Wait a goshdarn moment...!

Hiyoko hurriedly hit the pause button, trying to find a song that wasn't Ibuki's.

Argh, what the hell?! Out of all the songs in her phone, random chance chose that one?! Did the universe hate her or something?! She knew Ibuki sure did, but that didn't mean the rest of the world had to rub it in her face!

Hiyoko winced, unintentionally stumbling onto the very subject she wanted to avoid. Ibuki hating her.

Why... why did her heart falter and sink when Hiyoko thought of sharp barbs and the coldest, most unnatural voice she heard coming from Ibuki? Why did her stomach drop when she remembered the fury and the pain she saw in Ibuki's eyes?

S-she didn't even like spending time with Ibuki. Hiyoko hated arguing with her and taking baths
together and teasing each other and being the model for her clothes! She hated Ibuki in general! Why was Hiyoko so affected by her?!

Whether it was bright smiles and excited rambling or anger and numbness or sorrow, Ibuki had a way of forcing Hiyoko to suffer with her. The rock star had a way of worming into Hiyoko's thoughts and staying there, like a song playing on repeat that you couldn't ignore.

That was just... Ibuki in a nutshell, wasn't it? Unpredictable, energetic, cheerful, unforgettable, beautiful, empathetic, selfless-

Wait, what.

B-b-b-b-beautiful?!

Ibuki, she was just, okay, she was a little bit attractive, okay?! It wasn't like- no, Hiyoko didn't, there was no fucking way that was-

Hiyoko froze, suddenly realizing two things. One, she was blushing so hard that she could almost be mistaken for a chili pepper. Which was fitting, since her face felt like she was either coated in chili powder or left in a furnace overnight. Two, Hiyoko sounded... well, she sounded like she was in denial. And she couldn't say she wasn't in denial without looking like she was digging herself even deeper into denial.

Hiyoko had to figure it out. Because, if she didn't, she would just stay stuck in her cycle of denial forever! As unpleasant as it was, it was something she had to do!

She sucked in a deep breath, steeling herself before beginning.

\[ \text{Nonstop Debate!} \]

'Ibuki is just annoying.'

Hiyoko would have liked to suddenly don a top hat out of nowhere and demystify the entire thing with one dramatic declaration, but... the silence in the empty store felt heavier, more pressing. The silence was empty space to give Hiyoko's thoughts to take shape and grow. It was like talking in a library; if you had to, it was to be done in the quietest voice possible, hidden under your breath. That's why Hiyoko kept silent, letting her conclusion rest in the safe room of her thoughts.

'She's...' Hiyoko gulped, forcing herself to admit it. Even though she was just confessing it to herself, it was so, so difficult to be honest with anyone about things like that. Even herself. But just letting the words take form was the first step to change, right?

"She became... really, really important to me," Hiyoko admitted quietly. Saying it out loud, putting it into words, made it feel so much more real. She couldn't deny it, she couldn't hide it from herself anymore. It was liberating, terrifying, and exciting and so much more, all at once.

Hiyoko had changed, she had grown and become an entirely different person, and it was because of one long, furious rant.

Ever since then, Ibuki had always been by her side, always been thinking of others before herself. To the point of hiding pain and tears behind a smile... Hiyoko couldn't stand it when she saw Ibuki put on a fake smile, because her real grin, her bright, beaming smiles were so beautiful that the false copies were an insult to her. It was like comparing a plastic forgery to a gleaming gemstone.
and saying they were the same thing. Hiyoko wouldn't even think for a second if she was asked to choose between the two.

She liked- no, loved seeing Ibuki smile, joyful and energetic, a laugh always at the edge of her lips. Somehow... those glowing grins- no, Ibuki had become so important to Hiyoko over time. And Hiyoko didn't even realize it until she almost lost her.

Hiyoko didn't want to ever see Ibuki sad or angry ever again. She didn't want to hurt Ibuki ever again.

But she did that anyways, hadn't she? Because Hiyoko couldn't completely let go of those past complexes, the same ones that destroyed her friendship with Mikan.

History wasn't about to repeat. Hiyoko wouldn't let it. She had to change even more, because the person she used to be was... well, she used to be a brat. And a bitch.

Okay, she was still a bit of a bitch. But she wasn't the kind of bitch who sabotaged her relationships because she couldn't swallow her pride long enough to apologize. Not anymore.

With a new resolve, Hiyoko swore to make it up to Ibuki. She could fix this-

"Hey, didn't you hear me?! Hand over all your damn money!"

Hiyoko snapped out of her reverie so hard that she almost felt the whiplash. Her eyes focused on a knife pointed right at her face, before travelling up to see the person holding it. Average height, dressed head to toe in black, stupid ski hat mask with eye holes and a mouth hole, yeah, pretty much your normal, everyday store robber.

"It's fucking rude to stick that thing in someone's face," Hiyoko rolled her eyes, completely unimpressed. The robber inched the blade closer to Hiyoko's throat, prompting her to smack the gloved hand away.

"Quit it! Just be patient, you bastard, I'm getting it!" Hiyoko groaned irritably, leaning under the counter.

Underneath the cover of the counter was a small flat head axe, meant for escaping from fires. Though 'small' was a pretty relative term. It was small in that, compared to other axes, it might have been a little bit tiny. But it was large enough for Hiyoko to need both her hands to lift it off the hooks holding it up.

It was light in her hands, experience letting Hiyoko swing it before the robber noticed anything strange. She smacked the knife out of the idiot robber's hand with the back of the axe, before brandishing it at the would-be thief.

"I'm in a bit of a bad mood today," Hiyoko scowled, glaring at the robber's mask so hard that there would be a new pair of holes in it soon. "So leave, before I use the sharp end, got it?"

The idiot moron robber gulped while nodding, before scrambling the fuck out of there. The bastard forgot to take the knife. Oh well, finders-keepers, right?

Hiyoko didn't have a pocket to put the blade in, so she kept it in her purse. In the outer pocket, since she didn't particularly want the inside of her bag sliced up. She kept a lot of important stuff in there.

Now, where was she again? Something about... new resolves and-
Dammit, she forgot all about it! Screw that asshole thief!

Mioda Ibuki was probably going to get arrested. Probably.

But at the same time, Ibuki's voice was beautiful and melodic, so who cared if she was screaming her lungs out at eleven in the morning? It made for a good wake up call to all the night owls in the building anyways.

She counted to three, taking a deep breath before strumming a few notes on her guitar. The intro was short, but mournful and slow, so Ibuki used her acoustic for the occasion.

'A broken cage lies in a thorny path

A victim of a vicious attack

Its mouth now a gaping maw

Claw marks on its broken jaw

What could have happened here?'

Ibuki scowled, thinking back to anger and- well, more anger. Blinding, furious anger, because no one hurt Ibuki's precious little brother! No one gave him bruises or made him bleed, not before Ibuki ripped out their throats!

Her voice was tight, strained from the effort to keep herself from screaming right then and there. Keep a cool head, Ibuki.

'A chick lays in a cage bright gold,

Watching her fairy tale unfold

Everywhere as far as her eyes can see

Winged creatures flying free

She begged, she prayed, she asked the sky

For her own chance to fly

Her pleas grew louder with each day that passed by'

A vicious smirk stretched across Ibuki's lips as she screamed the lyrics. The image was so concrete that she could smell the metal of the cage and feel the hot summer winds.

'But no one answered.'

She could see the bird slowly losing hope, withering away in her imprisonment. She could see the tears on Hiyoko's face when she-

'M-more and more desperate...'

Her voice died down, her hand falling slack. Ibuki... last night, she was too angry to see clearly, but... she remembered. Hiyoko had been upset, she had obviously been upset, but Ibuki yelled at her anyways! Because Hiyoko was upset and lashed out at the first person she saw...
'What's wrong with me...?' Ibuki sighed, gently setting her guitar down on the couch. She plopped herself down next to it, guilt pooling in her chest. What sort of friend was she? What sort of lowlife jerk yelled at someone who needed their support and then wrote a song about it?

Ibuki groaned, before forcing herself to stand. With slow, sluggish steps, she moved towards the dining table. A colourful notebook covered in sparkly stickers sat on top of the wood, the words 'My songbook!' written in cutesy script and pink ink. Ibuki snatched it up, flipping through the pages until she found the song she had written last night. A song about a trapped bird who lashed out at everyone who dared to fly where she could see, and ended up falling to her death after escaping her prison.

"We don't need sad endings like this," Ibuki said to no one in particular, before pinching the top of the page between her painted nails. She tore it from the book, tearing the page-and-a-half she had dedicated to the sorrowful song into pieces. She tossed the tiny scraps of paper into the air, thinking that it would be like confetti.

If Ibuki lived in a dramatic movie, then the world would have gone into slow motion at that moment. The camera would spin around her as flakes of white floated down gently, like snowflakes dancing in the wind. Unfortunately for Ibuki, she did not live in a dramatic movie, and what came up went straight down. And got stuck in her hair. And made a mess on the floor.

"Time to get the broom..." Ibuki muttered to herself, trying to think of what she would say to Hiyoko when they met again. Definitely 'I'm sorry', but maybe she should pair a gift with it...?

Mikan didn't get much sleep that night.

Dinner was an awkward affair that ended with Ibuki and Hiyoko sleeping in separate beds for the first time in weeks. Ibuki had stayed with Mikan for the night, forcing the nurse to endure hours of ranting on Hiyoko's general rudeness. The morning after, Hiyoko dragged Mikan with her to work, where she was subjected to Hiyoko's... rather colourful thoughts on the matter. And at the hospital, she got yelled at for almost falling asleep in the break room... Really, it was a miracle that she managed to stay conscious long enough to drag herself to Fuyuhiko's house-

A toy knife flew towards her face, forcing Mikan out of her thoughts. She tried to jump back, but her reaction was way too slow! The dull blade grazed her cheek, because Natsumi was feeling merciful. For the moment.

"Mikan, wide swings mean get the fuck out of the way!" Fuyuhiko called out from the sidelines, putting on his instructor voice.

"I-I know!" Mikan yelped, right before Natsumi took a stab at... well, stabbing her. Mikan stepped to the side, avoiding the knife. But then, Natsumi switched directions, slamming her shoulder into Mikan's chest! The brunette fell to the floor, her back slamming against the tatami mats.

"I win," Natsumi declared, trying to catch her breath. She grinned at Mikan, dropping the toy blade to the floor. "Even though you sucked more than usual today, you put up a good fight."

"Er, Natsumi, is that a compliment...?" Mikan asked uncertainly as she sat up.

"Yes, it is," Fuyuhiko stated, kneeling next to Mikan to help her up. "Right, Natsumi?"

He glared at Natsumi, prompting her to add, "Sure, whatever."

Mikan yawned, before smiling a little bit. "That's good..."
"Tired?" Fuyuhiko stared at her, tiny amounts of concern peppering his voice.

"Was I that tough?" Natsumi smirked, crossing her arms over her chest.

"Yeah, that and the part where I didn't sleep at all last night..." Mikan mumbled, another yawn escaping from her lips.

"Go to bed, right now!" Fuyuhiko ordered. "You of all people should know better than to go without sleep!"

"But we didn't even do the stretching yet...!" Mikan protested, knowing better than to just let lactic acid build up in her muscles.

"Go to bed, right after stretching," Fuyuhiko amended. Mikan nodded gratefully, right before extending her legs, reaching over to touch her toes. She barely got past her knees.

"Well, you do do whatever," Natsumi shrugged, using one hand to flip her hair over her shoulder dramatically. Over-dramatically. "I'm headed out."

"If you're going to buy candy, bring me some too," Fuyuhiko said without looking up.

"That's not it!" Natsumi huffed. "I'm going out with Hajime and Koizumi!"

"Oh, all three of you at once?" Mikan asked, staring up at Natsumi as she held her left arm out to the side. She crossed her other arm over at the elbow and hugged her left arm to her chest, stretching out her shoulder. "Is it that kind of relationship?"

"No!" Natsumi retorted, stomping her foot down on the floor. She was practically fuming as she glared at Mikan. "We're just going to the arcade, you weirdo! Quit thinking of weird things!"

"I'm sorry, it's just- the way you worded it made it seem like-" Mikan's frantic apologies were cut off by an exaggerated sigh, paired with an eye roll so exasperated, Natsumi's head rotated with her eyes.

"Quit apologizing already, Miss Medicine!" Natsumi ordered, crossing her arms over her chest. "Geez, d'you think I'm going to scalp you or something if you piss me off? Because Fuyuhiko would kill me if I even thought about doing that."

"You haven't been thinking about trying that, right?" Fuyuhiko scowled, protectiveness seeping into his tone.

"Of fucking course not," Natsumi rolled her eyes, before turning back to Mikan. "Look, all I'm saying is this; Miss Medicine, you're my brother's boyfriend, so we might as well be on somewhat friendly terms. So learn to relax around me already, got it?"

"...wait, you were trying to be my friend?" Mikan gasped, staring at Natsumi in shock. "W-were you trying to do that this entire time?!!"

"U-um-" Natsumi faltered, turning a little pink before forcing irritation into her tone, scrunching her face into a forced glare. "N-no! Of course not! I-it was just... I just wanted to see what sort of girl my brother was interested in!"

"She wanted to be your friend but couldn't admit it," Fuyuhiko translated, earning an undignified scream of embarrassment and rage from his sister.
"Shut up! I'm leaving!" Natsumi announced, stomping off and slamming the sliding door behind her. Mikan and Fuyuhiko could still hear her, muttering curses under her breath.

Mikan grinned, her eyes sliding shut as she laughed to herself. "Your sister's..." Yawn. "Actually a lot like you..."

"Mikan, go to sleep," Fuyuhiko commanded, though, his voice was... well, gentle. And quiet, and soothing. "You can sleep in my room if you want."

Another long, drawn-out yawn escaped from Mikan's lips, before an idea came to her. Her eyebrows knitted together in concern, pouting at Fuyuhiko.

"You'll be there when I wake up, right?" Mikan asked.

"Where else would I be?" Fuyuhiko huffed, before smiling fondly at Mikan. "I'll make you tea when you wake up."

"That... sounds wonderful..." Mikan whispered quietly.

And then she bowled over, falling right on top of Fuyuhiko.

"Hey, Mikan!" Fuyuhiko called out, trying to hold Mikan up and check for injuries at the same time... and then he heard snoring. He paused for a few seconds, letting out an exasperated sigh. "Did you really just fall asleep on me...?"

He only got snoring in return, prompting Fuyuhiko to grumble something under his breath. Fuyuhiko moved to loop an arm over Mikan's shoulders, then his other arm under her knees. He stood, lifting Mikan up with him.

"Seriously, I can't believe this..." Fuyuhiko muttered to himself, carrying Mikan down the halls.

Mikan's hair was still disheveled from her workout, strands sticking to her sticky, sweaty forehead. The green t-shirt she had worn was clinging to her skin, her bandaged arm crossing over her chest. Her other arm hung loosely, dangling around Fuyuhiko's legs. Her mouth was slightly open, a line of drool already beginning to drip down to her chin.

She was absolutely beautiful.

Fuyuhiko smiled warmly at his girlfriend, lifting a hand to brush hair away from her face. He leaned over to press a quick kiss to her forehead... then he suddenly jerked back, acutely aware of what the hell he was doing. His eye scanned the hallway furiously, trying to see if anyone had seen the action. Even though the hallway was empty just a second ago...

"Argh, quit turning me into a sappy idiot!" Fuyuhiko groaned, a bright red blush on his face. He tried to muster up the annoyance necessary to properly glare at Mikan, but he was too flustered to go further than a petulant pout. "I swear..." Fuyuhiko trailed off, unable to think of a proper threat or insult or anything. "You're going to end up ruining my brain one day..."

In her sleep, Mikan only smiled serenely at him. Even though she didn't say anything, Fuyuhiko wanted to tell her to shut up.

Or maybe that was his embarrassment talking.

(Later, in the privacy of his room, Fuyuhiko pauses, before smiling down at Mikan.)
He really was lucky to have her in his life. He was so lucky to have met someone as amazing as her-

Fuyuhiko freezes, suddenly realizing that he said that out loud. He doesn't check to see if Mikan heard, his face flooding with colour as he fled the room. He nearly knocks Peko over in his haste, but he's too embarrassed to think straight.

Damn Mikan and her uncanny ability to steal his sense of reason from him.)

There weren't many games for three at the arcade. Or any at all, really. Most of the games were built for one, or two at most. Despite that, Natsumi didn't feel like a third wheel at all, even when she had to sit out so the lovebirds could play.

Most of it was the fact that Koizumi and Hajime took great care to include her in the fun. If the group played a game for two, then the role of the person excluded would switch, so that everyone was equally included and left out at the same time. They even figured out an order for it. Koizumi, Hajime, then Natsumi, because the pair of lovey-dovey moms volunteered for the role, and, well, how could Natsumi possibly take their sense of martyrdom away from them? That would be cruel.

What wasn't cruel was bragging. (At least, according to Natsumi.)

"Ha, in your fucking face, Freckles!" Natsumi cackled as the word 'K.O.' flashed onto both of their screens, her huge, green, hulking monstrosity roaring victoriously, while Koizumi's ninja lady collapsed. Koizumi swore under her breath, before grabbing at Hajime's sleeve, dragging him towards the fighting game.

"Take up my sword!" Koizumi ordered overdramatically. "Defeat the evil possessing this fair maiden!"

"There is no madness clouding my mind, no magic drawing my strings!" Natsumi replied, making the most exaggeratedly evil expressions she could. "I just want to conquer the world!"

"Oh no, this... um..." Hajime struggled for a good word. "...wizard? This evil wizard must be stopped... or something."

"Boo!" Natsumi made a thumbs-down at the brunette's poor performance, sticking her tongue out.
"Try again, but with feeling!"

"Try to be the dashing hero who saves all!" Koizumi added.

"I'm not really the dashing hero type..." Hajime said awkwardly, before wilting under the glares of the pair in front of him. He cleared his throat, trying to do his best to make both of them happy. "Release thy grip on my companion, 'fore I unleash my divine fury on thee!" Hajime proclaimed, pointing a finger at Natsumi.

"Grip? Companion?" Natsumi asked innocently, before letting a twisted smirk stretch across her lips. "You fool! There was never a bond between us, only a ploy to control you like a pawn! I always planned on betraying you!"

"That cannot be!" Koizumi gasped in disbelief, before viciously rebutting the idea. "You're saying that every moment was a lie?! An act to gain our trust?!"

"Yes, yes, that is exactly, precisely it!" Natsumi beamed, puffing her chest out with pride. "And you fell for it, you gullible, unimaginably stupid worms!"
"No, I won't believe it!" Hajime exclaimed, pretending to ready his sword... or something like that. "O foul miscreation! I shall smite thee from this world! Or else, my name shall not be Hinata Hajime!"

"Ooooooh, you managed to work a dramatic name drop in there!" Natsumi laughed, dropping character.

"I give your performance about..." Mahiru grinned, pausing for maximum dramatic effect. "Six out of ten."

"Better luck next time?" Hajime offered with a bashful smile.

"Keep working on it, and maybe you can join the ranks of highly accomplished actor people such as me and Freckles," Natsumi declared haughtily.

"Mahiru," Koizumi corrected.

Natsumi rolled her eyes, before huffing an, "I guess it's me and Mahiru the Freckled now."

"You're never going to let go of that, are you?" Mahiru sighed.

"Trust me, she can stick to nicknames for years," Hajime offered, trying to comfort the redhead.

"What did you just say, Spiky-Hair Lightning Eyes?!" Natsumi roared, earning chuckling from Hajime in return.

Natsumi supposed that, if asked, she could maybe say that she was having fun. Maybe. Definitely.

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Nanami Chiaki was trying. She really, really was. Her heart was set on her choice, her mind kept yelling at her to just do it already, but every time, she ended up backing out.

She was wasting time, and she knew it. Chiaki wanted to gather the courage to just ask, to impose herself on others and take a little bit of their time. She wanted a moment of fun that she could look back on and smile at later, she wanted to ask to spend time with the people who considered her a friend.

But every time she tried to call them, she remembered. It wasn't normal for her to have a phone installed into her brain. It wasn't normal for her to be able to soar through the air with metallic wings. She... Chiaki wasn't even...

A sigh left her lips, forcing her shoulders to slump.

Even when she tried to tell herself that she was worth their time, that people wanted to spend time with her, doubt kept gnawing at her, flipping and twisting her stomach into knots. It said things like 'you're too arrogant' and 'they could be lying to you' and 'you're not worthy of their attention, of their love. It's wasted on something like you.' It paralyzed her, making her shy away from reaching out, but then she just hated herself for not being brave enough to even try, and she would force herself to move. She would force herself to ignore insistent whispering until she couldn't, backing out once again, and the cycle repeated over and over and over again.

Chiaki tried to calm herself down, before heading out. She didn't see the world around her, following the lines of the digital map in her head blindly, hoping that she would end up... actually,
Chiaki didn't even know where she hoped she would end up. But, even without that knowledge, she kept moving forward.

She was looking for something, but Chiaki had no idea what. The thought of facing her friends still brought uncomfortable sinking feelings to her stomach, and playing games, for once, didn't appeal all that much to her. Her feet kept moving without input from Chiaki's brain, leaving her completely lost as to where she was heading.

Maybe she was going to the park, to calm herself down. Maybe to see the ocean, or a lake or something so beautiful, she forgot about her fears.

It was actually pretty nice to wander. Chiaki was on the verge of forgetting everything that had nothing to do with getting from point A to point B. She didn't need to care about anything except making sure that she was still moving, putting one foot in front of the other. It was relaxing.

That train of thought was quickly demolished when Chiaki found herself heading towards the absolute worst part of town. Neon lights and shifty buildings with shadowed alleyways surrounded her, and Chiaki couldn't shake the feeling that someone was watching her. From the windows, from the alleys, she didn't know, but she felt like a glowing light in the middle of a pit of darkness, practically calling out for someone to come and extinguish her. She couldn't go a single second without feeling the need to look over her shoulder.

Chiaki couldn't help but let out a sigh of relief when she turned her back to the area, because she felt like she was almost there, she was so close to-

Wait.

Oh no. Oh shit.

Chiaki froze, suddenly realizing that her feet had brought her right in front of the Kuzuryuu house.

Ruto Ryuusei was a twig of an old man. He was so ancient that his muscles seemed to have withered away throughout the years, leaving nothing but skin and creaky bones. Really, you could probably knock him over with a fan. Not even, like, a mechanical fan. Just a gust of wind from one of Hiyoko's treasured folding fans could bowl the man over.

Unfortunately, Ruto Ryuusei was also Hiyoko's boss, so she couldn't even try it. Not without losing her job. And Hiyoko happened to like her job- No, that wasn't right.

Correction: Hiyoko happened to like earning money. And in order to continue earning money, she had to endure his ranting and pretend she was actually listening.

"Now, I know you're strong enough to deal with those guys on your own," The old man drawled, earning an obviously from Hiyoko. "But ya can't just keep letting 'em run off like that! How many times do I got to tell you, call the police!"

"Do I have to?" Hiyoko groaned. "That bastard was so stupid he forgot to take his knife. There's no way that idiot would ever manage to hurt anyone."

"Yes, ya have to!" He snapped. "'Cuz if the police caught wind'a the fact that ya keep 'forgetting' to report crimes, you'd get locked up for years, you hear me?!"

"Yes, yes, I do," Hiyoko nodded, putting a bit too much sarcasm into her voice.
"Don't gimme that attitude, young missy!" Her boss waved his pointer finger at her, drawing his mouth back into a scowl. "Why, I swear, your demeanor is completely unacceptable!"

Hiyoko groaned, knowing that she set off one of his rants. She bobbed her head up and down, pretending to listen even as she tried to tune him out.

"Disrespect, never woulda been heard of back in my day-"

"Uh huh, of course, sir-"

"And every single time, ya just do it again- don't know what I got to do to get ya to listen for once-!"

"I don't know either, sir-"

"Why did my sister even hire you in the first place?!"

Immediately after saying it, Ruto Ryuusei froze. Hiyoko tensed. The store suddenly felt colder, heavier, like water vapour in the air hung over their heads, weighing down their shoulders.

It was rule number one. No one mentioned Auntie Honoka. No one said her name, questioned her choices, or insulted her.

"I guess..." Her boss sighed, his face darkening. "I'll let you off easy this time, ya hear? Don't do it again, alright?"

Hiyoko nodded, knowing that she would most likely hear the exact same thing in a week. He knew it too. They went through that routine every time a robber got into the store.

But, well... when she looked at him, she didn't feel as annoyed as she used to. He looked more exhausted than anything. It wasn't like he was trying to annoy her. He just wanted to keep her out of trouble.

Hiyoko supposed she could try to listen, just this once. For Auntie Honoka.

"I won't," Hiyoko stated, and for once, she actually meant it.

"Good, that's good to hear," Her boss nodded, squinting at Hiyoko like he had lost his non-existent glasses or something. No, wait, he was looking behind her... "Now, I'm pretty sure that girl's here to see you, so I'm just gonna head on over to the back now..."

"Wait, what girl-?!" Hiyoko whirled around, accidentally twisting her back in the process. Her eyes widened when she caught sight of brightly-dyed hair and metal piercings.

Oh shit.

Chiaki was about to turn back, only to pause at the sound of a voice.

"Nanami...?" Pekoyama peeked out at her from the front door.

Chiaki just stopped, staring at the swordswoman like she had caught her in the middle of murdering her crush or something like that.

Her hair was loose from its usual braids, silvery strands falling loosely around her shoulders. Instead of the form-fitting suit she normally wore, Pekoyama wore a light blue yukata, vertical
stripes running down the fabric. With the shining snow on the ground, Chiaki couldn't help but think of *yuki-onna*, yukata-clad female spirits with power over blizzards. It... actually kind of fit, really. Pekoyama was an otherworldly beauty, capable of stealing Chiaki's breath away just by existing. Even though Chiaki didn't need to breathe.

Pekoyama didn't step towards her, and Chiaki didn't move, leaving an entire yard between them. Chiaki was tempted to just run away and forget the whole thing ever happened. She didn't want to face anyone, speak to anyone, or—or anything! She just wanted to leave-

But apparently, her feet didn't get that part.

Despite all her fear, all her worries and anxiety, her feet kept moving forward. Like her metallic bones were drawn to a magnet inside the house, no matter what her brain had to say about it.

She came to a stop right in front of Pekoyama, staring up at ruby-red eyes.

"I—it's fine if I stay here for a while, right?" Chiaki asked without thinking. "I'm not burdening you or anything?"

"Of course not," Pekoyama smiled warmly at her, beckoning her inside. "You are always welcome here."

'I was looking for her,' Chiaki realized as the tension drained out of her body. Her movements felt lighter, stress no longer weighing down her every move. A quiet chuckle left her lips as she headed towards the door, warmth hitting her like a punch to the gut.

Why was she worrying again?

Pekoyama had a calming air around her, one that brought images of still lakes and illuminated forests to mind. She was patient and understanding, beautiful and terrifying, and Chiaki wanted to know more. She wanted to explore uncharted territory, she wanted to dive deeper and deeper into the happiness and serenity Pekoyama could give her.

"I just wanted to see you," Chiaki admitted honestly, a small smile stretching across her lips. "It's alright if I want to learn more about you, right?"

"Y-yes!" Pekoyama exclaimed, her cheeks suddenly turning bright pink. "That- of course that's fine! I-I'll go make tea!"

Chiaki giggled a bit to herself at the sight.

For such an otherworldly beauty, Pekoyama sure was a dork.

Hiyoko was not freaking out. There was absolutely no way that she was-

Okay, she was freaking out. But only, like, a little bit! Who would expect Ibuki to just *show up out of fucking nowhere*?! No one would expect that Ibuki would just walk in, head hung low and hands behind her back, a frown tugging down at her lips and-

Wait, fuck, Ibuki was *in the store*! Fuck, shit, son of a fucking ass-

"I'm sorry!" Hiyoko screamed in a panic, just as Ibuki said the exact same thing. They froze, staring at each other with wide eyes.

"Um... what?" Ibuki hesitated, an awkward grin stretching across her lips. "I think I heard that
wrong, I mean, you don't have a reason to apologize-

"Of course I fucking do!" Hiyoko screamed, almost snarling at Ibuki. "Mioda fucking Ibuki, if you try to take the damn blame for this even when you weren't involved at all-

"I yelled at you when you were upset instead of comforting you!" Ibuki interjected, cutting Hiyoko's threat off. "I'm an awful friend, and I have to-

"Untrue, untrue, lies and slander and bullshit!" Hiyoko snapped. She slammed a fist into the armrest of her wheelchair, glaring up at Ibuki with hellfire in her eyes. "Don't you dare fucking say *anything* like that again when you're around me, *got it*?! Because you were completely justified in getting mad! I *hurled a fucking box at your brother's face*!"

"But why are you apologizing to *me*?!" Ibuki demanded, almost whining. "I'm not the one you hurt!

"Yes, I did!" Hiyoko declared, putting her thoughts into words before she could stop herself. "I... I didn't mean it when I said I didn't need you! I do!"

Ibuki stilled, her mouth falling open in a perfect oval. She... she knew she could rely on her ears, but she couldn't believe what she was hearing!

Still riding on her high of emotions and adrenaline, Hiyoko continued, balling her hands into fists as she went along.

"I- because of you, I've changed. I'm still changing. I'm becoming someone different, someone *better*, and it's because of you!" Hiyoko gritted her teeth together, suddenly choking on her words. Her voice became shaky and pleading, tears coming to her eyes. "I... I need that. I need *you*. I... dammit!" Hiyoko would have stomped her feet if she still had them, her train of thought completely derailed. She forgot what she was going to say. And in the middle of her heartfelt speech, too! "Fuck, shit- fucking god fucking dammit, son of a-"

"Hiyoko-chan," Ibuki cut through the other woman's nonstop swearing, placing a hand over Hiyoko's clenched fist.

Hiyoko looked up, all the tension bleeding out of her body when she saw Ibuki's face.

Ibuki smiled down at her, the fluorescent light behind her head illuminating her from the back. Like an angelic aura, or spotlights on a ginormous stage. Hiyoko wasn't sure which one was more fitting.

A soft giggle left Ibuki's lips, one that brought a grin to Hiyoko's face too.

"We're both being a little bit dumb, aren't we?" Ibuki offered her hand to Hiyoko. "Friends?"

"You're acting like I would say *no* after a speech like that," Hiyoko quipped as she gave the rock star's hand a firm shake.

"I mean, it sort of devolved into swearing halfway through," Ibuki offered teasingly.

"Shut up!" Hiyoko screamed, bright red. It was so easy to fall back into the routine of teasing and insults they didn't really mean, ribbing at each other playfully. "You're just being picky! I dare you to do better!"

"Heh, I can definitely do that!" Ibuki declared, before puffing her chest out, clearing her throat.
"Saionji Hiyoko, I've learned something really important during all of this. You're prickly, you can be rude and unapproachable and pretty mean-"

"I fail to see how this is heartfelt and touching," Hiyoko deadpanned.

"But..." Ibuki’s grin widened as she presented her other hand to Hiyoko... revealing the bouquet she had hidden behind her back. Sunflowers, narcissus, yellow poppies, yellow roses... Ibuki was not subtle with her colour scheme at all. "You've got a smile like the sun, when you bother showing it," Ibuki plucked a sunflower from the bouquet, pressing a kiss to the stem before giving it to Hiyoko.

"You're too beautiful for words, and people can get super jealous of that." A narcissus and a yellow rose.

"People don't always see it, and, actually, I didn't see it either at first," Ibuki stared at a poppy fondly, before letting out a wistful sigh. "But you've got a heart of gold under all that grouchiness."

Ibuki handed Hiyoko the entire bouquet, a sound akin to a dying monkey escaping from the blonde's throat.

"What. Wha-what the fucking hell was that?!" Hiyoko shrieked, her face hotter than lava as she brandished the bouquet at Ibuki like an axe. "You-you have no right- just barging in here and saying something so-so-!"

"So what?" Ibuki asked, an innocent smile on her lips. She was teasing Hiyoko! Right after saying the most touching, romantic thing ever-

Hiyoko threw the flowers at her.

Chapter End Notes

believe it or not, ive actually been trying to get hiyoko and ibuki to have a serious fight for a while now. but even though they bicker all the time, they don't really hurt each other's feelings all that often. hiyoko 'gets annoyed' by ibuki being hurt (she cares but she won't admit it), and ibuki is too nice to willingly say something that will hurt hiyoko. the only way i could think of to actually get them to argue was making ibuki so mad and hurt that she forgot about niceness.
Nanami Chiaki was evil. She was cruel and sadistic and knew exactly how to use her beautiful, dazzling smile as a weapon!

"You're pretty cute, you know?" Nanami laughed, making Peko turn an even brighter shade of pink.

"That's- no, preposterous, n-no!" Peko stammered. She slammed her fist down on the table, trying to glare at Nanami. 'Trying', since Peko was too flustered to muster the annoyance required for a proper glare. "That's enough about me! T-tell me something about yourself instead! Hobbies, interests, anything!"

The lighthearted mood evaporated, Nanami staring at Peko uncertainly.

"I... you..." Nanami floundered about, searching for the right words. Peko frowned, sympathy resonating within her. Nanami stuck her hand into her pocket, fiddling with something inside as she hesitantly spoke up. "Are... are you sure...? I'm the sort of person who won't shut up about video games if you get her started. You probably don't want to hear me ramble..."

"It's not rambling!" Peko declared quickly, before clearing her throat. She tried to compose herself, to look calm and cool and collected when she spoke. "If you're talking about something you really love... then I would be glad to listen. Because..." Peko's cheeks were slowly becoming pink. "Hobbies can bring people together. We wouldn't be nearly as close if I didn't share my love of kendo with you."

Nanami stared at her blankly, before quietly echoing, "Hobbies can bring people together..."

Then her eyes widened, lighting up like someone set off a flash grenade in her head. She grinned brighter than a dancing wildfire, practically palpable warmth emitting from her skin as she reached out, clasping Peko's hands in hers.

"Hobbies can bring people together!" Nanami declared excitedly. She remembered a teacher in a blue dress, kart-racing and Tetris. Her voice was rushed and near-indecipherable as she spoke, tripping over a few words in her haste. "That's- Pekoyama, you're a genius- I can- With Bash Sisters 5! We can have fun and-! Ah, thank you! Thank you so much!"

"I, um, you're welcome...?" Peko offered awkwardly, unsure how to react.

"And since the newest game has an upgraded engine, up to ten players can play! It'll be chaotic and amazing and we can play in teams or go in story mode together or-!" Nanami squealed, releasing Peko's hands to wave her hands around energetically. A huge toothy grin made its way on her face as she gushed about Bash Sisters 5's newest features and fighters and items. Her eyes shone brighter than sunlight reflecting off of ice as she spoke.

Peko couldn't help but smile at the adorable sight.

The question slipped out before Chiaki could stop herself.
"Do you want to play video games later?"

Mikan paused, staring at her curiously. Chiaki forced herself to stay calm, not letting any of her shock or anxiety show on her face. She meant to do that. Right. It wasn't like she would get hurt or anything if she said no, because-

"That would be great!" Mikan grinned, clasping her hands together.

Well. That was easier than Chiaki thought.

"Huuuuuuuuuuuh?! What's this about video games?!” Ibuki demanded, pouting at Chiaki. The pout dissolved, becoming a toothy smile and a wink thrown in Chiaki’s direction. "Is it some sort of super-secret nurse training?"

"Actually, I was about to invite you, too," Chiaki admitted honestly.

Ibuki cheered, throwing a fist up into the air, just as Mahiru opened the door.

"Ibuki-chan, your break's over already! Get back to work!" Mahiru huffed, trying to act indignant, even when Ibuki spun around on her toes, giggling joyfully.

"Mahiru-chan, Mahiru-chan!" Ibuki called out cheerfully, practically skipping towards the secretary. "Chi-chan's hosting a video game party!"

"You're invited too," Chiaki stated, a small smile on her face.

"I'd be glad to come!" Mahiru grinned, before switching to her stern voice. "Now Ibuki, go back to work! Your children need you!"

Chiaki smiled as Mahiru did her best to force Ibuki out of the break room, Mikan acting as damage control. She barely noticed the chaos going on around her, too busy sighing in relief.

Why was she worrying so much again?

Mahiru brought Hajime, who brought Natsumi, who brought Peko. Fuyuhiko tagged along with Mikan because he heard there would be food, and Ibuki literally dragged Hiyoko along. Or, er, pushed her along.

Thankfully, Chiaki had set up the game system in her parents’ living room long before they arrived, bags of chips and various kinds of candy sitting on the armrest of the couch.

Natsumi immediately grabbed a controller and plopped herself next to the snacks, glaring at Hiyoko. "You better not bail out on me this time! I need you to get revenge on my brother!"

"It's not my fault I had something important to do!" Hiyoko snapped back, snarling.

"Wow, Hiyo-chan's making her best 'angry chihuahua' face!" Ibuki gasped dramatically, prompting Hiyoko to tell her to shut up.

"Not like she'd be able to help you anyways," Fuyuhiko quipped, settling into the other side of the couch. He smirked arrogantly at his sister as he grabbed a controller. "Even if it was you and everyone else against me and Peko, you'd still lose."

"You cocky bastard...!" Natsumi growled, nearly crushing her controller in her clenched fists. "I swear, I'll knock you down a peg! I'll knock you down five million pegs as my revenge!"
"Revenge...? I thought this was a friendly outing..." Mikan muttered uncertainly, staring at her boyfriend and his sister in concern. "You two will be okay, right?"

"Hey, at least there's like seven people here to stop them if they try to kill each other," Hiyoko offered, trying to comfort Mikan... though it didn't work much. Mikan's frown only deepened, crease lines appearing between her eyebrows.

"They're just... excited about the game," Mahiru tried her best, but the obvious hesitation in her words sort of (definitely) undermined her good intentions.

"I'm sure Chiaki will be a good host and keep them from doing anything like that." Hajime was very, very, very close to succeeding in his attempt, almost bringing a smile to the other brunette's face-

And then Chiaki opened her big mouth.

"Eight players. Items allowed. Red Valley Zone. Go wild," Chiaki said simply, deciding to leave the others to their own devices while she grabbed the video camera.

"What," Hajime gaped at Chiaki's retreating back as she left the room, unable to muster the energy to say anything more than that.

"Go ahead and get started," Peko commanded, her (somewhat) stoic demeanor giving her an aura of authority. "I'll go see her."

Peko turned, following after Chiaki, leaving the group dumbfounded.

The room was exactly as Chiaki left it when she left for Hope's Peak, all those years ago. Her navy blue walls were still covered in posters of classic games, her pale pink carpeting was still fluffy enough to tickle her toes when she tread on it barefoot. Her bed was covered in her favourite blanket, squares of fabric recreating 8-bit heroes and their dramatic battles. Game consoles were lined up on her desk, controllers and chargers neatly placed in their place. Chiaki remembered organizing them like her inventory system, trying to make sure nothing overlapped. Everything was as Chiaki recalled...

Except for the fact that she couldn't find that damn camera.

"Where is it, where did I put that thing..." Chiaki muttered to herself as she dug through her closet, tossing decade-old clothes (that still fit perfectly) onto her bed. She knew the camera was supposed to be in the closet, because that was how she left it so long ago, and her parents didn't touch it since then-

"What are you doing?" Pekoyama inquired from the doorway, nearly making Chiaki jump.

Chiaki almost shocked herself with how calm her voice was when she answered. "Looking for a camera."

"Why?"

"So I can record the gaming session."

"You're not going to join us?"

Chiaki shrugged. "I just want something to remember you guys by. Does it really matter if I'm in it
"Yes," Pekoyama stated, completely certain of her answer. "Because you are part of this group, and it would be an insult to you if you were left out. Even if it’s of your own volition."

Chiaki stared at the swordswoman quietly, not sure what sort of expression was on her face. Shocked, confused, definitely. But... a small part of her wanted to cry. Or to walk away without saying another word. Or both.

She knew that she would be the odd one out, and not just in body. Chiaki was the Super High School Level Gamer, after all.

"I'll just ruin it," Chiaki said, trying to keep the bitterness out of her tone. Her expression darkened as she remembered people calling for her to die, to quit, to delete her account, because her skill ruined the game for everyone. "You'd be better off without me." She was called a cheater, a hacker, every single name in the book, all because of her talent. "You'll have more fun without me."

Because all talent did was drive people apart-

"You're wrong," Pekoyama rebutted the idea, crossing over the threshold, stepping over that barrier to approach Chiaki. "You're the one who brought us all together today. It wouldn't be right to have fun without you."

"I'm telling you, I'll just mess it up for everyone-"

"How do you know that?" Pekoyama sliced through her words easily. There was no hesitation, no doubt in her voice. Pekoyama spoke with so much certainty that Chiaki couldn't think her words were anything but facts. "You belong with us. You deserve to have fun as well. There is not one person who would contest that," Her eyes softened as she reached her hand out to Chiaki, a small grin appearing on her face. "It is only a matter of whether you want to join us or not."

The difference between the blushing, stammering woman from yesterday and the confident, decisive woman standing before Chiaki was so startling that Chiaki could hardly believe they were one and the same. Chiaki had seen the serious, stoic side of Pekoyama before, because that was the side that came out whenever Pekoyama was trying to help her.

Chiaki wanted to believe her. She wanted to believe that Pekoyama was telling the truth, and that she had a place with everyone else. She wanted to believe that they could all have enjoy themselves and not worry about anything, not immortality, not death, not robotics, not a single thing, just for a moment.

So Chiaki reached out, taking Pekoyama's callused hand in hers.

They walked back to the others, hand-in-hand.

"Well, if Peko-chan says so!" Ibuki grinned, grabbing a controller for herself, Mikan, and Hiyoko. Mikan accepted it gratefully, while Hiyoko...

Well. Hiyoko was trying. She was trying to fall back into the routine of playful jokes and insincere insults, but, every single time, her voice sputtered and died in her throat. Hiyoko did her best to cover it up, to add a quick jab before anyone could notice, but it felt like everyone noticed!

Everyone could tell that something weird was going on with her. It was obvious, from the way her face turned red and her voice faded away when she caught sight of Ibuki's smile.
(Despite Hiyoko's fears, there were only three people who noticed her somewhat strange behaviour. And they weren't about to tell anyone. Hajime and Mahiru would never dream of doing such a thing, and Mikan would never do anything to upset her childhood friend like that.)

Even when everyone started the game, those weird feelings... Hiyoko couldn't ignore them at all, no matter how much she wanted to. She felt so far away from the chaos and screaming around her, and even though she was trying so hard to drag herself to where everyone else was, it never worked. Hiyoko forced herself to pay attention. She wanted to enjoy the game, just like everyone else.

Ibuki's robot lady knocked Fuyuhiko's dragon off the stage, earning a ton of swearing from the Yakuza heir. Mikan tried to comfort him and avoid projectiles from Mahiru and Natsumi's duel at the same time. Hajime was chasing a power-up that could turn the odds in his favour. There was so much going on in the game that it was nearly impossible to keep track of everything at once.

But Hiyoko could only focus on Ibuki's triumphant, musical laughter. The sound cut through all the other noises in the room, reaching through to Hiyoko in the cacophony. Something in Hiyoko melted, and she had to find a way to force her gooey feelings back into their place before someone noticed.

Hiyoko wasn't a dumbass. It wasn't her first experience with those feelings. She knew exactly what her fluttery heartbeat and blushing cheeks meant, and she did not want it. Crushes were painful. Crushes on a friend were worse. Hiyoko didn't want to have to hide her feelings, to pretend that she was the same as always, even when all she wanted was to lace their fingers together and press kisses to soft skin. She didn't want to dream of a relationship she would never be brave enough to ask for. But Cupid was an ass, and his arrows were not easily removed. No matter how much she wanted to rip out her racing heart and forget about it, she couldn't. Not without leaving scars and aching pains that Hiyoko wanted nothing to do with.

A laser beam tossed Mikan's pink puffball and Hiyoko's pikmon trainer off the edge of the stage, earning a cheer from Ibuki. Even when Mikan whimpered and Fuyuhiko swore vengeance, Hiyoko couldn't stop her eyes from being drawn towards the rock star.

Ibuki pumped her fist into their air, cackling madly over her victory. A grin brighter than neon lights stretched across Ibuki's lips, and Hiyoko couldn't stop herself from smiling at the sight.

Natsumi swore at Mahiru, claiming that the redhead got a lucky shot. Hajime's angelic archer chased Fuyuhiko and the newly-respawned-Mikan down with fiery breath. Ibuki was firing projectile after projectile in every direction, hoping to launch at least one of her friends off the stage. She succeeded in hitting Mahiru, giving Natsumi the chance to toss her into the air. Natsumi and Ibuki high-fived, while Mahiru grumbled under her breath.

The musician was laughing, and Hiyoko couldn't brace herself for it at all. Her heart lurched at the sound of Ibuki's joy, her cheeks igniting. She could see flowers blooming and sunsets and starry nights in the back of her head, beautiful sights that looked like a kid's scribble next to a masterpiece when compared to Ibuki's smile. That smile could disperse rain clouds to reveal a sunny sky, make musical melodies out of silence, bring colour and life to even the most boring work day-

Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaand Hiyoko was too busy being gay to notice Hajime's fighter coming her way, knocking her off the stage once again. Goddammit.

"Gyahahahahaha! I win, I win, I win!" Ibuki declared excitedly, pumping her fist into the air.
"That was incredible!" Mikan exclaimed. Fuyuhiko shrugged from beside her, not saying anything more on the subject as he chomped on a chip.

"Congratulations, Ibuki," Hiyoko smiled at the rock star.

Ibuki giggled, before flashing a bright grin at Hiyoko, double peace signs by her face. "Total victory! Isn't that incredible?!"

"Quit bragging already," Hiyoko huffed, switching from warm smiles to the cold shoulder in an instant. Ibuki practically deflated, almost dejected as she skipped through the results screen.

"Hm?" Natsumi glanced to her side, spotting something out of the corner of her eye. A huge grin breaks out on her face when she sees that it's Peko and Chiaki, H-A-N-D-H-O-L-D-I-N-G. "Peko, I can't believe this! Hooking up with the cutie gamer while we're all busy? What sort of things were you doing, all alone together~?"

"Natsumi, quit being weird," Fuyuhiko called out, prompting Natsumi to stick her tongue out at him.

"We didn't really do anything," Chiaki muttered as she led Peko to the couch. "All we did was talk about video games and friendship."

"May we join?" Peko requested courteously, earning a weird stare from Mahiru and Hajime.

"Peko, you're holding hands with the host," Hajime reminded the swordswoman. "Why are you asking us?"

"Is it because we're the 'mother hens' or something?" Mahiru joked.

"I don't need to be here if you don't want me-" Chiaki was cut off by Ibuki suddenly tossing her arm over her shoulders, dragging her onto the couch.

"There's enough room for everyone!" Ibuki said cheerfully, helping Chiaki settle into the spot next to her. Mikan shifted closer to Fuyuhiko, making room for Peko on the couch.

It was a snug fit, but everyone had their place on the couch.

(Except for Hiyoko, but that was because she was in a wheelchair.)

Peko selected a green-clad swordsman, while Chiaki hummed in consideration. After a moment of deliberation, she chose...

...the tiny astronaut who fought with little flower people?

"Awwww, it's as cute as you!" Natsumi cooed. In the same tone, she continued, even though her words didn't match her voice at all. "You're gonna get your ass kicked in five seconds!"

"Somehow, I doubt that..." Mahiru muttered under her breath.

Chiaki won in under a minute. Peko, Fuyuhiko, and Natsumi gaped at her in shock, while the others weren't really surprised by the result.

"Wow, you're still so skilled at this!" Mikan gasped in awe, beaming at the pink-eyed gamer.

"That's my Chi-chan!" Ibuki grinned, throwing an arm over Chiaki's shoulders. She rubbed at
Chiaki's hair, earning a groan from Chiaki. "Still got the reaction time of a leopard, I see!"

"She absolutely demolished us..." Natsumi mumbled under her breath. She glared at the gamer as Ibuki released her, still gushing about Chiaki's skills.

"What'd you expect from the Super High School Level Gamer?" Hiyoko huffed, rolling her eyes. "It'd take all of us together to take her down."

Natsumi turned towards her with a grin, making Hiyoko's eyes widen.

"Oh fuck no. You cannot be serious."

"I'm fine with that, as long as you guys want to," Chiaki shrugged.

"It would be fun," Mahiru called out, sounding like a mom trying to convince her kid to eat vegetables. And like a kid refusing to touch their vegetables, Hiyoko scrunched up her face, crossing her arms over her chest as she turned away.

"Oh forget it! Her loss if she wants to be left out!" Natsumi threw her hands up into the air in exasperation.

"That's not what I fucking said!" Hiyoko retorted. "I just think that it's a stupid idea to go up against Nanami!"

"Well, it was your idea! What the hell does that say about you then, bitch!?"

"Fuck off, you half-witted perv! You're the kind of dumbass who would throw yourself off the stage for a powerup you don't need!"

"That was a fucking accident!"

"Well, if you don't want to, no one's going to force you to do it, Hiyoko," Hajime offered quickly, trying to placate the blondes.

"Natsumi, please calm down," Peko requested, looking to Fuyuhiko for support. Unfortunately, Fuyuhiko was in the middle of eating a bunch of chips, and years of etiquette training had taught him to never speak with his mouth full.

Mikan had a much more direct approach to end the argument. She nudged Chiaki into nudging Ibuki for her, the musician leaning over to hear Mikan's words. Ever-so-helpfully, Chiaki ducked down, letting them speak over her back.

"I know she'll listen to you," Mikan hissed into Ibuki's ear, pointing to Hiyoko and Natsumi's bickering. "So please convince Hiyoko-chan, okay?"

Ibuki pulled away, staring at Mikan blankly for a moment. Then a bright grin broke out on her face as she winked at the other woman.

"Hiyo-chaaaaaan!" Ibuki sprung up from the couch, bringing the storm of insults to a standstill. She practically skipped behind the ex-dancer, looping her arms around Hiyoko's shoulders in a hug attack from behind. Because Ibuki perched her head on top of Hiyoko's skull, she did not notice the blush on Hiyoko's cheeks. "Seriously, don't you have any sense of adventure?! This is a great chance! I've always wanted to go up against Chi-chan in a video game that wasn't Mario Kart!" Ibuki lifted an arm from Hiyoko's body to pump her fist into the air. "I'm so excited!"
Saionji Hiyoko froze, though, ironically, her face was overheating. She couldn't say a single word, garbled stammering being the only thing to leave her lips. Hiyoko forced herself to gather up as much willpower as she could, forced her hands up to Ibuki's arms to shove her off-

Suddenly, Ibuki leaned over, her upside-down smile dominating Hiyoko's line-of-sight. Her hair fell down in multi-coloured ribbons, like a curtain separating Hiyoko and Ibuki from everyone else. Ibuki's grin was wide and toothy, creases at the edge of her eyes and oh fuck-

Damn Ibuki and her goddamn shining smile and excitement and soft hair and everything.

"Just for the fucking record, I warned all of you," Hiyoko grumbled as she selected her fighter. She went with a magical princess who turned into a ninja and vice-versa, since she sort of liked the Harpist of Lore series. The princess' clothes automatically switched to red, the same as everyone but Nanami.

"You have good taste," Chiaki noted, smiling as she selected the villain, an imposing, green-skinned man with sunken eyes and a deep scowl. He was immediately draped in blue, the only one-

Wait.

Mikan had a ruby-coloured dinosaur, Hajime's archer was clothed in red robes, Ibuki's robot lady was crimson by default, Natumi's starlight woman kind of looked like she was wearing a Santa dress, Mahiru's goddess had hair as green as a Christmas tree and a dress the colour of Mahiru's hair, and Fuyuhiko's robot was painted scarlet-

But Peko's swordswoman had hair as long and flowing as a river, the entire thing dyed the deep navy of the ocean's depths.

Everyone stared at Peko in shock, even Chiaki, the same question on all of their minds: Why?

"It can't be a team battle if Nanami-san is by herself," Peko explained curtly.

"We're going to get defeated, aren't we..." Mikan whispered under her breath.

"Maybe not," Fuyuhiko offered, holding out his bag of chips to Mikan. She gratefully accepted a chip as Fuyuhiko went on. "It's seven versus two. Even Nanami's going to have trouble with that."

"Come on, let's kick their asses already!" Natsumi whined impatiently at the game's loading screen. Both Mahiru and Hajime patted her on the shoulder, simultaneously telling her to calm down.

"Would you like some refreshments before you start?" Nanami Yuichiro poked his head into the room, grinning slightly as he interrupted the conversation. "I made cookies."

"How high's the sugar intake?" Hiyoko and Fuyuhiko asked in unison.

"Sweet enough to rot your teeth," Chiaki's dad joked.

Hiyoko and Fuyuhiko exchanged a glance, before heading over to the food. The rest of the group decided to join them for a quick snack break.

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Block, attack, jump, dodge, power-up, up-B-special, double jump, attack-

A new opponent appeared every second, a new attack to dodge or block. Chiaki had to react in
seconds, no- milliseconds, never having enough time to catch her breath and think.

She loved it.

For the first time in what felt like an eternity, a game felt fun to play. Chiaki used to be able to enjoy anything, until she could see her artificial state reflected in every game she touched. AI opponents were predictable, and Chiaki could see their every move in advance. In RPGs, platformers, visual novels, and so much more, she could see the programming behind every movement, she could see the strings controlling the world like puppets on a stage. It was impossible to see the game as anything but acting out a predetermined script. She was playing the part of the hero, just as the game developers intended.

But now?

Chiaki was fighting against humans. Real humans, who made mistakes, thought up strategies, and worked together.

They were unpredictable, chaotic, genuine, and Chiaki loved every second of it.

Her mechanical heart raced as she dodged another attack from Mahiru, tossing a bomb in her direction. Chiaki couldn't help but smile as the explosive went off, managing to hit Hajime and Mikan with Mahiru. She vaguely heard grumbling and groaning, before mad cackling came from her left.

Ibuki grinned excitedly, jumping up, and Chiaki's eyes widened. That glow from her arm cannon...!

She forgot to look out for Ibuki!

"Gotcha, Chi-chan!" Ibuki fired the laser, and Chiaki was sure that she would get hit-

(But she wouldn't mind. Chiaki wasn't aiming for a no-damage run or perfection, no, she just wanted to have fun with her friends.)

"I won't allow it!" Peko exclaimed, jumping in the way of the attack. She absorbed the damage in Chiaki's place, earning gasps of shock and groans of exasperation from the others.

"We can't even land one scratch on her!" Hiyoko huffed, halfheartedly tossing a crate at Chiaki.

"I won't lose without a fight!" Chiaki declared, a bright smile on her face as she smashed the box into pieces.

But really, Chiaki didn't care about winning or losing. In that moment, she didn't need to worry about anything but evading the next attack and figuring out her next move.

It was the kind of memory that Chiaki didn't really want to end, but she knew that, when it was over, she would look back on it and smile.

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**Bonus**

Saionji Hiyoko was screwed. Not even in the good way. No, she was in the process of being cheated by some cruel deity or malicious misfortune, simply put, she was screwed.

Because, son of a bitch, Hiyoko had to sleep with Ibuki for the night. It was true that, yeah, they only did it so they wouldn't have to buy another bed, and yes, they had been doing it for a couple mouths now, but still!
She was realizing how completely and utterly *un-platonic* sharing a bed was! Even seeing Ibuki with her hair down, loose from its usual horns, would be way too fucking much for her! And Ibuki was a cuddler! The rock star *loved* using Hiyoko as a teddy bear!

Hiyoko had no idea what to do. Even if Mikan let her sleep in her bed, Ibuki would think that she was still mad at her. But staying with Ibuki would mean dealing with racing heartbeats and sweaty palms and warm cheeks that she had to conceal! From the source of her fluttery feelings too, no less!

Damn, fuck, shit, son of a fucking goddamn-

"Hiyo-chan, ready for bed?" Ibuki stepped into the room, using one hand to towel-dry her hair. Her neon pink pyjamas were covered in white designs, embroidered records and music notes standing out among the fuzz. Hiyoko knew from experience that those pyjamas were just as soft as they looked.

Mioda Ibuki was adorable, and Saionji Hiyoko was fucked.

Chapter End Notes

just for reference, here are everyone's romantic/sexual orientations:

fuyuhiko: demisexual, demiromantic

mikan: pansexual, panromantic

hajime: panromantic, asexual

mahiru: bisexual, biromantic

peko: demiromantic, asexual

chiaki: homoromantic, ? (i don't know how robot sex works so...)

natsumi: biromantic, demisexual (all the kuzuryuu siblings are on the ace spectrum, yay!)

ibuki: Look there is an entire blog dedicated to proving that ibuki is gay and i am not one to argue with that

hiyoko: listen, if this chapter has established anything, it should be the fact that Saionji Hiyoko is so gay she pukes up rainbows when she's sick
Dear Diary

I don't get it.

When I first beat Peko in a fight, it was supposed to be amazing. Trumpets would sound, people would cheer, I'd feel excited and happy and Mom would praise me! She would compliment me just like she did with Fuyuki.

But it didn't happen. She didn't smile or clap or anything. She just... stared at me, like I was the most boring book she ever read, before walking away.

Did I do something wrong?

Dad says that Mom loves me just as much as Fuyuki, and that she just doesn't know how to show it. Fucking bullshit.

I've seen the way Mom smiles when she watches Fuyuki work. She's never smiled around me. I don't understand. Is it because I'm not good enough? Did I do something to make her mad?

Why is nothing I do ever enough for her?

I might have messed up. I definitely messed up. Mom's going to get so mad. I went into her room, and I found a book.

It's a yearbook from Hope's Peak Academy, AKA that rich school for talented people. The cover is made of leather and the name's printed in gold and the entire thing practically 'RICH FANCY PLACE'.

And it's hidden in my closet.

Look, I don't know why I took it, alright?! I just... did. And I'm going to get in so much trouble when Mom notices...

But she never notices me anyways. I bet she wouldn't even notice if I burned it.

Maybe I should. That would serve her right.

Mom still hasn't noticed that I took the book. But I decided not to burn it for now, since I actually learned something from it.

It turns out that Mom, Dad, and my aunt all attended Hope's Peak together. I didn't even know I had an aunt. Maybe she got disgraced or something? But she was the Super High School Level Sharpshooter there. Mom was the Super High School Level Yakuza, and- get this, Dad was the Super High School Level Baker. Yeah. Apparently, his family was actually trying to start a normal, somewhat-legal life by starting a bakery.

No wonder. My dad's cookies are so good, you could sell them as addictive drugs.

It's sort of hilarious, actually. His family tries to quit the business, and their son ends up falling in love with the heiress of the biggest Yakuza family in Japan. A Yakuza for life and a Yakuza in death.
That kind of sounds like a rock song. Heh, maybe I should be the Super High School Level Songwriter!

Whelp, I have a brother now. His name is Fuyuhiko, and he's smart, strong, clever, and invited to Hope's Peak.

Mom was so proud when he got the acceptance letter... I think she might have been hoping for this all along. She wanted Fuyuhiko to be her successor as the Super High School Level Yakuza. She even smiled when Peko got her letter. Peko's going to be the Super High School Level Swordswoman. I didn't get anything.

I think I understand now. If you've got a talent, you get love and attention and fame, but if you don't, you get left behind. You're worthless.

Mom saw that talent in Fuyuhiko and Peko.

She didn't see anything in me.

If that's how it is, then I'll just have to get a talent! I can be good enough to myself into Hope's Peak! I can be someone worthy of standing there with both of them!

Today was a weird day. Tiring too.

It started with photography. I kept trying to figure out how to get the best lighting for my shot, and then that damn Koizumi bitch came out of nowhere, nagging me about how to hold a camera.

Argh, she pisses me off! I didn't ask for your help, Miss Future Super High School Level Photographer! Quit rubbing your fucking talent in my face, you annoying ass bitch! The only reason I didn't stab you was because your damn lawnhead girlfriend got in my way!

I ended up tossing the camera at her head and storming off. I don't know how long I walked around the school, but I wound up in some abandoned hallway on the third floor.

It was quiet and peaceful, like sitting with Peko and watching snow fall from the sky. The floors were clean, so I decided, 'why the hell not?' and sat down.

And then this weird guy just fucking walks past me, with his spiky hair and chocolate snack.

I know I was in a school, okay?! It was completely normal and shit for people to be in there! But I got so fucking used to being alone there that I ended up asking why the hell he was there!

He just said that he got kicked out of class for bringing a snack that might have had peanuts in it, so he wanted to finish it before going back. And then he took another chocolate pouch thing out of his pocket and offered one to me.

We just... ate together. He wasn't afraid at me at all. Either he never heard of me, the fearsome Yakuza daughter, or he was just too stupid to care.

I don't even remember what we talked about. The only thing I really remember were his eyes. They were this pale, goldish-green colour, and I couldn't help thinking of lightning or whatever when we talked.

His name is officially Spiky-Hair Lightning Eyes in my head.
I wonder if I'll see him tomorrow?

Turns out, he's in a bunch of my classes. I just never noticed until now. Which is weird, considering that he's pretty much the only guy in school who can manage that style of hair-defying physics. Maybe it's because of his plain face?

I still don't have a name, but I know it starts with an H. Or maybe I'm wrong and/or deaf.

His name is Hajime. Hinata Hajime. And I almost punched twelve people for him.

To be fair, they were being jerks.

Like, in class, our teacher wanted to know what our dreams and aspirations and whatever, right? Everyone stands up, says their bit, and sits back down. They all said things like 'get this job' or 'get rich' or 'fuck this celebrity' (who was usually way out of their league). Normal stuff.

Hinata stood when he was supposed to, he even used the same format as the others. He said that he wanted to attend Hope's Peak.

When I heard that, I couldn't help but feel that we were kindred spirits, in a way. He wanted it just as badly as I did, he needed that talent just as badly as I did. And I understood that he would give up anything for that.

And then some asshole starts whispering about how normal he was. And then the next guy joined in, and the next, and the next. They muttered about how average he was, how ordinary, how he never stood apart from the crowd. He was lucky he was rich, he was lucky there was a reserve course, because there was no way he was getting in the normal way.

Hinata kept trying to look unaffected, but... I could tell that he was hurt by those idiots. And... well, don't tell this to anyone (wait, this is stupid, you're a fucking diary and you can't tell anyone), but... it stung. Being nothing special compared to the next guy, trying so hard to stand out, only to be another face in the crowd... I understood that. I knew Hinata did too.

But I couldn't give up, and if I couldn't, Hinata couldn't either! That would just mean that all our effort was pointless!

So I did the obvious thing. I stood the fuck up and told them to shut up, because my dream was to attend Hope's Peak with Hinata.

Hinata bought me ice cream as thanks for the support. We talked about rumours we heard about Hope's Peak and the SHSL students, until our ice cream melted and he had to buy us new ones.

I... what the fuck? Why did he do that?! Why would you

Hajime just fucking killed someone to save me.

He... he's never killed anyone before. That was obvious. The entire time, he was panicking and screaming and crying. He wouldn't stop crying after that.

He was a normal guy. If it weren't for me, he probably would live a normal life, dying without a single drop of blood on his hands... but because he got involved with me...

But I can't just leave him alone. Abandoning him after that would be worse for him than never
meeting me at all. I'm the reason he has blood on his hands, and I need to take responsibility. If I just let him deal with that trauma alone, I'd be worse than scum...

Koizumi and lawnhead think I did something to Hajime. They say he's been acting weird since we started walking home together.

I told them to shut up, since they obviously didn't understand anything.

I don't understand.

Fuyuhiko and Peko gave up their invitations... for me...? They gave up talent and worth and love for me?

I don't...They

(The next few lines are blotted out with wet spots.)

I don't need talent to be my brother and my sister's equal. Because... they love me enough to stay with me despite that.

I think I can be happy staying behind. It's fine if I cheer Hinata on from my high school, right?

Just kidding. I don't care about the approval of a book.

I would say I don't care about Mom's approval too, but... That would sort of be a lie. I mean, I don't want to stay up late studying to impress her anymore, but I still...

Oh well. I don't need anyone but my brother, my sister, Hinata, and me.

Yeah, that's fucking right! Me! Because I'm worth something, asshole! I'm worth giving up an invitation to the most prestigious school in the entire country! Talent or no, that's something that no one can fucking take from me! So bite me, bitch!

Woah, did I really write that? I don't even remember writing that.

I mean, it sounds a bit stupid... but I can't really erase it.

After all, it's true.
February 13th, 11:38 PM

"Mikan, are you sure this will work?" Hajime asked hesitantly.

"I mean, you, Fuyuhiko, Natumi, and Pekoyama-san are helping me, so I'm sure it'll be fine!" Mikan exclaimed with a grin. Then her phone vibrated in her pocket, prompting her to answer the call.

"Miss Medicine, me and Peko secured the back entrance! Fuyuhiko's distracting the victims, so get moving before more guards get here!" Natsumi hissed into her end of the phone.

"Got it," Mikan nodded, shutting off her phone. She turned to Hajime, who lifted her up so she could grab at the branch of a tree. With the strength developed from Fuyuhiko's training sessions and the determination of your average sports anime protagonist, Mikan lifted herself up. Mikan grinned at Hajime, before carefully climbing the tree to reach the roof of the house.

There, she would find a window that Peko and Natsumi had left unlocked for her. While Fuyuhiko distracted the wealthy family and Hajime watched out for guards, Mikan would nab their target.

They really were an amazing team, despite the... unorthodox activity.

Okay, very few people spent their evenings robbing a house with their boyfriend and his family. But it was very, very justifiable. Really, it was.

After all, Mikan's heart was full of love! She loved with all her heart, with all her body! No laws or security could stand in the way of her love!

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Valentine's Day Chaos - BEGIN

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February 14th, 12:08 PM

"I have no idea why you're worrying so much," Natsumi huffed, yawning as she watched Mahiru go back and forth between chocolate boxes. "It's not like Hajime's going to hate it."

"But they look totally different!" Mahiru exclaimed as she held up her top two choices. One was a rectangular box, wrapped in shiny golden paper. Pale silver stripes ran diagonally on the paper, the entire thing tied up with a thin pink ribbon. The other had a circular shape, like a cake tier, white polka dots on a ruby-coloured background. "The message, the aesthetic is completely different! Don't you understand?!"

"No," Natsumi said bluntly. Mahiru groaned in response, about to explain, before Natsumi added a simple, "Hajime really wouldn't give a damn what kind of box it's in, as long as it's a gift from you."

"But-"

"He. Will. Love. It," Natsumi stated, glaring at Mahiru. It was almost like she was daring the redhead to oppose her, to say that it wasn't the case.
Fortunately for both Natsumi's sanity and Mahiru's safety, the redhead didn't challenge that notion, only sighing.

"Alright, which one do you think looks best?" Mahiru asked, turning to Natsumi for help. "Gold or red?"

"Freckles, it doesn't make a damn difference!" Natsumi groaned in exasperation. "Just use ini-meeny-mini-moe or something!"

"No!" Mahiru shot back, before throwing her hands up in exasperation. Thankfully, she didn't accidentally toss the boxes at the ceiling. "I guess I'll choose... this one," Mahiru set the red box down, hugging the golden one to her chest. She turned to Natsumi, smiling as she signaled for her to follow. "Come on, let's go."

"Fucking finally!" Natsumi screamed in joy. "We're free from this red and pink capitalist hellhole!"

An employee nodded with a grin as Natsumi ran past him, Mahiru trailing behind with a chuckle falling from her lips.

"Come on, Freckles! Hurry it up! I want to see sunlight again!" Natsumi whined, spinning around on one heel to face Mahiru.

"I'm coming, I'm coming," Mahiru smiled warmly as she moved to reach Natsumi.

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Noon

Baking; the bane of all clumsy, awkward, screaming nurses. Or, well, Mikan, since she didn't know if there were any other clumsy, awkward, and screaming nurses out there.

Now, there was a reason behind the screaming, since baking on its lonesome was not enough to reduce Mikan to hair-pulling frustration and broken sobbing.

You see, Tsumiki Mikan was an unlucky soul. Events seemed *determined* to end badly for her.

It started with four simple words: She was in love.

Women of all ages were called to give treats to people they loved on Valentine's day, right? Except for the part where Mikan was so preoccupied with her late-night robbery that she forgot all about it. Mikan just couldn't disappoint Fuyuhiko like that, especially after asking for his help with something so big!

Thankfully, Hajime was kind enough to lend her his kitchen, where she could hurriedly whip up something sweet for her boyfriend. Pekoyama even offered to help.

But, unfortunately, Hajime asked for one thing in return for his kind gesture: for Mikan to watch over Kotoko while he distracted Fuyuhiko for her.

And Kotoko... well.

"Here's the sugar, Big Sis Mikan!" Kotoko called out cheerfully, passing the container full of white powder to Mikan. Or she would have, if Pekoyama didn't snatch it out of her hands, opening the lid to examine it.

The swordswoman caught a sniff of the smell, then immediately slammed the lid down.
“Where did you get these drugs?” Pekoyama inquired, staring Kotoko down suspiciously. Mikan gasped at the red-eyed woman’s words, nearly dropping her whisk in shock.

“Yakuza Big Brother,” Kotoko answered with a cheeky grin.

“That’s amazing what high school students can hide in the chemistry lab without being noticed, isn’t it?” Kotoko smiled innocently, fluttering her eyelashes like butterfly wings to charm Pekoyama into ignoring it. It didn’t work much.

“Oh come on!” Kotoko whined after a few seconds of Pekoyama’s stony stare. “It’s not like they were going to die or something! They would just hallucinate for a few hours! It would be so funny!”

“T-there’s no way you can do that!” Mikan shrieked, protectively hugging the mixing bowl closer to her chest. She shifted away from the pink-haired teen, while Kotoko stuck her tongue out at the nurse.

“Put it away before I tell Hajime about this,” Pekoyama ordered. Kotoko pretended to pout, before complying. She giggled under her breath, excitedly looking for new ways to get past Pekoyama’s sharp eyes and ruin Mikan’s dish!

It was almost like a game between Kotoko and Pekoyama. Kotoko would think up strategies to outsmart the swordswoman, while Pekoyama stopped her at every turn. Mikan was just caught in the crossfire.

Poor, unfortunate Mikan.

11:29 AM (Chiaki’s house)

“I can’t believe you dragged me away to play video games,” Fuyuhiko said flatly, staring up at the taller brunette.

Hajime was spared from answering by Chiaki speaking up.

“Relaxation is vital to your survival,” Chiaki quipped, already setting up the controllers. “If you want to preserve your sanity, you can’t just work, work, work all the time!” She puffed out her cheeks, trying to glare angrily at Fuyuhiko. It... really did not work. “That’s illogical, and it’ll just end up with you collapsing in a ditch somewhere! Your inventory will be stolen and you’ll have a stab wound in your leg!” Chiaki brandished one of the controllers at the Yakuza heir, bringing it up and down like she was stabbing some poor guy over and over and over again. She even made little ‘splat, shank, stab’ noises. Ibuki would be proud.

“That’s a bit...” Hajime paused, trying to think of the right word. Finally he settled on,”...excessive.”

“It’s a true story,” Chiaki stated, her eyes darkening as she remembered the experience.

“In one of your games, yeah,” Fuyuhiko added. Chiaki nodded, glad that he understood.

“Double Dragons 2,” Chiaki declared with a smile.

“...so... four dragons?” Fuyuhiko stared at Chiaki strangely.
"No, Double Dragons 2," Chiaki repeated insistently.

"Two times two is four," Fuyuhiko pointed out.

"Double Dragons is the name, and then there's the sequel."

"So there's an original two dragons, and then you add another two on top of that," Fuyuhiko offered.

"No!" Chiaki puffed out her cheeks in anger(?) as she explained, expressively gesturing with her hands to prove her point. "Double Dragons is a story about a man who fights everyone! Double Dragons 2 is the continued story of the man, after the end of the first one!"

"Well, you could have just said so from the start," Fuyuhiko huffed, earning an exasperated groan from Chiaki.

Hajime didn't fully understand what just happened, but he's glad that Fuyuhiko and Chiaki were getting along... at least, that's what he thought they were doing.

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11:15 AM

I-it wasn't a Valentine's chocolate, okay?! Hiyoko was just buying Ibuki a gift as thanks for forgiving her. That gift happened to be chocolate. On February 14th. Shut up.

Hiyoko groaned as she yanked the drawer open, knowing that the chocolates would take a huge chunk out of her life savings. Well, more like 'the-past-few-months' savings, since she didn't bring her actual life savings onto that boat. Which sucked, because Hiyoko had spent the past ten years trying to save up to buy herself some prosthetic legs, but it wasn't like she could actually make those chocolates by herself.

Years of being waited on, hand-and-non-existent-foot, had robbed her of the chance to learn important cooking skills. And despite what video games tell you, it was completely impossible to become a master chef in one night. The... somewhat charred oven was proof of that.

That left Hiyoko with no choice but to dip into her meager collection of-

"...huh?" Hiyoko's eyes widened as she dug around the cabinet, pulling out a roll of money. Last she checked, she had left her salary in a huge plastic baggy, and that bag was slowly approaching the halfway point.

So why were there rolls of bills, neatly tied up with elastics in there? Why were there cans full to the brim with coins? Familiar green cans, with Hiyoko's name written on them in black ink?

The door creaked a little, and Hiyoko whirled around as best as she could.

Mikan froze in the doorway, nearly dropping the huge box in her hands. It was so wide that Mikan could barely fit it through the door. It must have been lighter than it looked though, given that Mikan could carry it under one arm with no problem.

"Um..." Mikan hesitated, before forcing an awkward grin on her face. "I can explain?"

"Go right ahead," Hiyoko huffed, crossing her arms over her chest.

"Okay, so, um, I just- I wanted to get you some stuff from your old house, but then, er, I may
“...Mikan sucked in a deep breath, hugging the box to her chest as she nearly screamed the words. "I may have found your money supply and I decided to bring it over!"

"How did you convince my grandparents to let you in?" Hiyoko asked cautiously.

"Er... I didn't really... ask..." Mikan confessed, pinching at her fingers.

"You broke into the house," Hiyoko concluded.

"I broke into the house," Mikan echoed, lowering her head in shame.

Hiyoko snickered under her breath, a bright smile appearing on her face.

"Oh my god, Mikan, I fucking love you."

For the second time in ten minutes, Mikan nearly dropped the box. She couldn't help but feel a weird sense of déjà-vu as she recovered, placing the box on top of Hiyoko and Ibuki's bed. Mikan stepped over to see Hiyoko's reaction as she turned towards the box and its contents.

Hiyoko's eyes widened at the sight, her mouth falling open in disbelief. Her hand hesitantly reached inside, extracting a paper fan with careful, almost reverent caution.

She silently sifted through the box, pulling out memento after memento.

A disheveled, hastily-made doll that Mikan gave her for her birthday. Her old folding fans. Her father's badges from his time in the military. A kimono from Auntie Honoka. The third game in the Pikmon series, along with the game console it was meant for.

Hiyoko pinched the chain of a golden necklace between her fingers, letting tears flow freely as she pulled it out. Half of a metal heart dangled from the necklace, the word 'friends' carved into the surface.

Mikan poked at her shoulder, drawing Hiyoko's gaze away from the box full of memories. The nurse pulled the neck of her t-shirt down with a smile, revealing the necklace hanging around her neck. The chain was meant to fit children, so it was a little snug around Mikan's neck, but it still fit.

Hiyoko froze, before turning her eyes towards the other half, pinched between her thumb and forefinger. She wiped her face with her sleeve as she silently considered it.

It was what, nine, ten years since the last time Hiyoko wore it? Eleven?

But, even if there was a chance it might not fit, even if it had been years since Hiyoko first gave them to Mikan...

No one ever grew too old for friendship necklaces.

"Help me put this on," Hiyoko said immediately, holding her chain out to Mikan. They exchanged a grin as Mikan grabbed it.

The metal was cold against Hiyoko's skin, but Mikan's fingers were warm as she did the clasp. Hiyoko wheeled herself around, facing Mikan.

"You're beautiful, Hiyoko-chan."

Hiyoko couldn't keep the smile off her face when she heard her childhood nickname once again.
"Of course I am," Hiyoko nodded, puffing her chest out with pride as she placed her hands on her hips. "We're the shining superstar sisters, aren't we?"

Mikan giggled at the weird name. "You sound like Ibuki if you say it like that."

"Urgh, please no!" Hiyoko gasped in faux-offense. Her words were delivered in the most overdramatic, grandiose tone she could muster, too exaggerated to possibly be genuine. "Never, ever say anything like that again! My feelings will get hurt!"

"Would you rather be Fuyuhiko then?" Mikan asked with a smile. "Or maybe Natsumi?"

"Nope and nope!" Hiyoko shook her head, puffing her cheeks out in a pout. "No way! I'm nothing like those guys!"

"Ah, you're doing a perfect imitation of Chiaki!" Mikan declared excitedly.

Hiyoko sighed, before looking down at her flat chest. "Now if only I could imitate her in horizontal growth spurts too..."

"But you're much bigger than you were before!" Mikan exclaimed, waving her arms around to seem more convincing... though it didn't work much. If anything, the arm-waving made her attempts look stilted and forced. "Really!"

"Pft, nice fucking try!" Hiyoko snickered behind her hand. "Try to trick me again in a hundred years, maybe you'll convince me then!"

"We'll both be dead by then!" Mikan retorted with a giggle.

"Then you better learn how to lie, before I turn into a granny!"

Mikan couldn't even say anything to that, only laughing in response. Hiyoko joined in, wiping tears away from her eyes.

The joke probably wasn't even that funny. Mikan had heard better puns from Ibuki, actually. But they still laughed hysterically, tears running down from their faces as they made up for years of hatred and fear.

"I missed being able to joke around with you!" Mikan declared, tossing her arms around Hiyoko's neck and pulling the blonde close.

"Mikaaaaaaaaan, you're going to suffocate me!" Hiyoko whined, trying to push Mikan's chest away from her face. "You're going to suffocate me with your gigantic tits!"

"Um. What am I looking at?" The pair turned towards the new voice, spotting Ibuki and her brother staring at the scene strangely.

Mikan immediately jumped away from Hiyoko, throwing her hands up into the air. Even though she wasn't being arrested.

"Way to ruin the touching moment, dunderhead," Hiyoko rolled her eyes.

"Ibuki is not a dunderhead!" Nagisa glared at the blonde, while Hiyoko stuck her tongue out at him.

"I mean," Ibuki ignored Nagisa and Hiyoko's antics, rambling on, even when no one was listening. "I was going to invite you to go shopping for Valentine's chocolates with me and Nagi-chan, but if
you're too busy-

"Wait," Mikan said suddenly, her eyes widening in horror. "It's Valentine's Day!"

"You didn't know?" Ibuki asked, staring at Mikan curiously.

"I didn't!" Mikan wailed, tugging at the ends of her hair as she panicked. "Oh crap, oh crap, shit, Fuyuhiko's going to-! I can't believe I forgot! And after doing something so big together last night, too!"

"What," Nagisa was so weirded out by Mikan's behaviour that he couldn't even put emotion into his voice.

Hiyoko and Ibuki were much more expressive though.

"What the hell did you do?!" Hiyoko demanded, as Ibuki gurgled and gasped for breath, incapable of saying a word.

Mikan completely ignored the question, rushing out of the room. Ibuki moved to follow her with a battle cry. Nagisa sighed before trailing after his sister, and Hiyoko wheeled herself to get her answers.

They kinda looked like the four stooges.

11:46 AM

"This is what you get for saying that 'Double Dragons 2' is a stupid name!" Chiaki cried out, her character striking Fuyuhiko's with a flaming projectile.

"So I'm getting punished for telling the truth?" Fuyuhiko asked, a teasing smirk on his face as he tried to dodge the attack. Unfortunately for him, he failed, the tiny attack wiping out what little was left of his health meter. He let out a groan when the 'K.O!' appeared.

"Best twenty-three out of forty-four," Chiaki offered, already skipping her way through the victory screens.

"Does it even count as a competition anymore?" Hajime piped up, earning a glare from both Chiaki and Fuyuhiko.

"I'm going to fucking beat her soon, you hear me!? Just sit your ass tight and be patient, you damn bastard!"

"I still need to get my revenge! For the sake of the legendary warriors whose names he slandered, I must defeat him a hundred times over!"

"...uh. Okay then," Hajime said simply.

Well, Hajime really had no idea which one was more likely to happen first, a hundred wins or a darkhorse victory, but... um, Fuyuhiko and Chiaki were getting along... maybe...?

11:48 AM

"Huh...? What happened to the kitchen...?" A distraught Mikan stared at the (lightly) charred oven, having absolutely no idea how that happened.
"A bomb must have went off in here or something..." Nagisa muttered, taking note of the solid, burnt flecks of some strange substance stuck to the walls, the fridge, the floor...

"Yeah, must have been one huge accident," Hiyoko grumbled under her breath, pouting a bit. Ibuki gave her a questioning look, and Hiyoko glared back. Their moment of eye contact was less of a staring contest and more of a battle of wills and dominance. Eventually, Ibuki caved, looking away with a huff.

"Yup. Total accident," Ibuki sighed in the most forced, unconvincing tone she could muster.

"T-here's no way we can bake here... and since it's Valentine's day, every store's going to have nothing but chocolates...!" Mikan realized in horror.

"Maybe Mahiru-chan will let you use her kitchen or something?" Hiyoko suggested, unable to even glance at Mikan in her guilt.

"Sorry to break this to you, but Mahiru-chan went chocolate shopping," Ibuki frowned, deflating a bit as she broke the bad news. "Don't know when she'll be back," Ibuki quickly slapped a smile on her face, trying to recover with a, "Maybe you can ask someone else! I know Chi-chan would totally let you, if she's awake!"

Mikan gasped, suddenly getting an idea from Ibuki and Hiyoko's words.

"Hajime-kun!" Mikan grinned brightly, clapping her hands together. "His apartment is in the same direction as Fuyuhiko's house! I'll be able to rush over the minute I'm done!"

'Kotoko's older brother..." Nagisa noted, silently making a note of the friendship between the two brunettes. But he wouldn't say anything. No, he would just keep to the shadows, observing everyone's actions until he found a vital weakness that he could take advantage of-

Oblivious to her brother's somewhat worrying, serial killer-like habits, Ibuki cheered, a bright smile on her face as she spun Mikan around. She turned Mikan towards the door, giving her a quick push towards the exit.

"Wha-what-what-!? Mikan yelped as she stumbled forward, trying to regain her balance.

"What are you waiting for?!" Ibuki called out. "Go make those chocolates! Make Fuyu-chan fall for you all over again!"

Hiyoko gave Mikan a thumbs-up, a grin blooming across Mikan's face as she stood up, tall and proud.

"I will!"

And with that, Mikan left, the door closing with a click behind her.

There were a few moments of silence between the trio, before Ibuki spoke up.

"So... what actually happened to the kitchen?" Ibuki asked.

"Mioda Ibuki, there are questions that no human being is meant to know the answer to," Hiyoko declared. She glared at the rock star with a fire that could scorch ice caps burning in her eyes. "This is one of those questions."

"She blew up the oven trying to make something," Nagisa theorized. Hiyoko let out a yelp,
confirming his hypothesis. "And she was too embarrassed and ashamed of herself to admit it."

"Shut up, you fucking asshole- bitch- you son of a motherfucker!"

"Please stop calling my baby brother weird things," Ibuki requested politely.

"Wait, what," Hiyoko stared at Ibuki in disbelief. When the hell did Ibuki talk formally?! Politely?!

That was not Ibuki, that was an alien sent from space to impersonate her or something!

Normally, Ibuki would have somehow picked up on Hiyoko's thoughts, cracking a joking retort with a teasing grin.

Hiyoko was only creeped out when that did not happen. Instead, Ibuki bowed her head, continuing on with the stiff, blank voice as she addressed the other two.

"Please get along. I do not want to hear you insulting each other."

"Why are you talking like that?!" Nagisa demanded, looking a bit pale as he wondered if his sister was sick.

"I don't get what happened to her head this time, but she wants us to... not kill each other, right?"

Hiyoko continued at Nagisa's nod. She let out a sigh, before extending a hand to the taller teen.

Nagisa regarded her with a suspicious stare, prompting Hiyoko to begrudgingly explain.

"She doesn't want us to fight. So... if we get along, she'll go back to being the weirdo we all know and love."

"I see. That is the logical conclusion..." Nagisa sighed, before giving Hiyoko's hand a shake. "Then I attempt to be civil, so long as you do the same."

"Yeah, yeah, got it," Hiyoko nodded, before glancing at Ibuki.

At first, Ibuki was still. She gave absolutely no indication that she was even alive, even more motionless than a statue. She didn't even blink.

Hiyoko and Nagisa watched carefully, their eyes focusing intently for any twitches or any signs that Ibuki was even breathing...

And then Ibuki suddenly jumped, startling both of them.

"Hooray, this is wonderful, excellent, beautiful, supercalifragilisticexpialidocious!" Ibuki rattled off the cheers, sucking in a breath before continuing, almost twice as fast as before. "Yay, yay, you two are gonna be such great friends! Actually, I was planning on going shopping with both of you, but now I can see that I'm no longer needed! So please have lots of fun together while I go ahead and clean, I insist!"

Ibuki was about to shove Hiyoko and Nagisa towards the door, just before Hiyoko gave her a glare that would make babies cry and zombies die another death.

"Ibuki, don't even fucking think about it!" Hiyoko snarled. "I'm the-" The blonde cut herself off, before holding her head up with an air of arrogance. "I'm the kindest, most generous, most caring person here! Therefore, it's my duty to clean this mess up!"

"I doubt it," Nagisa said simply, and if she wore shoes, Hiyoko would have thrown one at him.
"Heeeeeeeeeeeey, no, what happened to getting along-"

"Screw off! Buy a teddy bear made of asbestos! Use chlorine as hair dye!"

"I doubt you have the intelligence to know that-"

"Get along! No fighting, no fighting, or I'm banning you both from eating sugar!"

...yeah, it would take a bit more work for Nagisa and Hiyoko to get along. A lot more work. An amount that could really only be described as tremendous.

But Ibuki was a girl who never knew when to give up. So that's why, even if it took years and years, she would get them to be friends! She had the power of cuteness and pouting on her side, after all!

1:12 PM

A knock came on Chiaki's door, though the two players were too engrossed in their game to notice. Hajime sighed, before standing to answer the door.

"Look, Kazuichi, she's not-" Hajime paused, blinking as he realized the identity of the visitor, or rather, visitor. "Oh. Hey."

"Kazuichi?" Kotoko snickered behind her hand. "You seriously can't remember my name? Are you becoming a geezer that fast?"

"Completely impossible," Hajime retorted with a wry grin as he moved to let Mikan, Peko, and Kotoko inside.

All three of them held a bag in their hands, shiny, decorated paper glittering in the fluorescent light. Peko stood up straight, holding her baby blue bag in her hands like any normal, well-meaning person would hold a tiny bag. Kotoko kept chattering on excitedly, even when no one responded. Her hands moved on their own, jostling the pink (of course) bag in her hand. Mikan fidgeted with the thin ribbon tied around the handle of her bag, her knees pinched together as she looked around. Or rather, for someone.

Hajime decided to help out. After all, that's what friends were for, right?

"Fuyuhiko, get your ass over here!" Hajime called out. He got annoyed grumbling and something that sounded like "Just a little bit longer!" in response, so he decided to add, "Don't keep your girlfriend waiting!"

A few seconds later, Fuyuhiko rushed into the room in that weird half-walk, half-run pace you did when you wanted to run, but rules and/or common courtesy prevented you from doing so. A sleepy Chiaki trailed after him, staring at the scene blankly. Scene, not screen.

There was a brief moment of silence, before Mikan took a deep breath. She stepped forward, holding her bag out to Fuyuhiko with a bow.

"I-I made you Valentine's chocolates!" Mikan yelped. "I hope you like them!"

Fuyuhiko and Hajime exchanged a glance, an exchange that basically went like:

'It's Valentine's day?"
'How did you forget?'

'...shut up.'

Fuyuhiko turned back to Mikan before suddenly realizing-

"Uh. Chocolate?"

"Shit, no, I meant sweets!" Mikan corrected quickly, reassuring Fuyuhiko that he would not have an allergic reaction to whatever was inside. "U-uh... um, what do couples normally do..." Mikan straightened, getting an idea. She grabbed at Fuyuhiko's hand, dragging him towards Chiaki's kitchen. Every time Fuyuhiko asked a question or raised a complaint, Mikan replied with her best attempts at verbal evasion. Which... weren't very good, but she was trying.

"They'll be okay, right?" Peko asked warily, watching the two leave.

Chiaki shrugged, before giving a non-committal, "Probably."

"Hey, hey, Big Bro Hajime, want some chocolates?" Kotoko grinned excitedly, pulling out a piece for the brunette.

"They're not poisoned, I can assure you," Peko added. Kotoko gave her a smile lined with sharp blades, one that looked innocent but hid threats and blood. Just like Kotoko herself.

Peko gave her no mind, knowing that she could easily disarm the teenager.

"Hope so, because this looks delicious," Hajime considered the chocolate for another second, before popping it into his mouth. Kotoko almost felt guilty when the hot sauce kicked in. Almost.

Nanami and Peko stayed behind as Hajime ran to the bathroom to wash his mouth out, Kotoko following after to help out (and watch and laugh).

"He's probably going to be fine," Nanami muttered to herself, Peko nodding along.

The silver-haired swordswoman pulled out one of her sweets, raising it up to her mouth. She paused, her eyes drifting over to the other woman's soft-looking hair...

And then she got an idea.

"Would you like some?" Peko held the bag out to the docile gamer. Nanami blinked up at her, staring at Peko and her gift curiously.

"...really? You don't have anyone to give it to?"

"You are the person I am choosing to give these to," Peko said simply, taking a bite out of her cookie.

Nanami turned a shade of pink that roses would envy, reaching out for Peko's bag. She pinched it carefully, making sure that she didn't take it. Instead, Peko kept holding it as Nanami opened the bag, grabbing the first cookie she saw.

Peko didn't really notice it before, but... when she watched Nanami nibble at the treat, she couldn't help but compare the sight to a hamster. But Nanami was probably even cuter. That fluffy hair, those puffed-out cheeks, the way she licked at her fingers after to get every crumb...

"Are they all cherry-flavoured?" Nanami asked apprehensively, pouting a bit.
"Er. N-no, not all of them," Peko floundered about, trying to hide the fact that she had been staring. It didn't work much. "There are also vanilla and chocolate flavours."

"Ah... that's good," Nanami reached into the bag, pulling out another cookie. She examined it carefully, before cautiously taking a bite. Her eyes brightened when the filling touched her tongue. Vanilla-flavoured!

"D-do you like it?" Peko inquired.

"Yeah, it's really, really good!" Nanami exclaimed with a grin that rivaled stars in brightness and beauty. Her cheeks turned a bit pinker as she added, "Thank you for choosing to share them with me. They're really tasty."

Oh fuck, she was adorable. And Peko was weak around adorable.

Without another word, Peko took Nanami's hands in her own. Pink eyes stared up at her in confusion as she deposited the bag of sweets in Chiaki's hands.

(Her hands were soft, a great deal softer than any artificial flesh had any right to be. Touching them was like running your fingers over velvet; a fleeting warmth, soft, ticklish feelings, and something that you just did not want to stop doing.)

"They're all yours," Peko stated. "If there's any you don't want, I'll eat them."

Nanami paused, before a soft, glowing smile stretched out across her lips. "Thank you."

Peko's heart felt warm in her chest at the sight.

She wanted to cut down everything that threatened that smile and protect everything that caused it. Peko wanted to admire that grin for hours on end. But most of all, she really, really wanted to squeeze Nanami and never let go.

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1:14 PM

It was kind of weird to walk through her old apartment again. Mikan kept noticing little bits and pieces, her eyes darting all over the place. It was almost exactly as she remembered it, but then she spotted something different. There weren't any plants anymore. Her kitten calendar was replaced by a Cario one. Her healthcare posters had been taken down... either that or Ibuki and Hiyoko took them.

(The makers were obligated to give her posters that featured her, but Mikan had absolutely no idea what to do with them, so she just tossed them up on the wall. It was sorta weird to walk past your own face all the time, but Mikan got used to it.)

The apartment felt emptier, and Mikan realized... it was because of her. It was because of her and Ibuki and Hiyoko. The three of them had lived there, added their influence, added proof of their existence and their time together... and when that was gone, the apartment felt lonely.

How could Chiaki start eating alone when she was so used to chaotic meals with the three of them? Did Chiaki still wake up in time to wake Mikan up for her shifts, only to realize that she didn't have to do that anymore? Did Chiaki miss them?

Mikan had affected others, and she had been equally changed in return. She already knew the second part, but learning the first part... well, it was a slap to the face. Mikan was as big of an
She turned back to Fuyuhiko, a spoon in one hand and her bag of treats in the other. Her mind kept wandering, wondering if Fuyuhiko had changed since they met because of her.

"What are you doing?" Fuyuhiko asked, dragging her out of her thoughts.

"Something couples do," Mikan answered with a smile. She dipped the spoon into the bag, balancing a cookie on top of it as she lifted the spoon out. "Now, say 'ah'!"

"You- are you serious?!" Fuyuhiko almost flinched away from the sweet, his face turning redder by the millisecond.

"I mean, you did the same thing to me, so I'm just returned the favour!" Mikan replied, completely oblivious to Fuyuhiko's embarrassment. She paused, humming thoughtfully. "But using a spoon feels silly... ah. I know."

She pinched the cookie between her fingers, dropping the spoon into the depths of the bag. With a bright grin on her face, she held the sweet out to Fuyuhiko.

"That's- no! This and that are unrelated!" Fuyuhiko shot back. His face burned a brighter crimson than every other analogy made to red stuff in this entire story. Combined. "I mean, spoons and your fingers are totally different...!" He was not blushing over the idea of Mikan's fingers tracing over his lips and cheeks and shut the fuck up bitch do you want to fucking die.

"But the spoon makes me feel stupid," Mikan said with a pout.

"W-why are you trying to feed me in the first place?!!" Fuyuhiko demanded. "I can feed myself!"

"Oh... I guess if you don't want me to, it's fine..." Mikan deflated, disappointment audible in her voice. A frown marred her face, and even though she didn't mean to, she accidentally wiped out his resistance in one hit.

"You have one try," Fuyuhiko huffed, pointedly turning his head away. "So don't mess it up."

Mikan looked up at him with curious eyes, before gasping in shock. "Y-you really mean it?!!"

"Hurry up before I change my mind," Fuyuhiko grumbled, refusing to add 'I might end up letting you do anything to me' at the end. Mikan didn't even mean to influence him most of the time, but she had a weird way of getting him to do what she wanted anyways. Or maybe it was just him trying to make her happy. It was hard to tell, really.

But it didn't really matter, not when a huge, excited grin stretched across Mikan's lips. Not when she pressed a kiss to his cheek, whispering 'thank you' against his skin.

That alone made the embarrassment worth it.

1:36 PM

"You were at Nanami's place the entire time?" Natsumi groaned in exasperation, exhausted from the wild goose chase.

Mahiru let out a sigh, before holding the box out to Hajime. "Here. For you."

Hajime nearly fainted.
Peko had to explain that the entire thing was Kotoko's fault.
Kuzuryuu Amaterasu didn't ask for permission before entering the room, her posture upright and confident as she strode towards him. She didn't even wait for him to put down the weights he was preparing before speaking.

"Fuyuhiko. A moment of your time, if you please," His mom had a calm smile on her face and her words were phrased as a question, but her words were like a poisoned chalice drowning in silk; too pretty and innocent to be real, too conspicuous to be good, and too formal to be refused.

There were fangs in her grin and threats lining her words, and it was clear that trying to escape would only lead to stab wounds.

"Yes, Mom?" Fuyuhiko sighed, wanting to get the ordeal over with already.

"I don't remember raising such a rude child," She stated, her omnipresent smile growing colder by the second. "Can you not refer to your own mother correctly?"

Fuyuhiko stared her down silently, waiting for her to say what she actually wanted to say. He didn't have time for poisoned words or false smiles.

(Well, he technically had the time to deal with it, he just didn't want to.)

His mom showed no sign that his wordless defiance affected her, her infuriating grin still on her face as she continued without missing a beat.

"You've been training your little girlfriend for a while now, haven't you?" She asked, even though they both knew it was the truth. Fuyuhiko didn't answer, and his mom continued without waiting for a response. "I've been wondering... why?"

"What do you mean, 'why'?" Fuyuhiko has to bite his tongue to keep himself from adding 'isn't it obvious?' at the end. Instead, he explained simply, "It's so she can protect herself."

"If you wanted her to be safe, you could just kidnap her," His mom's grin widened at the notion, like she was barely holding herself back from yelling at Fuyuhiko to try it already. Despite her excitement, her voice was light and casual, like kidnapping your girlfriend was perfectly acceptable behaviour. "She'll be surrounded by gunmen and fighters. Plus, it'll be easier to keep her from running away that way."

"Run away?" The words slipped out of his mouth before he could stop himself. He tried to pretend that he hadn't said anything, he tried to look neutral and unaffected, but it was too late.

Delight flickered behind her eyes, her smile growing to show her fangs. She had trapped him in her grip, taking a moment to bask in her victory before striking.

"Yes, women are fickle creatures. The moment they find someone better suited to them, they run off, abandoning their old lover to rot. You really should be careful with the women you trust your heart to, or you might find her missing the next morning."

"Shut up!" Fuyuhiko snapped, gritting his teeth together in a scowl. He could handle backhanded
compliments and subtle insults aimed at him, but there was no way in hell he was letting anyone insult Mikan. Not even his mother. "She wouldn't do something like that!"

"Are you sure?"

"Yes!" Fuyuhiko answered, way too quickly. He didn't care about politeness or what would happen later, he just wanted her to get the fuck out. "Quit bothering me already!"

"Of course, my child," His mom's smile was almost taunting as she nodded. She spun around, turning to leave, satisfied in knowing that she got the last word.

Fuyuhiko grumbled under his breath, his mood infinitely worsened by the intrusion.

"Go, go, go!" Ibuki cheered, pumping her fist into the air. Her fighter had already been knocked out, so she was demoted to 'team cheerleader'. "Get her! Get that point, knock Chi-chan off the stage!"

"I'm trying!" Hiyoko retorted, lobbing a bomb in the other direction. Unfortunately, Chiaki jumped over the blast, foiling the attempt neatly.

"Take this!" Mikan declared, her magician shooting a fully-charged lightning bolt at Chiaki's cute villager.

"Try again next time," Chiaki smirked, and suddenly, the attack disappeared.

"What?!" Hiyoko shrieked, her panic only increasing when she realized, oh crap, Chiaki's character had a crackling aura around her, and double oh crap, Chiaki was headed towards her.

Hiyoko let out a frustrated half-groan, half-scream when she was launched away once again. That left Mikan as the only one still standing against Chiaki's attacks!

Unsurprisingly, Mikan lost. Horribly.

"One more round!" Ibuki demanded. "We have to beat Chi-chan!"

"Actually..." Mikan paused, pulling her phone out to check the time. "I have to go to Fuyuhiko's house now."

"Workout?" Ibuki asked, just as Hiyoko offered "Sleeping together?" and Chiaki wondered "Why would you do that in the middle of the day?"

Because they were all talking at the same time, they had no idea who Mikan nodded to.

"It was really fun!" Mikan grinned, as she hugged her friends goodbye. "Please invite me next time! And have fun while I'm gone!"

"Yeah, yeah, just go date your fucking boyfriend already," Hiyoko rolled her eyes, though she was smiling. Just a little bit.

"They need to be dating to be a couple," Chiaki pointed out.

"The details don't matter!" Hiyoko shot back, scowling.

"Hiyo-chan, Hiyo-chan, calm down!" Ibuki declared, making a huge 'X' with her arms. "No real life fighting! If you have an issue with Chi-chan, settle it in Bash!"
"She'd kick my ass a million times over in that game!"

"We can try Pikmon instead," Chiaki suggested.

Hiyoko gasped, though she immediately tried to pretend she didn't. Her attempts were less than stellar, but even if she was the most skilled actress in the world, she wouldn't be able to hide the flicker of interest in her eyes.

"I guess we can try that game..."

Mikan smiled, figuring that her friends weren't going to die or start killing each other while she was gone.

Fuyuhiko didn't smile when he saw her coming. His eyebrows were knit together, his jaw tight, and Mikan could instantly tell that something had upset him.

But before she could ask, he ordered her to get started. Twenty push-ups, twenty squats, twenty crunches, repeat.

Mikan obeyed immediately, figuring that she could comfort him later. Or maybe exercise would make him feel better? After all, some people liked being in control...

With the hopes of pleasing Fuyuhiko with her submission, Mikan got to work enthusiastically.

Her hair was drawn back in a loose, messy bun as she did her best to complete Fuyuhiko's regime. Even though it was tough, Mikan never complained, using her brief breaks to catch her breath before exerting herself again. Sweat stained her old t-shirt, and occasionally, a strand of hair would fall and get stuck to her flushed, sticky face.

She was beautiful.

Mikan was amazing, adaptable, and adamant. She never whined about the cards life had dealt her, she just powered through them as best as she could. With a calming smile on her face, Fuyuhiko had already admired how she dealt with issues of the past, but seeing it in action, right in front of him, even for the most mundane things...

Maybe she was too good for him.

Fuyuhiko gritted his teeth together, wanting to slap himself. His mom was just being a bitch! He didn't have anything to worry about!

"I'm done!" Mikan exclaimed, pushing herself up off the floor. She got up so fast, she practically leaped into the air. Her eyes shone with eagerness as she asked, "What's next? Because I can do anything you want me to! Anything at all!"

"Jeez, so energetic..." Fuyuhiko muttered, though a lazy smirk stretched across his lips. "Grab two knives. We're working on disarming techniques today."

"Got it!" Mikan nodded, running off to get the weapons.

His smile fell as he watched her leave. Even when she was out of sight, his eye was fixed on the empty doorway.

Really... how in the world did he deserve someone like her?
There were so many words you could pair with her. Sweet. Caring. Kind. Gentle. Cute. The list went on and on. But no matter how long the list grew, no matter how many adjectives he thought of, he couldn't think of one that meshed well with him.

Seriously, an adorable, well-meaning nurse and a foulmouthed, rude Yakuza heir, falling for each other? A year ago, he would have laughed at the notion. The man he was a year ago wouldn't care what one stuttering nurse thought of him.

But he couldn't stop himself from overthinking, from feeding the seed of doubt that had been planted inside him. Fuyuhiko hated feeling like he was failing her expectations, hated doubting himself, and hated the sinking feeling in his stomach, the weight in his lungs... but no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't just stop.

What if she found someone better? Someone who lacked all his bad traits and-

"I got the knives!"

Mikan dashed into the room, carrying a pair of butter knives over her head.

"Be careful with those, would you?!!" Fuyuhiko snapped, putting up a mask of irritation. He didn't want her to know what he had been thinking about. He held out his hand, and Mikan gave him a blade without thinking. "Let's get started already."

"Got it!" Mikan nodded enthusiastically, looking absolutely adorable as she took a defensive stance. Fuyuhiko almost wanted to stop to admire her before trying to stab her.

Almost.

He stepped forward, quickly jabbing at her gut. Mikan reacted without thinking (good!), jumping back, raising her arm in defense.

"Keep dodging!" Fuyuhiko barked, stabbing at her once again. "You're just going to get hurt if you use your arm!"

Mikan gave him a sharp nod as she sidestepped the strike. Her movements were slower than Fuyuhiko would have liked, but she got out unharmed, so it counted as a point for her.

And then she grabbed his wrist, yanking him forwards. Fuyuhiko beamed with pride as he twisted his way out of her grip, his blade coming up to strike at her again-

Warm arms wrapped around his shoulders, pulling him closer as soft lips kissed his forehead. A strangled, startled, surprised shriek escaped from Fuyuhiko's throat.

It took a few seconds for Fuyuhiko to recover his ability to speak, but when he did, the first thing he said was, "W-w-w-w-w-what the hell?! What the- what do you think you're doing?!!"

"Disarming you?" Mikan suggested, grinning awkwardly as she pulled away.

"That's- no! That's not allowed!" Fuyuhiko protested, stomping at the floor in indignation.

"I-it's a valid technique, isn't it?!" Mikan exclaimed defensively.

"No, it's not! Why would you do that?!" Fuyuhiko demanded, his face a shade of red unseen outside of glowing neon lights.

"Because..." Mikan hesitated, slowly beginning to match Fuyuhiko in cheek colour. "Because I
wanted to... to k-kiss you..." She didn't add the 'I thought it might make you smile' at the end.

"But still, don't try that on anyone else," Fuyuhiko grumbled, his voice dropping to a whisper as he went on. "Don't want you kissing anyone but me..."

Mikan paused, staring at him silently.

"What are you looking at?!" Fuyuhiko snapped, glaring up at Mikan. "I didn't say anything!"

"I didn't say anything either," Mikan stated.

"Well, isn't that just fine and dandy?" Fuyuhiko rolled his eye, clenching his hands into fists. "We're both completely silent! Incredible!"

"Fuyuhiko-"

Fuyuhiko either didn't hear or ignored Mikan's attempt at an interjection. He continued, gritting his teeth together as he practically spat out the words.

"And we both become mimes and you can't talk to anyone else or-"

Mikan reached out, placing a hand on Fuyuhiko's shoulder.

"Fuyuhiko, you're freaking out," Mikan looked him in the eye, her voice steady and calm.

"I am perfectly calm."

"Fuyuhiko," Mikan repeated insistently.

"I. Am. Calm," Fuyuhiko forced the words through gritted teeth, looking away with a huff.

Mikan sighed, dropping the knife on the floor. Her hands came up to frame Fuyuhiko's face. She made Fuyuhiko look her in the eye, her thumbs tracing light circles over his skin.

Fuyuhiko's face slowly began to turn pink in her hands, though he wouldn't admit it. He wouldn't admit that... well, he was actually relaxing a bit in Mikan's hold. Tension bled out of his body, a sigh falling from his lips. Mikan smiled, before wrapping her arms around his shoulders, pressing a kiss to his forehead. His arms came up to complete the hug, burying his bright red face in Mikan's neck.

They stayed like that in silence for a while, before Fuyuhiko spoke up. His voice was muffled against Mikan's skin, his chest tight as the words left his mouth.

It was so stupid. He was worrying over nothing. Everything was fine, and he would just ruin it by bringing up his fears.

But Fuyuhiko never was all that good at keeping his mouth shut.

"What kind of person do you like?" Fuyuhiko asked quietly.

"What?" Mikan's voice was confused, but not judging. She was just... asking for clarification. Yeah.

Fuyuhiko fumbled, knowing that it was too late to take it back and pretend everything was okay. With a sense of 'why did I do that?' hanging over his head, he elaborated.
"Y'know... if you were looking for someone to date. Smarts and strength and stuff like that."

Mikan paused, before humming thoughtfully. Finally, she answered, a small smile on her face.

"Someone determined. Someone passionate and thoughtful and kind. Someone who's always there to listen to me and support me. Someone who always speaks their mind. Someone who really loves candy," Mikan's grin became knowing as she pressed a kiss to his forehead, muttering the final piece of the puzzle against his warm skin. "Someone whose name is 'Kuzuryuu Fuyuhiko'."

"Guh- what?!" Fuyuhiko's head snapped up, his face bright red as he gaped at Mikan.

"So you don't have anything to worry about, okay?" Mikan said with her reassuring grin.

"T-that's- I wasn't worried!" Fuyuhiko exclaimed, before faltering. "I just... wanted to know, that's all."

"Right, I understand."

"You don't believe me at all, do you?!"

"I believe you, I believe you!"

Fuyuhiko rolled his eye with a huff.

"Fuyuuuuuuuuuuuuu!!" Mikan whined. "Believe me when I say I believe you!"

"Quit sounding like an anime character already!" Fuyuhiko ordered.

"B-but..." Mikan whimpered, pouting at him. "I thought I was the cute clumsy girl..."

"You are," Fuyuhiko nodded, earning a scream of shock from Mikan. He raised an eyebrow at her surprise. "What? Am I wrong?"

"No!" Mikan exclaimed quickly, her face burning brighter than a flaming spotlight. A flaming spotlight that was thrown into the sun. "B-but, um, you don't usually c-call me cute or stuff like that..."

"Well..." Fuyuhiko hesitated, his cheeks filling with colour. "It's a bit embarrassing to just say it like that..."

"I understand," Mikan declared with a glowing grin. A giggle fell from her lips before she added, "But it still makes me really happy to hear it."

"It doesn't take much to satisfy you, huh?" Fuyuhiko said solemnly, before freezing. He didn't mean to say something like that, shit!

His eye hurriedly scanned Mikan's face for any sign of disapproval, only to find-

Her smile still plastered on her face.

"As long as it's from you, I'm happy with any compliment I can get," Mikan answered, and Fuyuhiko breathed out a sigh of relief. He didn't mess up.

...why was he walking on eggshells? Why was he avoiding saying too much, carefully controlling his words to keep Mikan away from his thoughts? It wasn't comfortable, it wasn't like him to be so antsy.
He could always relax around Mikan, trust her... with everything, really.

But Fuyuhiko didn't want to admit it. He wanted to tell her, but he didn't. He wanted to share his insecurities with her, but he didn't want to burden her.

It was a choice between suffering in silence and saying it outright. Between seeing Mikan happy and carefree while he fostered doubt and uncertainty, or... just saying it. Because... Mikan wouldn't hate him. She insisted on staying with him after a goddamn massacre, so... would a bit of doubt really ruin anything?

"You won't leave me, right?" Fuyuhiko asked, pushing all his fear, all his anxiety into the open.

(Terrifying, liberating, good and bad wrapped up into one as he waited for an answer-)

"What- no!" Mikan exclaimed immediately, staring at him in horror. "Never!"

"Even if you find someone better?"

"There's no one I could ever love more than you," Mikan stated with a smile. "No matter what they looked like, no matter what sort of impressive things they can do... they would never compare to you."

Fuyuhiko gaped at her, not believing his ears.

Her eyes shone with what could only be called absolute adoration as she continued.

"No one else can make me as happy as you do," Mikan declared, her grin becoming more bashful. "I fell in love with you because you're you. There's no one on earth who can replace you, so you don't have to worry, okay, Fuyuhiko?"

"...thanks, Mikan," Fuyuhiko returned her beaming grin, unintentionally making Mikan turn the same (familiar) shade of pink that dusted his cheeks.

"Of course," Mikan giggled, right before pressing another kiss to his cheek.

 Seriously... how in the world did someone as sweet as Mikan exist? He really couldn't believe that she was real sometimes.

So he decided to verify her existence, starting with kissing every bit of skin he could reach. Mikan laughed, the joyful sound filling the room and reverberating around his ears.

His conclusion: Mikan's neck and collarbone were definitely real. Fuyuhiko would have to check for everything else though.

Natsumi snickered to herself as she crept away from the scene, already taking out her phone. She tapped out a message, because, hey, her brother probably wasn't stopping any time soon, and it would suck if Miss Medicine's roommates came while the L-O-V-E-birds were making out. Really, Natsumi was just doing a service to the world! Her brother ought to thank her for being such a good, thoughtful, generous sister!

[Yo, Mioda.]
[You don't need to pick up Miss Medicine today.]

[She's on a date with Fuyuhiko.]

The reply came a few seconds after with a quiet 'ping!'.

[got it! thanks for the info, natsu-chan! ^ω^]

[but, quick question (´・ω・`)]

[Yeah?]

[you call mikan-chan miss medicine? (?_?)]

[Nicknames are cute! Shush, you!]

[im not denying that! (≧∇≦)/]

[but now i wanna give you a nickname! o(≧∇≦o)]

[Go right ahead! As long as it's cute, I'm fine with it!]

[hmmmm, hmmmm, a super cute nickname for natsu-chan... ＿σ ＿σ ＿]

[Wait, does Natsu-chan count?]

[it doesnt have the same appeal! (крытег)]

[lets see... natumi... (¬з¬)]

[natumi... mi do ray... (¬ε¬)]

Ibuki hummed a tiny little tune to herself, before getting an idea. Her eyes brightened as she tapped the new nickname into existence.

[thats it! youre officially midoray-chan! (•̀¬•́) ]

[Wow.]

[I'm calling you Rainbow Horns from now on.]

[im so excited! o(*^▽^*)o ]

[a super cute nickname from a super cute girl! aaaaaah, my heart is going super fast! (／_／) ≧◇≦ )]

[Hope that's not arrhythmia.]

The horn-headed moron snickered to herself, trying to think of a good reply. She was so preoccupied with her conversation that she didn't even notice Hiyoko's stare.

Maybe that was for the best, because Hiyoko wouldn't want anyone to see her in that state.

It just... it just felt like a punch to the gut, one that stole away her breath and kept her from recovering. Even though Hiyoko should have known...
Ibuki was like the sun, shining brightly and sharing her warm smiles. And like the sun, Ibuki gave that warmth to everyone. Hiyoko had managed to delude herself into thinking that Ibuki grinned like that just for her, but no. The rock star was kind and bubbly and energetic to everyone she met. Hiyoko wasn't special in that regard.

And as much as Hiyoko wanted to shove it down, hide it and pretend it didn't exist... there was still a part of her that wanted to be special. She wanted to keep laughter and friendly jabs and toothy grins close to her heart, where no one would be able to take that from her. But Hiyoko knew better! Treasuring those memories would just make her fall even deeper! It would just end up feeling even more painful later on!

It would just hurt more when Hiyoko watched her laugh with others. It would just bring aching pains and stabbing jealousy that she would have to hide under barbs and cute smiles. She didn't want that-

"If you don't want to look, don't look," Nanami said suddenly, startling Hiyoko out of her thoughts. Hiyoko stared at her, waiting for an explanation, but she didn't get one. Just when she thought that she was suffering from auditory hallucinations, Nanami spoke up once again.

"You're just going to keep worrying about it and hurting yourself if you keep looking," Nanami stated, not looking up from her game. "Sometimes, the best thing to do is to try to stop thinking so hard. If you need to stop worrying, then..." She tilted her head up, holding the console out to Hiyoko. The screen displayed the title screen of the third Pikmon game, an 8-bit tune playing from the speakers.

"A game can be the best distraction."

Hiyoko paused, staring at the pink-eyed gamer in shock. Then her lips curved into a small smile, her eyes crinkling at the edges as she took the console.

"I've always had a soft spot for the Pikmon series," Hiyoko admitted, which was the closest she would ever get to confessing that she loved the games. She used to collect the plushies.

"Which starter would you pick?" Nanami asked as Hiyoko started up the game.

"Leaftor, duh," Hiyoko answered as she skipped through the intro, typing in a half-assed name as the professor rambled on about evolution. She kept talking as 'Hi' began her new adventure through the region. "Starting form's an adorable little leafy lizard, I always liked grass-types, and the fully-evolved form is a fucking tree dragon! How the hell can I choose anything else?!!" Hiyoko belatedly realized that she was rambling, quickly adding, "I mean, the others suck in comparison. So obviously I chose the cute one."

"Don't say something so scandalous in front of a Solaira user," Nanami pouted, Hiyoko gaping at her in shock.

"You chose the fucking fire cocoon," Hiyoko reiterated in disbelief. "The motherfucking fire cocoon."

"It evolves into a flaming butterfly!" Nanami exclaimed defensively. "A beautiful flaming butterfly with high stats!"

"Stats aren't everything in this world!" Hiyoko shot back. "What about that weakass movepool, huh?! Your burning butterfly's going to be completely useless as an attacker!"

"Solaira was never meant to be a front-line fighter! The line is supposed to inflict multiple status
effects on the opponent to weaken them!"

"Ew, ew, ew! Those types of fighters are the worst!" Hiyoko declared. "It's so annoying to have to constantly heal! It's a waste of my money!"

"It's a valid strategy, and it works!" Nanami protested.

"A Pikmon fight is a battle of power!" Hiyoko retorted. "Status effects are fucking weak! Fight with your attacks, not your annoying fire breath!"

"You're just saying that because you don't see the value in debuffs and buffs!"

"What value?!"

Ibuki shut her bedazzled phone, skipping towards the bickering pair with a bright smile on her face. Then she paused, bringing a hand up to her chin as she stared Nanami down. The fight was officially on pause as the combatants waited for Ibuki to say whatever she was thinking.

"Hmmmm, hmmmm, hmmmmmmmmmm," Ibuki considered Chiaki for a few seconds, before brightening. "That's it! Chi-chan can be Galaga-chan from now on!"

"Cool," Chiaki said simply.

Ibuki spun towards Hiyoko, beginning her thoughtful humming once again. But it went on longer that time, until Ibuki slumped her shoulders in surrender.

"I can't think of anything!" Ibuki whined. "I like saying 'Hiyo-chan' too much to change it! Your name's too pretty to replace!"

"Wha-" Hiyoko cleared her throat, trying to compose herself. Note the 'trying' instead of 'succeeding', because her burning cheeks gave her away. "That's... okay, I guess."

"Awwwww, you're happy, aren'tcha?!!" Ibuki cooed, grinning teasingly. "You're happy but too embarrassed to admit it like the tsuntsun you are!"

"Shut up!" Hiyoko snapped automatically. "I am not a fucking tsuntsun!"

"You kind of are," Nanami said blankly.

"Another witness of your tsundere tendencies!" Ibuki beamed triumphantly.

Hiyoko glared at Nanami, drawing her teeth back in a snarl. She pointed an accusatory finger in the pink-eyed woman's direction, yelling, "You traitor! You're not supposed to agree with her!"

"I can't just lie either," Nanami stated, earning a high-five from Ibuki.

Forget what Hiyoko said about wanting to see Ibuki's smile! Forget all of it! Ibuki could burn and die and choke for all Hiyoko cared!

(Not really. Please don't take her denial seriously.)

"But, but, you know, Hiyo-chan..." Ibuki drew out the word as she approached Hiyoko's wheelchair. Hiyoko turned away with a huff, only for Ibuki to step in front of her. It became a little game, Hiyoko trying to look away, Ibuki trying to dominate her vision, until Ibuki leaned so close that she was the only thing Hiyoko could see.
That meant being so close that Hiyoko could feel puffs of breath on her skin and see light sparkling in pink eyes. Ibuki's soft, soft-looking lips were barely two centimeters away from Hiyoko's, and fuck, fuck, fuck. Hiyoko could feel her heart racing in her chest, her eyes couldn't pick a spot to focus on. Her eyes were too busy darting all over Ibuki's face, hurriedly trying to put all of the moment to memory. Gleaming eyes, pink lips, fluttering eyelashes, glowing smile-

"Being a tsundere isn't a bad thing, you know!" Ibuki exclaimed, giving Hiyoko a toothy grin. (Oh fuck, oh shit, son of a goddamn bitch, that smile could melt ice and make flowers fucking blossom-

"I-I don't care if you think it's cute or whatever! Stop talking already!" Hiyoko ordered, crossing her arms over her chest as she sharply turned away. Over Ibuki's hairhorns, she could see Nanami giving her a thumbs-up. That fucking bitch.

"What other things do you like about Saionji-san?" Nanami asked, because she was a bastard.

Ibuki hummed thoughtfully, turning away from Hiyoko to face the gamer.

(Hiyoko was not mourning that fact. She didn't want Ibuki's eyes on her and only her. Her heart didn't race when Ibuki smiled, and her stomach definitely didn't flutter either. Her lungs worked normally, no fire, no bated breathing, nothing ridiculous like that. Hiyoko was not in love. That was stupid and nonsensical and fuck you.)

"I love how Hiyo-chan is always so cute!" Ibuki declared, and something in Hiyoko's mind froze. The blonde was left gaping at Ibuki in shock as the rock star went on. "I mean, every time I compliment something about her, she tries to act tough to hide her embarrassment! It's the cutest thing ever! Hiyo-chan has the prettiest hair and I really, really want to braid it and play with it and stick sparkly ribbons all over- don't you think that would suit her, I mean it would definitely suit her," Nanami nodded, encouraging Ibuki to continue with her rambling, "And even though she pretends to hate it, she still hangs out with me! Always saying stuff like 'not like I have anything better to do' or 'only if it'll keep you from bugging me' and it's adorable!"

"Why do you talk so much...?" Hiyoko groaned, her face bright red. Her hands came up to tug at her hair in frustration, and- oh, whoopsie! She accidentally pulled out her hair tie! Looked like someone would have to help her fix it! (Yes, she said that out loud, obvious emphasis on certain words included.)

Ibuki turned to Nanami, who gave her the most scathing, judgmental stare possible in return. After a few seconds of silent staring, Nanami literally took Ibuki by the shoulders and spun her towards Hiyoko.

Hesitantly, Ibuki reached out for Hiyoko's hair, carefully pinching a few strands between her fingers.

"What the fuck are you waiting for? Get going already, we don't have all day," Hiyoko ordered, which was as close to 'go ahead' as she could get.

Ibuki's movements were gentle and slow, making sure not to hurt Hiyoko as she ran her fingers through blonde locks. Despite the fact that peace and calmness were practically as far from the whirlwind of energy that was Mioda Ibuki as you could get, Hiyoko couldn't help but... relax a bit. Having someone toy with her hair was nice, kind of. The feeling of having her hair braided was sort of soothing. But Hiyoko would never say that out loud. Ever.

(She was a little bit in love. An itty-bitty, teeny-tiny bit. But no more than that.)
"Are we almost there?" Peko asked, trying to see through the bag draped over her head.

"Almost," Hajime confirmed, turning the car into an abandoned parking lot. He turned towards Peko, saying, "Remember to act convincingly. We can't have our cover blown."

"Of course," Peko nodded, before immediately beginning to struggle against her bindings. She didn't actually try to worm out of the ropes binding her, since they were fragile enough to fall apart if she tried hard enough, but she did an excellent job of acting. Hajime nodded in approval, before turning to the woman in the back seat.

"Mahiru, help me get her out," Hajime ordered, putting on a harsh mask. Mahiru nodded, unbuckling her seatbelt and pushing the door open.

She moved towards Peko's door, stepping away when Peko swung her head towards the noise in a headbutt. Mahiru grabbed Peko by the shoulder, yanking her out of the car. Her arms looped through Peko's, restraining her and holding her up in one motion.

Hajime stepped out, standing next to the suited redhead as they all waited.

Another car swerved in, parking on top of the parking spaces to stop before the trio. The front passenger window rolled down, the scarred face of a longtime Yakuza staring down at them. Hajime met the man's intense eyes without flinching, his voice steady as he spoke.

"We have the Kuzuryuu heiress," Hajime stated. "Now hand over the money."

"Hand her over first," The man replied.

"You bastards, don't touch me, I'll kill all of you!" Peko roared, her voice pitched up to imitate Natsumi's voice. She began to thrash about even more violently, and Mahiru was forced to bring a hand to her throat to keep her still.

"Not yet," Mahiru hissed into Peko's ear.

"You know, I could just give her to the Kurogane family. Or I could kill her myself," Hajime said factually, pulling out a pistol from his suit pocket. He handed it to Mahiru, who pointed it at Peko's head. "So make your move."

The man ducked down, and the trio could hear him swearing curses to the driver, who nodded along silently. Then he returned, tossing a briefcase at Hajime's feet.

"Now you hold up your end of the deal."

"Understood," Hajime smiled coyly, grabbing the briefcase as Mahiru let Peko go.

The swordswoman immediately broke free of her poorly-tied restraints, grabbing a knife from her back pocket as she charged the car. Mahiru passed the gun back to Hajime, who went to join Peko in the attack.

Mahiru decided to walk around, avoiding bullets and ignoring screaming as she sat down in the thankfully bulletproof hearse.

"Sorry for dragging you into this," Hajime said bashfully as he sat in the driver's seat. His bloodied hand held the briefcase out to Mahiru, who regarded it carefully. "Here, it's yours."
"Uh, I thought you needed that cash for rent," Mahiru pushed the briefcase away with an awkward, forced grin.

"He's paid enough to meet his needs," Peko stated calmly, folding the bag into a neat square.

"It was mostly to show that 'you can't bribe a member of the Kuzuryuu family into betraying them and expect it to work,' or something like that," Hajime shrugged as he began driving back to the Kuzuryuu house. "So you can have it."

Mahiru was about to refuse it, citing something like 'I don't need your bloody money' as her reason why. Then she remembered that she was a secretary who sometimes had cup noodles for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, despite her attempts to eat healthy.

Silently, she took the briefcase.

"You didn't burn it this time," Mahiru noted with pride as she took sips of Natsumi's tea.

"Shut up!" Natsumi whined as she slammed the tea pot down on the table. "You can't even burn tea!"

"You managed it the last time me and Mahiru came over," Hajime quipped as he and Peko entered the room, not a single drop of blood on them.

"Somehow, I doubt that's possible," Peko deadpanned.

"It really shouldn't be possible, but my cup was on fire," Mahiru recalled, before shaking her head. "It wasn't even the cup. The tea was on fire. I don't know how."

"T-that was just a magic trick!" Natsumi exclaimed, puffing her chest out in a show of bravado. "It was so convincing, you thought it was actually on fire! But I tricked you!"

"I'm more willing to believe that you broke the laws of thermodynamics than that," Peko replied, earning a wail from Natsumi.

"You're my sister! You're supposed to take my side on everything!"

"I'm my own person, Natsumi," Peko said with a smirk. That smirk was her attempt at a joking grin. Thankfully, Hajime and Natsumi knew her well enough to know what she meant. And Mahiru was observant enough to notice that the others were not affected by the creepy-looking smile, and thus, neither should she.

The group chatted amicably for a while, before Fuyuhiko trudged into the room, his pinstriped pyjamas crumpled and messy. He sat down next to Natsumi, seamlessly involving himself into the group.

"Where'd Miss Medicine go?" Natsumi inquired, turning to her brother curiously.

"Walked her home," Fuyuhiko answered.

"Awwwwww, how sweet!" Mahiru cooed. Even Peko cracked a grin at that.

"Nice to see that you've been taking care of her," Hajime smiled in approval, right before Fuyuhiko's phone buzzed in his pocket. The group crowded around him, leaning over his shoulders as he checked his messages. He had one from Mikan-
Fuyuhiko nearly dropped his phone, his face immediately turning, well. You already know that it's red. And not like maroon red. We're talking shitty MS Paint super-bright-and-will-burn-your-eyes clashing crimson hubapalooza red bonzanapapana.

"That's adorable!" Natsumi squealed, her eyes shining brightly.

"Shut up," Fuyuhiko groaned.

"You're really lucky to have someone as loving as Mikan-chan," Mahiru said with a kind smile.

"I already know that!"

"I'm so glad that she's treating you well," Peko stated, and Fuyuhiko stares at her suspiciously.

"Why do you sound like you expected her to be evil?"

"Er... no particular reason," Peko said unconvincingly.

Hajime stepped in before Fuyuhiko could accuse Peko of lying, because he was a good friend like that.

"You know, as cute as this is, if you ever hurt her, I have to smack you with a baseball bat," Hajime stated. "No hard feelings though."

"If I ever hurt her, I'd hand you the bat!" Fuyuhiko declared, turning away to type out a response to Mikan's message-

Only to pause, when he realized that he had already sent a message. Several messages, actually.

[That's a door able shut up you're really lucky to have someone as loving as Milan can I all ready know that]

[Imessage so glad she's treating you well why do you sound like you expected her to be Eve ill no party cull are reason]

[You know as cute as this is if you ever hurt her I have to smock you with a base ball bat no hard feelings throw if I ever hurt her ID hand you the bat]

Horror dawned in Fuyuhiko's expression as he realized that he left speech-to-text on.

(In the safety of her bedroom, Mikan snickered a bit at the messages. Her boyfriend was too cute sometimes!)

Chapter End Notes

Bonus

Kuzuryuu Amaterasu practically skipped into the room, earning a wary stare from her husband.

"What did you do this time?" Atsushi asked, watching as Amaterasu puffed out her
chest with pride.

"Just became the world's best wingwoman."

"What?"

"Hearts in adversity together grow closer together, you know!" Amaterasu laughed. "And by the time I'm done with them, they'll be inseparable!"

"I have no idea what you're talking about, but I'm getting concerned," Atsushi said flatly.

"Don't worry your cute widdle face off, I can handle it by myself."

"If... if you say so...?"

"It's an order! You can't deny an order from me!" Amaterasu declared.

"You're not going to let me say no, are you?"

"Nope!"

"...fine," Atsushi sighed.

"Good husband," Amaterasu nodded, patting at Atsushi's arm in approval.
Chapter Notes

If you're in love and you hate it, clap your hands!
If you're in love and you hate it, clap your hands!
If you want to confess, but your words just make a mess, if you're in love and you hate it, clap your hands!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was practically a given that Ibuki would wake up before Hiyoko did. If Hiyoko ever woke up before noon, she would yell at the inconsiderate being that woke her from restful dreams, before going right back to sleep. Most mornings, Hiyoko woke up to cotton candy-scented sheets and a silent room. It was like the gleeful giggles and soft pyjamas, her thumping heartbeat and clammy palms were all part of a dream. A faded fantasy that Hiyoko had to forget when she started her day.

Which meant that Hiyoko was all the more shocked when she woke up in a warm embrace. She felt soft breathing on her cheeks, felt fingers intertwined in her hair, and her heart stopped for a second. They were face-to-face, Ibuki's serene smile dominating her view.

For once, Ibuki was still and calm. There was no makeup on her face, her hair was loose from its usual horns. Ibuki wasn't the legendary 'demon rocker' admired and desired by millions, she was a normal woman named Mioda Ibuki. She was energetic and excitable and loud, but she was still normal. Kinda.

'Man, millions of fans would kill to be as lucky as I am,' Hiyoko smiled to herself as she admired Ibuki's sleeping face.

She was probably the only one aside from family who could see Ibuki like that. The only one lucky enough to spot freckles on shoulders and eyes without contact lenses, the only one lucky enough to see how cute she was when she was sleeping... Her eyes traced over the curve of her cheek, the freckles on the bridge of her nose, her lips...

Hiyoko shook her head back and forth, trying to forget the idea. She wasn't a creep who touched people in their sleep! She wasn't a pervert! And besides, they would both have morning breath! It would be gross and weird!

The motion roused Ibuki from her slumber, her eyes slowly fluttering open. Her grey, silvery eyes. Like every other time she caught a glimpse of Ibuki's true eyes, Hiyoko froze at the sight.

Ibuki paused, staring at Hiyoko. Hiyoko stared back, a scowl on her face to hide the fact that she had been... admiring was too pretty of a word. She was examining Ibuki's stupid-looking sleeping face. Yeah, that was it.

It was almost as if Ibuki had heard Hiyoko's thoughts, with the way her lips quirked up into a grin in response.

"Good morning," Ibuki said quietly, a volume that Hiyoko didn't know she was capable of
operating at.

"Your breath stinks," Hiyoko retorted automatically.

"It's a historical moment, and that's what you say?" Ibuki gaped in shock.

"Why the hell is it historical?!"

"It's the first time you woke up before noon!" Ibuki grinned teasingly. "Ever!"

"That is so not true!" Hiyoko screamed in return. "I went to a grade school where we had to wake up at six!"

"But something makes me think that you skipped half the time!"

"Obviously not! I am a respectable member of society, not a delinquent!"

"You sure, Hiyo-chan~?"

"Bitch, I will punch you to the fucking moon~"

"Will you two please go back to sleep!" A frazzled Mikan shrieked from the other bedroom. Politely, of course.

Ibuki and Hiyoko quieted down, a bit guilty from waking Mikan up. That guilt did not stop Ibuki from nearly shoving Hiyoko off the bed when she got up. To be fair, that was mostly accidental.

"What are you doing?" Hiyoko asked quietly, watching as Ibuki stretched her arms out over her head.

"Going for a run," Ibuki answered simply, before moving to the drawers, grabbing a black hoodie.

"Is that where you go every morning?"

"Yup!" Ibuki exclaimed, before mentally shushing herself. Her voice was lower as she continued, but no less excited. "A star's got to get her exercise somehow!"

"Well... have fun, I guess," Hiyoko huffed, pushing herself up off the bed.

"Awww, don't be so grumpy, I'll be back soon," Ibuki 'reassured' Hiyoko as she tugged the hoodie over her pyjama shirt. She didn't care enough to change out of her pyjama bottom, deeming fuzzy pink music note-covered pants acceptable for a run. That wasn't cute at all.

"It's not like I'll miss you or anything," Hiyoko said with a pout, not wanting to look too caring, but at the same time not wanting to look too mean.

"Hehehe, if you say so~!" Ibuki waved, wiggling her fingers at Hiyoko as she shut the door behind her.

Hiyoko groaned the moment the other woman was out of sight.


Hiyoko had absolutely no idea how Mikan showered, dressed and ate in fifteen minutes. It really should have been impossible. When she was bathing, Hiyoko loved to include long periods of time
where she did nothing but relax in warm water, periodically interrupted by blowing bubbles in the water. Maybe Mikan didn't have that urge because she didn't normally have a bathing partner. That made sense, but it didn't explain how Mikan could eat a sandwich and put on her clothes at the same time. Without a single crumb making its way on her clothes.

Yeah, the only explanation was liberal use of time travel.

"Promise you won't die while I'm gone?" Mikan asked, and Hiyoko rolled her eyes.

"Mikan, I'll be fucking fine, you goddamn worrywart," Hiyoko groaned.

"Just had to make sure!" Mikan exclaimed quickly, her grin becoming more bashful. "Have a nice day!"

"Have fun, Mikan," Hiyoko waved to the nurse, smiling a bit when the door closed.

Hiyoko couldn't help but feel a bit (okay, a lot) proud of the other woman. If Hiyoko hadn't seen Mikan grow up before her eyes, she wouldn't have believed that the girl from her memories was the same woman before her.

The way they walked, the way they talked were as different as a sun and a black hole. One constantly shied away from human contact and always went to great lengths to avoid hurting others with her actions and words. The other held her head up high, a confident grin on her face. She didn't lose her kindness or her love of helping others at all.

The timid child had grown up into a proud beauty standing tall, and Hiyoko couldn't keep the proud grin off her face at all. Not that she was trying to, of course. After all, she was alone-

Her ears pricked up, detecting... a low, droning buzz?

She turned her wheelchair around, trying to find the source of the annoying noise. It wasn't a bug, no insect could be that loud-

It wasn't a bug.

It was a flying streaker, crashing through the window.

"You... you were trying to walk Mikan to work," Hiyoko reiterated, her tone equal parts exasperated, shocked, and pissed off. "So you flew through the fucking window."

"I thought it would be open," Nanami retorted, sticking shards of broken glass back in place with super glue.

"You!" Hiyoko couldn't even say anything to that, a mess of garbled swearing and insults falling from her tongue. The only sentence that could be discerned was 'you fake-breasted, stupid, bitch dummy!'. Curiously, that phrase popped up numerous times.

When Hiyoko had calmed down enough to speak understandably, the glue had already dried. That may or may not have been due to Nanami's creative use of her forearm-embedded exhaust ports as glorified hairdryers. Hiyoko groaned, slapping her palm to her forehead.

"Borrow some of my clothes before leaving, that way you won't get arrested," Hiyoko grumbled, only for Nanami to give her a weird look.

"I can't wear clothes when I fly."
"So leave through the front door like a normal person, dumbass!"

Nanami seemed to quietly consider that for a moment... before stepping towards the couch, flopping herself down on the seat. Hiyoko's face scrunched up into a glare as she flatly asked, "What the hell are you doing."

"Staying," Nanami answered calmly, pulling a game console out of nowhere. (how)

"AT LEAST PUT SOME DAMN CLOTHES ON FIRST, YOU FUCKING-

Hiyoko did not succeed in her self-imposed mission of throwing Nanami out of her residence. She did, however, succeed in getting the other woman to wear a blue kimono. That counted as a victory in her eyes.

"Seriously... you're like Ibuki in terms of annoyance levels..." Hiyoko muttered to herself. Unfortunately, Nanami caught that.

"You think Ibuki's annoying?" Nanami inquired, staring at Hiyoko curiously.

"I mean, sometimes!" Hiyoko huffed, crossing her arms over her chest. Then she softened, her pout becoming more of a small frown. She didn't want anyone to think badly of Ibuki... plus, Nanami was Ibuki's friend! What if she tattled?! (Oh, the second reason was definitely more convincing. She would have to remember that if someone asked later)

"But... she can also be fun to be around, don't get me wrong. She's really energetic and cu-" Hiyoko cut herself off, hastily searching for a word that was not 'cute'. "-cucumber. She's a cucumber, which is a metaphor for how much of a dick she can be sometimes."

"Right, and you didn't pull that one out of your ass," Nanami retorted, managing to play her rhythm game while giving Hiyoko an incredulous stare.

"Why would I be sticking cucumbers up my ass?!" Hiyoko demanded.

"You meant to say something else," Nanami said flatly. Somehow, her dull, bored tone managed to sound accusatory.

"Nanami, shut the fucking hell up!" Hiyoko screamed, snarling at her so fiercely that wolves would flee from her intense glare. Nanami didn't care, humming thoughtfully as she tapped her pointer finger on her chin.

"Ah, you like Ibuki, don't you?" Nanami asked innocently. She finished her level with a perfect score before looking up to see Hiyoko's reaction- "Er, no- I mean-! That's not-! It's not like I don't like her, but still-!" Hiyoko stammered and flustered and blabbered, her face burning brightly the entire time.

"You love her," Nanami stated, and Hiyoko shrieked.

"She's a friend! I-I love her, but it's all friendly and platonic and junk! It's-"

Nanami stared at her, raising an eyebrow as if to say 'really?'. Hiyoko's face fell when she realized, no, she wasn't convincing the other woman at all. She had a feeling that no matter what she said,
nothing would convince Nanami otherwise.

"I... you can't tell anyone, okay?" Hiyoko asked quietly, desperately. "Not even Mikan. I don't want anyone to know."

"Alright," Nanami nodded.

Hiyoko gaped at her, her jaw falling open. "Really? Just like that?"

"You don't want anyone to know, so I'm not telling anyone."

"I don't have to grovel or anything? You're not going to make me beg or lick your shoes or whatever?" Hiyoko reiterated in disbelief.

"I'm not fueling your weird fetishes," Nanami quipped, and Hiyoko immediately reached for something to throw at her. That something happened to be a pillow.

The cushion smacked Nanami right in the face, ruining her concentration just enough to break her combo. The sound of the 'MISS' ping rang in Nanami's ears, and she hit the pause button.

"How dare you," Nanami snarled, setting the console aside as she grabbed the offending pillow. Her eyes were filled with bloodlust, but Hiyoko glared back with a taunting grin.

Hiyoko snatched another pillow to use as a shield, just before Nanami shot her soft projectile at the ex-dancer.

The ensuing pillow fight was so vicious and bloody that it had to be skipped in order for this fic to maintain its family-friendly rating.

An exhausted Nanami flopped back onto the couch, swapping her weapon of war for her console. Hiyoko did her best to catch her breath as Nanami started up another game, an RPG she hoped to complete.

"What do you like about Ibuki?" Nanami asked, skipping through the opening cutscene.

"You beat my non-existent ass in a pillow fight and then ask about my non-existent love life," Hiyoko said flatly, giving Nanami a weird look.

"There seems to be a lot of things about you that don't exist," Nanami noted.

"Glad to see that your eyes still work," Hiyoko grinned wryly, waving a hand at the space where her legs would have been if they hadn't been crushed under a roof.

"...if you wanted, I could get Kazuichi to make you some," Nanami offered. "Some new legs, I mean."

"Can't," Hiyoko replied immediately, her expression darkening. "The accident crushed my bladder and intestines too, so I need to save up to get replacements for those too. As good as he is, I doubt he could build organs."

Nanami was about to speak up, before remembering that she had an engine in place of a stomach and gears in her heart.

"If you say so," Nanami nodded, deciding to drop the subject. She paused, before asking, "How did you and Mikan meet?"
"Why do you want to know?"

"I'm curious about you," Nanami answered.

"You're weird," Hiyoko stuck her tongue out, before rolling her eyes and begrudgingly saying, "My dad was friends with her dad. Something about her dad being a nurse while mine was in the Navy, I think," Hiyoko shrugged, before snickering at a memory. "When we first met, I was five and she was four. She kept crying around me, so I thought she was a baby, and I tried to give her a milk bottle. 'cept I didn't know where they kept the bottles, and I was too short to reach the milk in the fridge, so I gave her mud water in a bowl."

"She didn't actually drink that, right?" Nanami's voice had more than a hint of concern to it, and Hiyoko chuckled.

"Nah, her mom knocked it out of my hand with a tennis ball. Left a huge bruise," Hiyoko showed the back of her hand to Nanami, using her other index finger to circle the area where knuckles curved to meet fingers. "I wouldn't stop crying, and Mikan and her dad patched me up. We've been friends ever since."

"Neat," Nanami smiled, before Hiyoko cried out.

"Hey! You can't just ask for a sweet, touching memory from my childhood and not return the favour!" Hiyoko yelled indignantly. Nanami blinked stupidly, and Hiyoko rolled her eyes. "An eye for an eye, dammit. Tell me something in return."

Nanami hummed, before shrugging.

"I don't know if playing games with my parents counts."

"As long as it's touching and sweet, it counts," Hiyoko reasoned.

"Well..." Nanami smiled fondly, recalling laughter and pink controllers. "In my first year at Hope's Peak, I was class rep. We all played games together, even had some fighting game tournaments... but the only person who could beat me in a game was Ibuki."

"The Super High School Level Gamer, losing to someone?" Hiyoko gasped scandalously... or pretended to, anyways. "I can't believe it! It's like the moon shattering to reveal a squirrel's tail or something just as stupid!"

"Oh, shush you. It was Guitar Hero. Of course I would lose there."

"Well, it makes sense now!" Hiyoko declared, more than a bit of pride shining through in her voice. "When it comes to music, there's no way a mere gamer can stand up to the best musician who's ever lived!"

"The best musician who's ever lived', huh?" Nanami grinned bemusedly. She switched her game to auto-pilot, her voice becoming teasing as she leaned towards Hiyoko. "Is that your crush or your music sense talking?"

"G-guh-!" Hiyoko flinched back, her face bright red. "I meant- she's just the best screamo musician who ever lived. And there aren't many of those running around, y'know? It isn't that hard to stand out in such a small crowd."

"You're making it sound like she isn't anything special."
"That's not it! She's fantastic at what she does!" Hiyoko exclaimed immediately. "She's just stuck in a tiny fish pond! Don't you dare spread around the idea that she isn't amazing!"

"So you admire her," Nanami suggested, laughing internally when Hiyoko's face glowed brighter and denials spilled from her mouth.

*(Chiaki was not having fun teasing the blonde, that was immature and yeah she was having way too much fun messing with the tsundere.)*

"Shut the hell up already!" Hiyoko whined, slapping her hands over her flushed face. "It's not *my* fault I'm crushing on her!"

"It kind of is." 

"No, it's not! It's all Ibuki's fault! It's because she's so-so-so beautiful!" Hiyoko groaned, before clutching at her chest like she was having a heart attack. "I- just the way she lets her hair down-! It rips my fucking lungs out of my chest! And those eyes, when she's not wearing those contacts, *agh*, I can't stop staring like an idiot! And whenever she smiles, I-I..."

"...Can't stop my heart from racing," Nanami finished, fully understanding what Hiyoko was talking about.

"You too, huh?" Hiyoko sighed at Nanami's curt nod. "I can't believe this. Everyone is falling in love like it's the goddamn zombie love apocalypse."

"I've heard about something like that before, actually," Nanami said. Hiyoko gave her a suspicious stare, which Nanami ignored. "Hanahaki disease. A disease that makes you puke up flower petals when you suffer from unrequited love. The only cure is to have your feelings be returned before you choke to death."

"Im-fucking-possible," Hiyoko shot back, rolling her eyes. "Don't say something so stupid."

"Don't be so quick to call it stupid," Nanami retorted easily, tapping out the combo to her favourite spell.

"How am I supposed to believe that people can just vomit up flowers? No matter how you look at it, it's impossible!"

"Are you sure-"

"Of course I am-!"

"I'm hooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooome!" The door was flung open with a flourish, a giddy rock star bouncing into the room. Behind her was a seriously stoic silver-haired samurai, smiling a bit at Ibuki's antics.

"Hey," Chiaki waved, and Ibuki paused, but only for a second. The moment that second was over, Ibuki launched herself at the pink-eyed gamer.

"Chi-chan! You're here, you're here, you're here!" Ibuki exclaimed excitedly. "Ah, I'm so lucky! Running into a bunch of friends, all before noon!"

"Y-you consider me a friend?" Pekoyama asked, her face turning a lovely shade of pink.

"Of course I do! You're super super cool, and who wouldn't want to be your friend?!" Ibuki faltered
for a second, before adding, "Well, that doesn't matter, because I would punch them."

"Don't do that," Pekoyama ordered, her expression suddenly growing cold.

"Hmmm, hmmmHmmmmmmmm, hmm, no," Ibuki said with a teasing grin. "I'm gonna punch all your haters in the gut, and there's nothing you can do about it, Pekopeko-chan!"

"Mioda-san, there's no way you can do that!" Pekoyama declared. "I won't allow it!"

"Gyahahahahahahaha! Just try and stop me!"

'So cute...' Hiyoko and Chiaki had the exact same thought at the exact same time. They also, apparently, had psychic powers, because they exchanged a knowing glance while their crushes weren't looking.

Chiaki could see the flower petals spilling down Hiyoko's chin at the sight of Ibuki's mischievous grin. She knew that Hiyoko could say the same for her.

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One, two, three, four, five... the minutes ticked on and on, Mahiru barely noticing the stream of visitors and patients she saw come and go.

Her duties were a fog in her mind, her hands working while her head drifted. It was a good thing that Mahiru was very good at working with a head in the clouds. Why, that day alone, she organized the patient files, wrote names and times in the records, read through the budget plans, made notes on what issues needed the most attention (and money), wrote up an outline for a more efficient health card organization system...

Wait, since when did a secretary have that much power? Was Mahiru even a secretary at that point, or did she become a boss when no one was looking?

Mahiru hummed to herself as she considered the chance that her position was much higher than originally thought. She dismissed the idea, because being a boss meant a bigger paycheck, and the hospital didn't have the funds for that. Yeah, she really needed to work out that budget.

Her eyes flitted towards the clock, wondering if she had enough time to work on that before her shift ended, before she paused.

4:22 PM. Just a few minutes before Mikan's shift ended.

Mahiru glanced towards the doors expectantly. She shoved her papers away, grabbing at a sheet of paper she had hidden under a hole-puncher.

See, being a secretary could be boring sometimes. And, like all bored workers, Mahiru tried to find ways to entertain herself in small ways. Like helping Ibuki's kids with art projects, chatting with the patients, and making bets with her boyfriend.

The bet was built on one thing; Kuzuryuu Fuyuhiko's punctuality.

Yeah, Kuzuryuu had a habit of picking Mikan up from work. Sometimes, he showed up right when Mikan's shift ended. Sometimes he was early and waited for a while by the doors. There were also times when he showed up fifteen minutes after Mikan's shift had ended.

Mahiru had faith in Kuzuryuu's punctuality, and bet that he would show up in the first five minutes
after Mikan's shift ended. Hajime, being the overachiever ass he was, bet that Kuzuryuu would show up at least five minutes early.

'Looks like I'm the one getting that ice cream today!' Mahiru giggled triumphantly as she checked the time once again. 4:24! Just two more minutes, and victory would be guaranteed!

Mahiru was gleeful when, seven minutes later, Kuzuryuu Fuyuhiko walked through the doors, just as Mikan's shift ended. Of course, she was careful to keep her grin polite and calm, because she had a reputation to keep.

"You're here to pick Mikan up again, huh?" Mahiru grinned, propping her elbow up on her desk as she jotted down the time in her notebook.

"Yeah," Kuzuryuu nodded. "Is she here?"

"Not yet," Mahiru started counting down in her head, her ears listening intently for-

"S-sorry to keep you waitiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii}
"sorry, but I don't regret it at all! I would do it again if you let me!"

"Argh, you're seriously going to be the death of me one day!" Fuyuhiko groaned, throwing on an irritated scowl to cover up his blushing and embarrassment.

"Only if I die first," Mikan said. Her face darkened as she went on, an awful idea coming to mind. "If you died before me... I wouldn't be able to cope with that pain...!"

"Won't that just mean that I'm the one stuck mourning you?!" Fuyuhiko retorted.

Mikan paused, silently considering their options. "Then... I guess the best end to our story would be us dying together. Maybe in some blaze of glory attack thing?"

Fuyuhiko hummed thoughtfully for a few seconds, before crossing his arms over his chest with a huff, saying, "No. You're not allowed near anything dangerous enough to kill me."

"What?! But-!"

"If we're dying together, we're dying of old age, after raising three kids and a dog! I'm not accepting anything else!" Fuyuhiko exclaimed.

Mikan took a moment to process that, before a smile brighter than all the stars in the sky bloomed on her face.

"I'm okay with that!"

"You better be," Fuyuhiko huffed.

If he noticed that he basically, y'know proposed to Mikan, he didn't show it. But he managed to give Mikan the kind of memory she would look back on often, with a giddy smile and wistful sigh on her lips every single time.

(It took a while for Fuyuhiko to realize the implications of his words... about nine hours, actually.)

Chapter End Notes

If you're in love and you love it, clap your hands!

If you're in love and you love it, clap your hands!

If your partner's really great, then don't you hesitate, if you're in love and you love it, clap your hands!
If you thought that adulthood would be enough to break Kuwata Leon's habit of running from undesirable situations, well, you've got that wrong.

He hid in the storage room, sweat dripping down his face as he pulled out his phone.

"MAKOTO I THINK I FUCKED UP"

The replay came a few tense seconds later.

[leon?]

[what happened?]

[ok, so]

[i'm working at the ice cream store, right? and then this hot babe walks in]

[i figure that she's a single mom, since a kid in a suit goes in with her]

[but when i complimented her]

[THE KID FUCKING STARTS GROWLING AT ME AND STARTS SAYING SHIT LIKE STAY THE FUCK AWAY FROM MY GIRLFRIEND]

[oh gosh]

[it gets worse]

[HOW]

[like, i was shocked, alright?! i was surprised and trying to un-fuck up!]

[so i'm like haha, i was talking to you, bro]

[AND THEN THE GIRLFRIEND STARTS SCREAMING STAY THE FUCK AWAY FROM MY BOYFRIEND]

[mukuro says 'this is what happens when you flirt with the wrong person']

['their jealous partner will tear you apart']

Leon needed to have that carved into a locket before he forgot that piece of wisdom. Or ignored it because of overconfidence. Either one, really.

"I can't believe this!" Mikan snarled, nearly crushing her ice cream cone into pieces. She glared at nearly everyone they passed by on the street, her bad mood obvious to anyone who even glanced at her.
"That bastard..." Fuyuhiko growled, his arm looped around Mikan's waist. He scowled at anyone who stared at them too long, looking like a vicious wolf lashing out at innocents to protect his red riding hood. "Flirting with a taken woman's a crime punishable by death!"

Fuyuhiko tightened his grip around her waist when a tall woman passed a bit too close to them, like he was afraid that one instant was enough for Mikan to be taken away.

"Do you think we need to look more like a couple?" Mikan wondered suddenly, bringing a hand up to her chin as she thought.

"We already looked like a couple," Fuyuhiko retorted. "That dumbass was just blind."

"Maybe holding hands isn't enough... Maybe I should rip your shirt open and carve 'MINE' into your collarbone..." Mikan muttered under her breath, a small smile appearing on her face as she imagined the possibility.

"What, are you nuts?" Fuyuhiko raised an eyebrow at his girlfriend incredulously. "Any dunderhead with a knife and more than one finger can write one word. At least write your name or something."

"Wait, you're actually okay with it?!" Mikan gasped in shock.

"It's like jewelry or matching clothes," Fuyuhiko reasoned. "You get scars to show your allegiance when you join and burn it off when you split."

"You're talking about a 'Yakuza' thing, not a 'cute couple' thing!" Mikan realized, staring at Fuyuhiko with wide eyes.

"Why can't it be both?!" Fuyuhiko shot back.

Mikan paused. Several times she tried to speak up, but every time, she held herself back at the last moment.

Why couldn't it be both?

"You'd actually let me do that?"

"As long as it goes both ways," Fuyuhiko replied easily.

Mikan stared and stared and stared, but the buffering logo over her head never disappeared. She was puzzled and confounded and bamboozled and more increasingly complex synonyms for the word 'confused'.

"Why would you need to do that?" Mikan asked. "No one is trying to steal me from you."

"The guy from the ice cream store from five minutes ago?"

"He was trying to steal you from me!" Mikan hissed. Just thinking of those piercings, that beard, it was infuriating!

Because, because, if she thought of that man, she thought of him succeeding. She thought of Fuyuhiko smiling around him, laughing together, kissing-

No, no, no, no nonononoNO! Fuyuhiko belonged to HER! No one else! No one else was allowed to touch him like that! No one else was allowed to see him like that!
SHE WOULD NEVER LET THAT HAPPEN.

"You'd never go for a guy like that, right?" Mikan demanded furiously, staring at Fuyuhiko intensely. She gritted her teeth together, possessively pulling Fuyuhiko closer to her. "He's unprofessional and his hair's a mess and he looks like a member of Red Night! I'm much better, don't you think?!

As Mikan glared him down with rage and desperation burning in her eyes, Fuyuhiko slowly realized something.

The reason why Mikan was getting so mad, the reason why she understood his worries so easily before...

She worried that he might find someone better and leave her. Mikan feared that she wasn't good enough for him, even though she was the one out of his league. Mikan was plagued by the exact same insecurities he was.

They were a lot more similar than he thought.

But Mikan had already reassured him before. Fuyuhiko needed to return the favour.

With a fond smile on his face, Fuyuhiko reached out to grab her hand. Mikan's eyes widened in shock as he lifted her hand to his lips.

"You don't have anything to worry about," Fuyuhiko stated, lifting his eye to see Mikan's face. A bright red blush bloomed across her cheeks when he met her eyes. "I'm yours and you're mine, and it'll be like that until the end of time."

Incoherent babbling escaped from Mikan's lips, right before she covered her very, very pink face with her other hand. Why was her boyfriend so-so-so cute?! So sweet and calming and charming and aaaaaaaaaaaaah!

(Token of wisdom: The number one cure of jealousy is reminding the other person of how special they are to you.)

Spending some time at Pekoyama's house for tea was normal for Chiaki. Almost routine. She was pretty used to the tea, the calming conversations, even the tiny tiny cat.

What Chiaki wasn't used to was having Ibuki and Saionji there.

Apparently, Ibuki decided to visit Pekoyama and dragged Saionji there too, but Chiaki didn't really think that was the case. Maybe Pekoyama invited them, or maybe Ibuki broke in. But, the specifics didn't really matter.

What mattered was the fact that Ibuki was there, Saionji was playing with Tangerine in the corner, and it was the perfect time to help Saionji out.

"Hey, Ibuki," Chiaki nudged the musician, taking a sip of delicious tea to seem more casual. "What do you think of Saionji?"

"Why? You interested in her or something~?" Ibuki asked teasingly, and Chiaki had to fight to keep the triumphant smirk off her face.

Because, even if it wasn't obvious to, say, Pekoyama, it was clear as food dye in pure water to
Chiaki. Years of knowing Ibuki let her notice the tiny details about her. Ibuki's voice was a bit too cheery, her tone a degree too cold, her smile a twitch too forced. Those weren't symptoms any nurse was trained to spot, but Chiaki could almost make a diagnosis anyways.

But it would be unprofessional to assume without proof. And thus, Chiaki decided to collect more evidence.

"Just wanted to see if someone found her just as cute as I do," Chiaki said in the most innocent voice she could muster. And she could sound as innocent as a nine-year-old if she wanted. "Don't you think that she'd be a great girlfriend?"

Ibuki's flinch was nearly imperceptible, but only nearly. The musician forced a grin on her face so fast, Pekoyama didn't see anything wrong with her behaviour. But Chiaki knew better.

Yup, Ibuki was jealous.

Chiaki was almost giggling from excitement. That meant that Saionji had a chance!

"You know, you're a great friend, Ibuki. But that won't stop me from competing with you," Chiaki declared with a bright grin. "You better be careful, or I might steal her away."

"You can't steal a friend," Ibuki retorted. She stood suddenly, throwing a wink at Pekoyama and Chiaki. "But you can steal a cat!"

With that non-sequitur, Ibuki hopped over to Hiyoko and Tangerine, Chiaki nodding approvingly the entire time.

It was not Fuyuhiko's fault that he was fucking ticklish. It was also not his fault that Mikan started showering his sensitive neck and collarbone with kisses instead of using the damn knife.

"Cut it out already!" Fuyuhiko snapped, though he made no moves to actually, y'know, shove her away. It was only because she might get hurt if she fell on the blade. It wasn't like he enjoyed the kisses. Shut up.

"Sorry," Mikan grinned, obviously unapologetic. She dropped the knife on the floor, before wrapping her arms around his waist.

A giggle escaped her lips as they fell back on her bed together. Her ear was pressed against his bare chest, her hand coming up to rest on his stomach. Their legs became a tangle of limbs together. Fuyuhiko tossed an arm over her back in a lazy hug, and suddenly, neither one of them wanted to move. Ever.

"Argh, seriously, at this rate we won't get anything done..." Fuyuhiko grumbled, even though he wouldn't mind just staying like that for hours. Mikan didn't answer, instead letting out a wistful sigh.

Fuyuhiko smelled like gunpowder and sugar, a combination which had become synonymous with many concepts to Mikan. Love. Happiness. Warmth. Peace.

Home.

When they were together, Mikan forgot about the bad in life. Her tears would be replaced with a glowing grin, her heart would soar in a sky of euphoria, all because Fuyuhiko stopped to listen. Mikan could trust him with everything, from her troubles to her trauma to her heart. She did her
best to do the same in return for him. That was the least she could do to repay him, you know?

Mikan smiled, tracing her finger over Fuyuhiko's skin. She wanted to remember the moment. She wanted to remember the sound of his heart in her ear and the feel of his skin. Mikan wanted to carve it into her memory so she would never, _ever_ forget.

Every single second was something to be grateful for, to be treasured. The thumping in her ear was proof that Fuyuhiko was alive and real, and he belonged to her. Just as she belonged to him, body, heart, and soul.

They were in love, and Mikan never wanted that to change.

Peko wasn't on edge. That was ridiculous. She had absolutely no reason to be affected by Nanami befriending the blonde. In fact, she ought to be happy! Nanami was reaching out to others instead of isolating herself! That was a good thing!

But, still... Peko couldn't stop herself from feeling awkward. She tried her best to force it into some deep, dark corner of her mind, to swallow it down with her tea, but it never worked long. Her eyes kept drifting towards Nanami's face, examining the pleasant smile on her face. Peko would follow the other woman's gaze, finding herself staring at the other corner of the room, where Mioda and Saionji were cooing over Tangerine. They laughed together, and Nanami's grin widened.

The lurch in her chest, the twist in her stomach, that must have been illness.

"Have you... always been such good friends with Saionji?" Peko asked stiffly, earning a curious stare from the other woman.

"No, I don't think so..." Nanami hummed thoughtfully. "Why?"

"I just noticed how you spoke of her," Peko said, surprising herself with how steady her voice was. "Are you interested in her?"

"Do you really think that?" Nanami leaned towards her, propping her face up on her elbows. An angelic grin stretched across her lips, her interlaced fingers supporting her chin like a hammock.

"E-er, I assumed-" Peko cut herself off, her cheeks suddenly a bright red. "I thought... maybe?"

"Hehe, I guess I maxed out my acting skill!" Nanami declared brightly, sounding proud of herself. Her grin became more knowing, like she was sharing a secret with Peko, one that no one else could know. "But, really, look at them."

Peko turned to the other pair, watching them play with Tangerine. The tiny, tiny cat had managed to climb on top of Mioda's head, hanging from her hair horn for dear life. Mioda laughed, her hands ready to catch Tangerine if needed, while Saionji stared at the spectacle with a small smile on her face. Her eyes were warm, fondness clear in orange depths.

"See the way Saionji stares at Ibuki like she's the most beautiful thing she's ever seen?" Nanami asked, and Peko nodded. "Those are the eyes of a woman in love."

"So... you love Saionji, who loves Mioda," Peko reasoned. Nanami sighed, shaking her head in disappointment.

"I'm not in love with her," Nanami stated. Peko stared at her in confusion, and Nanami added, "I mean, Ibuki likes her back. But I don't think she knows it yet. And what better way to get her to
realize her feelings than a bit of friendly competition?"

"I doubt that you can call your actions 'friendly competition'," Peko noted dryly, and Nanami snickered.

"Well, as long as they get together, it doesn't really matter what it's called, right?" She extended her hand to Peko, smiling conspiratorially. "So, what do you say? Want to help me?"

Peko quietly considered the offer for a second. If she helped, she could keep Nanami from doing anything too out of line... Plus, it could be a good bonding experience and a way to learn how to interact with people...

She took Nanami's hand, giving it a firm shake. Nanami's skin was still as soft and velvety as Peko remembered.

"Hey Fuyuhiko," Mikan called out, gently breaking the tranquil silence. "Do you have a tattoo?"

"Yeah, everyone in our family gets one when they come of age," Fuyuhiko answered. "It's on my back."

"Bleh," Mikan scrunched up her nose and stuck out her tongue a bit. "I don't want to move, but I want to see it."

"I think Natsumi took a picture of it for memories once," Fuyuhiko tried to reach for his jacket pocket, only to belatedly realize that his shirt and jacket were on the floor. He couldn't reach his phone with Mikan on top of him, but he wasn't really in the mood to move either... "Eh, later."

"Can you tell me what it looks like?" Mikan requested, staring at him with huge pleading eyes. "Please?"

"Fine," Fuyuhiko huffed, though there wasn't a drop of annoyance in his voice. "There's a circle on the middle of my back, and nine dragons heads leading to that. Or spiraling out, whichever one makes sense. They're gold, and there are some flowers in the background," Fuyuhiko paused, before remembering, "Oh yeah, in the circle, there's the word 'family'."

"To symbolize devotion to your family or something?"

"Yeah, everyone has a different word," Fuyuhiko nodded. "Natsumi has 'loyalty', Peko has 'purpose', and I think Hajime has 'companionship'."

"Is there a theme to it, or can I just get any random word?" Mikan asked, before hastily adding, "I mean, hypothetically! If I was part of your family...!"

"Well, obviously you can't write anything stupid," Fuyuhiko stated. "Usually we take one of the four virtues, but it can be pretty much anything that sounds good on paper."

"Four virtues?" Mikan echoed.

"The four traits that the nine-headed dragon searched for; loyalty, bravery, wisdom, and honesty. Though the last one isn't all that popular in my family..." Fuyuhiko sighed. Yeah, his family had fallen from the standards of old. He had a feeling that, if the legendary dragon returned from the grave, it would be ashamed of what its family had become.

"Can you tell me about it?"
"Are you sure? It's a long story."

"I want to hear the story," Mikan confirmed, shooting him a calming smile.

"Well, if you say so..." Fuyuhiko grumbled, not wanting to spend too long admiring his girlfriend's smile.

Kuzuryuu, the nine-headed dragon, was the strongest being in existence. He had defeated the dragons of the sea and the dragons of the sky with mere swipes of his claws. All of creation feared his power.

But it was lonely, being feared by all you met. Most fled at the sight of his golden scales, but those who approached him had one goal in mind: taking his place. Whether it was a challenge of strength, or a traitor looking to betray him when his back was turned, Kuzuryuu destroyed them all.

Kuzuryuu never found companionship, never found love, never had a home.

One day, when the fierce dragon was soaring between mountain peaks, he spotted tiny creatures on the ground. They were so small that he could crush them with a single footstep. They had no wings, no claws, no fiery breath.

But they laughed and sang together. They had a bond Kuzuryuu had never seen before. Curious, he tried to look closer, but the beings fled when they noticed him.

The nine-headed dragon was crestfallen, until he had an idea. He flew as high as he could, until he could touch the stars and taunt the sun. Then he turned, his wings carrying him down faster and faster with every passing second. He kept going, even when the ground was in sight, until he crashed into the earth. The impact was so great that his heads split from his body, each becoming a dragon without wings or feet.

("So he became a bunch of snakes?" Mikan inquired.

"Basically," Fuyuhiko shrugged.)

He was far less intimidating than the powerful dragon he used to be, but serpents were still widely feared for their poison and malice. Kuzuryuu's heads thought, until one got an idea.

The head stripped off golden scales and morphed to be like one of those creatures. No claws or fangs or fiery breath, but two arms, two legs, and a head of golden hair. The other heads followed suit, taking on human forms.

("And no, they weren't naked."

"Uh... I wasn't going to say anything."

"Crap, sorry, too used to Natsumi being weird whenever I tell her bedtime stories."

"Awwww, you tell your sister bedtime stories? That's so sweet!"

"Shut up and let me finish already...!")

Eight of the heads left, to the North, to the South, and everywhere in-between. They sought to bring back the creatures they had seen. The remaining head stayed where they fell, building a home that would never fall.
Nine days passed before the house was completed.

On the first day, the northern head brought back the bravest people they had met, ones who wouldn't run from danger and death. People fearless enough to stare a dragon in the eye without backing down.

On the second day, the eastern head returned with the loyalest humans, along with their families, because they were so loyal that they would never willingly abandon their loved ones.

The third day, the southern head brought back scholars and researchers, because they would know better than to run from an unknown that could be investigated.

The fourth day, the western head brought back those who were honest and straightforward. They would never betray anyone, because they were too honest to do so.

The next four days, the not-cardinal directions ("Shut up, I don't know the word." "-I didn't say anything!") brought back people who were looking for something. People looking for a home, those who were looking for companions, people who were looking for a family, and those who were looking for a purpose.

On the ninth day, the heads gave a golden scale to everyone who had gathered there, as a token of friendship. When their hands touched the scales, the image of a fierce dragon appeared on their skin in a paint that would never fade. That mark would be passed onto their children, then to their grandchildren, and on and on, forever.

"And those are the roots of the Kuzuryuu family," Fuyuhiko concluded with a warm smile. Then he added, in a dismissive tone, "I mean, it's not the most popular version of that story though. Most versions have the dragon creating the family because he wanted to control the land as well as the sky and sea. And there's the part where he usually carves the mark into their skin with sharpened scales instead of, y'know, just giving it to them..."

"I like your version of the story better," Mikan muttered.

Fuyuhiko paused, before his grin widened.

"Yeah. I do too."

"It was a nice story..." Mikan mumbled sleepily, her eyes slowly closing.

"Mikan, you can't fall asleep! Your roommates will get the wrong idea if they catch us like this!" Fuyuhiko exclaimed in horror.

"Let them think what they want," Mikan said, wrapping her arms around Fuyuhiko so he couldn't escape. "I don't care, as long as we can stay like this."

"Stop being so embarrassing!" Fuyuhiko groaned, his face bright red.

"I wouldn't mind staying like this forever..."

"Mikan!"

"I love you so much," Mikan snuggled against his chest, completely knocking out Fuyuhiko's HP.

"You are so lucky I love you enough to let you get away with this shit," Fuyuhiko huffed, rolling his eye.
"I know," Mikan giggled. "I'm really lucky to have you."

Fuyuhiko's blush only deepened, and he could barely look Mikan in the eye when he said, "And... I'm lucky to have you, too."

Mikan thought it was adorable.

"Hey, hey, Hiyo-chan, you know something?" Ibuki asked as Tangerine stalked off to go wherever. Probably to take a nap.

"I know a lot of things, Hiyoko retorted, and Ibuki snickered.

"Well, do you know what I'm thinking of?"

"No, because your brain's the kind of weird place that no one can understand."

"How mean!" Ibuki declared with a bright grin on her face. "Hiyo-chan, you're a huge meanie-pants!"

"I don't even wear pants, you dolt!" Hiyoko exclaimed, barely able to keep the joking smile off her face. "Seriously, what are you even talking about?!"

"I'm talking 'bout the fact that Chi-chan has a crush on you!" Ibuki proclaimed, carefully watching for Hiyoko's reaction.

"Don't be a dumbass, idiot," Hiyoko rolled her eyes. "She'd never go for someone like me."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Ibuki asked curiously.

'That she has a type, and that type is red eyes, glasses, and huge boobs.'

Hiyoko couldn't say that out loud, not with Nanami and her crush in the fucking room, so she lied.

"I'm flatter than a board," Hiyoko patted her hands against her chest to prove her point. She had a morose expression on her face, lips twitching like she was on the verge of tears, because Hiyoko was an excellent actress. "My hair can be such a mess, and my skin is-"

"You're beautiful."

"H-huh?!" Hiyoko gaped at Ibuki, her face aflame.

"You're beautiful!" Ibuki declared, even louder. "You're the prettiest girl I've ever seen!"

"Wha-what's with you all of a sudden-?!"

"It's true, you know!" Ibuki proclaimed passionately. "When I wake up and see your sleepy face every morning, all I can think is 'Ah, Hiyo-chan is super cute! Super, super cute!'. Actually, you can be adorable, with your pinchy cheeks and really pretty hair and your tsuntsun attitude!" Ibuki placed her hands on her hips, looking indignant at the notion that anyone could call Hiyoko ugly, even if it was Hiyoko herself. "So I can't let you say stuff like that!"

Oh fuck, Hiyoko was falling deeper and deeper with every day. She could barely speak, her words a jumbled mess of stammering and blushing. Her heart raced faster than a race car, every beat a strike against her tight chest. Hiyoko couldn't even look at Ibuki's face directly, like staring the sun straight on, she had to look away after a few heart-pounding seconds.
Her eyes drifted over to the table where Nanami and Pekoyama were sitting. Nanami met her eye, and silently gave her a thumbs-up.

In her mind, Hiyoko thanked Nanami, before letting out a quiet, "Thanks, Ibuki."

Her voice was a strangled hiss, like air escaping from a slash in a tire, but it was enough for Ibuki to give her a big bright grin.

"No need to thank me for telling the truth!"

Hiyoko was so red, she could beat Fuyuhiko in a blushing contest.

Chapter End Notes

i confess, i couldnt take the cuddling scene seriously when i was writing it bc i was too busy laughing

please remember that fuyuhiko is much, much smaller than mikan. she must have been crushing him alive. mikan was probably breaking his ribs and he just ignored it because that's what love is sometimes. sometimes love is letting your adorable girlfriend use your nonexistent boobs as a pillow, even if you can barely breathe, because it makes her so happy that it's worth all the pain.

also, it's kinda hilarious to imagine chiaki as someone who can be snarky and sarcastic when she wants to. she just doesn't want to most of the time.

i hope all of you have a great day today so you can start 2017 off on the right foot. happy new years eve everybody!
Ibuki hummed to herself as she worked, sitting with her legs criss-crossed on the couch. The sound of snow pounding at the windows, the roof, the walls were like the drums to her slow strumming, or it would be, if she was playing music.

No, it was way too early for that. Ibuki usually woke up early for her morning run, but it was snowing! It would be too cold for that! And music would just wake everyone up! It was too early for eating, too early for talking, too early for playing music.

But Ibuki couldn't go back to sleep. Not with Chiaki's words bouncing around her head. Not with Hiyoko waiting for her in the bed.

So, Ibuki took one of her projects from her room, an unfinished turquoise dress, and got to work. She attached straps to a sweetheart neckline, and prepared glittery frills for the hemline. Ibuki considered adding stuff like jewels and flowers, before wondering where she could buy that. Then her thoughts drifted further and further from the starting point, until Ibuki probably wouldn't remember what she was thinking of before.

She thought of many different things. Why Chiaki would say stuff like that, a wordless tune, how happy Hiyoko would be when Ibuki gave her the finished dress, how you could possibly steal a friend, what she wanted for breakfast, Hiyoko would probably like flowery designs, she seemed like she liked that look...

"It'd look nice if you added a sash belt."

Ibuki looked up curiously, finding herself face-to-face with Kuzuryuu Fuyuhiko. She couldn't stop herself from snickering at the sight. The oh-so intimidating Yakuza heir was in a huge pastel purple sweater dotted with violet hearts, holding a cup of coffee.

"Morning Fuyu-chan!" Ibuki exclaimed, before remembering- oh, right, people were asleep. And then she realized something. "Hey, isn't that Mikan's sweater?"

"No," Fuyuhiko said, even though it was so big, it could be mistaken for a dress with the way it was hanging around his thighs. It was ridiculously huge, even on Mikan.

"Awwwww, that's adorable!" Ibuki squealed, nearly dropping her work to coo over the blonde.

"Shut up!" Fuyuhiko hissed. "Do you want to wake everyone up?!"

"Oh-oh right," Ibuki dropped her voice to a whisper, but she didn't drop her excited grin. "Well? Enjoying your stay at the coveted Girlfriend's Place? Is it everything you dreamed and more?"

"Stop being weird," Fuyuhiko huffed, drinking his coffee so he wouldn't have to answer to her anymore.

"It's a good thing I'm working on Mikan-chan's wedding dress!" Ibuki declared, and Fuyuhiko nearly choked on his drink.

"What the hell?! What the fuck?!" Fuyuhiko demanded, though his voice was still quiet. He was considerate like that.

"Haha, just kidding~" Ibuki said lightheartedly. "This dress isn't even for Mikan, anyways."
"I can tell," Fuyuhiko stated. Ibuki gave him a look, and he begrudgingly explained. "The top's fine, but the bottom's way too tight for Mikan to move her legs. She wouldn't be able to walk at all in that."

"Should I be concerned that you're spending so much time staring at her legs?" Ibuki asked immediately, and Fuyuhiko automatically told her to shut up.

"But, I didn't expect you to be so observant!" Ibuki chimed cheerily, genuinely impressed. "Got any other super secret skills that impress any gal you meet?"

"No idea what the hell that means," Fuyuhiko deadpanned.

"Sewing, touching your head with your feet, screaming, cooking, dressing up in less than ten minutes... stuff like that!"

"You have the weirdest idea of what it takes to impress girls," Fuyuhiko said flatly.

"You underestimate my wisdom!" Ibuki cackled... softly, of course. "I know for a fact that Mikan-chan would be super impressed if you knew how to sew!"

"It's a good thing I know how to sew then," Ibuki gasped dramatically in response, prompting Fuyuhiko to give her an annoyed stare. "What? Yakuza have to deal with a lot of rips and cuts."

"But, but, I'm beginning to think that maybe, Fuyu-chan, you might just be interested in fashion!"

"Don't say something so fucking stupid," Fuyuhiko retorted.

"Hmmm, hmmmmm," Ibuki hummed thoughtfully, before getting an idea. Slapped the back of her hand to her forehead, throwing her head back as she melodramatically cried, "Oh noooooo! Woe is me, I-bu-ki! I have suddenly been so unfortunately stricken with some sort of forgetting disease! I can no longer remember how to sew at all! Oh no, oh no! My work is ruined!" She turned towards Fuyuhiko with a roll of her head, trying to look pleading and cute. Well, cuter than usual, as she 'subtly hinted', "Now, if only a kind, noble hero would help me sew this together! Nudge nudge, wink wink!"

"No," Fuyuhiko said flatly.

"Nudge nudge. Wink wink," Ibuki repeated insistently.

"Do it yourself!"

"Fuyu-chan~"

"No!"

"Please, help a helpless damsel in distress and fulfill your destiny as hero of this land, so that you may level up and defeat the evil emperor."

"Now you're just pulling cliche RPG plots out of your ass!"

"C'mon," Ibuki grinned, holding the dress and needle out to Fuyuhiko. "You know I'm not going to stop until you at least try it."

"I hate you," Fuyuhiko grumbled, downing the rest of his sugary coffee and setting it on the floor before sitting next to Ibuki. He halfheartedly took the fabric in his hands, examining the dress. His eye softened a bit as he ran his hand over the soft material, but he still had a grumpy frown on his
"It's not bad."

"Wow, I'm honoured!" Ibuki declared.

"But it's kind of plain," Fuyuhiko added, circling the area just below the waist with his finger. "Maybe you could add embroidery here. Flowers and junk like that, if that's what you're into."

"You know how to embroider stuff?" Ibuki asked.

"Sometimes when I was patching up our clothes, I got bored," Fuyuhiko admitted, his face turning a bit pink. "So I added stuff to some of Natsumi's shirts," He grinned at the memory, remembering Natsumi's face when she discovered that her dress shirt suddenly had a bunch of colourful shapes and rude words on the back. "She loved it. Even asked me to add stuff to all of her clothes."

"Wo-ow, you're a super doting big bro, aren'tcha?" Ibuki had a bright grin on her face, but she wasn't teasing him that time.

"Shut up," Fuyuhiko huffed.

"It's not like it's a bad thing!" Ibuki exclaimed, pouting slightly. "I mean, it's the duty of big siblings everywhere to make the little ones happy! And in that category, you score full points!"

"Huh, you really think so...?"

"Yup!" Ibuki smiled. "You're a super good big brother! Actually, I'm promoting you to the rank of excellent big brother!"

"Ha, I'm honoured," Fuyuhiko said jokingly, though he had a small smile on his face. He wasn't just going to stop someone who was complimenting him.

Mioda wasn't that bad, actually.

She was someone Fuyuhiko wouldn't mind getting to know better. Maybe.

Fuyuhiko was in the middle of teaching Mioda how to do the simplest design he knew, a literal fucking square, when Mikan walked in.

And holy shit.

Mikan yawned, her hair a mess that stuck to her face and even managed to float in defiance of the laws of gravity. She could barely keep her eyes open as she trudged towards the coffee machine, still wearing the pants she wore the day before. They were crumpled and folded all over from a good night's sleep. A pinstriped jacket was draped loosely over her shoulders. If she actually tried to wear it, the sleeves would be too short and the chest would be too tight.

She was fucking adorable.

Mioda let out a low whistle at the sight, and Fuyuhiko almost elbowed her in the gut. Almost, since a movement so drastic would completely ruin the design, and he wasn't about to destroy that. He wasn't that much of a jackass.

"Goo' mornin'," Mikan mumbled, wiping a trail of drool off her chin with the back of her hand. She glanced towards the pair, before freezing, her eyes widening in shock. "Is... is that my sweater?"

"...it looked comfy, okay?" Fuyuhiko grumbled, his face turning pink. Ibuki grinned excitedly, letting out a low squeal. Fuyuhiko gave her a kick to the shin to make sure she stayed quiet. A
gentle kick though.

"Oh my gosh...!" Mikan gasped, pressing her fingers over a delighted grin. "You-you're so cute-!

"I'm not cute!" Fuyuhiko protested.

"You're wearing a gigantic sweater with purple hearts on it," Ibuki retorted.

"Shut the fuck up."

"Aaaah, I need to get pictures- where's my phone-?!"

"Mikan, don't you dare-!"

"Lovey-dovey couple~ lovey-dovey couple~"

"Mioda, shut up!"

"Oh gosh, so cute, ah, my heart's going to burst!"

"An all-around adorable couple~! Live your lives full of love in your hearts~!"

"Both of you, shut up!"

They were a spirited group. Very spirited. That was kind of admirable, given that they were awake before seven on a Saturday morning.

By the time Hiyoko had woken up, Ibuki, Mikan, and Fuyuhiko had eaten breakfast. Ibuki even managed to master the art of creating squares. Fuyuhiko was in the middle of teaching her how to make a heart when Hiyoko emerged in all her exhausted, disheveled glory.

Maybe it was because she had just woken up, but Hiyoko looked really annoyed. Like, really, really annoyed. She looked irritated enough to glare at someone she didn't like for hours. Her face seemed like it would be stuck in her pinched scowl all day. Hiyoko took one glance at Fuyuhiko, before-

"What the hell are you doing here?"

"Teaching Mioda how to embroider stuff," Fuyuhiko replied easily. Hiyoko rolled her eyes, wheeling herself towards the table with a dismissive, "Whatever, it's not like I can kick you out."

Ibuki laughed, though she was the only one. Fuyuhiko elbowed her, before returning to his demonstration.

"Did you sleep well, Hiyoko-chan?" Mikan asked.

"Yeah, good enough," Hiyoko shrugged.

The morning was slowly becoming something normal and casual. It was calm and peaceful and everything was okay.

Of course, because this is a fic based off of the Dangan Ronpa franchise, it was not allowed to remain so.

A phone let out a sharp cry, and Mikan's eyes widened at the familiar sound. Mikan immediately
dashed to her room to silence her phone, only to pause when she read the text.

Mikan stepped back into the room, giving Fuyuhiko a weird stare.

"Your sister wants me to punch her," Mikan stated simply.

"What the goddamn fuck," Fuyuhiko stared at Mikan blankly.

"Oh god, she's a masochist!" Hiyoko screamed in horror. "And she's looking to drag you into her weird BDSM shit! Run as far as you can, Mikan!"

"I mean, I'm pretty sure that's not it!" Mikan exclaimed. "I'm sure there's a perfectly rational reason for-"

"What rational reason is there for asking someone to punch you?!" Hiyoko demanded.

Ibuki turned to Fuyuhiko with curious eyes, asking, "What's a BDSM?"

"Oh hell no," Fuyuhiko said flatly. "I am not explaining that for you."

"Why won't anyone tell me anything?!" Ibuki whined.

"Go look it up if you're so damn interested!" Fuyuhiko snapped.

"No! Don't you dare think of doing that, because if you do, you'll wish you hadn't!" Hiyoko yelled, pointing a finger at Ibuki.

"Uh, it's kind of like roleplaying-" Mikan's attempt at an explanation was cut off by Hiyoko throwing the nearest object at her, which was a spoon.

"Watch it!" Fuyuhiko snarled, glaring at Hiyoko. "If you hurt her, I'll put a dent in your head!"

"Relax, guard dog, there's no way she's getting hurt because of a spoon!" Hiyoko retorted. "And I have enough sense to not hurt anyone!"

"Okay, we are getting out of hand!" Mikan stomped her foot on the ground, forcing everyone to look her way. "I'm fine, so Fuyuhiko, please relax, and Hiyoko-chan, please don't try something like that again!"

Both parties mumbled a small "fine", while Ibuki snickered.

What a way to start the day, huh?

Natsumi was in trouble. No, trouble was too casual a word. She was in a dilemma, a mess, a predicament of epic proportions, she was in the middle of being screwed over by some angry deity for no damn reason! What in the world did she do to deserve something so awful and terrible and horrible?! Be too cute for her own good?! Was it because she ate Hajime's kusamochi?!

Okay, that last one would be weirdly fitting. Actually, Natsumi could imagine Hajime looking down at her, laughing haughtily- no, wait, she couldn't. Because Hajime wasn't the kind of person to do that. He would just look stupid if he tried that. But Natsumi could still imagine someone looking down at her, cackling in face of her suffering. And it was because that someone loved throwing obstacles into her relationship with Hajime.

The most recent obstacle, er, obstacles, were a bunch of photos, each one clear and vibrant. They
were the pictures taken during the vacation, and most of them were completely innocent. Ibuki teasing Saionji, Peko and Nanami chatting in a garden, Fuyuhiko and Miss Medicine laughing together... yeah, they were all heartwarming pics of sweet moments. But there were two that stood out.

One picture was of her, Mahiru, and Hajime. All of them were facing the camera with bright grins on their faces. Mahiru had her arms around Hajime's waist and Natsumi's shoulders, while Natsumi quirked her fingers in bunny ears behind Mahiru's head. It was one of the few pictures of Natsumi, since she and Mahiru weren't on good terms for the first half of the trip.

The other picture was of just Mahiru and Hajime. They were playing in a pool together, Hajime wearing swim trunks and Mahiru wearing a cute polka-dotted bikini. They weren't even facing the camera, too busy laughing as they splashed each other.

That last one was the biggest challenge Natsumi had to face.

Because, because...! Every time she looked at it, she would stare at Hajime's smile and admire how the sun shined off his wet skin! Or, she would stare at Mahiru, in her cute swimsuit and her cute face and what the fucking hell?! Natsumi was not thinking of her friends, who were dating each other, like that! She was not!

But she couldn't let go of the damn picture! Every time she tried to put it away, she would end up pulling it out a few seconds later! And-and, as if that weren't enough, she was a fucking tomato! Hell, you thought her name was Kuzuryuu Natsumi? Forget about it! Her name was Blushuryuu Natsumi from that moment on!

Natsumi needed help. She needed moral support and a way to kill the fluttering in her stomach.

With that thought in mind, she grabbed her phone. Natsumi knew that her brother and her sister wouldn't help her, because they would dismiss her request as some kinky shit and refuse to get involved. No, she needed someone who could and would help, someone who wasn't Hajime.

She tapped out a message, praying, no- begging for her humble request to be accepted.

[Miss Medicine, please punch me in the stomach.]

"Please don't tell me that you're actually thinking about punching that pervert," Hiyoko said flatly as Mikan and Fuyuhiko prepared to leave.

"No, I'm just walking Fuyuhiko home," Mikan replied with a smile.

"And the part where you have self-defense lessons," Fuyuhiko added.

"Right, that too!" Mikan nodded enthusiastically.

"Have fun!" Ibuki sang as she waved the couple away.

"Yeah, see ya," Fuyuhiko said in return, and then they were gone.

And then... Hiyoko was alone... with Ibuki...

"Oh crap."

Surprisingly enough, Hiyoko was not the one who uttered those words. Ibuki stared at the dress quietly, before snapping her head up to meet Hiyoko's eyes.
Then Ibuki folded her body over the fabric, using her arms to build a sort of fort around it.

"Don't look! You can't look!" Ibuki wailed. "I don't care if you have to choose between looking and getting your hair chopped off, you can't look!"

"Jeez, calm down, would you?!" Hiyoko groaned, covering her eyes with one hand. "I'm not looking, so relax."

"I needed to make sure!" Ibuki huffed. "And I still need to make sure!"

"Wha-" Hiyoko cut herself when she heard footsteps going away. "Ibuki?"

There was no answer.

She was tempted to peek, to see where Ibuki had gone, but... Ibuki said not to look. So Hiyoko kept waiting with her hand over her eyes, even though she looked silly and felt stupid.

Hiyoko didn't have to wait long though. A few seconds later, she heard steps dashing towards her and-

-A blanket was draped over her head. A big, floofy blanket.

"There! Now your arms won't get tired!" Ibuki declared, and Hiyoko could hear the pride in her voice.

"You are the weirdest person I have ever met," Hiyoko stated, before realizing that... yeah, that could be considered rude.

A few seconds passed before Ibuki spoke up.

"In a good way or a bad way?" Ibuki asked in a steady voice. A completely calm, quiet tone that one would never expect to hear from someone like Mioda Ibuki.

"A good way," Hiyoko answered immediately.

"You sure?"

"Don't question it, dammit! If I say it's good, it's good!" Hiyoko snapped. "That's what people like about you, isn't it?!"

"Hmm, I guess that's sorta true?" Ibuki mused, before sighing. "I'm the lovable, quirky, joke character."

"What?" Hiyoko would have stared at Ibuki incredulously, if she could fucking see.

"It's not a bad thing!" Ibuki exclaimed quickly, trying to sound enthusiastic. "Like, people think I'm lots of fun to be around! That's I'm all sunshine and smiles and sparkles all the time! It makes me lots of friends, you know?"

Hiyoko made a face under the blanket, before rolling her eyes, "Quit reducing your character to something so simple," She crossed her arms over her chest, adding, "There's no way anyone could be super cheerful all the time."

"Yeah, but... people expect me to be that person," Ibuki said quietly. "I can't be sad, because I'm the cheerful singer who's always smiling! I can't be anything but happy in front of them... I mean, I love singing, and I love playing music, but sometimes..."
"Who gives a damn about them?" Hiyoko demanded. "I don't care if you're an idol or whatever. If you start that 'act happy when you're in front of other people even if you're about to cry' shit again, I'm going to whack you in the head." She even cracked her knuckles to prove her point.

Ibuki began snickering, before smiling at Hiyoko fondly.

"It's good to know that you'll always be there to keep my self-sacrificial tendencies in check."

"Yeah, yeah, I'll only accept gratitude in unending adoration, kisses, and candy," Hiyoko joked, glad that she managed to help Ibuki out-

Wait.

"You want me to kiss you?" Ibuki asked, and something in Hiyoko broke. That something was most likely her brain, or, more specifically, the part of it that was responsible for rational thought and coherent speech.

"Ha! Haha, a-a-a-as if!" Hiyoko stammered, her face bright red as she laughed. "T-there's no way, n-n-no way in h-hell I'd want that! Nope! No way! Ever! Never!"

Oh fuck, she just wanted to crawl into a hole and hide! She wanted the roof to fall on her again, the floor to open up and swallow her, anything to get her out of her self-made hell! Why the hell did Hiyoko open her big fat mouth, why did she start speaking at all?! Why didn't she just flee when she had the chance?!

"Well, if you say so!" Ibuki said cheerily, dropping the subject. She began working on her dress, but Hiyoko couldn't help feeling antsy. And a bit nervous. And awkward.

Thankfully (or not), the moment was interrupted by a tap on the window and a knock on the door. After a brief moment of confusion, Ibuki answered both visitors, letting Chiaki and Peko inside.

"Nanami? Pekoyama?" Hiyoko spoke up, but she didn't remove the blanket from her head.

"Oh, there you are!" Chiaki grinned, darting for Hiyoko. She lifted the blanket just enough to crawl inside. Peko gave Ibuki a strangely sympathetic stare, before going to join Hiyoko and Chiaki under the blanket.

"Hey, what are you doing?!" Ibuki demanded. "Are you starting some sort of blanket society and not inviting me?!"

"No, this is a club for people who love Hiyoko-chan," Chiaki said with a grin. "You can't join if you don't love Hiyoko-chan with all your heart."

"What are you doing," Hiyoko hissed quietly, glaring at Chiaki.

"Helping," Chiaki replied simply.

"Well, that's no problem, because I adore Hiyo-chan!" Ibuki exclaimed.

"Then prove it," Chiaki ordered, even when Peko was whispering in her ear to tone it down a bit, to retreat and pull back. "The entry ticket is one kiss on the lips."

"WHAT."

"Nanami-san, this is really not a good idea, please-"
"I can't do that, because Hiyo-chan doesn't wanna kiss me!" Ibuki declared. "I mean, I would be fine with it, but she said that 'there's no way in hell' she'd want to kiss me!"

Chiaki turned to Hiyoko, her eyebrow raised in a silent 'how did you fuck up that bad?'

Hiyoko seethed at her in a wordless 'shut the goddamn fuck up.'

---

"Miss Medicine, you're here!" Natsumi wailed, relieved tears almost pouring down her face. Almost. Because she wasn't a punk-ass bitch who cried at the slightest provocation. She practically skipped towards the nurse. "Please, punch me as soon as you're ready!"

"Why?!" Fuyuhiko demanded, staring at his sister in a weird mix of 'what the fuck are you doing', 'get the hell away from my girlfriend', and 'Natsumi what the hell, stop being so weird'.

"You wanna fuck know why?! You want to know what's causing me so much pain and anguish?!!"

"I wouldn't ask if I didn't want to know!"

"It's simple!" Natsumi crossed her arms over her puffed-out chest, trying to look official and smart. And like she knew what she was talking about. "There's a disease in the air, one that immolates feelings of love and attraction! I seem to have contacted this disease through the means of over-exposure to lovey-dovey couples i.e, you and Miss Medicine! Since you guys are responsible for the weird, fluttery feelings in my stomach, it's your duty to fix it!" Natsumi threw her arms outwards dramatically, taking on a sort-of sumo position. "So hit me! I'm ready!"

"You're in love... so you want me to punch you until it goes away," Mikan reiterated.

"W-well, it sounds stupid when you say it like that..." Natsumi mumbled, losing some of her bluster.

"Because it's a stupid idea," Fuyuhiko stated. "Just ask your crush out on a date."

"Or get drunk and confess your feelings to them-" Mikan was cut off by a scathing glare from Fuyuhiko, prompting her to add, "What? It worked for us."

"No! I can't do that!" Natsumi snapped. "There is no way I can get into a relationship with them!"

"Them?" Mikan and Fuyuhiko asked in unison, before exchanging a stare. They both turned to Natsumi, like a pair of curious penguins or something.

"I... uh..." Natsumi blushed, before...

She spun around, dashing out of the room.

"Wha- get back here!" Fuyuhiko began chasing after his sister, Mikan trailing behind him.

"Ibuki, I'm sure she'll be fine with you kissing her, I mean, she was fine with me and Pekoyama-san kissing her-"

"No, I'm not-"

"Saionji, shut up and let me help you with your repressed love life already," Chiaki hissed.

"My love life is not repressed!" Hiyoko retorted.
"Nanami-san, that might have been a bit much-"

"Wow, Blanket Town seems a bit confrontational today," Ibuki quipped as she added cool circle designs to the dress. "Maybe you'll end up with two different towns to settle the fallout?"

"I told you already, we're not Blanket Town, we're the 'Hiyoko-chan love and fan club'!" Chiaki pouted.

"That's a stupid name," Hiyoko groaned.

"Don't insult Nanami-san's naming sense," Peko snapped.

"But it's stupid!"

"Just as stupid as accidentally convincing your crush that you-"

"NANAMI SHUT THE HELL UP BEFORE I PUNCH YOU IN THE GUT."

"I'm not letting you hurt Nanami-san!"

"Pekoyama, it's fine, I won't feel anything and she's just going to hurt her hand-"

"Yeah, they're getting a territorial divorce right before my eyes..." Ibuki sighed.

"Dammit, why is she so fast?!" Fuyuhiko cursed, right before Mikan wordlessly handed him a tin of mints. They exchanged a capital-L look in the way that only longtime couples could, then Fuyuhiko took it, aimed, and fired.

The container smacked Natsumi right in the back of the head, which led to her tripping, which led to her slamming into the floor. The pair caught up to Natsumi, who glared at them.

"Why would you do that?!" Natsumi demanded, rubbing at the point of impact as she pushed herself up.

"Because we're worried about you," Mikan said in a motherly tone.

"And because we're never going to be able to help you with your love life if you keep running away," Fuyuhiko added.

"I don't need help with my love life," Natsumi grumbled, even when Fuyuhiko and Mikan teamed up to give her a disapproving, slightly-exasperated stare.

"You wanted me to punch your feelings out of you," Mikan stated.

"That's not exactly the most effective cure for love," Fuyuhiko deadpanned.

"Well, it was a stupid idea brought on by desperation and hormones!" Natsumi huffed. "I'll come up with better plots when I'm not pissed off as hell!"

"So basically, when you calm down," Mikan reiterated, prompting Natsumi to nod along approvingly.

"So basically, never," Fuyuhiko said, and Natsumi immediately wanted to throw something at him. Something heavy.
"Shut up!" Natsumi scowled. "It's just- there's no way I can just ask, or anything! Trying to stop feeling like this, that's the best solution for everyone?"

"Why can't you just ask?" Mikan asked.

Natsumi hesitated, shying away from Mikan and Fuyuhiko's gazes.

"I... um, I... Er..."

Before she could turn to run away again, Mikan clamped her hand on Natsumi's right wrist, and Fuyuhiko did the same to her left.

"Okay, okay, fine!" Natsumi screamed. "I can't ask them out, because they're already dating each other! Are you fucking happy now?"

"I still don't see the problem here," Fuyuhiko grumbled as they let Natsumi go. He crossed his arms over his chest as he gave his sister a particularly impressive stink-eye. "Polyamory's a thing that exists."

"Oh, so I'm just supposed to go 'hey, I know that you guys are in a happy relationship with each other, but I think you're both pretty and nice so can I join?' to them?!" Natsumi demanded.

"Yes," Mikan nodded, clapping her hands together under a delighted, approving grin. "I'm so glad that you understand!"

"It was a fucking joke, Miss Medicine!" Natsumi snapped. She groaned, her lips drawn into a tight frown. "I am not doing that. I am not asking Hajime and Mahiru if I can date them."

"Why?" Mikan asked.

"Because I don't fucking want to," Natsumi huffed. "I want to let them be happy and not make our outings awkward by telling this super romantic couple that I want to date both of them."

"Natsumi, you're basically already dating both of them," Fuyuhiko pointed out. "You go to the arcade together, eat lunches at fancy cafes, visit each other's homes all the time..."

"I'm pretty sure the only things missing from your relationship with them are 'I love you's and kisses," Mikan added.

"What," Natsumi said flatly.

In that moment, something irreparably small shattered in Natsumi's mind, and she was forced to reevaluate her entire life, from the moment she was born to the-

"Stop being so dramatic!" Fuyuhiko snapped when Natsumi sank to the floor, clutching at her head as she wailed.

"Do you hear screaming?" Hajime asked as he took a bite of his ice cream.

"No, you're probably just suffering from auditory hallucinations," Mahiru replied easily, chomping on marshmallows and chocolate chips with a content smile on her face.
"You. Are. A. Horrible. Matchmaker," Hiyoko snapped as she selected her favourite Pikmon attack: Solar Blast!

"I did my best, and for that, no one can fault me," Nanami replied simply as her fire butterfly tanked a sunshine laser beam to the face.

"Are you sure? Because it seems more like you're trying to sabotage me more than anything."

"That's only because you're uncooperative," Nanami said as she picked a simple status effect move. The attack burned Hiyoko's leaf dragon, goading the blonde into letting out a string of swears and insults.

"Don't blame me when your stupid ideas naturally don't work."

"It's not my fault that you sabotage my ideas by not playing along."

"Even if I did, they wouldn't work," Hiyoko snapped.

"Yes, they would," Nanami stated.

"No, they wouldn't!"

"Yes, they would!"

"Fine, then prove it!" Hiyoko challenged, pointing a finger at Nanami over her game console. "I'll play along with whatever you try, but if it doesn't work out, you buy me all the candy I want for a month!"

"And when it does work, you have to get me chips and soda for two months," Nanami retorted.

"Deal!"

They sealed their bet with a handshake, which was the catalyst for everything that happened afterwards.

Oh boy, there was no way that could possibly go wrong.

________________________________________

**Attempt Number One**

"One thing I've learned from romance games is this: 'You must know the object of your affections very well'," Nanami declared, trying to sound wise and knowledgeable. "I've also learned that 'underwear is the soul of a girl'. So, in order to know Ibuki better, we're going to:"

"I refuse! I refuse, I refuse to hear it, I refuse to think it, I refuse to do what you have next!" Hiyoko screamed, covering her ears with her hands.
"Well, how else are we going to know..." Nanami trailed off, suddenly getting an idea. She grinned, moving to grab the handle of Hiyoko's wheelchair.

"What the fuck are you fucking doing you asshole son of a bitch?!" Hiyoko shrieked as Nanami all but dashed towards the door.

"Habits and hobbies and overheard conversations are some of the best ways to know someone!" Nanami stated. "So, for the sake of your love, we're going to become stalkers!"

"NO!"

**Attempt Number Two** was baking treats for Ibuki. Given that Nanami used Cooking Mama as the basis for her recipes and that Hiyoko still didn't know how to set the oven to anything but the highest temperature possible, there was no way that their creation could have been edible.

**Attempt Number Two** went up in flames. Literally.

It also gooped and it schlorpced and it glorbled in a way that normal verbs couldn't quite capture. The concoction glowed a gross green, a poisonous purple, a baffling blue, and a yucky yellow, all at the same time. And yes, glowed. If it weren't for the fact that it exploded into flames thirty seconds after being brought into existence, it would have been a great replacement for neon lights.

But alas, it wasn't meant to be, and soon the entire thing boomed in a fiery kablooey. It was glorious and somewhat tragic at the same time.

**Attempt Number Three**

"Showering your love interest with gifts is a surefire way to increase their affection points!" Nanami declared. "So get your wallet out, we're getting as many gifts as we can buy!"

"I'm broke," Hiyoko lied, because all her money went to either rent or her life savings. She didn't want one or the other to suffer for the sake of something so stupid.

Nanami paused, thinking.

"...then we have to get you a job. A high-level one, one that pays a lot, but I don't know if your stats are high enough for that..." Nanami trailed off, before suddenly saying, "Let's go to the gym to rank up your athletics stat."

"No."

**Attempt Number Three... Point Five**

Nanami passed Hiyoko a bunch of flowers that looked like they were ripped straight out of some poor grandma's garden. Seriously, the roots were still attached, a shower of dirt rained down every time the flowers were jostled too hard and-

"What am I supposed to do with these?" Hiyoko asked.

"Give them to Ibuki," Nanami stated, like it was the most obvious thing in the world.
It seemed simple enough, so Hiyoko turned to go accomplish exactly that-

"Wait, what are you doing?" Nanami held her back, giving Hiyoko a weird look. "You have to practice first."

"Practice what?!" Hiyoko demanded.

"Your dramatic one-liner, of course!" Nanami exclaimed. "You have to give some sort of suave line when you give it to her, or it'll all be pointless!"

"Nanami, that's stupid!"

Nanami stared at her expectantly. Hiyoko glared back, until she remembered the rules of their agreement. Right, she had to fucking play along...!

(Argh, why did she do something so stupid when all of it would end up being pointless and counter-productive and-)

"What sort of lines?" Hiyoko asked cautiously.

"Something like 'When I saw these, I thought of you, but you're twelve times as pretty' or 'I almost feel bad for the flower, compared to you, anything's ugly'."

"What's the point of giving her flowers then?!"

"Just try to be suave! Try to be a debonair protagonist with a maxed-out charisma stat!" Nanami ordered. "I want to swoon when I hear it!"

Hiyoko rolled her eyes, scowling as she halfheartedly grumbled, "These flowers are pretty. Like you."

Nanami frowned, completely unimpressed.

"We have to work on your charm stat..." She muttered to herself. Then she addressed Hiyoko in a 'stern teacher' voice. "Try again. We need to work on your delivery."

Hiyoko let out an exasperated groan.

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**Attempt Number Four**

They were at a cafe. A cute cafe with pictures of nature and animals on the walls and comfy-looking cushion-y chairs. Hiyoko and Nanami sat at one table, while, a few tables away, Ibuki chattedted with that Kuzuryuu girl.

"While we're trying to gain points with Ibuki, we also have to make sure that no one else gains points with her," Nanami whispered, pointing to where Kuzuryuu and Ibuki were talking. "So we have to find a way to make Natsumi embarrass herself in front of Ibuki."

"This feels immoral," Hiyoko mumbled, surprising herself with how she actually seemed to care about Kuzuryuu's reputation. A year or two ago, she would have readily agreed to anything that involved humiliating others. Why was she hesitating now?

Her eyes drifted to Ibuki's face, and Hiyoko couldn't help but smile.
Ibuki was just as expressive as always, talking with her body and her mouth. One minute, she'd be poking at Kuzuryuu's ribs playfully with her elbow, the next, she would be wiggling her fingers about while making exaggerated faces. She laughed together with Kuzuryuu, giving the other woman a smile that could outshine the sun. Even though it wasn't directed at her, Hiyoko still felt warm and bubbly, just from seeing it.

Hiyoko hesitated, her thumbs twiddling together as she dwelt on her skipping heartbeat and reddened cheeks. Ibuki was warmth and passion, excitement and enthusiasm, love and kindness and friendliness wrapped up into one. But, she wasn't just some super excitement girl that could never do anything that wasn't fun with a capital 'F'.

Memories of harsh, yet honest words played in Hiyoko's head. Yeah... Ibuki wasn't just sunshine and smiles. She had a fiery side too. And Hiyoko was lucky to be close enough to see it.

"I can't do it," Hiyoko declared, staring at Nanami resolutely. "No, I won't do it."

Because... doing that would be turning back on all of Mikan and Ibuki's attempts to help her. It would be opening herself up to repeating the mistakes of her past. Hiyoko remembered the words she said, the things she did, and she realized that she didn't want to be that person again. She wanted to be the person that Mikan and Ibuki and everyone else had helped her become.

Nanami sighed, pouting a bit. "I guess we need to find another plan then..."

Ibuki couldn't help but let her eyes wander as she spoke to Natsumi. They were small instances, her eyes drifting away for a second before snapping back to Natsumi's face. But every time she glanced away, her grin grew a little bit wider and a little bit more smug.

Hiyoko and Chiaki were whispering and plotting at another table, but in the din of the cafe, Ibuki couldn't hear a word. Not that she needed to. The pair's moods were obvious just from a glance.

Chiaki would suggest an idea, but then Hiyoko would roll her eyes and huff. The blonde would grumble and snark and complain, and Chiaki would look slightly dejected.

Yup, they were a totally bad match for each other! Ibuki knew that from the start! They were 100% incompatible~!

Ibuki could make Hiyoko smile in ways that Chiaki couldn't. Ibuki could make Hiyoko laugh and blush and all sorts of things! And Chiaki couldn't do that! Ha!

Pride burned in Ibuki's heart as she turned back to Natsumi with a wide grin.

"Well, I know that you can do it!" Ibuki cheered without missing a beat, like she hadn't been distracted at all. "You can definitely ask them out, or my name's not Mioda Ibuki!"

"Ah, thanks for your confidence," Natsumi smiled sheepishly. Ibuki slung an arm over the other woman's shoulders, feeling bubbly and celebratory. It was like she would start gloating at the slightest provocation.

Victory was incredible and beautiful, and Ibuki wanted to rub it in Chiaki's face. But she wouldn't, because that would be weird. And rude.

**Attempt Number Four, But A Little Less Immoral This Time**
"If she's already dating someone else, she can't date Ibuki. So we have to get Kuzuryuu-san a partner."

"So... you want me to help Kuzuryuu get together with someone, so you can have an easier time getting me together with someone."

"Exactly."

"Nanami, no, that's stupid. And complicated. And dumb."

"Anything's fair in love and war."

"Not if it's bound to get you shot."

---

**Attempt Number Five**

"Getting along with her family is very important," Nanami said wisely as she pushed Hiyoko towards Hajime's apartment.

"She's not related to Hajime," Hiyoko said flatly.

"No, but she *is* related to someone inside," Nanami retorted, knocking on Hajime's door.

A few seconds passed, before the door opened a crack. Not enough to show the person on the other side, but just enough for that person to scream, "Big Bro Hajime isn't here! If you want his ass, go to the coffee shop!"

Another voice hissed, "Kotoko, don't say stuff like that about your brother!"

"What? It's a good way of warding off his harem."

"Your brother has a girlfriend."

"That never stopped anyone."

Nanami cleared her throat, saying, "We're not interested in Hajime. We're looking for Ibuki's brother."

Hiyoko could almost *feel* the atmosphere grow colder, figurative frost spreading around the door. Even though she couldn't see the apartment's occupants at all, Hiyoko could sense the eyes glaring holes at Nanami.

"No. You're not allowed near him."

"Kotoko-"

"Nooooope~! Not on my watch~! Get out of here before I chase you down with pepper spray~!" The girl's voice was bright and cheery, even with the freezing atmosphere and burning glares. She was weird like that.

"Nanami, can we get out of here already?" Hiyoko huffed, rolling her eyes. "They obviously want nothing to do with us."

"I will not admit defeat," Nanami declared. "Defeat is nothing but a state of mind."
"The fuck are you doing-"

Hiyoko's words were cut off by Nanami tackling the door, trying to force it open. A yelp rang out, before the occupants of the apartment began pushing back just as hard. It was a battle of wills and dominance, and Hiyoko was left staring and gaping uselessly at the sight.

"We will rank up your social link, Shingetsu Nagisa!" Nanami exclaimed in a needlessly ominous voice. "Heed my words, because we are not leaving without bonding with you!"

"Get the fuck away from Nagisa, you creepy hag! Before I stab you and gut you like the world's nastiest fish!"

"...wow. I don't know how it was possible, but it turned out to be a worse idea than I thought," Hiyoko deadpanned.

Hajime and Mahiru stared them down disapprovingly, like a pair of disappointed parents. Or moms. Either one.

"Apparently you two tried to break down my door," Hajime stated.

"Look, it was Nanami's stupid idea, alright? I didn't even do anything," Hiyoko spoke up, glaring at Nanami the entire time.

"Listen, I don't think we have to tell you that breaking into Hajime's apartment to do *whatever* with Ibuki's little brother is illegal," Mahiru sighed.

"To be fair, your kid started it," Nanami declared.

No one really believed her.

"My intentions were pure and my actions were justified," Nanami added, before pointing a finger at Hiyoko. Hiyoko recoiled, giving her a scowl. "I was trying to get her together with Ibuki, so I wanted to make sure that she was on good terms with the brother-in-law," Nanami finally seemed to notice Hiyoko's annoyed gaze, amending, "*Future* brother in law."

"You tried to break into my apartment. To get Hiyoko and Ibuki together," Hajime said flatly.

"Yes, exactly," Nanami nodded, grateful that someone understood.

Mahiru shot Hiyoko a weird look, as if to ask, 'Why would you put up with this?'

Hiyoko shrugged, and Mahiru and Hajime exchanged a glance. They seemed to have come to a psychic agreement in that fraction of a second, in that weird way that couples could do sometimes.

"We're helping you," Mahiru declared.

"To prevent any more harm to my door," Hajime added. "And to your reputations. And virtually everything else you guys have damaged."

Silently, Hiyoko was thanking the pair with all her heart.

**Attempt Number Three Point Five But With A Little More Thought Put Into It**
"Remember to smile and relax," Mahiru had reminded her, as she passed Hiyoko the bouquet of flowers. Pink amaryllis and blue forget-me-not. Subtle. Not.

"Relax. Right," Hiyoko echoed as she entered her apartment, even though her heart was pounding in her ears. She was giving Ibuki flowers. One of which meant true love, while the other meant shyness. In Ibuki's trademark colours.

It was basically a confession! It was a confession that Hiyoko was in love, but too shy to say it! Ah, Hiyoko could only hope that Ibuki didn't know flower language, because-

Hiyoko knew, okay?! She knew that Ibuki thought of the bed-sharing, and the bathing, and the teasing and laughter and everything as 100% platonic! She didn't want to be the one to sour all of that, to make everything weird and awkward!

That was what she thought as she wheeled her way to the couch, where Ibuki was painting her toenails. Before Hiyoko could hide the flowers under her wheelchair, Ibuki looked up and waved to her with a grin. Hiyoko gulped.

"Want to start a garden in the kitchen or something?" Ibuki joked, with that smile that made Hiyoko's stomach flip.

"Um. No," Hiyoko stumbled through her words, before thrusting the bouquet towards Ibuki. "Take them."

"Is it my late birthday gift or something?" Ibuki offered as she took the flowers with her hands. "I mean, I didn't expect you to get me anything, but this is nice! My favourite colours!"

"I just figured..." Hiyoko paused, suddenly unable to look at Ibuki's face. Ibuki didn't know the meaning of the flowers. Good. Slightly disappointing, but good. "I thought... argh, fuck this!"

Hiyoko snapped, almost glaring at Ibuki. "I mean to say that I had a very busy and stressful day, I decided to visit the flower shop to admire the flowers, and for some reason, I bought a bouquet! Except now, I realize that it was a stupid idea, and I'm handing it to you! So take it, because I can't be bothered to take care of it!"

Ibuki gave her a weird look, but Hiyoko wasn't taking it back. She was definitely not making it seem like she had just decided to give Ibuki flowers, a very romantic action mind you, out of the kindness of her heart. Because that was too close to making a move on Ibuki, and Hiyoko did not want to do that.

So she ruined it. Hiyoko made it as clear as could be, she didn't care. She wasn't flirting with Ibuki, because she was just on mildly antagonistic terms with the rock star! Why would Hiyoko flirt with her?! That was stupid, and you were stupid for thinking that!

But Ibuki just gave her a knowing smile, and plucked a forget-me-not from the bouquet.

"Don't look so blue around me," Ibuki grinned, offering the flower to Hiyoko. Hiyoko groaned.

"No. No flower puns."

"What can I say," Ibuki started off, waggling her eyebrows at the other woman. "The need for puns just rose!"

"You don't even have any roses in there!" Hiyoko cried out indignantly.

"But I needed to make puns! The urge just wouldn't leave me alone! I'm a budding punster, you
"know!"

"You're awful!"

"Aw man..." Ibuki pouted in a way that made it very clear that she was not actually hurt by Hiyoko's words. "I guess my standards for jokes have never gone f-lower."

"Stoooooooooooooop."

"Does your hatred of puns stem from something? Do I have to get to the root of things?"

"Ibuki!"

"You're really pretty, you know?" Ibuki said suddenly. Hiyoko froze, staring at that rock star with wide eyes. A warm smile graced her sight, and Hiyoko's heart stammered like a nervous nurse in front of an entire auditorium.

Ibuki reached out, hooking the forget-me-not over Hiyoko's ear. She stared at her work for a few seconds, before nodding in approval.

"Yup, beautiful things go great together," Ibuki stated.

Oh good fucking hell.

"If beautiful things go so damn great together, then take it back!" Hiyoko snapped, snatching the flower so she could throw it at Ibuki. "It's a gift for you! Not for me!"

"...did you just call me beautiful?" Ibuki asked.

"You did it first, " Hiyoko huffed. "So I'm just returning the favour, got it?" Yup, only because Ibuki said it first. Not like she thought Ibuki was beautiful on her own. That was just stupid. Right?

"Heh, if you say so!" Ibuki sang.

Hiyoko's thoughts were basically:

'AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAARWALKANWOIHSAKLNNOWIALKSLFNANOBAOWIAOWHOHOA'

Or, put simply: 'Love-induced impairment of cognitive function'.

Chapter End Notes

every time i write hiyoko denying her feelings, on the western winds i can hear the whispers of tsunderes of all of time and space saying the exact same thing, over and over again: "i-it's not like i like you or anything, baka!"

AND YOU KNOW WHATS COOL?????? PUNSTER IS AN ACTUAL WORD
AND I AM SO HAPPY
"And _then_ she has the nerve to call me the worst matchmaker ever!" Nanami huffed, nearly slamming her teacup down on the table.

"Oh dear," Peko said flatly, because she had no idea what else to say. It would be rude to say that Nanami _was_ the worst matchmaker ever, but after hearing that story...

"Hmmph!" Nanami puffed out her cheeks, crossing her arms over her chest as she pouted.

Peko _knew_ that she was supposed to be sympathetic to her friend's plight (_gosh, just calling Nanami a friend gave her jittery feelings_), but. Please consider this, readers.

In that moment, Peko's heart was beating much faster than it ever had during a fight to the death. Her cheeks burned, her chest constricted, and she had the sudden urge to just sort of... pet Nanami's head. Like an adorable, cuddly bunny.

Her mind was a _little bit_ preoccupied when it came to, you know, actually listening.

She was a little bit curious. Peko wanted to see if her hair was as soft and fluffy as it looked. Peko wanted to reach out, to trace stars into Nanami's skin and run her fingers through locks of hair. It was very strange and-

Oh. Oh, Peko was touching Nanami's head. Okay. Wow. What.

Peko stiffly patted Nanami's head in what she hoped was a comforting manner, before snatching her hand away.


_(Oh gosh, her hair was soft and smooth and Peko just wanted to keep touching Nanami's body and that was weird, wasn't it!!)_

"Well, sure," Nanami shrugged it off like it never even happened. She 'hmm'ed and 'ummm'ed for a bit, before launching herself into an animated account of one particular gaming session she thought Peko would like.

And, well, she was right. Even though Peko had never played the game in question, Nanami's explanations helped her visualize the controls, the layout, and all of the game mechanics. Peko couldn't stop herself from smiling when Nanami began making little 'vroom vroom' noises as she detailed how the acceleration worked. Seeing Nanami so enthusiastic about something was enough to make Peko happy.

"And then Mikan's bomb comes out of _nowhere_!" Nanami exclaimed excitedly, waving her hands around to illustrate her point. "And Ibuki was really good at timing her banana placement! They almost managed to knock me out of first place!"

"Almost?" Peko asked, hoping to encourage Nanami to talk more, smile more. Her efforts were rewarded with a brighter grin and a warm laugh that could melt even the stoniest of hearts.
"Yeah, almost," Nanami nodded, before lifting her hand to her ear, her pinky and thumb extended to mimic a telephone. "But then Mikan got a call and people started screaming," Nanami giggled a bit as she recalled the incident. "I kinda want to host another video game night like that. It was really fun last time!"

"You really do love video games, don't you?" Peko grinned just from seeing Nanami smile, the question falling from her lips before she was even aware of it.

"Hm..." Nanami puffed out her cheeks, lifting her index finger to her chin as she thought. It was absolutely adorable. "It's not really about the video games, you know? I like spending time with people... and video games are a good way to bond with people, right?"

"Yes, that's true," Peko nodded. "It would be really enjoyable to have another gaming day."

"Aw, you really think so?" Nanami's grin turned sheepish, and Peko almost let out a squeal at the cuteness. Almost.

"Of course. I'd love to spend time with you."

"If you really think so... do you want to visit a cafe with me tomorrow?" Nanami asked, turning a bit pink.

"I would love to."

"Ahaha, great! That's great!" Nanami smiled brightly.

Peko had the feeling that she would do anything to keep seeing that smile for the rest of her life.

"I did it, I did it!" Chiaki cheered, almost dancing in place.

"Congratulations, Chiaki!" Mikan clapped.

"You finally managed to work up the courage to ask her out," Saionji huffed in a half-approving, half-'I don't care' tone.

"Yay, yaaaaaay!" Ibuki sang cheerfully. "Chi-chan's got a da~ate!"

"W-well, it's not really a date date," Chiaki corrected, her cheeks flushing. "I mean, it's a friendly outing! Testing the waters a bit, y'know?"

It was like there was a speaker in the room, blasting triumphant music, but the moment Chiaki said those words, the music began slowly fading away to silence. The other three women quietly stared at Chiaki.

"Uh. It's not a date?" Mikan asked.

"Wimp," Saionji muttered, and Chiaki kicked her wheelchair. "Hey, watch it!"

"You're not much better," Chiaki stuck out her tongue in response. Mikan nodded knowingly, while Ibuki just looked confused.

"Fuck you!" Saionji shrieked.

"Not interested," Chiaki said smugly, and Saionji threw the nearest object at her. Which happened to be a pillow.
"Oh no," Mikan whispered in horror, before fleeing as Chiaki grabbed a cushion. She hid behind the couch, while Ibuki snatched up a pillow and dashed towards Chiaki with a grin on her face.

Somehow, talking about someone's love life turned into a pillow fight death match. Again.

"-And I feel this profound urge to just... touch her hair and her face!" Peko exclaimed, staring at her hands in shock. "And I would do the strangest things to see her happy and smiling. Whenever I see her smile, my heartbeat accelerates, and my face grows hotter, and I get the strangest feelings in my stomach..." Peko paused, before offering a theory in a dead serious tone. "Am I broken? Was I brainwashed by her smile?"

Fuyuhiko gave his sister the most scathing, exasperated stare he could. Which was impressive, considering that he only had one eye.

"Peko. You cannot be serious."

Peko gave him a curious look, and Fuyuhiko let out a groan.

"You're not broken, Peko you melodramatic ass. You're in love."

Peko thought for a few seconds, before...

"How do I turn it off?"

"What the-" Fuyuhiko gave Peko a glare, his mouth set into a scowl. "No! There is no off switch for love!"

"But..." Peko grimaced, pinching her eyebrows together. "I don't want to continue feeling like this for a friend."

Fuyuhiko let out a sigh, before muttering something that sounded a lot like 'what is it with my sisters and emotional repression?!' to himself.

"Peko. What the fuck is wrong with being in love with Nanami," Fuyuhiko asked flatly.

"I don't wish to continue invading her boundaries like this. I don't want to do something that makes her uncomfortable."

"Do you even know that it makes it uncomfortable?" Fuyuhiko waited for an answer. Peko didn't have one, so he went on. "So you have no idea if she doesn't like it or not! But if you're so worried, then ask! Ask her if it makes her uncomfortable or if it's invading her boundaries or what the fuck ever!"

"I- okay. I'll try to do that," Peko stated, after a few seconds of nonstop glaring by Fuyuhiko. "Thank you for the advice."

"Yeah, yeah, it's my job as your brother to help you sort out your messes," Fuyuhiko said dismissively. Peko smiled, before thanking him one more time.

They settled into a comfortable silence, before Fuyuhiko realized something.

"Wait, didn't Nanami ask you out on a date?"

Ibuki 'hmm'ed as she sifted through Chiaki's closet, searching for suitable clothes. Chiaki waited
patiently on her bed, while Mikan sat on the floor and searched for nail polish in Ibuki's makeup kit. Saionji did absolutely nothing but look pretty sitting on the mattress. And grumble a lot.

"We're gonna knock Pekopeko-chan off her feet with how beautiful you are!" Ibuki exclaimed.

"Hard to see how you can manage that with looks alone," Chiaki quipped, making Saionji roll her eyes.

"Just shut up and let us help you with your ailing love life," Saionji retorted.

"You didn't let me help you with yours," Chiaki said in return, wearing an innocently adorable smile. "This is my revenge, Hiyo-chan."

"Don't call me that! Only Ibuki c-" Saionji suddenly slapped a hand over her mouth, looking horrified and terrified and various other '-fied' words.

"Only Ibuki can call-" Chiaki's 'educated guess' was cut off by Mikan abruptly asking for help, because the difference between 'Pink Lemonade' and 'Dreamy Fantasies' was so minute that it would take her minutes to tell which one they wanted.

"That one," Ibuki declared, pointing at the one in Mikan's left hand, before turning back to Chiaki's closet. And groaning. "Chi-chan, is everything you have a reference to some video game?!

"Yes."

"Well, I guess we can work with this," Ibuki mumbled, nodding to herself. "After all, video game things are pretty cute!"

"Since when?" Saionji huffed, earning an elbow to the ribs from Chiaki.

Mikan passed a hairbrush to Saionji, politely asking her to brush Chiaki's hair instead of talking. Saionji muttered a bit, but decided to do it. Her movements were probably rough, but Chiaki couldn't really feel it.

"Why the fuck's your hair so soft?" Saionji asked in genuine disbelief. "You're like a fluffy puppy."

"Maybe it's Maybel-"

"Hey, Hiyo-chan!" Ibuki called out suddenly, spinning around and hopping towards the bed. She pinched a lock of her hair between her fingers, holding it out to Saionji. "Is my hair soft like a puppy too?"

"Uh..." Saionji hesitantly reached out for Ibuki's head, before Chiaki began snickering. The blonde shot Chiaki a glare, before touching Ibuki's hair. "Soft, I guess."

"Awww," Ibuki pouted. "I thought I'd get a great reaction by doing that..."

"Hiyoko-chan, which one do you like more, Ibuki or Chiaki?" Mikan asked, and Saionji flinched. Ibuki stared at Saionji intently, while Chiaki had to cover her mouth to muffle her laughter.

"E-er, I'm not saying that one or t-the other's better, not that I like either of 'em, but, I-I suppose, and keep in mind that this is only if I was forced to, then I guess, after a-a lot of thought, I'd say... I like... I-Ibuki better..." Saionji's voice died, just as Ibuki cheered triumphantly.

"I win, I win!" Ibuki sang.
"It's just a stupid guessing game, so don't read too much into it!" Saionji snapped.

"Man, the wonders of UST," Chiaki sighed at the sight. Mikan shot her a glare in a silent 'please shut up before they hear you.'

"Alright, I'm going to make you look amazing!" Natsumi declared, pointing a finger at Peko.

"No, you aren't, because you have no fashion sense whatsoever," Fuyuhiko said flatly, pulling his twin sister away from the clothes.

"I'd rather ask for Fuyuhiko's help," Peko stated. She paused, before adding, in a quiet voice, "Sorry Natsumi."

"Eh, I guess I can be some sort of fashion supervisor," Natsumi huffed. "Or I can just laugh at you guys whenever you fail. Either one."

"Thanks for being useful," Fuyuhiko rolled his eye.

"You're welcome," Natsumi smirked, before turning to Peko. "So tell me~! All about what you love about Nanami~!"

Peko looked to Fuyuhiko for help, but the shrug he gave her pretty much meant 'you're on your own'.

"Um. What I like about her?" Peko repeated, hoping to stall for time.

"Tell me! What about her charmed you, captivated you, entranced you until you could hardly think! I want to hear ev~er~y de~tail!" Natsumi spoke exaggeratedly, with overblown shoujo pouty eyes and an innocent smile. A smile too innocent for anyone named 'Kuzuryuu Natsumi'.

"...I like her smile," Peko stated stiffly.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaand?"

"Her laugh."

"Go on!"

"I like it when she talks about video games," Peko smiled, remembering wide, excited gestures and sparkling eyes. "She gets so enthusiastic about it... When I hear her talk about something she truly enjoys," A wistful sigh left Peko's lips, "I can't help but feel fortunate. I'm very lucky to know her."

Natsumi hummed in contentment, before continuing. With a few well-placing questions and careful prodding, Peko was soon rambling about Nanami's beautiful smile and her adorableness and everything else Peko loved about her. How she gestured grandly whenever she got passionate about a subject she loved, how beautiful and joyful her laugh was, how much Peko loved being the one to make Nanami smile, even if it was a teasing grin. Peko wanted to make sure that Nanami kept smiling, instead of the crying or screaming or the cold, blank, emotionless tones she saw before.

Nanami deserved to be happy.

"Oh gosh!" Natsumi squealed, slapping her hands over her cheeks as she grinned. "So, so, so adorable! A pure and honest love! I'm totally rooting for you, big sis!"
"T-thank you," Peko said in return, averting her eyes as she turned pink.

Fuyuhiko turned away from the closet, holding up hangers in his hand. On those hangers were black dresses, black skirts, black blouses, black tights...

"Your closet is apparently the dream of goths everywhere," Fuyuhiko joked, but Peko blanched. She never realized it until then, but all of her clothes were black or dark grey! Or very dark grey! She was like a monochromatic bear!

"You do realize that you look great in black, right?" Fuyuhiko asked, somehow sensing her unease. "And besides, Nanami probably won't care either way."

"At this point, we kinda can't imagine you in anything but black," Natsumi shrugged. "Pretty sure it's gonna be the same thing for Nanami."

"I... alright," Peko nodded, deciding to trust her siblings. They just wanted to help her out, after all.

---

"Do you really have to paint my toenails?" Chiaki asked.

"Yes," Mikan said seriously, holding Chiaki's foot in place as she carefully coated her nails in 'Pink Lemonade'. "Because it looks pretty."

"You know, no one's crazy enough to wear flip-flops in February," Saionji huffed. "Unless this bitch," She stabbed a thumb at Chiaki, "Decides to strip again."

"You can't strip!" Ibuki cried out indignantly. "Not when you're gonna look so, so cute in this outfit!"

"I promise I won't strip and/or try to fly," Chiaki stated.

"Good!" Saionji declared, before putting down the hair brush. "Got any cute hair accessories?"

"Other than my Galaga one, I have a cute star clip that Mikan gave me a few years ago... should be on my desk somewhere, I think."

"You kept that...?" Mikan asked, almost tearing up at the touching thought.

"It was a gift from a friend. Of course I'd keep it," Chiaki smiled.

Of course, the sweet moment had to be ruined a few seconds later. Of course.

"Right, and I'm just going to hop off to your desk and grab- oh wait, I don't have legs," Saionji grumbled, before resigning herself to her fate and beginning to crawl-

"I'll grab it for you!" Ibuki declared, placing her choice of clothing on the bed next to Chiaki. Chiaki glanced at the outfit, before nodding approvingly.

"All the classics together. Nice," Chiaki said with a slight grin.

"I think Pekoyama-san will be really happy to see you," Mikan smiled warmly. "You two would be such a great couple! I can see the two of you getting married and-!"

"U-uh, that's- no, this is just a friendly date!" Chiaki protested. "Not marriage! Not yet!"
"Ehehehe, *not yet*, huh?" Saionji echoed with a teasing smirk. "So, five months from now?"

"No!" Chiaki exclaimed, her face bright pink. "Not in five months!"

"Six? Seven?" Ibuki suggested, turning to Chiaki with a heart pin in her hands and a grin on her face. "Oh, or maybe four!"

"No, Chiaki's a lot more responsible than that. She'd probably only propose after a year of dating," Mikan added.

"Will you guys quit it already?!" Chiaki shrieked, covering her blushing face with her hands.

Saionji paused, like she was actually considering it, before...

"No. This is my revenge for everything you put me through."

"I was trying to help!" Chiaki protested.

"You tried to break into Hajime's apartment and stole flowers from a granny and blew up your stove-!"

"Both of you, behave!" Mikan commanded in a motherly tone. Both of them hung their heads and apologized with a 'Yes, Mikan.'

Ibuki found it hilarious.

Nanami was going to pick her up in a few minutes. Nanami was going to take her out on a date in a few minutes.

"I'm ready. I am ready. I am very much ready," Peko repeated in front of the mirror. Her eyes skimmed over her clothes, her hair, trying to see what might be unsatisfactory or unappealing. She tried to find flaws and cracks in her armour before she even entered the battle. Naturally, it just made her even more anxious and worried and-

"You're freaking out," Natsumi pointed out, and Fuyuhiko jabbed his elbow into her ribs.

"Natsumi *means* that you should calm down and breathe," Fuyuhiko 'corrected'.

"I am calm!" Peko declared, and the twins gave her a skeptical look.

"Peko, breathe," Fuyuhiko ordered. "You're going on a date, not heading towards your execution."

"They could be synonymous-" Natsumi got another jab to the ribs for that, in Fuyuhiko's way of telling her to shut up without opening his mouth.

"Yes, I'm okay. I'm fine," Peko said stiffly. "I'm ready."

"*Hey, Pekoyama-san!*" Nanami's voice called out, and suddenly, Peko wasn't so ready.

But Fuyuhiko and Natsumi shoved her out of the room, forcing her to confront Nanami.

They both paused, staring at each other with wide eyes.

Nanami was *adorable*.

Her short hair was tied into a small bun, a clip with an 8-bit shooting star keeping her bangs out of
her forehead. A huge green hoodie hung over her frame, three golden triangles arranged into a pyramid on her left breast. The hoodie was unzipped enough to show a portion of the black t-shirt underneath. Peko could see a parasite-looking thing, above a ‘METROID’ logo. Nanami wore blue short shorts, to show off the patterned leggings she wore. Stars, mushrooms, flowers, hammers, ‘?’ blocks, wings, and shells made rows upon rows of 8-bit designs from the bottom of her shorts to the top of her boots.

"You... you look..." 'Incredible, dazzling, beautiful,' Her mind supplied, but Peko was too distracted to say one of those. "You look nice."

"Thanks!" Nanami smiled, blushing a bit. "I think you look great too."

Peko's outfit was all black. As expected. A black leather jacket covered a black tank top, while black jeans covered her legs. Peko's hair was loose from its usual braids, falling around her shoulders. Peko didn't really think she looked like anything special, but if Nanami thought she looked good...

"T-thank you," Peko muttered, a smile coming on her face automatically. "Should we go now?"

"Yeah, I think I found a place you'll really like!" Nanami exclaimed, pride obvious in her voice.

"I'm sure I'd like going anywhere with you," Peko blurted out before she could stop herself. The two of them immediately turned an even brighter shade of red.

"Geez, they're going to die of embarrassment before they even get out the doors, huh?" Natsumi whispered to her brother as they watched from behind a door.

"Natsumi, shut up!" Fuyuhiko hissed back.

Peko had grabbed a winter coat before heading out, but she was beginning to think that maybe she shouldn't have bothered. Nanami projected heat like a space heater, managing to protect Peko from the cold just by being there.

They walked to the cafe together, chatting about random topics. Nanami's latest high score in a video game Peko had never heard of, how Tangerine was doing, a high-class party Peko had attended once (but Peko didn't mention why she was there, or what she did there, and Nanami didn't ask.)

The entire time, they walked side-by-side, close enough to for their hands to brush against each other. Every time that happened, a jolt of electricity surged through Peko's body. She became a little bit more aware of Nanami's presence (though Peko doubted she could be unaware of her presence at all at that point). It became harder to tear her eyes away from Nanami's grinning face, and her face grew hotter. Hot enough to melt a cactus and burn an iceberg.

That didn't even make sense. But Peko's mind wasn't really capable of rational thought when Nanami was smiling like that. Her brain was kinda flitting between 'blabbering' and 'gushing' levels of thought.

She also had a huge portion of her mind obsessing over the idea of holding Nanami's hand. Her mind had imagined scenarios on repeat. Peko would say something suave (but she had no idea what it was), Nanami would laugh, and they would hold hands. Or Nanami reaching out on her own, lacing their fingers together, and her hands would be so- ah!

I-it was okay, right?! They-they were on a date! It was normal to hold hands! It was normal to do l-
Just the idea was enough to set Peko's face aflame. Every time Nanami's hand brushed against hers, the idea would pop up again, persistently nagging at her to just do it already. And Peko would reach out, just a bit, before the flipping of her stomach became too much to bear and her hand dropped back to her side.

"Oh, there it is!" Nanami exclaimed, pointing at a cute building on the corner of the street. Her hand came up to grab at Peko's bicep, lightly tugging her towards their destination.

Peko let out a very eloquent 'um' as Nanami guided her towards the building. She lost her chance to hold Nanami's hand!

It was a small building, just a story tall. Large, rectangular windows were decorated with advertisements and posters. Warm, orange lights glowed from within, and Peko could see people chatting and eating inside at little tables. The glass double doors were shaped like a cat's face, white paint forming the eyes and mouth. White vinyl-coated handles made up whiskers. Above the doorway was a pink and white striped awning, with the cafe's name printed in dark, almost-red pink.

'The Cat's Eye'

"Trust me, you're going to love it!" Nanami declared excitedly, her pace picking up as she all but ran towards the cafe.

Peko smiled, running to match Nanami's speed. Even if she didn't like it, it would be worth it just to see Nanami that happy.

The cafe had pale brown carpeting and white paint covering the walls. Designs of animals decorated the walls, cats chasing after birds, dogs playing with toys, and many other delightful scenes. There was a lot space between the tables, like polka dots spaced apart on a canvas. Lights hung from the ceiling, giving the space a warm, inviting feel.

But the cozy atmosphere was not why Chiaki was so sure Pekoyama would like it.

No, that had something to do with the pet toys scattered around the area, the barking, the meowing, the animals-

Yep, surprisingly enough, the Cat's Eye cafe had cats inside. And dogs. But the dogs were a recent addition, since the animal shelter downtown was closing...

Chiaki wasn't shocked to see that her explanation was practically bouncing off of Pekoyama's skull. Honestly, she sort of expected it. That didn't make it any less amusing when Pekoyama dashed after a spotted cat, nearly tackling the poor thing in a hug. The cat practically leaped five meters into the air, though of course, cats always landed on their feet, so no cats were harmed in the making of this chapter. Probably.

"Careful now, don't want to scare the animals," Chiaki snickered as Pekoyama pushed herself up to her knees. The swordswoman whipped her head around, searching for more furry friends/potential victims.

Fortunately for the animals, a waiter popped by and escorted them to a table. He made it very clear that, while petting the animals were allowed, if any of the animals were hurt, they would get kicked out. If the pets wanted to go to them, they would walk up to their table and wait to be
petted. There was no chasing allowed in the establishment.

Pekoyama was very dejected by that. Chiaki almost felt bad for laughing.

Chiaki could probably recite the contents of the menu in reverse alphabetical order from her numerous 'research' visits, but she still pretended to flip through it. Pekoyama hesitated, no doubt pausing at the cutesy foods and desserts and drinks she saw.

"What do you want? A hot dog?" Chiaki asked teasingly, pointing at the image of a coffee with a dog's face drawn in cream on the surface. "Or maybe you're feeline like having something more purr-ty," Her finger glided over to a cookie shaped like a cat, facial details and stripes drawn in icing.

"Your puns are pawful," Pekoyama grinned, and Chiaki's eyes brightened.

"Really? I thought they were pretty..." Insert obligatory pause and wink, "Pawsome."

"Your bark is worse than your bite."

"Ah, hear meowt! I've got a tailent for puns, you know!"

"You've got to be kitten me."

Chiaki dissolved into a giggling mess, hiding her smile behind her hand. Pekoyama smiled at the sight, before turning her attention back to the menu.

"They all seem too cute to eat..." Pekoyama sighed, frowning as she imagined chomping the head of a cookie cat off. Now that wouldn't do.

"You know, I've been here before, actually," Chiaki whispered conspiratorially. "The staff are actually fairies who feed off of the tears of humans. They want to make you cry over eating those adorable foods to get your life force," Pekoyama laughed, and Chiaki added exaggerated expressions and gestures to make her smile more. "It's a trick, it's a sinister plot! Mweheheheh, it's clever, but there's a way to win it, you see?"

Chiaki paused. Pekoyama decided to humour her, asking, "How?" with a grin.

"The only way to win is to beat them at their own game!" Chiaki exclaimed. "You have to devour these things without batting an eye! You have to chomp, chomp, chomp those itty-bitty kitties and eeny-meeny pups and like it! That's the only way to beat the evil, nasty fairies!"

"Well, it would be an awful idea to let the fairies succeed in their plot to take over the world," Pekoyama said.

"Don't you mean clawful?" Chiaki wiggled her eyebrows, and Pekoyama began giggling.

"Yes, I believe I do."

Chiaki had never been more proud of herself! They hadn't even ordered the food yet, and there was already a lighthearted and joking atmosphere between them!

And just when Chiaki thought things couldn't get better, the impossible happened.

A bit of fur brushed past her leg. Chiaki glanced down, and there was a tiny, fuzzy dog sitting next to her chair. Chiaki grinned, scratching at the dog's ears, then looping her arms under front paws and lifting the fuzzbutt up.
"So cute, right?" Chiaki asked, holding the dog in place. Peko gasped, her eyes widening in shock. Her trembling hand reached towards fluffy, fluffy fluff! Peko almost started crying when, not only did the dog let her make contact, but a tongue lapped at her fingers. A wordless half-squeal, half-sob left her throat as she petted and petted and petted and—It was adorable.

"Fuyuhiko!"

Fuyuhiko paused in his tracks, turning to see who had called his name. Mikan ran up to him, taking a moment to catch her breath.

"What are you doing here, Mikan?" Fuyuhiko asked with a smile.

"Ah, Chiaki had a date, and Ibuki and Hiyoko-chan wanted to watch, but Hiyoko didn't want to leave," Mikan explained. "Said it was too cold. So she asked me to check it out."

"We're in the same boat, huh?" Fuyuhiko rolled his eye as he recalled how he got there. "Natsumi wanted to spy, but she had a date with Hajime and Koizumi, so she sent me."

"Oh, is she finally dating them?"

Fuyuhiko shrugged, saying, "Don't know. She'll probably tell me if she managed to ask them out later, but for now, I don't have a clue."

"That's kinda disappointing..." Mikan mumbled, and Fuyuhiko nodded in an 'I know, right?'.

They settled into a bit of a lapse, before Fuyuhiko spoke up again.

"I'd rather not stalk my sister's date, so... want to grab something to eat?"

"I'd love to!" Mikan grinned.

The two of them began walking together, animatedly discussing their meal options.

Maybe it was because they were already a couple, but the two had no problem holding hands while they walked. Either way, Peko could learn something from them and their ways of showing affection.

Peko was still kind of crying inside when they left the cafe. When she waved goodbye to the cats and dogs, the dog barked goodbye. She still felt giddy! A dog liked her!

But still, despite her heart, mind, and soul screaming and crying, she kept a calm face on as she walked at Nanami's side. No one would be able to see through her facade, except for maybe Fuyuhiko and Natsumi. But they weren't there, so there was no one to challenge the idea that she was calm and not somewhat crying.

She wasn't quite relaxed, though. Nanami had brought her down an unfamiliar path to return home, and Peko kept an eye out for suspicious behaviour. Peko didn't spot anything that would require such a reaction, but she was in new, uncharted territory, one that hadn't proven itself to be safe just yet.

For once, being on edge was a good thing. While Nanami was content to remain oblivious to her
surroundings and rely on her internal map, Peko spotted it.

"Hey, Nanami," Peko called out, pointing a finger at the building. "Would you like go there?"

"Go where..." Nanami turned to follow Peko's gaze, before pausing. Her jaw dropped in a small circle, her eyes widening.

Neon lights on black paint defined the building, making it stand out from the others on the street. Colourful bars of light made up geometric patterns, drawing the eye towards the sign and the entrance.

"Galaxy's Best Arcade'

"Can we really?!" Nanami asked, turning towards Peko with bright eyes. Light sparkled in pink eyes, and suddenly, Peko wouldn't be able to say no, even if she wanted to. Not that she wanted to.

"If that's what you wish," Peko stated, surprising herself with how factual and dull her voice was. There was no part of her, not her voice, not her posture, not her face, that said something along the lines of 'As long as you smile at me like that, I would go anywhere with you.'

"Then, let's go already! No time to waste!" Nanami exclaimed, pumping a fist into the air. Oh gosh, she was adorable!

"R-right..." Peko reached out, grabbing at Nanami's wrist.

Nanami paused, looking up at Peko with curious eyes, silently asking for an explanation.

"Um... I thought it would b-be a good way to not lose each other," Peko stammered, her face flushing.

"This is just uncomfortable though," Nanami said bluntly. Before Peko could apologize and let go, Nanami shifted, and suddenly, Peko was grabbing her hand.

Oh. *OH.*

"This is much better, don't you think?" Nanami smiled as she laced their fingers together.

"I-I-I, uh, y-yes! I t-think this is good!" Peko declared, her face hotter than a blazing fire.

"Good."

Nanami shot her one last grin, before turning to guide Peko to the arcade. Somehow, even though it was Peko's idea in the first place, Nanami ended up being the one in charge.

Not that Peko minded.

A delighted squeal left Nanami's lips the moment she spotted the interior of the arcade. Platformers, fighting games, air hockey, puzzles, they were calling out to her! She needed to start playing and not stop until she had to be kicked out!

Peko smiled as Nanami's eyes went from machine to machine, unsure where to go first. After another moment of indecision, Nanami went over to a fighting game, taking up the controls. Peko stood next to her, almost standing guard. She scanned the environment, taking note of the layout and waving to Natsumi and her datemates. That's when she spotted it.
In the corner, a bored-looking employee was manning a stall, exchanging tickets for prizes. Tickets that were earned by winning games.

A memory from one of Natsumi's movies came to Peko's mind. A couple on a date at a festival, one wins the other prizes, the other gives thanks for the gifts with... with a kiss to the cheek...!

Peko immediately turned red at the thought, sneaking a glance at Nanami's grinning face. S-she seemed so excited... so getting her a prize would make her even happier, right? Yeah, she would probably laugh, thanking Peko with a wide, toothy grin, one brighter than the-

Okay. Peko was going to win Nanami a prize.

B-b-b-but not to get a kiss, alright?! It was just that, she had made a good point with the 'making her smile' thing and Peko just wanted to make Nanami smile! That was all!

With a steadying breath, Peko moved to the game next to Nanami, inserting a coin into the slot.

And then she realized that was a horrible idea, because she had no idea what the coloured buttons did or what the moving pixels on the display meant or why those green things were flying around or-

Peko went all of five seconds before getting a game over. Cause of death: trying something she had zero experience in to impress a cute girl.

"Ah, I won again!" Nanami announced with a grin. Tickets poured out of the game machine at an impossibly fast pace, making a pile on the floor. Peko immediately swooped down to grab them, adding them to the ginormous mass of tickets Nanami had accumulated.

"Congratulations," Peko said, in a completely monotone voice.

Argh, she really should have expected that Nanami would be an expert at the games! Nanami was incredible with anything related to video games! Peko had never even heard of half the games that Nanami loved! She-

Peko hid her pout behind the giant clump of tickets, trying to force her expression back to normal. She would have to try again later. With a game she could conceivably win.

"Sorry for making you hold all of it..." Nanami mumbled, and Peko flinched.

'No, no, no, that's not what I meant-! Don't apologize-!'

Before Peko could say that out loud, Nanami shot her a smile.

"So, how about I get you some prizes to make up for it? I think we can get something good with all of that."

"Uh," Peko said eloquently. "You can't do that."

"Why not? Do you not want gifts?" Nanami asked.

"N-no, that's not-! I mean, you're the one who won them, so you should get the prizes!" Peko declared, her face red.

"But I made you watch me play and hold the tickets!" Nanami protested. Peko was about to say 'no, I don't mind, watching you have fun is enough for-', but then-
Nanami puffed her cheeks out in an adorable half-glare/half-pout.

Oh no.

Peko didn't even last five seconds before caving.

GAME OVER.

(...but not really, because Nanami was happy with Peko's choice and Peko liked seeing her happy.)

Peko got a pink unicorn with a monobrow. Nanami said that the unicorn was angry, and she named him 'Charlie the Grumpbrow'.

It was ridiculous. Peko, a literal assassin, sister and right hand to a Yakuza heir, was carrying a plush unicorn named Grumpbrow. All because she couldn't say no to one tiny, adorable gamer.

But, no matter how much one wished for it, a moment couldn't be stretched into an eternity. The day had to end sometime, and Nanami and Peko walked together through snow-covered streets.

"That was really fun, wasn't it?" Nanami asked, grinning up at Peko.

"Yes, it was," Peko smiled back. Nanami paused, her cheeks turning pinker as her lips twitched.

"Wanna do this again sometime?"

"I would love to," Peko nodded.

As they walked side-by-side, their hands naturally gravitated towards each other. Peko reached out, intertwining her fingers with Nanami's.

She never wanted to let go of that warm hand, never wanted to let go of cheerful smiles and excited laughter, never wanted to let go of her.

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**Bonus**

"So, uh, when did you guys actually get together...?" Natsumi asked awkwardly, turning from Mahiru to Hajime and back again for answers. "I mean, it sorta came out of nowhere."

"Actually, I think that was because I was supposed to date you at first," Hajime stated, and Natsumi flinched. "Yeah, weird, right?"

"U-uh..."

"So I'm just a replacement love interest, huh?" Mahiru mumbled, frowning dejectedly. "I was just thrown into this relationship because the author changed their mind at the last minute."

"Don't worry, Mahiru," Hajime said reassuringly, wrapping an arm around Mahiru's waist. He pulled her close, pressing a kiss to her cheek. "What does it matter if we didn't get any development at all? I still love you. You're not a replacement or anything like that to me."

Mahiru shoved his face away with a bright blush across her cheeks. Hajime seemed to take that as a challenge, considering how he loudly exclaimed "KOIZUMI MAHIRU IS THE BEST GIRLFRIEND ON EARTH!"
Mahiru snapped at him to shut up, because 'you're so embarrassing'! And then she rolled her eyes and muttered about his idiocy, before kissing him.

Natsumi had never felt more uncomfortable in her entire goddamn life.

Chapter End Notes

I love puns. I hope you punderstand.

I like the idea of Hajime and Fuyuhiko being binder buddies, but let's be real here. No matter what the fanart tells you, in this universe, Hajime does not have huge, ginormous, binder-needling Hina-tatas.

Chiaki chose Team Instinct in Pokemon Go, but then she quit when she realized that flying didn't get her flying type pokemon. I guess her team went Ex-stinct.

You know what Mikan says to motivate herself? 'Me-can do it!'

I identify with Natsu-me the most.

What do you call it when Mahiru makes a photo bigger? Koi-zoom-in!

Peko says 'Peko-yeah-man!' when she agrees with something.

I love Fuyouhiko the most.

When Hiyoko leaves, you're supposed to say 'Byeyoko!'

If Ibuki put her hair in a bun, she would be Ibunki.

Nagisa's magical girl name would be Magisa.

When Kotoko doesn't like something, she says 'Koto-no!'

I had a dream where an elephant fell on Kazuichi and crushed him flat. It was Souda-pressing.

Chihiro is a Chihero to everyone.

Mikan, Hiyoko, and Peko all associate warmth with happiness. Mikan because warm food = people caring about her, Hiyoko because the only people who were nice to her (her dad, Mikan and her family, and Auntie Honoka) were all (figuratively) warm people, and Peko because relaxing in the sun or in front of a fire place is one of her happiest memories. Because of that, for those three, strangers take a long time to warm up to.

After coming up with a bunch of somewhat canon puns, I'm beginning to think I might be the SHSL Punster. After all, I've got a punchant for puns!
March kinda just marched into people's lives. One day it was February, then next, it would be March, but you didn't really notice it until you had to. It wasn't full of the holiday cheer of December, nor the excitement of the new year that came with January or February... March was that moment of time where tensions were cooling down and the temperature was warming up. Just warm enough for Chiaki to pull off her plan unhindered.

See, in the chilly February air, it wouldn't be wise to go around wearing short skirts, and October wouldn't be a good idea either. Besides, Chiaki didn't want to wait *that* long for a chance to make her idea work. Plus, in March, she had an excuse.

Her birthday was coming up, and so was Saionji's. If Chiaki could persuade Saionji to join her, they could use their combined birthday influence to rope the others into it!

Chiaki went over her arsenal of appeals, trying to figure out how to present her case to Saionji as she walked. Yes, *walked*. Because flying through the window would only piss the blonde off and Chiaki needed to not do that for once.

Saionji probably wouldn't appreciate bullshit reasons like *'I'm doing this all for your own good'* or *'it's for the best'* . Chiaki couldn't even *pretend* that it was an attempt at matchmaking. No, Chiaki had to be honest. And if she was honest...

...then she had to admit that she was doing it solely for her own amusement.

She felt like Saionji could appreciate that.

Chiaki was practically skipping towards the door, swinging her arms so wide that her bags would have hit anyone in her way. She could do it! The plan was going to go off without a hitch-

Son of a hitch, Chiaki just met the mother!

The hitch in question would *normally* be a welcome sight in Chiaki's eyes, but not when she needed to talk to Saionji. Chiaki might've found it fun to mess with Ibuki and make her jealous, but if she accidentally triggered it during her plan, it would be nothing but a hassle!

Chiaki mulled over her options as she listened outside the door. She could hear them bickering, the weird, sort-of fond arguing that they liked to do so often. The one that made her want to scream *'Please just start making out already!!'*

How to not activate jealousy...

Aha!

With a wide grin, Chiaki knocked on the door. Ibuki answered it, but before the musician could say anything, Chiaki asked,

"Want to help me get my crush in a maid outfit?"

"What," Saionji said flatly from behind Ibuki. Her voice pitched up, obvious disgust entering her
"You haven't even started dating and you're already trying to push your kinks on her?!"

"No, I'm just trying to be a pervert," Chiaki stated, rolling her eyes.

"Obviously."

"I think it's a great idea!" Ibuki sang, almost dragging Chiaki into the apartment. Chiaki offered the bags in one hand to Ibuki, keeping the others for herself.

"Those are the costumes," Chiaki explained as Ibuki took them, examining their contents curiously. "I also have some accessories and tights."

"You're so weird," Saionji sneered, and Chiaki ignored it.

"Wow," Ibuki gaped as she pulled out a maid outfit, letting out a gasp at the sight. "These are super pretty! Where did you even get them?!!"

"Online," Chiaki answered simply, making Saionji roll her eyes with a 'probably from some weird fetish site or something'.

"Wait," Ibuki said as she realized something. "This is only for Pekopeko-chan, right? Why are there so many?"

"Because," Chiaki grinned, her excitement bubbling up to the surface. "We're making everyone wear one."

Ibuki let out a delighted squeal, while Saionji stared at Chiaki like she was made of sea scum.

"Why?"

"Do we really need a reason why?!" Ibuki demanded with a bright smile. "It's a dress-up party with all our friends! It'll be so fun!"

"But it's in maid costumes!" Saionji protested.

"Don't see the problem with that," Chiaki stated.

"You know exactly what is wrong with that, you fucking bitch," Saionji retorted.

"What could you possibly be talking about?" Chiaki said with a smile far too innocent to be genuine.

"Yeah, the costumes are really nice, so what's the problem?" Ibuki asked, her face practically a poster child for the 'too innocent to understand fetish-y stuff' archetype.

"You're an idiot," Saionji huffed, before turning to glare at Chiaki.

"What? Don't you want to see all your friends in maid outfits?" Chiaki not-so-discreetly gestured at Ibuki rummaging through the bag, causing Saionji to blush. Her grin became more teasing as she went on. "Come on, it'll be funny! Just imagine how embarrassed everyone'll be!"

"T-that's-!" Saionji's voice raised in a protest, before falling silent at the sight of Ibuki pulling out another dress.

"Woah, is this one for me?!" Ibuki exclaimed in awe.
Rainbow ribbons decorated the hot pink outfit. An abundance of frills sat at every edge, and the skirt was loaded with crinoline. The only plain thing was the white apron paired with it.

"There are cat leggings to go with that too," Chiaki stated, before turning to Saionji. She wiggled her eyebrows as she repeated, "Don't you want to see all your friends in maid outfits?"

"Shut up and tell me what the plan is, you fucking moron," Hiyoko grumbled.

Chiaki's grin was triumphant as she explained her plot. First, at the hospital, she would...

Mahiru looked like she was on the verge of fainting, her face redder than her hair. Her hands fumbled, almost dropping the gifted dress in her embarrassment.

"T-this is, um-! Are you really g-giving this to me?!!" Mahiru exclaimed, trying to process the part where, you know, her friend just gave her a fucking maid outfit.

"Yep, I thought you would like it!" Chiaki spoke cheerfully, her words coated in sweetness and innocence. She didn't give a single sign that she knew the implications of such a thing. Yup, it was completely normal to give your friends maid outfits! "I saw a cool video game lately, this one cooking game, and I thought it suited you! It would be great for the costume party!"

"What costume party?"

"Oh, did I forget to tell you?" Chiaki asked quizzically. "For our birthdays, me and Saionji are hosting a costume birthday party at her place. It'll be really, really fun!"

"Uh..." Mahiru's eyes went down to the dress in her hands, before darting back up to Chiaki's face. "I, I'll think about it, okay?"

Chiaki pouted, using her trump card: the cutest face she could make. Her adorableness zapped bits and pieces of Mahiru's HP away, until the redhead sighed.

"I'll come," Mahiru stated.

"And you'll wear it?" Chiaki asked hopefully.

"I-I mean, it would be a total waste if I let you spend all that money for nothing, r-r-right?!" Mahiru stammered, blushing once again. "I'm not interested in stuff like this at all, but since you want me to do it, I will!!" Mahiru let out a huff, pointedly turning away as she crossed her arms over her chest. "You're lucky I'm willing to do stuff like this for you. I wouldn't touch this stuff with a ten-meter pole if you weren't involved."

"Yes, I'm really lucky to have a friend like you," Chiaki nodded along.

"Glad to see that I'm appreciated," Mahiru worded her phrase like some smug acceptance the praise, like a kid proudly saying that their hero was the best ever, a fact that everyone should have already known. But her bashful grin and reddening cheeks gave her away.

What a tsundere.

Step two: capturing the second part of the troublesome threesome.

To do this, Chiaki made her way towards the Kuzuryuu house, managing to catch up with the twins. She didn't say 'hello' or 'how are you' or anything like that. Instead...
"O great and beautiful master of the dating arts, please help me with my ailing love life!" Chiaki begged, suddenly bowing down before the blondes.

"What the goddamn fuck," Fuyuhiko said flatly.

"She's obviously talking to me!" Natsumi declared, puffing her chest out with pride.

"You've never dated anyone before," Fuyuhiko retorted. "And the part where you're having a fuckton of trouble-

"Shut the fuck up!" Natsumi snapped. "I've got a great grasp on the concept, but not the execution! Give me a break, I could pass a university course on dating if I tried!"

"If you're never going to apply the damn knowledge to your life, then tuition's a waste of money! Get out of that fucking class immediately!"

"I won't have you crushing my dreams, you bastard!" Natsumi exclaimed. "I'm going to become a master dater and you can't fucking stop me!"

"Don't you have to start by getting a goddamn date first!?" Fuyuhiko demanded.

Chiaki snickered a bit, feeling like she was watching a comedy show. But, alas, alas she couldn't just watch them argue forever.

"I have faith in Natsumi-sensei's skills, regardless of her experience," Chiaki said demurely. Wow. She didn't even know that she could demure.

Natsumi laughed triumphantly, proudly proclaiming, "Yup! I'm the beautiful and knowledgeable Natsumi-sensei, after all! I'm the one people always go to for help!"

"Since when!?" Fuyuhiko hissed in disbelief.

"Since now," Chiaki stated, before switching back to stroking Natsumi's ego. "Yes, I need your immeasurable talents and attractiveness to help me win over the beautiful women of the Samezuka Maid Cafe!"

"Wait, what?!!" Natsumi gaped. "You want to go to a maid cafe?!!"

"We won't have to leave my home!" Chiaki said excitedly. "We can even do it here, if you have the right console! But I need your help to get the good end!"

Fuyuhiko began cackling madly, even when Natsumi yelled at him to shut up. Actually, he started laughing even more after that.

"She needed your help with a dating game!"

" Shut up, idiot big brother!" Natsumi huffed, stamping her foot at the floor. "It's still a valid dating thing! It's still something that one would need my reputable skills for!"

"Yes, that's very true," Chiaki nodded along. "The game is known for its difficulty, but I know Natsumi-sensei can do it."

"Yes, just place your faith in me, and I'll pull you through!" Natsumi declared. "I'm the great and wonderful Kuzuryuu Natsumi, after all!"

"You forgot incredible and grand," Chiaki grinned. The fishie grabbed the bait! Or, uh, bit it,
since... you couldn't really grab with fins...

"Ahahaha, yeah, I did! My good traits are so immeasurable that I can't remember all of them in one go!"

"Good fucking hell," Fuyuhiko groaned, slapping his hand to his forehead.

'Ah, Protagonist-chan...' The big-breasted, blue-haired maid blushed beyond the screen. 'I love you.'

"Take notes, Nanami!" Natsumi exclaimed, puffing her chest out with pride. "It takes a pure and innocent heart to romance girls! Like me!"

"Pure..." Chiaki repeated in disbelief.

"Innocent..." Saionji added in the same tone of voice, watching the entire thing from behind the couch.

Chiaki summed up both of their thoughts on the matter with a drawn-out, "Right."

"Screw you!" Natsumi screamed, turning to glare at everyone. "I'm pure and innocent and kind, dammit!"

"Yup, yup, of course you are!" Ibuki grinned, popping up right next to Saionji.

"Hmph," Natsumi pouted.

"It really is amazing how you managed to romance her, though!" Chiaki gasped in awe. "You really are the best!"

"Now that's more like it!" Natsumi smirked smugly.

"Yes, it's as I thought, Chiaki concluded, tapping her foot against the floor in a simple pattern. Tap-tap, tap. Tap-tap, tap. "Attracting the eyes of someone you're interested in... it's as easy as putting on a maid outfit."

"Huh?" Natsumi glanced at her in curiosity.

"Uh-huh, you'll totally look great in one!" Ibuki exclaimed, and Saionji reached under her wheelchair. The ex-dancer passed the hidden bag to Ibuki, and Ibuki pulled it out with a flourish. "I'm sure of it, you'll look amazing in this!"

"Woah, woah- what the-?!" Natsumi exclaimed in shock, but it was too late.

Chiaki grinned, the 'YOU WIN' screen practically in sight.

"You're beautiful and dazzling, but this will be a bonus stat booster!" Chiaki declared. "With this on, your confidence will go through the roof! You won't have any problem confessing at all!"

"sides, if you don't, then the money would go to waste," Saionji stated.

Natsumi paused, considering it for a moment. That moment stretched on for a few seconds, the trio staring at her expectantly. She only lasted a few more seconds before she grumbled something under her breath and took the dress.
"Mikan, take these," Hiyoko said bluntly, giving two bags to the nurse. Mikan stared at her strangely, prompting her to add, "What? They're yours."

"Um. What are they exactly?" Mikan asked, taking a peek inside one of the bags.

"Cosplay," Hiyoko answered bluntly, and Mikan almost dropped them both with a loud 'WHAT?!'
"One's for you, the other's for your boyfriend."

"W-w-w-w-w-w-why?!" Mikan shrieked, her face bright, bright red at the thought.

"I want to be a goddamn aunt already," Hiyoko smirked. "Bonus points if the kid's named after me. So this is a bit of 'encouragement', got it?"

"Y-y-y-you want me, to-to, um, er-!" Mikan blushed and blushed and blushed and blushed some more.

Hiyoko nodded, saying, "You want a future with that bastard, right? Consider this my seal of approval. I'll even be the bridesmaid."

Mikan stared at her in shock, gaping.

"What?" Hiyoko asked defensively. "Did you have someone else in mind?"

"No, no, that's not- that's not it!" Mikan stammered, before she began sobbing, throwing her arms around Hiyoko's neck. "Hiyooooooooko-chaaaaaan! I swear I'll make you proud!"

"Yeah, yeah, you definitely will," Hiyoko muttered, patting Mikan on the back.

Normally, breaking into someone's living quarters was grounds for arrest. But in Ibuki and Hajime's case, it was just Ibuki's way of getting inside. Hajime didn't even bat an eye when Ibuki joined him at the dinner table.

"Haji-chaaaaaaaannnn!" Ibuki grinned, leaning towards Hajime. She propped her head up in her hands, her elbows on the table. "Wanna do me a favour?"

"What kind of favour?" Hajime asked automatically.

"I've got a costume you need to-"

"No."

"You didn't even wait for me to finish!" Ibuki whined.

"If this is for some concert, then the answer is no," Hajime declared. "I've already suffered enough, don't you think?!

"You only caught fire once!" Ibuki protested. "And this is nowhere near that bad! It's not even bad at all, and it has nothing to do with concerts!"

Hajime still looked suspicious as Ibuki went on.

"Hiyo-chan and Chi-chan's b-days are coming up!" Ibuki exclaimed. "And you know what they
"Peace and quiet," Hajime said bluntly.

"No! No, no, wrong, incorrect, nada, nope!" Ibuki made an 'X' with her forearms, glaring at Hajime. "You're their hopes and dreams! You're their super hot, fanservice friend! That's why, for the sake of keeping up our appearances as a normal, fanservice-y romcom, we need at least one fanservice scene! And you're the protagonist, so you have to sacrifice yourself for everyone else's sake!"

"They're gay," Hajime stated, cutting through Ibuki's words in an instant. "You'd have better luck with Mikan or Natsumi. Or you."

"Gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!" Ibuki cried out, almost slamming her head into the table. Her hands tugged at her hair in frustration as she groaned and grumbled and grumped. "No, no, no! You misunderstand! You are not understanding, tu ne comprends pas! It's not for Chiaki and Hiyoko! It's for the audience! I swear, there are people who would really like to see you in a maid outfit, and they would—"

"You are absolutely not allowed to sell pictures of me in a maid outfit to people on the internet."

"Why are you so difficult?!" Ibuki whined.

"Maybe you should start by saying the real reason why you want me in a costume," Hajime deadpanned.

Ibuki huffed, pouting as she spoke up once again.

"Chiaki wanted you in a maid outfit for her birthday because she thought it would be funny."

"...tell her that there's no way I'm doing it," Hajime answered.

"Waaaaaaaaaaaaaah...!" Ibuki whined. "You're a meanie-pants!"

"I can live with that."

"Pekoyama-san, I got you a gift," Nanami smiled as Peko let her inside.

"R-really?" Peko blushed, staring at the pink-eyed gamer in disbelief as she produced a plastic bag from behind her back.

"Yup, this is for you!" Nanami handed the bag to Peko, keeping her cheery tone as she added, "The best maid outfit I could find!"

"Maid... outfit..." Peko repeated, processing the words. Her expression died a little, going from shocked and overjoyed to... awkward. "You got me a maid outfit."

Nanami nodded. "Yup, I thought it would be a great idea! I mean," She quieted her voice down to a conspiratorial whisper, "What else would be better for a ninja?"

"What."

"I know it doesn't really make sense, given that you're kind of a samurai, but consider this!" Nanami's voice picked up speed as she grew more and more excited, a bright smile on her face. "I made a really cool swordsmaster unit after you, but in order to get more skills, I switched you over
to ninja! And the more you stayed in that class, the more it suited you! Like, you can be quiet and deadly, a warrior hiding in the shadows until she strikes in the silver moonlight! It's so cool, so you're a ninja forever in my mind!"

"I see," Peko grinned slightly, watching Nanami go with warm eyes.

"And, there's also this super-awesome time-stopping ninja maid I know, she throws knives and she's totally awesome, and I sort of associated ninjas with maids ever since! So, so, since you're a ninja, you must also be a maid, but I don't think you have any actual maid outfits, so I got you one! Isn't it so cool?!!" Nanami asked enthusiastically, eyes sparkling as she impatiently waited for Pekoyama's answer.

"Thank you for this wonderful gift," Peko said gratefully, before hesitating a bit.

You could give someone a kiss in gratitude, right? That was something people could do, right? And, they were kind of sort of dating, so it would be fine, right?!

Peko's face heated up as she considered it, before turning her head away.

"W-well, if you wanted to see me to be a ninja maid... I wouldn't want to disappoint you..." Peko mumbled quietly, earning a confused look from Nanami. Peko took a deep breath, trying to raise her voice to a normal level and keep it steady as she spoke. "Stay here. I'm going to..."

"You're going to try it on?!!" Nanami's grin reappeared, her eyes shining with delight. "Oh gosh, oh gosh, oh gosh, you're really going to be a ninja maid!"

"Yes, I-I am," Peko stammered, leaving out the part where she would be a lot of things to see Nanami that happy.

Peko sucked in air, steeling herself for the experience. Just to make the cute girl smile. She just had to put on the outfit-

Nanami's phone rang, and she muttered an apology before answering it. Peko didn't hear much, only something about a 'mistake' and a 'failure'. The light was gone from her pink eyes, her lips drawn into a tight frown.

"I have to go. Right now," Nanami said urgently. Sadness and disappointment tugged at her frown, and she looked away from Peko's face. "Maybe you can show me next time?"

"I will," Peko promised, watching as Nanami turned away-

"Oh! I almost forgot! Since it's almost my birthday and all..." Nanami went up on her tiptoes, placing her hands on Peko's shoulders. She leaned in, pressing a kiss against Peko's cheek. Nanami winked at her. "Then I'm allowed to have a little treat, right?!"

Something that sounded a lot like 'ahagabarastenflable' left Peko's mouth as she blushed, and Nanami giggled.

"Ah, well, see you later!" Nanami grinned, waving as she left.

Peko waved back, her mind whirling like a northern wind in a snowstorm, her face redder than the setting sun.

Hajime answered the doorbell, staring down at an angry Chiaki. Her arms were crossed over her
chest, her cheeks puffed out, and her nose scrunched up in a glare. She looked like an annoyed pomeranian.

"Chiaki. Why," Hajime said flatly.

"Because-!" Chiaki popped her cheeks, switching to an excited grin in a second. "It's a great way to bond with everyone, right? Schools all have the same uniform to create a sense of unity in the students! It sows seeds of friendship and harmony and a sense of belonging in the community! It's all for the sake of the people and-"

"You thought it would be funny," Hajime interjected.

"I thought it would be funny," Chiaki admitted, bowing her head in what would have been shame, if she were actually ashamed.

"What do I get out of it?" Hajime asked.

"The beautiful memory of your girlfriend in a maid outfit," Chiaki answered. "I'll even get you pictures."

"Not interested."

"She's going to be embarrassed and blushing and spouting tsundere lines the entire time."

Hajime 'hm'ed, considering it for a moment.

"Still no," Hajime said, and Chiaki huffed.

"I'll give you a thousand yen."

"Two thousand and it's a deal," Hajime offered. Chiaki grumbled, pulling out her wallet. She slapped bills in his outstretched hand, pouting the entire time.

Hajime absentmindedly counted the money, before blurring out, "Is it a short dress? Do I have to get my legs waxed-"

He cut himself off hurriedly, but it was too late. Chiaki had a devilish grin on her face, her eyes shining with excitement.

"Of course you do! And your eyebrows plucked and your makeup done and your nails painted..." Chiaki snickered mischievously, and Hajime suddenly had the distinct feeling that he fucked up.

Saionji and Ibuki were going to have lots of fun with him.

Technically, it was only false pretences if the entire thing was a lie. So, Chiaki inviting herself and Fuyuhiko over to Mikan's place to 'record a video' was only a lie if she didn't do that.

And since that she was recording them playing video games together, she wasn't a liar. She was just someone with a plan.

"So this is a dating game..." Mikan grinned as she moved her black-haired schoolgirl around the school. "Alright, Ayano-chan! I'll do my best to help you win your Senpai's heart!"

"You should probably start by actually finding him first," Fuyuhiko said, smiling bemusedly at his girlfriend's excitement. "You think he'll be around the classrooms?"
"Maybe!" Mikan answered as she ran the girl into the art room. She gasped in awe at the sight, admiring paint-splattered canvases and posters. "Look at all the detail in here! It's amazing!" She moved Ayano over to a table, noticing a prompt over a pair of scissors.

Mikan tapped the button, and Ayano picked them up.

"I'm holding a pair of scissors!" Mikan exclaimed excitedly.

"Don't run with them," Fuyuhiko quipped, and Mikan giggled, promising that she would be careful.

Chiaki smiled when a member of the art club walked in, beginning to work on her painting.

"I should say hi!" Mikan walked Ayano over, pressing the prompt that appeared over the artist's head-

A scream ripped out of her throat as Ayano stabbed her in the face.

"What the hell?! What did you just do?!"

"I-I don't know!" Mikan shrieked, as the body crumpled to the floor. Chiaki snickered as they panicked, only upgrading to full-on cackling when another member of the art club walked in. The schoolboy screamed, running off to call the police.

Mikan and Fuyuhiko got a game over in the first five minutes, though to be fair, it was mostly Chiaki's fault.

"Wanna try again?" Chiaki offered, hiding her laughter behind her hand.

"No!" Fuyuhiko yelled immediately. "What kind of dating game lets you kill people?!

"It was called Yandere Simulator," Chiaki said in return.

"You said that a yandere was someone who would do anything for someone they loved!" Mikan wailed.

"What part of anything excludes murder?" Chiaki asked teasingly, and Fuyuhiko swore at her.

Time for Step Forgot-The-Actual-Number-But-It's-Close-To-The-Endgame!

"Well, time for something else then!" Chiaki said out of nowhere, switching tracks so fast that the couple had trouble keeping up with her.

Chiaki jumped off the couch, picking Fuyuhiko up in a bridal carry. She rushed Fuyuhiko away before the other two could realize what was going on.

"What the fuck?! Put me the hell down, you bitch!" Fuyuhiko screamed, trying to struggle out of her hold. But Chiaki was determined.

"GET YOUR HANDS OFF MY BOYFRIEND!" Mikan shrieked furiously, chasing after Chiaki.

The gamer rushed towards the bathroom, shoving Fuyuhiko inside and shutting the door. She couldn't lock the door from the outside, but she could block the door off with her body! Chiaki pressed her back against the door, standing her ground firmly.

Mikan grabbed her, snarling threats as she tried to pry Chiaki from the doorway, but Chiaki wasn't budging, not until Fuyuhiko put on that maid-
And then she fell back, because Fuyuhiko just opened the door. Fuck.

"What. The hell. Were you fucking trying," Fuyuhiko demanded flatly, standing over her. Mikan crossed her arms over her chest with a ‘hmph!', glaring down at Chiaki.

"I'm trying to recruit you into the ninja maid association," Chiaki stated as she pushed herself up. "It's a very simple process, you see, all you've got to do is..." Chiaki grabbed Mikan's hands, guiding her towards the buttons of Fuyuhiko's suit jacket. Both of them stared at Chiaki blankly as she made Mikan unbutton Fuyuhiko's-

"W-w-w-w-w-wait, what are you doing?!" Mikan yelped, suddenly becoming aware of the fact that she was undressing Fuyuhiko! The two were blushing, and Fuyuhiko was about to try to stop it-

"Initiation," Chiaki said, and suddenly Fuyuhiko was swearing and there was a pink maid outfit being pulled over his head. She pulled the dress all the way down, and even though he looked sort of silly, wearing it over his dress shirt, he made it look cute.

"What the fuck?! The hell are you doing?!" Fuyuhiko demanded, staring down at his outfit in horror.

"You are now a part of the ninja maid association," Chiaki smiled, before turning to Mikan. "Please wear your uniform too."

"Huh?" Mikan thought for a moment, before remembering- "Oh, Hiyoko-chan's gift!"

She rushed off, and Fuyuhiko glared at Chiaki.

"If you take it off, you don't get to see your girlfriend in a cute maid outfit," Chiaki spoke before Fuyuhiko could say a word. "And I'm sure you want to see that."

Fuyuhiko continued glaring at her, but in silence.

"Hey, to be fair, she wants to see you in one too," Chiaki added, making Fuyuhiko blush.

"Shut up, you goddamn immoral bitch," Fuyuhiko grumbled.

"Well, that's not very nice," Chiaki grinned teasingly, and Fuyuhiko suddenly had the urge to punch her in the face.

[party's on! remember to bring your maid outfits!]

By the time Mikan had managed to find and wear her maid uniform, the rest of the main characters had managed to show up in the apartment.

Hajime was dragged in by Hiyoko and Ibuki, his makeup impeccable. His dress was shorter than his actual apron, showing off his perfectly shaved legs. Hiyoko had even tied a ribbon around his lightning bolt hair. He was grumpy and had a new appreciation for people who had their eyebrows plucked.

Hiyoko and Ibuki were also wearing maid outfits. Ibuki's was decorated with rainbow ribbons and Hiyoko... well, Mikan was pretty sure that she just took a black kimono and threw an apron over it. But saying that out loud would be rude. Hiyoko had a fake flower in her ponytail, the bit of blue the only splash of colour in her outfit.
Natsumi and Peko showed up next. Their uniforms had a matching faux-corset pattern on the stomach, but Peko's was blue while Natsumi's was black. They both tied their hair into twintails, with matching white ribbons.

Mahiru was blushing and muttering when she came in. Her dress was as red as her hair and had a green ribbon under her neck.

Mikan actually felt a bit weird in her long skirt. The only other person with a long skirt was Hiyoko, and that was because she was wearing a kimono! Ah, were her legs not cute enough or something?!

"Nah, you look cute, it's just that your boyfriend would throw a hissy fit if everyone else saw you in a super sexy outfit," Hiyoko said, seemingly reading Mikan's mind. Mikan gave her a weird look, and Hiyoko reacted defensively. "What? You can be predictable sometimes."

"Thank you," Mikan smiled. "I think you look cute too!"

Before Hiyoko could thank her, Ibuki spoke up.

"Aahahahaha, I can't believe it!" Ibuki cheered as she danced around. "We're the maid nation! We're the incredible, beautiful maid association!"

"Everyone must be envying our incredible beauty!" Natsumi declared.

"I'm not being paid enough for this..." Hajime grumbled.

"Hey, should you really be dancing around like that?" Mahiru asked in her 'concerned mother' tone. "I mean, I know it's your apartment and all, but what if you break something?"

"If she breaks anything, I'll kick her ass," Hiyoko called out, before adding, "Shut up Ibuki, I know I can't kick anyone!"

"I didn't say anything!" Ibuki said defensively.

"You were about to!" Hiyoko snapped. Thankfully, the potential argument was derailed by Chiaki's grand entrance.

"Got the cake and I got the Fuyuhiko!" Chiaki exclaimed delightedly as she ran into the room. Even she was wearing a maid outfit, though she wore her signature blue hoodie over it. A chocolate cake (lactose-free) sat in her arms, and Fuyuhiko trailed behind her.

Fuyuhiko...

Mikan's eyes widened, her hands coming up to cover her mouth.

S-s-s-s-s-so cute!

He was blushing and trying so hard to look unaffected, but Mikan could totally see the embarrassment he was feeling! A pink dress sat on top of his white dress shirt and when it was paired with his white apron, it looked like a matching pair! So cool! Even though he was wearing pants under, he was adorable in a dress and oh gosh, oh gosh, Mikan's heart was racing! She wanted to hug him like the adorable cuddly teddy bear he was and-!

"Fuyuhiko! Mikan cried out, throwing herself at him in a hug. "Ohmygoshyou'resooo cuteandwowyou're-!"
She kept rambling, even when she accidentally knocked them both to the floor. Fuyuhiko rolled his eye, looping an arm behind her back as she talked about how cute he was.

"What a sweet couple..." Natsumi sneered in disgust.

"Get a fucking room!" Hiyoko called out. "I might want to be an aunt, but I sure as hell don't want to see you make the baby!"

"Both of you shut up!" Fuyuhiko snapped from the floor. His glare would have been intimidating, if his girlfriend wasn't snuggling his chest and cooing over how cute he was.

Chiaki grinned. The party was off to a great start.

Peko sighed, grabbing a cake slice and retreating to a far corner of the room. She was having fun, talking to everyone, playing video games together and all, but she needed a break sometimes, alright?

The cake was sweet, almost too much so. But she couldn't complain. It was still edible, so she ate.

Despite the fact that there weren't many people there, the party was still busy. Natsumi, Fuyuhiko, Mioda, and Saionji played one of Nanami's racing games. Apparently, Mioda was winning, judging from the amount of curses the three blondes were throwing at her. Koizumi was talking with Hajime, the two of them blushing and trying to stretch their skirts out to cover more of their legs. Tsumiki ate her cake peacefully, watching the game with a smile on her face.

Peko finished her food, about to go back for more, until Nanami walked up to her.

"You sure look cute!" Nanami grinned, and Peko froze in her tracks.

"Y-yes, you too," Peko mumbled. Nanami straightened a bit, her cheeks turning a rosy pink.

"Hehe, thanks," Nanami said, before hurriedly switching to something else. "But uh, hey! It's a party, so I'm hoping you'll have fun! I mean, it's small, but it's good! Like, in a 'small things come in good packages' or- fuck!" Nanami's blush deepened, and she became more and more flustered. "I mean, packing goods come in- wait, no, good packs-! Shit, I mean-"

"Good things come in small packages," Peko supplied, smiling amusedly.

"Argh, don't laugh at me! Everyone messes up from time to time, okay?!" Nanami exclaimed defensively.

"I w-wasn't laughing!" Peko said quickly. "I just, you looked cute and embarrassed and-!"

"You thought I was cute?" Nanami asked, and Peko nodded. They both settled into a blushing silence, before-

"Percussion..." Mioda pointed at Natsumi, who understood immediately, tapping her feet against the floor in a rhythm.

"Winds..." The musician pointed at Saionji, who stared at her in confusion, before halfheartedly whistling.

"Stings..." She pointed at Fuyuhiko, who had no idea what to do.

"Words," Mioda grinned, before hopping up and singing.
'There, you see here, standing there across the room,

She don't got a lot to say, but there's something about her.'

"What," Nanami said flatly.

Tsumiki joined in, singing, 'And you don't know why, but you're dying to try, you wanna kiss the girl!'

"I-I-! That's-!" Peko blushed, unable to say the 'untrue', because, well, it kind of was true.

Mioda laughed in approval, before dragging Hajime and Koizumi over.

"Yeah, you want her," Hajime rolled his eyes, almost bored with the entire thing.

'Look at her, you know you do!' Koizumi sang with a grin.

Tsumiki looked at Fuyuhiko pleadingly, and he sighed.

'It's possible she wants you too, there is one way to ask her,' To people who had never heard him sing before, his voice was a lot more melodic than they would expect. He used to be a choirboy, after all.

Saionji and Tsumiki gasped, while Mioda cheered. Natsumi just grinned in pride, before Mioda went straight back into the song.

'Doesn't take a word, not a single word, you've just got to kiss the girl!'

In an act of surprisingly good coordination, Hajime, Koizumi, and Tsumiki became her backup, making 'sha la la la la la~' sounds.

Saionji dropped her whistling, grinning as she continued.

'My, oh my, looks like the gal's too shy, she ain't gonna kiss the girl!'

'Woah woah!'

'Sha la la la la la la, ain't that sad, looks like a shame, too bad, you're gonna miss the girl,' Natsumi added, throwing a wink at Peko.

The makeshift musical group was about to do the grand finale, but then Nanami spoke up.

"If I kiss her, will all of you shut up?" Nanami asked bluntly, nothing but her reddened cheeks showing that she was as embarrassed as Peko was.

"Yes," Everyone nodded.

"Alright then," Nanami rolled her eyes, before looking up at Peko. "Sorry about this-"

"Don't be," Peko said, right before ducking down to kiss her. She could hear the sound of her heartbeat in her ears and the sound of everyone cheering when their lips touched.

Nanami's lips were soft.

Chapter End Notes
going from 'im not human' to 'making all my friends wear maid outfits for no reason other than ninja maids and because it might be funny' is one of the weirdest character arcs ever but i'm not complaining
Natsumi woke up with her arms looped through the arms of two other people. That wasn't really anything out of the ordinary for her. In fact, one of her oldest memories was sleeping with Peko and Fuyuhiko, their arms linked together just like that. Even though they stopped doing it around the time Peko's age hit double digits, Natsumi still liked the memory-

Wait. If she stopped doing that with Fuyuhiko and Peko, then who-?!

She sat up suddenly, her eyes snapping open.

"Mornin'," Hajime greeted her, looking up from his book with a small grin. His other arm was looped with Natsumi's.

"Sleep well?" Mahiru asked from her other side.

"W-what the fuck happened last night?!" Natsumi demanded.

"You got drunk because of the placebo effect," Mahiru said, grinning in amusement.

"And became the karaoke master," Hajime added, before beginning a dramatic retelling of last night's events...

---

Chiaki pulled away from the kiss, turning to glare at the makeshift acapella group.

"Show's over. Go eat your cake."

"Awww, you can't even make it romantic?!!" Ibuki whined.

"Maybe it's our fault for forcing it..." Mikan muttered.

"No! I know that there was a real romantic atmosphere there!" Hiyoko declared, pointing an accusatory finger at Chiaki. "You just fucking ruined it!"

"H-hold on," Peko tried to calm everyone down, but she was still flustered from, well, everything. Too flustered to be an effective group herder.


"It's really good, you should try it," Natsumi said, taking another bite of her slice. "But you're going to go to hell if you try mine, so get your own."

"I hope you get drunk off your ass," Chiaki snapped, puffing her cheeks out in an angry glare.

"There's no alcohol here..." Fuyuhiko trailed off, his eye widening in horror as he realized it. "No. You wouldn't."

"Vodka cake," Chiaki smirked, and everyone froze.
"Oh fuck," Natsumi whispered.

"Actually, I'm pretty sure there wasn't any alcohol in it at all," Mahiru stated, before shrugging. "You just started acting drunk."

"And singing. Loudly," Hajime added.

"Sha wa- la bababab my oh my...!" Natsumi giggled, shoving her brother towards Mikan. "Looksche like that boy's too shy, he- hehehehe, he ain't gonna kiss the gi~irl!" And then she suddenly stopping, pouting as she went, "Okay, I'm bored. Gimme a new song."

"Natsumi, what the fuck?!" Fuyuhiko snapped.

"A song! I want to sing a different song!" Natsumi declared.

"Uh... Frère Jacques?" Mikan suggested.

"No, something fun!" Natsumi whined.

"I've got an idea," Chiaki said with a smile that no one should ever trust.

"She made Ibuki start playing music and gave you a hairbrush," Hajime grinned amusedly.

"You know, even though you forgot half the words, you were really good," Mahiru stated.

"Heh, even when I'm drunk off my ass, I'm incredible!" Natsumi said proudly.

"I NEED A HERO!" Natsumi sang loudly. She pumped her fist into the air, making a little 'pschew' sound. "I need a hero till the until the li~ight, and he's something, fuck I don't know and jumps real low and he's a something something something fight!"

"I need a hero!" Ibuki added with a bright smile as she strummed the notes. "And he's gotta be strong and he's gotta be cool and he's gotta last till the end of the night!"

"What the hell are they doing," Fuyuhiko said flatly.

"Having fun, I guess," Hiyoko answered with a shrug. She wasn't even looking at Natsumi's drunken antics, just smiling warmly at Ibuki.

("Probably looked stupid."

"Natsumi, that's rude! You shouldn't be rude to Hiyoko-cha."

"Well, she did look kind of dumb."

"Ha!"

"Hajime!")

Fuyuhiko gave an expression that was half-wait, are you serious? and half 'oh fuck you're serious'. Chiaki rolled her eyes, and Hiyoko gave them both the middle finger without changing her expression at all.
"Come on! This is a party, isn't it?!" Ibuki bounced towards them, grabbing Fuyuhiko by the hand and dragging him towards the makeshift karaoke session. "We're gonna sing so loud, the entire building’s going to shake!"

Natsumi cheered, before sauntering over to Hajime and pulling him along too. He sighed in faux-exasperation as Natsumi passed him the hairbrush. Hajime muttered the lyrics to the song halfheartedly. Ibuki booed, before deciding to ‘show you how it’s really done’! Fuyuhiko grumbled something about how even he could do better. Natsumi dared him to prove it, and the twins began a heated singing competition. Very few people knew the actual words to the song, but what they lacked in musical literacy, they made up for in spirit. Even Hajime was (sort of) getting into it.

Mahiru snickered as she pulled out her video camera, beginning to record the chaos.

"Do a sappy love song next!" Chiaki cheered from the sidelines.

Mikan and Hiyoko exchanged a glance, before breaking out into matching mischievous grins.

"Oh, Pekoyama-san~!" Mikan called out, practically skipping towards the blushing ninja maid.

"Er, yes, Tsumiki-san?" Peko replied stiffly.

"Hm, no, it doesn't feel quite right..." Mikan muttered, and Hiyoko shot her a capital-L Look, managing to send a message without saying a single word. Mikan jolted as the idea came to her, her smile becoming innocent and joyful. "Peko-chan! Would you please come with me?"

"U-uh, of course... um..." Peko hesitated, her face turning pink as she quietly whispered, "M-Mikan...chan..."

Mikan giggled, taking Peko by the hands and guiding her towards the singing group. They didn't sing, but they danced together, in a strange half-stumble, half-actual-dancing that would make any actual dancer hang her head in embarrassment. Thankfully, Hiyoko kept her mouth shut, and Peko was able to loosen up and start enjoying the moment.

"Well?" Hiyoko turned towards Chiaki, a sly smirk on her face. "Want to help them all embarrass themselves?"

"I can't believe you even have to ask," Chiaki answered. She took the handles of Hiyoko's wheelchair and stepped towards the group.

"It was sort of nice, until Hiyoko got the brush," Hajime let out a sigh, shaking his head in disapproval.

"Wait, you liked being forced to sing?" Natsumi asked with a grin. "Should we host a karaoke night every week now?"

"Shut up," Hajime said simply, and Mahiru gasped in faux-horror.

"Hajime, apologize this instant, you jerk!" Mahiru ordered, though she was wearing a joking smile.

"Oh, fair maiden, I have wronged thee greatly, and I can only hope that with your endless grace and goodness you can find it within yourself to forgive me," Hajime said flatly.

"Damn right I'm graceful and good," Natsumi had a satisfied smirk on her face, obviously enjoying the praise (even if it was somewhat sarcastic.) "Anyways, go on! I want to hear what happened..."
next!"
"Well, if I remember right, then..." Mahiru groaned.

"This song goes out to all the sad, lonely people who can't work up the courage to ask their crush out!" Hiyoko winked at Chiaki.

"You're dedicating a song to yourself?" Fuyuhiko asked, and Chiaki burst into laughter.

"H-hey! Shut the hell up, you itty-bitty midget! I'm too fucking good for romance!" Hiyoko snarled.

"More like you can't actually ask someone," Fuyuhiko not-so-subtly glanced at Ibuki, who was confused but okay. "Out on a date, no matter how obvious your crush is."

"You're fucking blind, you moron!" Hiyoko shot back.

Peko and Mikan exchanged a glance, before moving simultaneously. Mikan pulled Hiyoko's wheelchair back, and Peko physically restrained Fuyuhiko.

"Behave," Peko ordered.

"Please be nice," Mikan pleaded.

Chiaki stifled her laughter, pressing her hand over her mouth. She still couldn't quite contain her snickering as she went over.

"Come on, Hiyo-chan, you've gotta be nice!" Chiaki declared, and-

"Chi-chan, you are banned from using my nicknames! Immediately and forever!" Ibuki screamed.

"Oh, I'm sorry, should I use something like 'darling' or 'sweetheart' instead?" Chiaki asked with a grin. Ibuki began pouting, because that wasn't what she meant!

("And suddenly, Hajime is a psychic now. Who knew?"

"Well, it's the only way he could be that good at reading people..."

"Oh yes, I am so totally capable of reading your thoughts. In fact, I can see them right now. Floating in front of me. Makes total sense."

"Shut your sarcasm hole already, dumbass!")

"Ew," Hiyoko sneered at the thought. "Keep it in your pants, bitch."

"We're all wearing skirts," Fuyuhiko pointed out, with a glare thrown at Chiaki. "Unfortunately."

"I'm the reason your girlfriend's wearing a maid outfit, so you have no right to complain."

"Um," Mikan said awkwardly, and Fuyuhiko's expression turned fiery.

"You act like that's supposed to be a good thing! Do you think that I want her walking around in something like that, showing that sight to people that aren't me?! I'd rather [CENSORED IN ORDER TO COMPLY WITH RATING REGULATIONS]!"

Peko let out an eloquent 'uh', before releasing Fuyuhiko and stepping away. Everyone was staring
at Fuyuhiko, except for a hiccuping Natsumi.

("What was I doing?"

"Hiccuping."

"Hajime, you ass! Tell me!"

"You were lying down on the couch and complaining about zombies."

"Oh. Thanks, Mahiru.")

"Good lord," Hiyoko muttered.

"That's...wow," Mahiru said, unable to come up with a better response.

"Awwww!" Mikan cooed, bringing her hands together. "You want to keep me to yourself that much?"

"I mean, it's only natural, right?" Fuyuhiko huffed, blushing a bit. "Since you're my girlfriend and all..."

"Don't worry!" Mikan smiled, walking over to Fuyuhiko. She pressed a kiss to his forehead, before saying, "I'm all yours!"

"Jeez, you're so embarrassing..." Fuyuhiko mumbled, even though he was grinning too.

"GET A FUCKING ROOM!" Hiyoko screamed.

"Unorthodox couple, but it's still cute! I think!" Ibuki piped in.

"As cute as a murderfest love triangle," Chiaki deadpanned.

"Good thing there's no third person," Hajime kind of felt bad for any potential... victims of their love. Or something like that.

"Yep! I'd gladly kill anyone who gets between us!" Mikan declared cheerily.

"You don't have to get your hands dirty," Fuyuhiko stated. "Just leave it to me."

"No, there's no way I could trouble you like that, Fuyuhiko-"

"Hey, was Fuyu-chan always this type of character?" Ibuki asked cautiously, watching the two go back and forth over who would kill and who wouldn't.

"I could see him as the possessive type, but I didn't know he would go that far," Hajime answered.

"I've never actually seen him like that before," Peko added.

"He's not actually going to do that to us, right?" Hiyoko grimaced at the thought. "I don't want My vacation plans to get ruined."

"You want to go on a vacation?" Mahiru stared at Hiyoko curiously.

"I mean, yeah, it would be... nice to go with everyone," Hiyoko mumbled. "I mean, just going on a roadtrip with all of you or something," She shot a glance at Chiaki, before sighing. "Yes, even you, Nanami."
"I am so honoured," Chiaki grinned.

"You fucking should be," Hiyoko declared in return.

"We can go camping!" Ibuki suggested.

"Natsumi's lazy and hates the outdoors," Fuyuhiko countered.

"Oh, you're done cuddling up to Mikan," Chiaki said, and just then, Mikan wrapped her arms around him. "I stand corrected."

"Perhaps a visit to another city?" Peko offered.

"Where are we going to get a car for nine?" Hajime asked, pointing out the obvious problem.

"I've got a limo!" Ibuki exclaimed proudly.

"This is going to be so fun!" Mikan grinned excitedly.

"We started planning out a vacation, until you woke up and started clinging to Mahiru," Hajime stated, and Mahiru flinched.

"N-n-n-no, we don't have t-to talk about this part!" Mahiru screamed, frantically waving her hands about in a panic. Her face was as red as her hair, her expression desperate.

"Yes, I think we do," Natsumi said with a grin, and Mahiru shot her a burning glare that would set fire to the ocean and smoulder flame retardant. Thankfully, Natsumi was just as hotheaded, and she was completely immune to Mahiru's glare.

"Well, fine then!" Mahiru turned away with a huff., crossing her arms over her chest. "Don't blame me if you get embarrassed! I tried to save you, so don't go crying to me if you can't get him to stop!"

"Trust me, I can make Hajime do a lot of things," Natsumi declared proudly. "In fact, one time I-"

"Moving on," Hajime cut in, silencing Natsumi with a hand over her mouth.

"Mahiruuuuuuuuuuuuuuu, tell me a story," Natsumi whined, tugging on Mahiru's arm like a child. Mahiru gave her a mildly amused look, before speaking up in a motherly tone. "Please let go of my arm first."

"Don't wanna," Natsumi pouted. "I like you."

"Well, I like you too, but-"

"Actually, I like you a lot. Enough to date you," Natsumi continued. "And kiss you and stuff. You're really pretty."

"What," Hajime said in disbelief. He had been listening in before, mostly for his amusement, but what?!

"Oh, don't worry Hajime," Natsumi beamed at him. "I like you that much too!"
"Uh-"

"I've been dreaming of stuff like that, you know? I wanted to eat dinner with you guys and make pillow forts and hold hands and kiss you guys and-"

"W-wait, wait wait!" Natsumi cried out desperately. "I said stuff like that?!"

"You did," Hajime confirmed.

"And... we woke up. Together. In the same bed."

"No, we didn't have sex," Mahiru stated preemptively.

"Okay, good," Natsumi sighed in relief. "But, um... did I make things awkward?"

"You did when you passed out and forced us to drag you to my apartment," Hajime answered.

"Uh... so, you're okay with me... hypothetically having a crush on both of you," Natsumi asked cautiously.

Mahiru and Hajime exchanged a glance, before breaking out into matching grins.

"To be honest, we were considering asking you, but we thought you might think it was weird," Mahiru said.

"Told you we didn't have anything to worry about," Hajime smirked smugly, and Mahiru reached over Natsumi to swat at him.

"No you didn't, you liar, you were even more worried than I was," Mahiru huffed, not moving her arm away.

"Y-you were-?!" Natsumi blushed brighter than a spotlight, slapping her hands over her reddened cheeks.

"We'd love to date you," Mahiru smiled, and Natsumi suddenly realized that the two of them were hugging her.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaah-! Ah-aha! Ahahaha, of course you would!" Natsumi tried to puff out her chest in pride, except her smile was so wide her cheeks were starting to hurt and-! "Ha, I-I guess, the natural thing to do is, um, to k-kiss you to seal the deal, right?"

"Right," Hajime nodded. "Whenever you're ready."

Natsumi turned a deeper red, before taking a deep breath.

First, she turned to Hajime, pressing a kiss to the bridge of his nose. Hajime smiled at her, before kissing her cheek in return.

Natsumi turned over to Mahiru, kissing her freckly cheeks. Mahiru giggled, and Hajime pulled them all closer together. Natsumi's back was pressed against Hajime's chest, and her arms wrapped around Mahiru's waist. Their legs were all laced together in a tangled mess, but it was so comfortable that none of them wanted to ever get up.

Natsumi could probably get used to that.
Definitely.

And then Natsumi remembered something. Her eyes widened in horror, and she tensed up.

"We aren't telling my mom about this, right?" She whispered fearfully. "Because she would freak out if she heard that I'm dating Mahiru."

"Is it because I'm a girl?" Mahiru asked.

"No, her mom would have the same reaction if it was me a few years ago," Hajime answered. "Because."

"Because she's always going 'you're above those normal people'!" Natsumi declared. "She talks about how you can't expect a normal person to understand anything, and you can't trust them anymore than you can trust a revenge-driven bastard..."

"Natsumi's mom really hates people who aren't part of the Yakuza," Hajime explained. "So she would probably be fine with Natsumi dating me, but you?" He shook his head sadly.

"Alright then," Mahiru smiled reassuringly at Natsumi. "We're not telling your mom."

"Good," Natsumi grinned in return.

Bonus

Listen, Natsumi wasn't picky where her money came from, alright? She had sold everything from organs to pipe cleaners, this could hardly affect her.

...at least, that's what she told herself. But, the truth was, the product she was selling was a little bit... personal.

"Five hundred a picture," Natsumi declared, holding the stack of photos in one hand. Miss Medicine took them, carefully considering each one.

Natsumi could practically see the drool dripping down the other woman's chin at the pictures of a young Fuyuhiko. Natsumi suddenly thanked herself, because she had the foresight to only pick the photos from Fuyuhiko's later teenage years. She didn't think Fuyuhiko would appreciate her accidentally outing him, and besides. If he wanted to tell his girlfriend, well, that was his job. Natsumi didn't want anything to do with that.

Mikan nodded, before going for her wallet. Natsumi smiled appreciatively, getting ready for-

"The fuck are you two doing?!!" Fuyuhiko demanded, barging in out of nowhere.

What the hell. Where did he come from?!

"Uh. She's buying pictures of you," Natsumi mumbled, jerking a thumb at Miss Medicine. "Kid pictures."

"I mean, you understand, right?" Mikan asked, and suddenly her stare became cold and creepy. "Your past, your present, your future, all of it belongs to me. So, it's only natural that I would want them, right, Fuyuhiko?"

"Huh? Are you saying that the person I am now isn't good enough?" Fuyuhiko's voice became dangerously on edge, like a simple slip-up would be enough to set him off. He gave Mikan the
same cold stare, and Natsumi shivered. "I thought devoting myself to you entirely would be enough for you. Do you really like the past version of me that much? Huh?" A crazed grin appeared on his face at the thought. "Should I destroy him then?"

'WHAT THE ACTUAL FUCK?!' Natsumi gaped, caught between a pair of dueling-

"No, no, Fuyuhiko, you're misunderstanding!" Mikan exclaimed, suddenly wearing a bright, innocent smile. She went over to him, wrapping her arms around his shoulders. Fuyuhiko tensed at the sudden movement, before relaxing in her hug. "I love you, the person you are now, and the person you will be." She giggled softly. "If the present and the future belong to me already, then it's normal to want to own the past too, right?"

"You should have just said so from the start," Fuyuhiko huffed, and Natsumi suddenly had no idea what was going on.

"What the goddamn fuck," Natsumi said flatly, and the two jumped away from each other like they forgot she was in the room. She wouldn't be surprised if that was the case, actually.

"J-just take the m-money!" Miss Medicine screamed, all but tossing her wallet at Natsumi.

Oh well. At least she was still getting paid. With that much money, she could probably bring Mahiru and Hajime to a really good restaurant...!

Chapter End Notes

I think it's the Kuzuryuu family tradition to get drunk at a party and accidentally confess your love. This is the third generation this happened.

Also, Mikan is a bad influence because everyone around her becomes a yandere. EVERYONE.
Natsumi tapped her foot against the floor. Her leg bounced impatiently as the two waited for their missing member. Hajime seemed unaffected by her movements, even though she was slumped against him and he could feel every vibration. He was half-reading on his phone and half-watching the door. Natsumi, on the other hand, was looking all over the place. Her gaze would fall on a waiter, shift to the cushion-y seat she and Hajime were sitting on, then jump over to the tables and notice how yummy the patrons' food looked.

And then Hajime elbowed her in the stomach.

"What was that for-?!" Natsumi glared at him, before he pointed towards the entrance.

"Sorry I'm late, I got held up by work," Mahiru stepped towards them, and the pair were completely silent.

It was true that Natsumi said that they were going to a fancy restaurant. It was true that she and Hajime had dressed up. Hajime was in a suit and tie, Natsumi was in her best baby blue cocktail dress (that may or may not have been stolen from Peko).

But Mahiru... damn.

Her dress reached down to her ankles, flowing like a stream of water behind her as she walked. Specks of white on top of pink layered on purple mixed with black made up the starry sky that was her dress. She was like a goddess of the night, meant to be looked at with the same awe and wonder one felt for the stars.

And then she opened her goddamn mouth, a dorky grin on her face.

"Hey, you two, are those guns in your pockets, or are you just-" Mahiru cut herself off, eyes widening as Hajime pulled a pistol out of his pants pocket.

"Yeah, I carry it around for self-defense. Hope you don't mind."

The waiters gaped at them in shock, jaws falling open and gasps echoing around the room. Natsumi broke down cackling, depending on Hajime to hold her up in her mad laughter.

"Fuyuhiko, here!" Mikan smiled, holding out her fork to him. A poor, innocent shrimp was speared on it, but Fuyuhiko turned his head away.

"Nope."

"Why not? Are forks different than spoons?" Mikan asked quizzically. "Should I use my fingers?"

"Mikan, no matter what you do, I'm not eating that," Fuyuhiko stated.

"Why?"

"Because you're sort of masochist who orders all the spicy food in the restaurant!" Fuyuhiko exclaimed, waving a hand at Mikan's food. Spicy shrimp, spicy beef, spicy noodles, spicy soup, spicy vegetables...

"It's not masochistic!" Mikan declared defensively, pulling her shrimp closer to her. And her beef.
And her noodles. And the rest of her food. "I-it's just like eating w-warm food, or being w-with you, or being in t-the sunshine..."

"What was that second one?"

"Um... being in the sunshine...?" Mikan offered with a weak smile.

Fuyuhiko gave her a completely unconvinced stare, and Mikan's feeble defenses crumbled.

"I-I meant... being with you makes me feel warm and happy..." Mikan mumbled, her face turning pink.

"Holy shit Mikan," Fuyuhiko said as he covered his bright red face in his hands. "Holy fucking shit."

"Aaaaaaah...!" Mikan shrieked, just as red. "That's the most embarrassing thing I've ever said out loud! Ever!"

"Wait, does that mean that you've thought something even more embarrassing?"

Mikan flinched, before trying to divert his attention away from her. "W-well, haven't you ever thought of anything like that?!"

"This isn't about me!" Fuyuhiko retorted. "This is about you and what you've been thinking!"

"Nooooooooooow!" Mikan protested in horror. "I can't be the only one getting embarrassed! That's just- There has to be an equal amount of embarrassment here, that's just how coronations work!"

"No, it's not! That's not even the right word!"

"That's just how correlation works!"

"That's not it either!"

"That's just how... communism works?" Mikan offered tentatively, not really expecting it to work.

Fuyuhiko paused, giving Mikan a weird look. "No."

"Thought so..." Mikan slumped forward with a sigh. A frown marred her face, and Fuyuhiko obviously didn't want that.

"Mikan," Fuyuhiko called out, leaning forward. He had his mouth open expectantly, and Mikan was just plain baffled.

"...are you doing your best dead fish impression?" Mikan asked.

"Of course not, Mikan!" Fuyuhiko snapped. "If you actually wanted to feed me or whatever, then now's your fucking chance! Otherwise, you never get to-"

Mikan didn't even wait for him to finish talking before jamming a piece of spicy steak in his mouth.

Fuyuhiko regretted that flavor for a very long time, but he couldn't deny that seeing Mikan's smile afterwards was totally worth it.
When Nanami visited the day after, neither of them brought up the kiss. Even though it was obviously on both of their minds. Nanami wouldn't look at Peko's face, Peko was red, even though it was a little bit windy and chilly out. They discussed mundane things, safe things, boring things. The weather, Tangerine's eating habits, the dead flowers in the garden...

Yeah, they were less 'dancing around the topic' and more 'hiding in the corner deserpately hoping the topic wouldn't explode while also kind of expecting it to blow up'.

Nanami cracked first, screaming and slamming her head into the table. Peko stared at her in concern, her mouth falling open in shock. Nanami's muffled voice came from her mush of hair, frustrated and exhausted.

"Okay! Okay, I give up! It's too much trouble! We have to tackle this monster eventually, or it's going to keep hunting us down!"

"Uh, Nanami?"

"I'm sorry! I shouldn't have kissed you! I mean, I know they were singing and all but..." Nanami's voice died, and she frowned with a sigh. "I just, I know I wanted to kiss you, but not like that. I kinda imagined something else."

"What did you imagine?" Peko inquired carefully.

"Being on a nice date," Nanami stated immediately. "And we would be laughing and smiling and it would just be natural for me to lean over and kiss you..." Her eyes widened suddenly, and she blushed red, red, red.

"Would you like to forget about that party?" Peko offered, her cheeks growing red as she went on. "We can pretend that kiss never happened, and we can go on a date and kiss then."

"H-h-h-huh?!!" Nanami almost fainted, before shying away. "I m-mean, um..." A small smile appeared on her face. "Y-yeah. I'd like that."

"How about that arcade you liked?" Peko grinned. "I'll win you a prize and you can kiss me in gratitude."

"No offense, but it's way more likely that the opposite'll happen," Nanami said bluntly.

"No," Pekoyama Peko did not pout, that was beneath her, but if she did, she would be giving Nanami the biggest, puffiest pout in the history of pouting. "I don't care how long it takes, I will be the cool heroine who wins her date a prize."

"Aww, you're trying to look cool for me?" Nanami cooed, and Peko flinched.

"N-no, of course not! Ah-ha-ha! What a ridiculous, preposterous notion, Nanami, you joker!" Peko almost screamed. Except she didn't, because she was a calm and collected person who wouldn't get flustered over something like that. Ha.

"Awwww, you're adorable!" Nanami declared with a bright grin. "You're the cutest girl in the world!"

"No!" Peko rebutted the idea immediately. "I won't steal a crown that rightfully belongs on your head!"

"Wh-wha-?!" Nanami gasped, her face heating up. "That's, that's not true! It's you!"
"It's you!"

"No, you!"

Somehow, their tea party became a weird argument.

Hiyoko had never really considered being an author before. She liked stories, but she didn't want to come up with them. And writing non-fiction would be so boring! Honestly, if she had a list of 'Please no I don't want this' jobs, being an author would probably top the list.

Which is why she surprised herself a little when the idea of writing a book came to mind. It would be a long self-help book, because, shockingly enough, she cared enough about humanity as a whole to not want people to suffer like she did. Yup, that book would be called 'Falling In Love Is Horrible and You Should Never Try It.'

Because she was in love, Hiyoko let Ibuki choose a cheesy, boring-as-fuck, idiotic love movie to watch. Because she was in love, Hiyoko was too busy forcing her focus on the TV to notice Ibuki's snores. Because she was in love, Hiyoko froze the moment Ibuki's head touched her shoulder. Hiyoko hadn't moved since.

Yes, love was the root of all her suffering.

If Hiyoko wasn't in love, she wouldn't be stuck between trying to focus on the unappealing movie or facing Ibuki. Pushing Ibuki away wasn't even an option, and Hiyoko couldn't just stand up! Even though her heart was racing, her mind was screaming, her face was heating up, and even worse, some huge part of her still didn't want to move away!

"Uuuuuurgh, you're so lucky I like you," Hiyoko groaned. "Otherwise I would have shoved your ass off an hour ago."

"Aww, you like me!" Ibuki sprung up suddenly, a bright smile on her face. Hiyoko let out an undignified shriek of shock, before pushing Ibuki away.

"You were awake the entire time?!" Hiyoko demanded.

"What, did something happen while I was asleep?" Ibuki asked with a grin. "Something you don't want me to know about~? Like a touching declaration of friendship~?"

"S-shut the fuck up! Eat worms and munch on a fucking beaver!"

"Hey, why are you encouraging cruelty to wildlife?! That's mean! so, so mean!"

"Newsflash, Ibuki, I'm a fucking bitch!"

"No, I-M-P-O-S-S-I-B-L-E!" Ibuki declared. "No bitch would ever admit her affection for a sleeping someone!"

"WOULD YOU JUST SHUT UP AND DROP IT ALREADY?!"

Unsurprisingly, they started arguing and didn't stop until Mikan got home.
The Yakuza Are The Scariest, Rudest, Most Vicious, Swearing-est. Murderiest Bastards On This Entire Goddamn Planet: A Report By Saionji Hiyoko, Mioda Ibuki, and maybe Nanami Chiaki

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

[Want to go out today, Fuyuhiko?]

[Sorry, can't. I have business to do.]

[Oh. Okay! Have a great day!]

[I love you!]

[OAHIONALKWAOGTHWFUCK]

[Uh, sorry. Love you too.]

Mikan giggled at her phone, before heading to the living room. Hiyoko lifted her head from a magazine, glancing at Mikan lazily. Ibuki was slumped over the couch in a way that would have had any lesser human being dizzy and unconscious, but Ibuki was just fine.

"Gonna get ready for your date?" Hiyoko asked, raising an eyebrow at Mikan's huge smile.

"No, Fuyuhiko can't come. He has work," Mikan sighed, plopping herself down to Ibuki's feet. She giggled to herself like a smitten schoolgirl, clutching her phone to her chest. "But he's so cute! He's adorable!"

"He has a job?" Ibuki asked, staring at Mikan curiously.

"Uh..."

"The hell does he even do?" Hiyoko wondered. "I thought he sat around and wasted money all the time."

"There's no way Fuyuhiko would do that!" Mikan exclaimed defensively.

"Then what does he do?" Ibuki asked, and Mikan faltered.

"Er, um, I'm sure it's... important... Yakuza business..." Mikan mumbled weakly.

"She doesn't know," Hiyoko translated.

"Huh. What kind of things could he be doing if he can't even admit it to his girlfriend?" Ibuki 'hmm'ed, oblivious to how Mikan flinched at her words.

"I'm sure he would tell me if I asked!" Mikan declared immediately.

"But what if it's something like shooting guys in the head like those movies?!” Ibuki gasped. "Or, or, a brutal execution, where his liver gets pulled out and everything else turns to butter!"

"What?" Hiyoko gave Ibuki a weird look. "That doesn't even make sense."
"It makes sense in context!" Ibuki shot back.

"Then provide that context!"

"Nope. nuh-uh, ruining the artistic experience for you! If you wanna see, see for yourself!"

"I'm not wasting my precious life on some stupid movie!"

"Mikan!" Ibuki turned towards the nurse, a huge smile on her face. "Wanna see what Yakuza do for a living?"

"Um..." Mikan said eloquently, carefully considering her options. On one hand, it was probably a bad Yakuza movie. With too much fake blood, not enough real blood, and lots of swearing from someone who wasn't Fuyuhiko. On one hand, asking Fuyuhiko would be like admitting that he neglected to tell her in the first place...

They ended up watching the movie.

Hiyoko liked to think of herself as a calm, collected person. Note the 'would like to', because the author's not even going to try to gloss over Hiyoko's obvious attitude problems. Anyways, Hiyoko didn't flinch at blood, or death, or stuff like that. Not in games, not in the news, and definitely not in some bad Yakuza movie.

Or that's what she liked to think. Actually, that's what she thought, up until the movie started.

With a guy getting his [CENSORED] exploded.

Yup, the entire movie was full of awful, gory deaths. Hiyoko couldn't even figure out a plot from the mess, just an excuse to go from one bloodbath to the next.

Even Ibuki, endlessly smiling, eternally enthusiastic Ibuki was disturbed by it. At first, Ibuki had reached out for Hiyoko's hand, then a lady had her... everything sliced off. Ibuki switched to hugging Hiyoko after that, and, even though she would never say it out loud, Hiyoko found it a bit comforting.

But, of course, Mikan was completely unaffected. Where Hiyoko and Ibuki had shut their eyes and covered their ears, Mikan watched attentively. She was even jotting down notes. On what, Hiyoko had no idea, and she wasn't sure if she wanted to know. But Mikan seemed to consider the entire thing an educational experience.

Hiyoko, on the other hand? After watching a [CENSORED] explode and a real-life CPR doll (minus head) and blood puker and a room of bodies and a doll with the hair of the protagonist's enemies... she could only come to one conclusion.

The Yakuza were savage, brutal, soulless fucks. Savage, brutal, soulless fucks who were not to be messed with. Yup, there was absolutely nothing good that could ever possibly come from associating from the Yakuza, because they killed with little provocation. And the murders were gory and bloody and yikes. Hiyoko did not want any of that. Nope.

Mikan seemed to have learned a different lesson though.

"So... from that, I learned..." Mikan mumbled to herself, tapping the end of her pen against her chin. "In the Yakuza, women are expected to pour drinks for guests."
"Uh, are you talking about the scene where she poisoned his drink and then he puked his guts up?" Ibuki asked cautiously. Mikan didn't seem to notice, just going through her notes.

"And things like guns are very common gifts..."

"That was the gun stolen from his father's murderer!" Hiyoko interjected in horror. "It was supposed to be like 'I killed the man who killed my father, and you're next!'"

"Wedding dresses are usually red..."

"**THAT WAS BLOOD!**" Ibuki exclaimed.

"They like adding condiments to their meals..."

"That was to cover up the taste of poison!" Hiyoko shrieked.

"Yakuza also like shaking hands with people as a greeting," Mikan muttered, and Ibuki and Hiyoko stared at her in shock.

"They stabbed each other right after," Hiyoko said flatly.

"Did you even watch the movie at all?" Ibuki asked.

"Yup, it was such an educational experience!" Mikan smiled brightly, and the other two groaned in unison.

"What an oblivious fuck..." Hiyoko grumbled.

"Mikan-chan's innocence is cute, but not now..." Ibuki sighed.

"Think it's from her dating one of those guys?" Hiyoko offered.

"Don't know, maybe," Ibuki shrugged.

"I mean, she might gloss over their bad traits because of that guy, when in reality, the Yakuza are scary, bloody, foul-mouthed, murderous creeps."

"So, you," Ibuki said flatly.

"Yeah, li- NO!" Hiyoko was about to agree, before she realized what Ibuki actually said. Ibuki began snickering as Hiyoko snarled. "Of fucking course not you shitty bitch, asshole, you fucking assfuck bitch!"

"I think you just managed to outswear Fuyuhiko..." Mikan noted, and Ibuki let out a sharp laugh.

"You guys might even be related!"

Hiyoko shrieked in a mix of offense and horror. She was *not* qualified to be a Yakuza, not when bloodthirst and swearing and an insatiable desire to kill were part of the job description! No way in hell!

---

It should be obvious, but the Yakuza were not the horrible evil that the movie portrayed them as. Case in point, Pekoyama Peko.

Always polite, nearly always calm, and she had never sworn in her entire life. Not even during her
dates with Nanami. Not even when game machines were being unfair and cruel and not letting her win so she could impress Nanami.

"D-darnit!" Peko cursed, bemoaning her failure. The game machine spat out a pitiful amount of tickets, almost laughing at her loss.

"Maybe next time," Nanami patted her on the shoulder comfortingly. It would have been comforting, if she weren't obviously trying to suppress a few giggles. "Or... maybe you could let me do it?"

"No," Peko snapped, glaring at the game machine with determination in her eyes. "I will prevail!"

"That's what you said the last thirty times."

"It was only twenty-seven!" Peko corrected as she started up the game again.

"Well, if you say so," Nanami offered, before tapping her chin in thought. "But... I think you managed to scrounge up enough to buy a prize from all those attempts."

"I...I did?" Peko stared at Nanami in shock, before wincing at the oh-so familiar sound of a game over behind her. The game machine almost seemed tired as it let out a few more tickets. Nanami grabbed them off the floor, before pulling the rest of the tickets from her pocket.

"You've got an average of three tickets per attempt," Nanami stated as she leafed through the tickets, "twenty-seven, no, twenty-eight attempts..." Nanami glanced over to the prize counter, humming for a second. "The most expensive prize is about seventy tickets, so... I think you're fine."

"I-I see," Peko nodded, trying to pretend that she had planned this all along. Whether it actually worked... well, the flustered look in her eyes and the flush on her cheeks should be enough of an answer. "Of course. Please come with me to select a prize."

"I thought you were supposed to buy one for yourself and then give it to me."

"Please advise in selecting the most desirable prize," Peko offered. Nanami considered it for a moment, before nodding with a grin.

"Of course, madam, right this way, I will show you a collection of the finest toys in Asia," Nanami said in an exaggerated high-class accent, and Peko let out a laugh.

It was so easy to smile around Nanami. Seeing Nanami having fun was enough to bring warmth to Peko's heart.

"Here is your prize..." Peko paused, searching for a memory of a romance novel. Or, more accurately, the specific nickname used in one.

After a noticeable moment of deliberation, Peko settled on, "my dear," as she held out the plushie to Nanami, who took it gratefully.

"My dear? I'm swooning," Nanami grinned teasingly, hugging the bear to her chest.

"You're supposed to be," Peko said matter-of-factly, and Nanami laughed.

"Oh my, oh my!" Nanami cried out dramatically. "However can I repay you for such a wondrous gift?" She paused for a second, before going, "Oh, I know!"

Nanami went up on her tippy-toes, pressing a kiss to Peko's lips.
Peko could feel the eyes of the other patrons on her, some shocked, some disapproving, some happy for them. The plushie was pressed between their chests and she had to duck her head down at an unfortunate angle to kiss Nanami back.

But Peko wouldn't trade the experience for anything else.

"There's a good side to every story!" Ibuki declared as she sprung up from the couch. "As terrifying and awful and scary and creepy and bloody as that movie was, I got an idea for a new song from it!"

"That's great!" Mikan smiled.

"Maybe it'll be a good metal song...!" Hiyoko could barely contain her excitement as she snapped her fingers. "Get singing, songbird! A musical genius is going to critique your work!"

"...songbird?" Mikan gave Hiyoko a weird look.

"Shut up," Hiyoko said in return, just as Ibuki cleared her throat.

"If you say so!" Ibuki grinned, before lauching herself into a slow, low ballad.

'I, I think I'm a victim
Of your relentless assaults
I'm torn into pieces, and it's all your fault
There's a fire in my body, and you're the spark that set it off!'

Ibuki's words grew faster, more energetic as she sang. She couldn't keep still, her steps becoming notes in the accelerating beat. Her movements were dramatic and grand, a joyful smile on her face.

'I, I think I'm a victim!
Of your relentless assaults!
Now I'm pressing charges! For the theft of my heart!
There's poison inside me, and it's all your fault,
You're the reason I feel this way!'

Ibuki bounced towards Mikan, grabbing her hands and pulling the brunette into a dance. Mikan giggled as they whirled around the living room in chaotic steps and lovely notes.

Hiyoko couldn't help but sigh wistfully at the sight.

'Heart-pounding, resounding, noise
A battering explosion in my ears!
A horrible song, a wonderful song, depends on which side you're on!'

A step to the right, a hop back, a messy spin and Mikan was dipped back, Ibuki singing all the while.
Hiyoko felt the words leave her lips in a whisper, the two of them in near-perfect sync.

'I, I think I'm a victim
Of your relentless assaults
Now I'm pressing charges
For the theft of my heart'

Wasn't the song supposed to be based off of the terrifying gore movie? Where did those mushy lyrics come from?

Hiyoko realized it with horror. The thought shattered her dream-like trance like a hammer to a mirror.

Relentless assault, poison, torn to pieces, fire, explosion... They were all deaths from the film! It just somehow came out as a love song!

The stardust drained out of Hiyoko's gaze, and she was left sneering at the pair. They were still dancing, still laughing, and Mikan was completely oblivious to that! Mikan didn't realize what Ibuki was talking about! She didn't get Ibuki's thought process at all!

But Hiyoko did.

Hiyoko probably knew her better than Mikan did. Hiyoko had seen sleeping faces and tears and silver eyes, she had seen things that people all over the world would be desperate to see! Why was Mikan the one Ibuki was dancing with?!

A single glance down was all it took to remind her. Right. Wheelchair. That was obviously the logical answer. Hiyoko couldn't dance because she was in a wheelchair. Of course.

Logic didn't help settle the bitterness in her stomach or soften the steel in her eyes. Jealousy had a way of bearing its ugly head, even when there was no logical reason to do so.

Mikan giggled in Ibuki's arms, and Hiyoko couldn't watch anymore. The blonde let out a tired sigh, beginning to turn away.

The song died, Ibuki's expression falling as she saw Hiyoko look away. Mikan's eyes widened as she realized what was happening.

"Hiyo-chan?"

"I don't like it," Hiyoko said curtly, before leaving the room.

She didn't see how lost and disappointed and sad Ibuki looked, but maybe that was for the best.

"Maybe you should try again later," Mikan offered understandingly. "When I'm not here. Just the two of you."

"Mind if I tell you a secret?" Chiaki asked as they walked back together, their fingers intertwined.

"You can tell me anything," Peko said. Chiaki could feel her face warming at the sight, before she let the words escape from her lips.
"I've had a crush on you for a while," Chiaki confessed. "When I first saw you, I thought you were beautiful. And you tried so hard to help me and I couldn't think straight around you... So, I... kinda love you."

"Kind of?" Peko echoed, a twitch of doubt in her face.

"Definitely," Chiaki declared, pressing a quick peck to Peko's cheek to seal the deal. "So? What do you say, want to start up a two-player-er, want to date me?"

Peko's face lit up, eyes sparkling with delight. The swordswoman stopped Chiaki in her tracks, kissing the gamer right then and there.

Heart-pounding noise resounded in Chiaki's ears, one that sounded like rapid water rushing through a pipe. Peko's arms were looped around her shoulders. Chiaki could smell herbal tea and metal, but then again, the metal could have been her robot body.

Chiaki giggled into the kiss, hugging Peko's waist. A robot and a swordswoman, huh? A dynamic duo who would never lose in a fighting game. She loved it. She loved Peko.

"Nothing would make me happier," Peko grinned as she pulled away.

"I'm glad," Chiaki said breathlessly. "That you, um, like me too."

"And the same to you," Peko's smile became a bit sad. "But, unfortunately, we have to say goodbye, even if we wanted to be together for a million hours. I'll make sure you get home safely."

Two opposing trains of thought hit Chiaki at the same time.

'A knight in shining armour, offering her sword to me!'

'I can't get hurt, so protecting me is pointless.'

But she turned the second one away, taking Peko's hand with a beaming "thank you".

Peko's hand might have been roughed up by years of fighting, but her grip was gentle.

"I-I got, I actually- We're dating!" Chiaki screamed excitedly into her phone. "It, oh gosh, it's real! T-that actually happened!"

"That's great, Ch-" Mikan's voice was cut off, and all Chiaki could hear was a scream and a fight. Her eyebrows knitted together in concern and confusion, before another voice replaced Mikan.

"You're dating the Yakuza girl," Saionji said, and Chiaki could feel her sneer over the phone line.

"Uh...yes?" Chiaki's voice pitched up uncertainly.

"She probably cuts off limbs and poisons people and sets stuff on fi-"

"HIYOKO-CHAN!"

"What? It's true-"

"-no, it's not!"

The squabble continued, and Chiaki thought she heard Ibuki in there somewhere. Something about
explosions.

Absolutely perplexed, befuddled, and various other words for confused, Chiaki hung up, before dialing Hajime.

"What the goddamn hell did the Kuzuryuu family do to Saionji."

"Absolutely nothing, as far as I know," Hajime answered easily, not even questioning Chiaki’s weird greeting. "Might just be a video game grudge, though. Why? Is she not happy about you and Peko?"

"How did you-!?"

"You're forgetting that I'm technically her blood brother," Hajime said. "She's been screaming about it for the past hour and a half."

"She... she was?" Chiaki asked dubiously.

"Want to talk to her?" Hajime offered, before letting out a soft groan of pain. "Fuyuhiko just threw a pillow at me. Said that she would faint- oh, now he's saying that if you ever hurt her, he'll chop off your fingers and rip your arms out and let you burn in hell- Good lord, Fuyuhiko, isn't that overkill-!?"

Chiaki was completely silent as Hajime relayed bits of conversation to her. She processed that Fuyuhiko had threatened her with various death threats and various fate-worse-than-death threats, while Peko and Hajime tried to stop him. And that Natsumi wanted her teeth as jewelry. From that, Chiaki could only come to one conclusion.

Yakuza were scary, scary people.

Mikan begged Fuyuhiko to clear up the misconceptions her friends had about the Yakuza. At first, he refused, because he thought their fear was funny, but when he learned that they would try to separate him and Mikan...

...well, then he gave them a lecture so long and through that reading a transcript would take a minimum of three hours. Below is a shortened version that can be skipped.

The Yakuza had honour and chivalry in their blood. Literally. Fuyuhiko claimed that the Yakuza came from masterless samurai who began offering their services as bodyguards. Then single samurai formed groups, and those groups began gaining power in many fields, including illegal ones, and then they started competing with each other. Of course, they still had their honour during this. Codes and tradition were essential, a notion that was supported by Hiyoko.

And then the questions about what the hell they did for a living came up.

Hiyoko and Ibuki immediately jumped to scenes from the movie. They hurriedly asked if the Yakuza really did do x, did they also do y, and was z even a thing? They were like an algebra textbook, and Fuyuhiko answered as best as he could.

Yes, they did do human trafficking. Yes, they also blackmailed people. Yes, they killed people. Yes, bodyguarding and assassination were very common. Peko was a bodyguard for hire, actually. But if Mikan asked, Peko would protect her for free. He didn't extend the same offer to Hiyoko and Ibuki.
But most of their business operations were perfectly normal. Real estate, stock-trading, things like that. No, they didn't gain more from robbing people, Mioda shut the fuck up.

Yakuza didn't do petty crime. Period. Anyone who abused their position like that would be dismissed in a casket. Fuyuhiko was very adamant that no one in his group had never robbed someone, or something like that.

"So you don't have to worry about anything with Mikan, you dumbasses," Fuyuhiko concluded with a huff.

"I guess so..." Ibuki conceded.

Hiyoko gave Fuyuhiko a glare so icy that it would make a volcano freeze over, her lips pulling back to reveal a snarl.

"I don't give a damn about that. If you ever hurt Mikan-"

"-Then you would beat me to death, and I'd let you," Fuyuhiko supplied.

"Good, you understand," Hiyoko smirked in satisfaction.

"HOW IS BEATING MY BOYFRIEND TO DEATH A GOOD THING?!" Mikan demanded, protectively hugging Fuyuhiko. She leaned away from Hiyoko, staring at her friend in fear.

"Woooooo!" Ibuki cheered, pumping a fist into the air. "Cute couple, cute couple!"

"SHUT UP!" Fuyuhiko and Hiyoko screamed at the same time.

"Huh?! I understand why Fuyu-chan's grumpy, but what did I do to piss off Hiyo-chan this time!?"

"Hey, I should be the one calling Fuyuhiko Fuyu-chan!"

"No one is calling me Fuyu-chan! Don't even think about it!"

"Ohohoho, really, Fuyu-chan? Got a problem with looking cutesy, Fuyu-chan?"

"Saionji you bitch I will strangle you-"

"No! Fuyuhiko, you're not allowed to strangle anyone but me!"

"Mikan what the fuck."

"Why would you want him to do that?"

"Ibuki, now's not the time for you to be an oblivious fuck!"

"Rude!"

The lecture became one of the weirdest four-way arguments between a couple, an oblivious fuck, and a rude blonde in the history of arguments.

Chapter End Notes
If everyone else is a pot of boiling water, then Hiyoko and Ibuki are a glacier, since Hiyoko can't stop giving Ibuki the cold shoulder.

Also, Kuzumiki ask blog drama is picking up, I made new friends, and I'm trying to adjust, so updates might be slower as my life gets busier! I really hope that you don't mind!
Nurses normally worked long hours. It wasn't unusual for Mikan to be tired during her coffee breaks with Hajime.

It was unusual for her to look outright exhausted, though. She glared at her drink with an almost-crazed irritation as she shoveled spoonfuls of sugar into it.

"Tough shift?" Hajime asked cautiously.

"Fuyuhiko kicked my roommates out of the apartment," Mikan seethed, and Hajime wasn't sure if she was mad at Fuyuhiko or her roommates. Or both. Both worked too.

"Uh. How?"

Mikan let out a sigh, before beginning her explanation.

Like most things in this story, it started with Mikan and Fuyuhiko. More specifically, with Mikan bringing Fuyuhiko to a cafe.

She fidgeted in her seat, a stampede of wild thoughts rushing around her mind. Ones that berated her, told her that it was a stupid idea, it was too soon, he wouldn't like it, she shouldn't have done anything... things like that.

But, Mikan still brought the small box out from her pocket, and she-

"You proposed?!" Hajime demanded, his eyes going wide with shock.

"What," Mikan said flatly, before her face burst into flames. Her arms came up to defend her bright red face as she stammered. "N-n-n-n-no! I-I mean, no, it's not like I w-wouldn't not marry him, b-but, no, too soon! It's, we've only been dating for three months, and-! No! I didn't!"

"What was in that box?"

"I-I made him an extra apartment key," Mikan mumbled, still a bit flustered. "Since, well, he's visiting all the time, so I thought he might need it..." She let out a dreamy sigh, a grin coming on her face. "But then, he decided to do something amazing..."

"What are you doing?" Mikan asked, watching as Fuyuhiko unfolded the table's napkin with a determined eye. He didn't answer, pulling a pun from his pocket and scribbling something on it.

"Returning the favour," Fuyuhiko answered, passing the napkin to Mikan. "It's basically the same thing, since you can enter whenever you want with that."

"This is a napkin that says 'If you touch her, you fucking die', Fuyuhiko," Mikan noted.

"Yeah, it is," Fuyuhiko nodded, like that was a completely normal thing to have.

"...will this actually work? Anyone can just write that on a napkin..."

Fuyuhiko considered that for a moment, before conceding, "Good point," and taking the napkin
back. However, instead of ripping the napkin apart like you might expect...

...he just signed his name on it.

"Fuyuhiko. Your name is also a thing anyone can write," Mikan said flatly.

Fuyuhiko's face settled into a small glare, and he reached inside his pocket once again. He pulled out a stamp (who keeps a stamp in their pocket?!) and nearly stabbed the cloth with it.

"No one can refute the Kuzuryuu crest," Fuyuhiko smirked, pride obvious in his voice.

Mikan was about to congratulate him on finding a solution, but then she noticed something. The Kuzuryuu crest was supposed to look like a dragon, but... why was it rapidly becoming a blob...?

"A-ah! The ink! It's bleeding through!" Mikan screamed frantically. "It's gonna be ruined!"

"A different napkin, maybe?" Fuyuhiko suggested.

"No! Not a napkin!" Mikan wailed, clutching the ruined thing to her chest. "This one is special! You can't replace something with sentimental value! It's something to remember you by when you stop loving me!"

Fuyuhiko stared at her blankly, like she suddenly started spouting some strange Siberian sound.

"Mikan," Fuyuhiko said after a break in conversation so long that Kit-Kat would be proud. "Why the hell would I stop loving you?"

"Uh..." Mikan tensed up, unable to look Fuyuhiko in the eye. "I mean... I know that I should be enjoying being able to be with you right now, but I... I keep worrying about what happens when we hit the two-year mark. I mean, that's usually when people leave, right?"

"Mikan. Even if we break up, I'm not going to just leave you," Fuyuhiko stated like it was the most obvious thing in the world. "But I don't really see us separating anytime in the near future."

"You don't?" Mikan stared at Fuyuhiko curiously, and he started blushing.

"I mean... I kind of figured that you'd want to stick with me, and it's not like I would try to stop you or anything..." Fuyuhiko mumbled with reddened cheeks.

Mikan gasped, hiding a huge grin behind her hands.

"He was sooo cute, blushing while he was basically saying that he couldn't imagine being apart from me!" Mikan cooed, sparkles in her eyes as she held her hands together over her racing heart. "Ah, I fall more and more and more in love with him every day!"

"Yup, you guys are a really good match," Hajime said, pushing away the thought of 'okay what the hell does that have to do with your roommates getting kicked out of your apartment.'

A gleeful giggle escaped from Mikan's lips, and suddenly, she got an idea. Hajime could see her face brighten, like someone had flipped on her light switch, and she began rummaging through her bag.

"I kept it! Even laminated it!" Mikan declared, showing off a smudged napkin to Hajime. Hajime could barely make out the words 'fucking die' in the mess of crumples and ink. Mikan beamed, like she was showing off an Olympic medal instead of, you know, a napkin in a plastic bag.
"Yeah... that's, that's really cool," Hajime said awkwardly. "So, uh, the story?"

"Oh, right!" Mikan snapped out of her lovestruck state, launching herself back into her tale. "A few days later, Ibuki-san finished her dress for Hiyoko-chan, and, well..."

Hiyoko dissected a magazine article with such skill that Mikan thought she might have been a biologist in another life. The blonde picked at ambiguous wording like she was prodding at a blood vein with tweezers. Factual errors were sliced apart like the upper layers of skin and muscle of the poor magazine. Inconsistencies and outright lies were thrown away like dead organs Hiyoko saw no use for.

"They didn't even bother researching the dates at all!" Hiyoko huffed irritably. "Seriously, even the most casual Mioda fan knows she started her career in middle school, not high school!"

"U-uh-huh..." Mikan nodded along, conveniently neglecting to mention the fact that she had no idea what Hiyoko was talking about.

"Good fucking hell, who pays these journalists to produce this garbage? Even Nanami could do better," Hiyoko sneered, like being outdone by Chiaki was the worst insult possible.

Mikan didn't bring up the part where Chiaki had a search engine in her brain.

"So, we were in the living room. And then Ibuki-san comes in, and Hiyoko-chan starts screaming."

"Was Ibuki stealing her clothes or something?" Hajime wondered.

"No."

"Eating her food?"

"No."

"On fire?"

"Wha- no!"

"Oh, did she suddenly change her hair dye and look like someone entirely different and-"

"She was naked!" Mikan interjected, and Hajime's sentence halted in its tracks.

"Oh, Hiyo-chan, would you like to join me in the bath?" Ibuki asked in a needlessly sultry voice, leaning back against the doorframe in what was probably meant to be a seductive pose. A pink towel was the only thing to cover up her bare body. Her eyes were squinted and her lips in a pout, in a strange imitation of a sexy smoulder. Ibuki's hair was loose from its horns, swept over her shoulder.

"W-w-w-what?!" Hiyoko screamed, her face bright red. Then she looked back at Mikan, and narrowed her eyes.

Suddenly a pillow was being forced into Mikan's face, all while Hiyoko shrieked in horror.

"Mioda fucking Ibuki, what the hell are you doing?!" Hiyoko demanded.
"GWAUHAKABAMJAMPO!" Mikan struggled against the cushion, meaning something like 'HIYOKO PLEASE STOP'.

"Inviting you to a bath with me," Ibuki stated, still talking weird. "I'll undress you and dress you up in something beautiful, sweetheart."

"I REFUSE!" Hiyoko screeched, pushing Mikan down towards the couch.

"GWAH I DOAN THA PWAES HWIKO-CWAN! CWAN'T BREPATH!" Mikan wailed, in an attempt to beg her friend to let her breathe.

"Hiyo-chan, whyyyyyyyyy?!" Ibuki whined, finally using a normal tone of voice. "You already took a bath with me a bunch of times!"

"I don't care!" Hiyoko hissed. "This time, there's no way in hell I'm doing it! So get dressed, you moron!"

Ibuki seemed to actually follow those instructions, judging from how the pillow was pulled from Mikan's face and hugged to Hiyoko's chest. The blonde's face was so red that Mikan almost thought that she was suffering from heatstroke.

"And then Chiaki-san talked to Ibuki, and... uh, she's the one who told me this part, so it might not be accurate. But please bear with me here."

"O...kay...?" Hajime was a little lost at that point.

"I don't understand!" Ibuki cried in frustration. "I had it all planned out, invite her to a bath, dress her up in the dress after, presto! But then it fails at step one! And I still don't know why!"

"Maybe the problem was in the presentation," Chiaki stated, her focus on her game of Tetris. "Like the fact that your boobs were showing."

"What's wrong with my boobs? She's seen them a bunch of times," Ibuki said obliviously.

"The part where you tried to be a femme fatale and seduce her," Chiaki rolled her eyes. "With Mikan in the room."

"Why would Hiyo-chan have a problem with Mikan-chan? I thought they were best friends," Ibuki's voice was infuriatingly innocent, and Chiaki felt like smashing her head into concrete.

'You've got to be kidding me,' Chiaki felt like hissing, snarling at her friend. 'She looks at you like you're the sun, the moon, and the stars, but you don't even notice! Because you're a fucking moron!'

Since Chiaki couldn't say that out loud, she settled on one of her favourite back-up weapons: sarcasm.

"Oh no, you know what the problem is? Saionji's still in love with her, and there's no way she would react well to someone dressed, sorry- undressed, like that, around her precious Mikan-chan."

Ibuki stared at her blankly, before placing a hand to her chin and muttering to herself.

Oh no.
"It wouldn't be surprising..."

Oh no.

"It totally makes sense!" Ibuki declared with a snap. She hopped up to her feet, shooting Chiaki a huge grin. "Thanks for the info, Chichi-chan!"

"Wait, no-!" Chiaki reached out to Ibuki futilely, just as the rock star ran out of the room.

"She sarcasm-ed her way into a misunderstanding," Hajime reiterated, giving Mikan a weird look.

"Is that even a word?" Mikan wondered. "Can you sarcasm something?"

"Uh, maybe you can?" Hajime offered uncertainly. "I mean, it feels more like a-" He suddenly had a moment of 'What the fuck am I doing', snapping back to reality. "It's not a word! We are not making it a word!"

Mikan almost looked a bit disappointed, before continuing with her story.

She knew that she could discuss whether you could sarcasm something with Fuyuhiko later.

"Well, I guess Ibuki must have wanted to test it for herself, because..."

"If she's in love with Mikan-chan, does that mean that she wants to see Mikan naked?" Ibuki wondered, muttering to herself. "Maybe I should make Mikan give it to her... But, no, Mikan-chan's dating Fuyu-chan!"

Ibuki groaned, wondering why her friends' love lives were so complicated. Why did Hiyoko have to fall for someone who couldn't return her feelings, again?! Ibuki knew that love wasn't something anyone could control, but-! You'd think a heart would learn a lesson after all that time!

"Hmm, maybe I should get Mikan to do it. Just to make her happy," Ibuki slapped a grin on her face, hopping up with new determination and vigor in her eyes. "Yup, this is so going to work!"

"There is no way this is going to end well, is it?" Hajime asked cautiously.

"Hajime," Mikan stared at him pointedly, almost disappointed in him. "You should know us well enough to know that nothing is ever allowed to end well for us."

"Oh good god."

Mikan was a nurse. She knew how childbirth worked. It wasn't a pretty sight, not like in the movies. It was hours of hard labour. Babies weren't born pretty and clean and soft and gentle. Far from it. Babies were born kicking, screaming, and covered in blood.

Mikan kind of felt like she was being born again, in a weird metaphorical sense. She was kicking, she was screaming, and Ibuki had forced her into a bathrobe so red it could have been blood.

"Ibuki, what the-! What the hell are you doing?!!" Mikan shrieked as Ibuki yanked her down the hall. "Where are you-!?"

"Don't worry, it'll be fine!" Ibuki promised, making a thumbs-up at Mikan. "I swear, just a minute
and you'll make Hiyo-chan happy."

"With a bathrobe," Mikan said in disbelief.

"Trust me, I know what I'm doing," Ibuki smiled. Mikan bit back the 'I seriously doubt that' on her tongue, deciding to give Ibuki a chance.

Ibuki brought her to the living room, where Hiyoko was watching TV. Actually, Ibuki brought her right to the couch where Hiyoko was sitting. Right in front of Hiyoko.

"Um, what are you-" That was all Hiyoko could say before Ibuki untied the bathrobe and shove Mikan on top of her.

For Mikan, everything was kicking and screaming and pushing and pulling. Every time she got close to escaping, Ibuki 'gently' pushed her back down, making it a struggle to pull away from Hiyoko. Hiyoko was spitting insults faster than a machine gun shot bullets. Needless to say, she didn't seem very happy with her 'gift', and frankly, neither was Mikan. When she managed to get away from Hiyoko and dressed, Ibuki was so getting scolded-

("I kind of felt like you for a second, Hajime-kun."

"...")

And then she heard a very distinctive sound. One that made all of them stop and freeze in horror.

The sound of the door being unlocked.

The first time Fuyuhiko decided to use the key to his girlfriend's apartment, he was greeted with the lovely sight of Ibuki forcing a semi-naked Mikan's face into Hiyoko's chest.

There was a brief moment of silence where Hajime had to digest the absolute insanity of what Mikan was telling him. And then he realized that he had lived through a murder case with a living victim and a kidnapping at a wedding and the entirety of Natsumi's horrible late-night TV series. He had seen worse.

One question was just begging to be asked though.

"How the heck did those two get out alive?" Hajime asked, and Mikan winced.

"Lots of begging. Tried to mention that I couldn't pay rent without them."

"And his answer was...?"

Mikan tried to do an imitation of Fuyuhiko's voice. Her attitude was accurate, but the actual voice? Probably shouldn't even be mentioned.

"I'll just get the building for you! Who gives a damn about them?!"

"Of course," Hajime groaned. "I'll go yell at him for you."

"Why would you do that?" Mikan asked quizzically.

"Because... you're mad at him for kicking your roommates out of your room?" Hajime said uncertainly.
"I am?"

"You mean that wasn't why you were annoyed and tired?"

"No," Mikan let out an irritated sigh. "It's just that Ibuki and Hiyoko-chan kept asking to be let back inside, and they wouldn't let me and Fuyuhiko rest for even an hour... and I was looking forward to letting him stay at my place, too!"

'She's annoyed because they wanted to be let back in?!' Hajime gaped in disbelief. But, because he couldn't show that, he just let out a quiet, "I see."

He meant it more in a 'oh, I see that you take advantage of every chance you get to be alone with him,' but Mikan seemed to take it in a 'your reaction is perfectly justified,' kind of way with the way she was smiling.

Hajime didn't bother to correct her, instead sipping his coffee in silence.

"I can't believe how stupid you are," Hiyoko huffed as she flopped down on the hotel bed. "What were you even thinking, doing something like that?!"

"I'm sorry," Ibuki pouted, feeling like she was saying it for the hundredth time. She wasn't too far off from the truth; it was actually about eighty-seven times. "I just wanted to make you happy."

"By choking Mikan in my non-existent boobs," Hiyoko said derisively. "What a great idea. Not."

"No, that's not it!" Ibuki wailed. "I thought that if you didn't want to take a bath with me then you could take a bath with Mikan and then I could give you the dress and everything would be sunshine and rainbows!"

Hiyoko was taken aback, her voice coming out as a flat whisper.

"What dress?"

"Um..." Ibuki smiled awkwardly, rubbing her neck with a forced grin. She let out a sigh, before pulling a piece of fabric from her bag.

Hiyoko's eyes widened as Ibuki laid it out on the bed.

Embroidered flowers bloomed against a pale pink background, brightly-coloured blossoms against a warm sunset. Sequins and glitter made up stars in the kimono-like collar. The skirt poofed out like an upside-down rose, layers of crinoline peeking out from underneath.

"I made it for you," Ibuki admitted with a blush. "It's kind of late, but... happy birthday?"

"You made that. For me," Hiyoko reiterated.

"Do you not like it?" Ibuki asked cautiously.

"Of course not, you idiot," Hiyoko scoffed, and Ibuki froze.

Ibuki was about to apologize, to take it out of her sight and shrink away, but then-

"I love it."

"Huh?"
"Don't make me say it twice, dumbass," Hiyoko huffed. "Now help me get this thing on."

A smile stretched out across Ibuki's lips, and she gladly went over to help.
7:43 am

Fuyuhiko had lived with a cat for the past half-year. It was normal for him to wake up with weight on his chest.

It was not normal, however, for that weight to have wrapped arms around his chest, or for that weight to mumble things in her sleep. Fuyuhiko peeked an eye open, smiling just a bit when he saw short brown hair and a peaceful face. His hand automatically came up to rest on top of Mikan's back.

It was a nice chance for a lazy morning. The weather was warming up enough that they didn't need blankets all that much, the lack of roommates meant it was quiet and calm, the clock said that it was about eight o'clock...

Wait, didn't Mikan have work at seven?

"Mikan, get up," Fuyuhiko huffed, trying to wake her up with words so he didn't have to shove his girlfriend off his chest.

"Don't want to," Mikan pouted, pulling herself even closer to Fuyuhiko.

"Don't you have work today?" Fuyuhiko asked, and Mikan gave him a bright grin.

"Ehehehehe... I'm just lucky. Today just happened to be my day off."

"You took the day off to spend time with me," Fuyuhiko translated, and Mikan's face burst into flames.

"N-n-no, I wouldn't, er, I mean, I probably would, but- um-!" Mikan floundered about, before freezing at a sound. The sound was soft and soothing, warm and bright, and just hearing it let her relax.

Fuyuhiko was laughing, a smile stretching across his lips. Mikan continued staring at him for another second, before breaking down snickering.

In that second, Mikan understood. She knew that Fuyuhiko would choose the exact same thing, it was as obvious as the sun in the sky. It was so obvious that she shouldn't have even bothered trying to hide it. After all, Fuyuhiko would choose her over work any day, just as she did.

"Good morning, you lazy ass," Fuyuhiko greeted, and Mikan's grin widened.

"I'm not lazy, I just like being with you!" Mikan rebutted. "So forgive me if I don't feel like moving, Fuyuhiko!"

"You say that like being lazy and wanting to be with me is mutually exclusive."

"They are!" Mikan huffed.

"Are not."
"Are too!"

Fuyuhiko was too busy laughing to actually continue the argument, so Mikan considered that a win. Kind of. A little bit. Maybe.

Okay, Fuyuhiko definitely won! But it was only because he was the cutest person ever in the history of the world and beyond!

"S-s-s-shut the fuck up!" Fuyuhiko exclaimed, his face bright red. Mikan didn't even question how he managed to hear her inner monologue. He shied away from Mikan's curious gaze with a huff, saying, "You're lucky I like you. If anyone else called me cute, I'd rip out their fingernails."

"Yup, I'm really lucky you love me!"

"You're not supposed to agree with that!" Fuyuhiko snapped.

"Ha, sorry," Mikan grinned sheepishly.

For a lazy morning, they were really energetic.

10:27 am

"Mahiru, Natsumi, Kotoko, are you eating?" Hajime called out from the kitchen, and Mahiru could smell the delicious breakfast just waiting for her, just beyond the door...

But, unfortunately for her stomach, Mahiru was a bit preoccupied at the moment. With her girlfriend pinning her to the bed.

"U-uh, just a minute!" Mahiru replied, as Natsumi continued kissing down her neck. Natsumi smirked at her, before turning towards the door.

"Hey, Hajime, d'you wanna join in?!" Natsumi exclaimed, and Mahiru flinched.

"Don't just say that!" Mahiru snapped, her face as red as her hair. "What if Kotoko-chan hears-?"

"Go ahead!" Kotoko's voice called out from the other room. Mahiru groaned.

"Not now, I'm cooking!" Hajime answered. "And remember to wash your hands before eating."

"Got it!" Natsumi grinned wolfishly.

"Why are you so embarrassing...?" Mahiru huffed. "Seriously, you've got to remember that there are other people here!"

"I don't mind!" Kotoko screamed, her voice muffled from her food.

Mahiru ignored that, giving Natsumi a pointed look. Natsumi rolled her eyes, before relenting.

"I'll keep that in mind," Natsumi promised. "Next time."

"You better," Mahiru snapped, right before Natsumi kissed her once again.

12:19 pm
There were many things Chiaki imagined doing with a girlfriend. You had to bring a girlfriend on dates, give her gifts, and keep her affection level high. It had to be fun, or else you would get a bad score and then the affection meter would explode from your horrible performance and then you would be doomed to an awful terrible yandere end.

To avoid messing up that badly, Chiaki brought Peko to her home for the date. Peko sat on the bed like a lost puppy while Chiaki prepared the video games. A quick, yet thorough tutorial on game mechanics later, Chiaki was happily watching Peko zip through levels like a pro. Peko had a number of interesting tactics, like trying to use Triangle Attacks on everything and then throwing archers at enemies when that didn't work.

It was only a matter of minutes before Peko obtained her first swordsman unit.

"There, there, there he is!" Chiaki pointed at the screen excitedly, nearly stabbing the console with her finger. "Navalle! He's recruitable and he's a super cool sword guy! You have to get him!"

Peko squinted, before realizing that the unit Chiaki was pointing to was redder than her eyes.

"Um... how?" Peko tensed at the idea of not murdering every red unit she came across.

"Talk to him! Just like with Goldin! You just have to use the right unit and have a pleasant conversation!"

"So, who's the right unit?" Peko asked carefully.

"I'm not telling!" Chiaki huffed, puffing her cheeks out adorably. "You have to figure it out if you want the real experience!"

"I see," Peko said courtely, right before trying to select the healer-

"No! She'll die if you do that!" Chiaki wailed. "Don't kill your healer, she can become super strong and a hyper-powerful magic user if you keep her!"

"Then, who would be a better choice?"

"Your pegasus kn-" Chiaki froze, suddenly slapping her hands over her mouth.

"The pegasus knight then," Peko nodded, and Chiaki let out a whine.

"You tricked me!"

"I used information-gathering techniques," Peko corrected.

Chiaki slumped her face against the bed with a huff.

(She was fine about two minutes later, when she was advising Peko on how to not get her new swordsman killed.)

2:24 pm

Mikan's enthusiasm was clearer than a sheet of glass on a telescope. She didn't just make popcorn, she celebrated it, with cheers and a huge smile. She didn't just grab a blanket for them, she tossed it over them, quickly settling into the spot next to Fuyuhiko on the bed.

"Is the movie really that good?" Fuyuhiko asked, watching in amusement as Mikan practically
buzzed with energy.

"If it's with you, anything would be amazing," Mikan said with a grin.

"Quit being cheesy!" Fuyuhiko snapped.

"I'm not trying to be cheesy!" Mikan exclaimed defensively. "It just happens!"

"You just randomly make cheese? Like a cow?"

"A-a-a-a cow?!" Mikan flinched away, her eyes wide with horror. "Nooo! I don't want to be turned into beef! Spare me!"

"A wild cow then," Fuyuhiko decided. "One under the protection of the Kuzuryuu family."

"Why would your family protect a cow?"

"You tell me! It's your metaphor!" Fuyuhiko retorted. Mikan froze for a second, before automatically rebutting the idea.

"It's yours, isn't it?! I mean, you called me a cow first!"

"Because, you keep saying cheesy, romantic things that really shouldn't be cute, but are!"

Mikan paused, staring at Fuyuhiko curiously.

"...they're cute?"

"Shut up and watch the fucking movie," Fuyuhiko huffed.

Mikan was content to listen to that order, until she realized something halfway through the movie.

"Cows don't make cheese," Mikan stated simply, just as the protagonist got his legs sawed off. "They make milk. You have to be a cheeser to make cheese."

"What the flying fuck is a cheeser," Fuyuhiko demanded flatly.

"The one with the tall bucket and the stick!" Mikan exclaimed, before continuing with a wink and a pair of finger guns that would make Ibuki proud, "They keep churning out cheese blocks."

Fuyuhiko rolled his eye with a Hiyoko-worthy sigh.

"A: You're thinking of butter. B..." Fuyuhiko hesitated, a noticeable blush on his cheeks. "Stop being such a huge dork."

"Is it a bad thing?" Mikan asked curiously.

"I-it's not really a bad thing," Fuyuhiko conceded. "But it's still... kind of embarrassing, I guess?"

"Really?"

"...it's pretty cute," Fuyuhiko whispered quietly.

"H-h-h-h-h-huh?!" Mikan flinched back, her eyes wide and her cheeks red. "W-what did you just-?!

"Don't make me say it twice!" Fuyuhiko snapped.
Mikan let out a whine, pouting.

"But! I wanted to hear you praise me! It makes me really happy when you do that! I write it down in my journals and at night it helps me sleep and-! Basically! I treasure it a lot! I treasure you a lot!" Mikan declared.

"Holy shit, Mikan..." Fuyuhiko huffed. "Why the hell do you keep doing this to me?"

"Doing wh-"

Mikan's curious question was cut off by Fuyuhiko pulling her closer, pressing his lips against hers.

Mikan really loved movie marathons with her boyfriend.

Chapter End Notes

Bonus:

10:57 pm

"How many times do you have to do something to make it illegal? If I rode a llama and crashed into a car once, would that make llama-riding illegal?"

"IBUKI GO THE FUCK TO SLEEP."
YOU THOUGHT I WAS DEAD, BUT IT WAS ACTUALLY ME, APRIL FOOLS!

March went out like a blown-out candle, but April started off with a bang.

Literally.

Fuyuhiko and Peko rushed out to the source of the sound, before freezing at the sight of Natsumi, Hajime, and Koizumi unconscious and surrounded by a mess of shaving cream, pie tins, and empty balloons. They exchanged a hesitant stare, before realizing what was going on.

Oh no.

*It was April Fools.*

Chiaki was banned from everywhere. All of the places. She pranked Animal Crossing. She pranked Mario. She managed to prank the consoles. The stores too. No one was safe. No one was spared.

Not even her precious girlfriend whom she loved very very much. Nope, Chiaki had saved the biggest, bestest prank for Peko!

She laid in wait, waiting, waiting, waiting for the perfect moment to spring her devious trap card.

Then, when the moment hit-

"Chiaki? What are you doing on the flo-"

Chiaki pounced, launching herself at Peko! Her arms wrapped around Peko's neck, and she unleashed a flurry of kisses on her poor victim!

They ended up on the floor in a hug, and Peko sighed dramatically.

"You could have just kissed me normally, Chiaki," Peko said as she pressed a kiss to Chiaki's forehead.

"Wouldn't be a prank any other way."

"That was supposed to be a prank?"

"Shush you."

"It's time for a big announcement!" Ibuki screamed, standing up on the dining table.

"Ibuki, um, please don't, that table is made of glass-" Mikan's fearful whimpers were ignored.

"What the fuck are you doing," Hiyoko rolled her eyes, slightly amused by Ibuki's antics.

"I'm going on a world tour, forever!" Ibuki declared. "Never ever returning to Japan, ever!"

"...what."
Saturdayyyyyyyyyyyyyy I watched you fly awayyyyy
across the empty sky, I turned around and said goodbyeEEEEEE
and now it's me alone (Mikan doesn't count)
INSIDE AN EMPTY HOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOME (Mikan still does not count!)
ON AN EMPTY STREEEEEEEEEEEEEEET IN A TOWN THAT ALWAYS SLEEPS
A blind man in the dark knows no difference
But I have grown accustomed to the colors that you
BRIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIGN
I check your dial tone
ON THE KITTEN TELEPHONE
But when I wanna speak
The reception gets so weak (Cockblock!)
I took an hour's drive
Into the country sideeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee
The sky was bright and clear (like your smile)
But it was cold without you here
My mind is turning back before I knew you
The numbness was all I really knew
but then I met you
LONG AGOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO
i was happy by myself
LONG AGOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO
it was me and mikan and no one else
LONG AGOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO
and then I saw your face...
I'VE GO T A PHOTOGRAPH
B ENAETH A SHEET OF GLASS
IN A CHERRY FRAME
BUT IT'S JUST NOT THE FUCKING SAME
IT'S JUST A MEMORY
A SPOT IN HISTORY
IT'S NO GOOD TO ME
WHEN IM LIV IN G HERE AND NOW

OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOH I'VE TRIED TO MAKE MY PEACE WITH ALL THIS SILENCE
AND I'M TRYING TO PATCH THE CRACKS I'VE GOT MY FINGER IN THE DAM AND I'VE TRIED TO FIND CONTENT WITH THIS SECLUSION
BUT I WILL NEVER REALLY SMILE TILL THE DAY THAT YOU RETURN
till you return...

"Hiyo-chan no why are you crying that was a joke HIYOKO-CHAN THAT WAS A JOKE~"
"S-shut up, you moron! Don't you dare leave when I would miss you! Don't even think about it!"
Mikan silently stared at the scene, wondering why her roommates were so weird.
She decided to just shut up and go to work.

Mikan worked with a ducktor. Everything he said would quack you up, feather you liked it for not. He was also a ducktective, an alien abducktor, a master of winging his assignments, and mallardable. And duck tape. and stuff
May was coming, and so was Mikan's birthday. Fuyuhiko had decided to ask his weird circle of friends for advice for gifts.

They sent their answers at the same time.

[maid outfit]

[Try wearing cat ears.]

[Nothing but bandages.]

[nothing]

[a cute outfit, fuyu-chan!]

[Tie yourself up in ribbon on her bed.]

[Nurse outfit.]

He gave them all the same response.

[APRILS FOOLS WAS A MONTH AGO, YOU BASTARDS!]
Happy International Awareness Day for Chronic Immunological and Neurological Diseases

Tsumiki Mikan did not get suspicious. When there were whispers in the room that ceased the moment she stepped inside, when people avoided a subject around her, when people suddenly changed the subject around her... she didn't get suspicious.

She got anxious.

Now, while her anxiety had been getting better (kind of), there were still some things that could make her fret and stress to no end.

Mikan didn't mean to, okay?! She wanted to think that Fuyuhiko's sudden onslaught of outings with Chiaki and Ibuki and Hiyoko were just friendly! But, they were getting too frequent! They were getting too close! Mikan didn't want to be replaced by-

Wait.

Fuyuhiko thought Ibuki was annoying. He hated being around Hiyoko. Chiaki was unbearable to him.

D-did that mean that Mikan was such a bad girlfriend that even people Fuyuhiko detested were preferable?!

No, that was just... silly, there was no way.

Mikan kept saying that to herself, but she couldn't really convince herself. She just kept worrying and mulling over the possibilities, until Mahiru sat Mikan down in the former's kitchen one day.

"You seem stressed," Mahiru noted, staring at Mikan with motherly eyes. "Are you alright?"

"Y-yeah! Don't worry about me!" Mikan exclaimed immediately. "I'm fine! Just fine! Wonderful, in fact!"

Mahiru carefully raised one eyebrow at her, giving the brunette a silent, judging stare.

"...I'm worrying about something stupid," Mikan confessed guiltily.

"It can't be stupid if it's worrying you," Mahiru stated. "What's wrong?"

"W-well..." Mikan's eyes darted around the room, trying to find the right words to say. "It's... so empty."

"Huh?"

"Usually, when I'm at home, Hiyoko-chan and Ibuki-chan are there. Chiaki-chan visits, and Fuyuhiko does too," Mikan explained.

She could see the spots where they would sit. Hiyoko would yawn on the couch, Chiaki gaming next to her. Ibuki sat upside down, and laughed at any attempts to convince her to sit upright. Fuyuhiko would smile at her and ask about her day or complain about the others...

"But... these past few days, the house has been pretty empty... I've been alone, and they've all been
out together. Without me."

Tears began welling up in Mikan's eyes and a whine left her throat.

"And... I know it's silly, I know it's stupid, but what if they're-

Mahiru pulled Mikan into a hug, speaking with a soothing voice.

"They're not replacing you," Mahiru promised. "Just think about it. Your past conversations with all of them. This past few month."

"Um, I mean..." Mikan paused, recalling a strange conversation with Fuyuhiko.

It was normal for Mikan and Fuyuhiko to talk during their movie nights. Gory deaths and dramatic subplots were usually good conversation pieces, and their conversations could naturally flow into discussions about pretty much everything.

But Fuyuhiko was just being strange, when, out of the blue, he said, "You know, I know a guy who bought his daughter a new car every week."

"Um... o-okay?" Mikan stared at him in confusion, wondering what could have prompted that.

"So, uh, I noticed that you and Saionji and Mioda go by bus or foot to most places..."

"I don't have a driver's license," Mikan said flatly.

"You don't?" Fuyuhiko stared at her in disbelief.

"I mean, I read about it, but I didn't really have a responsible adult or a car when I was growing up, and the buses were almost always available, so..." Mikan trailed off, suddenly unable to look Fuyuhiko in the eye.

"Yeah, that's fine," Fuyuhiko nodded, turning his attention back to the movie. "Oh hey, that guy got his legs ripped off."

"Really?!" Mikan exclaimed excitedly, trying to push away her sense of strangeness about the conversation.

"He offered to buy you a car," Mahiru reiterated.

"He doesn't normally do that," Mikan mumbled to herself. "Why would he do that...?"

"L-let's think about why later, and think of, well, other examples."

"Yo, Miss Medicine, you've got a pretty empty jewelry box, huh?"

"Yo?" Hajime raised an inquisitive eyebrow. "How old are you again?"

"Shut it, Lightning Bolt!" Natsumi snapped. She punched Hajime's gut with enough strength to knock Mikan over. Hajime just withstood it, even laughing despite the awful pain he must have been in.

Mikan wondered if Natsumi's incredible strength and Hajime's impressive endurance had any
"No! No, it doesn't!" Mahiru screeched, her face as red as her hair. "Not at all! Never! Nope! No!"

"That's a very... passionate denial," Mikan noted.

"LET'S MOVE ON," Mahiru declared. "SOMETHING ELSE. ANYTHING."

"Oh, Mikan~!" Hiyoko called out with a forced smile as Ibuki wheeled her into the room. They were both wearing maid outfits, a white one for Hiyoko and a black one for Ibuki.

"We decided to get matching outfits!" Hiyoko exclaimed in a strained tone. "Since we're dating and all, what do you think?"

"You're dating?" Mikan asked curiously.

"We are?" Ibuki echoed, staring at Hiyoko in bafflement.

"We are," Hiyoko said with all the bitterness of someone who was staring right at everything she ever hoped and dreamed she could have, but wasn't allowed anything more than a fleeting glance.

"That's... nice?" Mikan offered, unsure of what to say.

Hiyoko shrieked, so loud that even Ibuki, whose life's work required constant exposure to booming speakers and screaming, winced at the volume.


"Um. What."

"They were visiting a jewelry store together, when the cashier recognized Fuyuhiko and started trying to shoot him..." Mikan sighed. "But I didn't hear that from them. They refused to tell me. Hajime-kun had to tell me."

"And why do you think that is?" Mahiru inquired. She paused for a second, preemptively adding, "And no, not because they wanted to exclude you."

"Um..." Mikan considered it. Thought about it from all angles, flipped her perspective around, used her Hint Coins, and...

...still couldn't figure it out.

"What day is it today?" Mahiru asked.

"Um... tuesday?"

"Number. Month."

"Twelfth of May...?" Mikan offered.

"And what's on the twelfth of May?"

"International Awareness Day for Chronic Immunological and Neurological Diseases?"
"Wha- no! How is that your first answer when it's your own birthday?!!"

"Um. What," Mikan said flatly, thinking it over again. "It... was my b-"

"Yes, it is!" Mahiru exclaimed. "So go meet your boyfriend already!"

"I-I, um, w-!" Mikan almost screamed as Mahiru all but lifted her up, the freckled woman shoving her towards the door.

Mikan smelled the food long before Mahiru shoved her in front of the door. Smelled delicious, mouth-watering, like...

Hanamura Diner?

Mikan carefully opened the door, then glanced around. There were a stack of DVDs by the couch. Pillows and blankets were carefully placed on the couch in the most comfortable arrangement possible. She heard Mahiru walk away behind her.

And Fuyuhiko was by the stove, stirring a boiling pot, carefully watching it cook. Two bowls sat next to the stove, awaiting their contents patiently. A cute white apron was tied around his neck, and Mikan couldn't help but notice that, despite the obvious heat, he was wearing a familiar blue hoodie.

Mikan was tempted to watch him cook from the doorway forever, but at the same time... it was the first time she saw him in what felt like weeks! She missed him, she loved him, she-

"What's this?" Mikan asked, hugging Fuyuhiko from behind. Fuyuhiko tensed in her arms, his cheeks turning red.

"Shit, uh... you were supposed to come later. When I was actually done," Fuyuhiko said sheepishly, turning back to his cooking. "I was making dinner for you."

"Really? What's the food?" Mikan grinned.

"Tempura soba. I forced Hanamura to give me lessons."

"Since when could you stand him?" Mikan wondered teasingly.

"Since it was for you," Fuyuhiko answered, and Mikan's eyes widened. Fuyuhiko continued to stir the noodles as he talked, seemingly unaware of how much he was making Mikan blush. "I mean, I realized something when I was shopping with jewelry with Nanami and your roommates. Buying a bunch of cars for your kid, that's more showing off your money than actual love. Fancy jewels, expensive food, that's more a show of wealth than anything else. It's not really an attempt to make anyone happy."

Fuyuhiko scooped out the noodles, carefully ladling them into the bowls.

"I wanted to make you happy," Fuyuhiko confessed. "I wanted to see you smile, so I thought about it... and I realized that, well, if our positions were reversed, then all I would want would be a nice warm dinner with you, and a movie marathon. Just spending time with you would make me smile, so..."

He turned around to gauge Mikan's reaction-

"W-why are you crying?!!"
"That's so sweeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeet!" Mikan wailed, unable to stop the tears from flowing down her face. "I'm so lucky to be able to spend time with youuuuuuuuu!"

"Hey, w-wait, that's supposed to be my line-"

"And, and I thought you were ignoring me or something but! You were doing it out of love-!

"Why would I ignore you?!

"I love you! I really, really do!" Mikan sobbed, hugging him even tighter.

"I love you too, Mikan," Fuyuhiko mumbled, bright pink. "So, uh... it made you happy?"

"Yes! I-it diiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii! I'm just, ah, I'm so happy right now and I could die! That's how happy you made me!"

"Don't die before dinner!" Fuyuhiko exclaimed, before thinking and then adding, "Don't die before the movies."

He thought that over too, then added, "Don't die before the sweater."

And then he just gave up and said, "Don't die, period."

"I won't," Mikan promised. And then realized, "Sweater?"

"I mean... couples wear matching clothes, right?"

Mikan gasped, pulling away from Fuyuhiko so she could see his face.

"You got me a-"

"Huge enough to cover your hands, as per Tsumiki tradition," Fuyuhiko smirked, moving over to the couch. He pulled fabric hidden under the blankets, proudly showing off pastel purple pullover with a deep purple crown on the chest.

Mikan immediately took off her sweater, replacing it with Fuyuhiko's gift. It was huge, soft, comfy, seemed to swallow her like a bear, and it matched Fuyuhiko's...!

Oh, she loved it!

"Thank you so much," Mikan smiled.

"There's no one I love more than you..." A familiar voice sang. Fuyuhiko froze, looking like someone had dumped a bucket of freezing frogs down his shirt.

"Yup, it's one hundred percent true! Mikan, I'm in love with you!" Hiyoko completed the verse, her and Ibuki wearing identical grins as they burst into the room and in song.

"LEAVE!" Fuyuhiko screamed, and Mikan couldn't help but laugh. It was the kind of laugh that started small and just kept going, growing, bringing tears to her eyes and making her smile so much her face hurt.

She missed her weird group of friends. She missed her boyfriend. She loved them all so much.

And they loved her in return.
What a wonderful birthday.
Tsunderes, Right?

Surprisingly enough, Ibuki and Hiyoko were not dating. No matter how much she wanted it, it just wasn't true.

Well, it's not like she could expect anyone to be impressed with her figure. Her appearance alone tended to turn people away, and if that didn't do it, then her personality did the trick. Having friends who actually liked her was both something she was grateful for everyday and still shocked by. People trying to smooch up to her for reputation, status... wasn't all that uncommon actually. But the moment they heard her talk, they would realize that she wasn't so easy to be around.

Ibuki sighed, slumping down on the table. Girl's Day (plus one) somehow became a love gossip session. One focused on her and her alone.

"Are you sure she even likes me? Like, at all?" Ibuki inquired, staring up at her friends in search of answers.

"Yes, I am." Mahiru nodded.

"Ibuki, she's a tsundere," Chiaki said flatly as she played Fire Emblem with one hand and held Peko's hand with the other. "If you were expecting her to, y'know, actually show her love and adoration openly, you haven't met her."

"It's not like that!" Ibuki protested. "I mean, I know she hates showing friendliness and stuff, but romance! Does she even like me romantically?! Because it sure as hell doesn't feel like it!"

"She's a tsundere," Chiaki echoed.

"Not one for displays of affection," Peko added.

"Or affection at all," Hajime stated. "She gets embarrassed by being called a friend."

"She tried to punch me for helping her with her love life," Chiaki said sorrowfully.

"That was because your methods were shit," Mahiru retorted bluntly.

"They were not!"

"They were," Hajime agreed, earning a huff of frustration from Chiaki.

"Wait, you were helping her with her love life?" Ibuki asked.

"She has a crush on you and she wants to kiss you a lot," Chiaki stated. "And hold your hand and see your smile and-"

"Chiaki, that might be a bit much," Peko cut in.

"It's true!" Chiaki huffed.

"No? It's not?" Ibuki stared at them in confusion. "She loves messing with me? And Hiyo-chan never actually says she-"

"Tsundere," Hajime interrupted, waving a hand at Mahiru. Mahiru turned to him with an indignant "hey!", which was ignored.
"Hiyo-chan loves seeing me cry and scream, though..." Ibuki mumbled. "Like Friday..."

"Why?!!" Ibuki screamed, staring at Hiyoko in horror as the blonde started up the horror movie.

"Horror movies are amazing, don't you know anything?" Hiyoko stated with a grin as she wheeled over to the couch. She sat next to Ibuki, whose body was as rigid as a steel bar at that point.

"No! They're not!" Ibuki protested.

"Scared, are you?"

"No! I-I'm just, I'd rather watch a romance movie!" Ibuki argued, knowing that she'd much rather do math for sixty minutes than be subjected to an hour of horror.

(Wait, weren't those two synonymous?)

"Well, we already did that," Hiyoko pointed out. "So it's my turn!"

"B-but-!"

"What, scared?" Hiyoko asked mockingly, smirking at Ibuki. "Don't worry! You can cling to me if you have to, scream all you want!"

"N-N-NEVER! YOU'RE THE WORST!" Ibuki shrieked, dashing out of the room.

"I fucked up! I really, really did!" Hiyoko wailed, almost slamming her head on the table. "But, how the hell was I supposed to tell her, 'hey, I think you're cute when you're scared, and when I think of you hugging my arm and trying to hide from fake monsters, my heartbeat goes batshit and my face lights on fire and my stomach fills up with moths'?!"

"You could try being more honest...?" Mikan suggested, unsure of what to say.

"Isn't that exactly her problem?" Fuyuhiko retorted. "She can't be honest, no matter how hard she tries."

"Remind me again why I'm here?" Natsumi interrupted, her focus not on Hiyoko's dilemma, but on painting her nails a bright pink.

"I don't know!" Hiyoko slammed her hands down on the table. "Why the fuck are you here?! I didn't ask for you!"

"She's in a relationship and I thought she could help," Mikan said.

"I bribed her with stickers for her gun casing," Fuyuhiko added.

"That's just weird!" Hiyoko interjected. "Who puts stickers on their gun?!"

Fuyuhiko wordlessly gestured at an immensely-offended Natsumi.

"Anyways! We are here to help you be honest and make out with her (though I'm pretty sure she's too good for you), so!" Natsumi stood, pulling a limited edition special winter holidays tour Mioda Ibuki poster out of nowhere. "So confess!"

"Why do you carry that around with you?!" Mikan shrieked.
"She has weirder things," Fuyuhiko groaned. "Just don't question it."

"How is anyone supposed to not question it?! It's weird as hell! I refuse to take part in this!" Hiyoko declared.

"Would you rather have a life-size doll?" Natsumi offered.

"NO."

"Why does she have that?" Mikan asked, turning to Fuyuhiko for an answer.

"She's weird and obsessed with idols," Fuyuhiko shot back.

"Am not!" Natsumi protested. "I only brought this poster for her to practice her fucking confession. Otherwise I'd never let it leave my room, where it might get scratched or even torn...!"

"Your weird sister is creeping me out!" Hiyoko huffed.

"Weird?!!"

"Don't act like it isn't true!"

"Hiiiiiiiiiiiiiiie! Please, please, don't fight! We're here to support Hiyoko-chan and-"

"I don't want to support this slandering bitch!"

"Natsumi, slander is when it's not true."

"And the fact that you're weird is one hundred percent true! Two hundred even!"

"Gh-! Two on one isn't fair! Miss Medicine, back me up! I need you!"

"Mikan, we're best friends and your boyfriend backs me up, don't listen to her!"

"I'm not siding with anyone! Not at all!"

Somehow a discussion of love lives became a bloody war.

"So... just be honest," Ibuki repeated dumbly.

"Yeah, that's all there is to it," Chiaki agreed.

"Huh, okay, I'll try it!" Ibuki declared, before pulling out her phone.

"Wait, what are you-?" Mahiru's voice was cut off by Ibuki making a call.

"Hiyo-chan, I love you!" Ibuki exclaimed cheerily.

"I-I, what the fuck?!" Hiyoko screamed from the other end. "What the actual fuck?! Don't say stuff like that out of the blue, you're interrupting my conversation! Stupid moron, idiot Ibuki! Go away!"

Ibuki whimpered as Hiyoko hung up, slumping her head down on the table as she despaired. Her hair horns deflated, her shoulders slumped, and little whimpers escaped from her lips every couple of seconds.

Peko patted her, but it didn't help much.
"Poor Ibuki..." Mahiru whispered.

"**WHAT THE FUCK WAS THAT?!**" The Kuzuryuu twins demanded in unison.

"She was confessing her love to you-!" Natsumi snarled.

"-And you fucking shattered the moment!" Fuyuhiko finished.

"Um, can you two please stop that? It's kind of creepy to see you two be so in sync..." Mikan mumbled.

"How else was I supposed to react?!!" Hiyoko slammed her hands on the table, glaring back at the siblings. "The stupid airhead says 'I love you' to her friends all the time! Even if it wasn't that, she could be joking like the jester she is! How could I respond to that seriously?! What kind of braindead moron would I be if I said 'love you too'?! I can't look like a smitten dork in front of her!"

"*But you can look like a bitch?!*" Fuyuhiko demanded incredulously.

"A jerk," Mikan added.

"An asshole," Fuyuhiko nodded along wisely.

"A-"

Mikan's next suggestion was cut off by Hiyoko screaming and sobbing "I GET IT ALREADY! QUIT IT WITH THE SYNONYMS!"

People talked, friends much more so than acquaintances. And love drama was obviously a topic of conversation between friends. Well, Peko and Fuyuhiko confided in each other about their problems and were shocked to find that they were discussing the same issue. Chiaki and Mikan chatted over tea, the two quickly realizing what the other was talking about. And with the troublesome threesome, well, Natsumi complained a lot, Mahiru and Hajime figured it out.

Which led to everyone in the group, save for the tentative couple in question, meeting up at the Kuzuryuu home. They sat around the Kuzuryuu table, where leaders of various Yakuza families came together to discuss strategy, trades, deals, alliances, and bloodbaths. Surely, with such a site surrounding them, they could come up with a viable plan of action-

"I say we lock them in a closet until they [CENSORED]," Chiaki suggested.

"No! Don't do that!" Hajime protested.

"Why not? It would work," Natsumi huffed. "A lot faster than waiting for them to sort it out themselves."

"Or it could backfire, make them argue and get even further from the start than before," Peko pointed out.

"Geez, why are they so volatile?" Mahiru sighed. "We need to stabilize them a bit more..."

"Give them a push in the right direction!" Mikan declared.

"Figure out a way to make Mioda seem serious about it, figure out how to keep Saionji from, well, flipping out," Fuyuhiko added.
"Flying off the handle," Mikan suggested with a grin.

"Exploding." Fuyuhiko nodded.

"Screaming and swearing."

"Going batshit."

"We get it already! Quit it with the synonyms!" Natsumi snapped, quite literally. She snapped her fingers in Fuyuhiko's face, glaring. Fuyuhiko snarled right back, irritated that his moment with Mikan was interrupted.

"Is this what a synchronized couple looks like...?" Hajime wondered.

"Me and Peko-chan can do better!" Chiaki pouted, puffing her cheeks out in a fit of adorable anger.

"Um, what," Peko said flatly, before Chiaki leaned over, wrapping an arm around the swordwoman's shoulders.

"We're a totally awesome lovey-dovey couple, you know, we maxed out at S-rank," Chiaki said smugly, pulling Peko closer, until Peko's head landed on her lap. Chiaki seemed to have planned that, as she immediately began petting Peko's head. The poor silver-haired woman's face became so hot, you could cook smores over her, something that was not unnoticed by the other nurse in the room.

"Chiaki-san, you're going to make her faint..." Mikan whispered fearfully.

"I love her so much! Especially when she's around animals, she tries to act so cool and stoic but it's obvious she's smiling and-"

"CHIAKI SHE'S NOT SUPPOSED TO BE THAT RED PLEASE STOP-"

"-Oh, she is the absolute cutest and I adore her and-"

"CHIAKI SHE'S GOING TO DIE STOP-"

"I love you so much!" Chiaki smiled, before pressing a kiss to Peko's lips.

"She's dead," Natsumi sighed, and Mahiru and Hajime nodded along.

While Mikan resuscitated Peko and Fuyuhiko kept Chiaki from doing any more damage, the strategy meeting was put on hold.

"Hiyo-chaaaaaaaine! What did I do wrooooooooonooong?!" Ibuki wailed, clinging to the back of Hiyoko's wheelchair.

"You were an idiot!" Hiyoko growled. "Now get off!"

"Not until you tell me the truth!"

"The truth's clear, isn't it?!!"

"Yeah, it is! But I wanna hear it from your mouth!"

"I already said it!"
"No you didn't! You said a tsun line!"

"I'm not a tsun!"

"YES YOU ARE."

"NEVER."

"Just tell me what I did so I can drag you out on a date and then make you smile again!" Ibuki whined.

"D-d-d-d-d-d-d-d-date?!" Hiyoko shrieked. "No! I would never! Never, never, never!"

"Hiyo-chan! Let me make you happy! I swear I can!"

"STOP FUCKING SOUNDING LIKE YOU'RE TRYING TO MARRY ME!"

"WOULD MARRYING ME BE THAT BAD?!"

"YES! IT WOULD!"

"YOU'RE BREAKING MY HEART, HIYO-CHAN!"

"GOOD! THE REST OF THE BLOOD WILL GO TO YOUR MALNOURISHED BRAIN!"

"THAT IS NOT HOW BIOLOGY WORKS!"

Somehow, the group devoted to getting the two together had a feeling that their job wouldn't be so easy...
May 18, 10:37 am

"Is this a good idea?" Peko inquired, staring at her girlfriend carefully.

"No," Chiaki said in return as she wrote the letter. She made sure her writing matched the sample exactly. None of her usual handwriting quirks showed up at all. There were no cutesy curls or little doodles in the margins. Nothing but cold professionalism. "If I know them, then I know that this won't end well at all. Ibuki isn't stupid, but she can't understand tsunderes without help. And even a blind man could see that Saionji is grade-A tsun. Really, what's the point in writing this?"

"We had a plan, remember?" Natsumi glared at them. "It's too late to try to back out. So keep going."

"It's just writing," Chiaki reassured her. "And besides, wasn't the rest fun?"

Peko let out a whine, before sighing. "I suppose so."

"Especially the cuddling~." Chiaki leaned over to Peko, grinning teasingly. "Didn't you love that part?"

"I-I would have fun doing anything with you..." Peko mumbled, making Chiaki blush too.

"DON'T DO THAT IN FRONT OF ME! YOU'RE SO GROSS!" Natsumi shrieked.

"Don't you know that saying 'don't do that' just makes me want to do it more?" Chiaki smirked, before moving to sit next to Peko.

She gently tugged Peko's arm over her shoulder, hugging the swordwoman's waist closer to her. They were literally hip-to-hip, and Chiaki sealed it all with a cherry on top: a kiss to Peko's cheek.

Natsumi stomped off with a scream of how much she hated Chiaki and Peko and embarrassment and lovey-dovey shit, while Peko almost fainted of blood rushing to her head. Again.

Were they really the best people to complete such a crucial step in the plan?

May 18, 1:09 pm

"Hiyo-chaaaaaan," Ibuki called out. "Mikan left us alone again to see Fuyu-chan! What do you want to do?"

"Um," Hiyoko said intelligently, because she didn't want to say dumb shit like 'know if you like me and think of me before anyone else' or 'hold your hand and hug you without blushing and screaming like a weirdo' or 'punch you in the face for making me feel like this'.

Instead, she just said, "I have work today."

"I'll take you!" Ibuki grinned, and Hiyoko sighed in relief.

It was normal for, um, best friends to do that. They did it before, it was casual and joking and she kept trying to stick to that persona. Joking, casual, someone who didn't care, not at all, if someone had a crush on her. The sharpwitted Hiyo-chan Ibuki knew, instead of the blushing, easily-flustered
Hiyo-chan Ibuki had turned her into.

"Don't get lost, I'm sure you forgot where it is by now," Hiyoko quipped. "I mean, your brain might as well be taffy with all the chemicals you put into your hair."

"Ha! My brain might be taffy, but I'd never forget something you told me, Hiyo-chan!" Ibuki grinned as she started pushing Hiyoko along. "Your favourite colour is orange."

"Wrong," Hiyoko interjected.

"What?!" Ibuki gasped in horror. "You lied?!"

"Favourite things can change over time! And I decided orange wasn't my colour anymore! That's all!"

"Is it purple now? Brown, red, yellow, blue, pink?"

"One at a time!" Hiyoko snapped. "Jeez, you're like an excited puppy. How much sugar did you have with your coffee?"

"Thirteen as usual, ma'am!" Ibuki answered with a wide smile.

"ARE YOU TRYING TO DIE!?" Hiyoko screamed. She turned around so Ibuki could see just how shocked and exasperated she was. "Thirteen is way too much! And we're the same age, don't you know not to call me ma'am?!"

"Thirteen's a lucky number! And you're older by like six months!"

"Thirteen is the unlucky number and it's only seven months!"

"Ha! Proof! Proof you're a ma'am!" Ibuki sang, exulting in her victory. "Soon you'll be calling everyone a whippersnapper and complaining about your wrinkles!"

"Stop being an idiot, this instant!" Hiyoko ordered.

"Nope! If my fate is to be the number one idiot in the world, then I'll do it with a smile!"

"Well you're making great progress on that! Congratulations, you're getting stupider by the second!"

Ibuki just laughed, and Hiyoko couldn't help but smile with her.

May 17, 12:58 pm

"So, you think this is a good place?" Fuyuhiko asked, looking around at the shop. Gleaming guitars lined the walls, along with headphones, earplugs, accessories, anything a musician could need. Amps formed an impressive wall around the cashier's desk, and Fuyuhiko had the feeling that, if the employee wanted, he could deafen everyone in the room...

"It's Ibuki's favourite store," Mikan answered. "This step is guaranteed."

"Yeah, she'll be Natsumi in a candy store." Fuyuhiko nodded with a grin, which he pretended was directed at a particularly imposing spiked guitar.

"Or you," Mikan said teasingly, leaning in front of the guitar. She dominated her boyfriend's view,
making him jump back with a blush.

"N-no! No way! I'm a hardass Yakuza heir, I wouldn't-!"

"They're not mutually exclusive~" Mikan sang, clasping her hands together. "In fact, I think it's cute! You're tough and sweet and love candy and me!"

"Don't say stuff like that in public!" Fuyuhiko screamed.

"...is it not true?" Mikan stared at him blankly, before realization hit. Her voice was full of horror as she recoiled. "DO YOU NOT LOVE-"

"I love you! I do!" Fuyuhiko cut her off. "I wouldn't date you if I didn't! I really love everything about you, so don't think that I don't!"

"I was going to say candy," Mikan mumbled.

She could see the words tumble around in his skull, the gears in his head slowly processing the sound of her voice. His cheeks started heating up as he averted his eye from Mikan's face.

A small, quiet "oh" was all that left his lips.

"But it really is sweet how you want me to feel loved." Mikan grinned, taking his hand.

He didn't pull away, just whispering, "W-well, I love you... so if you didn't feel loved, it would be pointless..."

It was then that the cashier interrupted.

Now, the cashier was an imposing man, he towered over both of them easily. His long dark hair was pulled into a ponytail, red eyes staring at them in interest. A bull nose ring pierced through his... well, just take a guess. Black clothes depicting anarchy symbols sat on top of a ridiculously-muscular frame. Seriously, the man looked strong enough to crush someone's head like a grape in one hand.

Which made it all the more ridiculous when he was cooing over their display of affection.

Using terms like "devotion" and "love visible from a kilometre away" and "unimaginable amounts of affection, the former-wrestler-turned-cashier eloquently turned them into lovers brought together by fate and held together by their love, which was an experience so embarrassing that Mikan and Fuyuhiko fled after the first five minutes.

"Can we just not include that place?" Fuyuhiko grumbled as they hurriedly walked away. "I never want to go through that again."

"We can't just take Ibuki's favourite store off the list!" Mikan protested. "We can probably switch guard duty with someone. Someone more resilient."

They both thought for a few seconds. Natsumi and Mahiru were tsunderes. They were easily embarrassed by any romantic implications, let alone an analysis of how their every action was proof of their true love. Hajime might fare a bit better, but he would still be a blushing mess by the three-second mark. Chiaki could probably take it, though Peko definitely couldn't, and the two wanted to stay together.

"None of our friends are resilient..." Mikan's eyes widened in horror at her realization.
"It's less a matter of resilience and more who we're willing to throw under the bus..." Fuyuhiko mumbled.

There was a small silence, before they spoke up at the exact same time.

"Natsumi."

They paused to look at each other, shocked by their identical answers for a second. Just one second, though, before they both started laughing.

"What did my sister ever do to you?" Fuyuhiko asked jokingly.

"I was just thinking-!" Mikan accidentally cut herself off with a giggle. "She's just the one who would be the most hilarious to watch in that situation!"

"Well, duh, she's Natsumi! There isn't a single dull moment when you're around her!"

"She really brightens up the room!"

"Of course she does! She's my sister!" Fuyuhiko exclaimed, beaming with brotherly pride.

Mikan's grin softened, looking at her boyfriend with knowing eyes. "You really do love your family, don't you?"

"Goes without saying," Fuyuhiko huffed, before grabbing Mikan's hand. "And I love you too."

"Huh?" Mikan gaped at Fuyuhiko in shock.

"Do I have to say it twice?" Fuyuhiko sighed, trying to look a lot more annoyed than he really was. "I love you."

"I-I love you too!" Mikan screamed, nearly knocking him over on the sidewalk with the power of her hug.

One could only wonder what the great cashier would have to say about that.

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May 17, 4:29 pm

"You are so weird," Hiyoko grumbled.

"Well, according to my newfound 'Tsun-to-Text Translator', hold on, let me check..." Ibuki pretended to read through the notebook. "That is equal to a "You're super cool, Ibuki-chan!" So thank you!"

"Do you really think that's true!?"

"Yep," Ibuki smirked. "I mean, I know now the key to unlocking the sweet-"

"Stop."

"Kind-"

"Ibuki what the hell."

"Lovely-"
"Stop being stupid!"

"Hiyo-chan underneath all the tsun!" Ibuki grinned, tapping her notebook. "Actually knowing what you're saying really helps!"

"ARE YOU TELLING ME YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND BASIC JAPANESE?! DO I HAVE TO FUCKING SPELL IT OUT FOR YOU?!!"

"Let me translate that..." Ibuki hummed, running her finger down the pages of handwriting. "That is 'I can't believe you didn't understand before, this is so embarrassing!'"

"I HATE YOU!" Hiyoko screamed.

"I love you too!" Ibuki grinned back, and Hiyoko blushed.

"I'm throwing that notebook in the nearest fireplace."

"Chiaki-chan worked hard to make this! Don't ruin her hard work!"

"YOU KNOW SHE MADE IT ENTIRELY TO FUCK WITH ME."

"She has a girlfriend!" Ibuki protested.

Hiyoko just gave her the harshest, most withering, most 'You must be joking, you cannot be that stupid' glare. Ibuki had the decency to look a little bit guilty for that.

May 16, 2:49 pm

"Pause it right now," Chiaki said suddenly, stilling as her eyes narrowed.

Peko did just that, Chiaki removing one hand from the crook of the swordwoman's arm to jot something down in the notebook.

"So, 'You are so weird' is a 'I admire you'," Chiaki mumbled, tapping the eraser against her cheek. Peko kept playing the anime, resuming the scene where the twintailed girl kept denying her affections for the protagonist.

"Is this really going to be accurate? I doubt that-" Peko's doubts were cut off by twintails screaming about how much she hated the other anime girl, followed by blushing and running off.

"Tsundere is a language that many speak, but few understand," Chiaki spoke like she was bestowing great wisdom and infinite knowledge to the world. But Peko knew she was just joking around.

"And we can understand with an anime marathon." Peko snickered, pulling the blanket even tighter around her and Chiaki.

"Undoubtedly." Chiaki nodded, before using a haughty voice. "Precisely. Remarkably well-spoken, ten points for presentation! As well as five hundred for beauty, another five hundred for intelligence, and another for strength-"

"T-that's a bit of an exaggeration! You're overstating my abilities!" Peko protested.

"I think I'm understating them," Chiaki stated, before grinning. "Well then, five million points to Pekoyama Peko, the silver-haired swordswoman of unparalleled ability."
"Chiaki-"

"Incredible, amazing, maxed-out stats-"

"Why do you keep complimenting me so much?!" Peko screamed, before they could get into the routine that always ended with her fainting.

"Because I love you and you deserve a girlfriend who always tells you the truth." Chiaki winked.

Peko could feel her heart being stolen all over again.

May 16, 3:32 pm

"You think this is going to end well?" Hajime wondered, walking through the city with Mahiru at his side.

"Of course it is." Mahiru grinned. "We know those two like the backs of our hands. Everything's going to go around to plan, so relax!"

"You sound so ominous and reassuring at the same time..." Hajime sighed.

"Jeez, thanks," Mahiru grumbled.

Hajime just laughed in return.
It started with a letter.

A letter that came in a pink envelope, sealed with a heart-shaped sticker. Ibuki's first and last name were printed on the paper in blue ink.

Hiyoko didn't fucking trust it.

She didn't trust it when Mikan handed the thing to Ibuki, nor when Ibuki's face brightened with delight at the fanmail. Hiyoko didn't trust it while Ibuki read through all four pages of how Ibuki's music had touched the fan and changed the lives of many and how so many adored the musician and how loved she was. She didn't trust it when Ibuki pulled out a picture after picture of busy streets and the inside of a music store.

"Come and find your biggest fan," the stalker-y letter had read, and Hiyoko was suddenly tempted to rip it to pieces.

"There is no way this is real," She said immediately. "Ibuki, this is a creepy stalker. Do not trust this."

"Don't go out, what if they sneak up on you with knock-out gas?" Hiyoko asked, as Ibuki held the letter over her heart and declared how she must totally meet her fan.

"Why would you ever think this is a good idea," Hiyoko rolled her eyes, staring at Ibuki flatly as the other woman went to her room to change into nice clothes.

"I refuse to comment," Hiyoko grumbled, making Ibuki pout. The rock star deflated a bit, making Hiyoko's glare weaken. "Fine. I guess your outfit is decent."

"You are lethally stupid," Hiyoko snarled as Ibuki went for the door.

She wheeled herself over, meeting Ibuki's wide eyes.

"What? Are we going or not?" The blonde snapped. "Like hell I'm letting you get butchered in an alley because of your stupidity. So come on."

"You're the best friend anyone could ever ask for," Ibuki grinned.

"And you're the worst."

"Love you too, Hiyo-chan!"

"Fuck off."

Mikan hid behind a corner, peeking over her shoulder as she watched them go.
"First, the music store," Mikan muttered, tapping out a message to her boyfriend.

[They're heading out! Mio-chan and Lovesick Idiot are leaving!]

He replied almost instantly.

[I thought we weren't using Natsumi's nicknames.]

[Sorry, "codenames".]

[It helps me feel more professional about the mission!]

[You're saying that calling one of your friends an idiot feels more professional than using her name?]

[I mean, it's not like the name is inaccurate. She is lovesick.]

[We're all kind of lovesick here.]

[Especially me.]

[I love you.]

[Oh my god Mikan you fucking dork.]

[I thought you liked it when I was a fucking dork.]

[No.]

[I love it.]

[Oh my gosh that's adorable.]

[SHUT UP YOU STARTED IT]

[GET MOVING ALREADY MIKAN]

[Alright! Love you, Fuyuhiko!]

[ASIOJAWOAP]

[STOP THAT]

[No! I refuse!]

[...fine, I love you too.]

"What the hell," Hiyoko said flatly as Ibuki bounced up and down next to her.

"You heard me," The ex-wrestler of a cashier said simply. "Anything in the store, completely free of charge. It's a gift for Mioda."

Now, by this point, Ibuki was less 'speaking' and more 'babbling incoherently with thank yous and oh my gods dropping from her mouth like raindrops in a thunder storm'. The musician was so excited that she immediately ran around the store, gaping at everything with a huge grin on her
Ibuki left Hiyoko alone to stew, which might have not been the best idea.

On one hand, Hiyoko was happy to see Ibuki so enthusiastic. It was honestly... a little adorable? Just a little, though. Hiyoko didn't like hearing Ibuki ramble about something she was passionate about. Not at all. It wasn't like she actually listened to those rants. No, she just loved the sound of Ibuki's voice- WAIT THAT WAS EVEN WORSE.

Okay, so Hiyoko was a little interested in things Ibuki liked. She wasn't going to say that she would listen to Ibuki talking about oboes for four hours, but she might search it up if Ibuki mentioned it. Only because Ibuki was passionate and that passion was somewhat endearing.

Ibuki's "secret admirer" must have thought so too, if they sent her to her favourite music store and let her choose whatever she wanted.

Hiyoko scowled. What if that creep was watching them?! What if that weird, insane, lunatic stalker was getting all [CENSORED] and [CENSORED] over Ibuki's excitement?! Hiyoko wouldn't let that happen! No one was allowed to ogle Ibuki, not at all! If she couldn't, no one in the world could!

UM.

Hiyoko did not ogle.

She admired.

But she was no longer in the mood to admire Ibuki's smile, so she huffed and glared at the wall for a few minutes.

Ibuki had gotten headphones. High-quality, wireless, comfortable headphones that had a flower pattern to them.

And she gave them to Hiyoko.

Hiyoko was not embarrassed by that. She was j-just grateful for it, okay?!

After Ibuki made her selection, the cashier directed them towards a nearby park. He said something about 'A flower that bloomed in adversity'.

Whatever that meant.

"Why are we still going along with this shit?" Hiyoko grumbled.

"Isn't it fun? It's like a scavenger hunt!" Ibuki grinned.

"It's not fun, it's probably going to end with us murdered in an alleyway! Or buried in a park!"

"Hiyo-chan, I'm sure it's not a murderer," Ibuki sighed. "C'monnnnn, trust me, okay?"

"Why do you trust this anonymous creep, anyways?!" Hiyoko demanded. "Shouldn't you know better than to go after every letter you get?! Don't you have a sense of self-preservation!"

"I just have a good feeling about this letter!" Ibuki chirped.
Hiyoko groaned, rolling her eyes.

"It's a good thing I'm armed."

"You are?" Ibuki raised an eyebrow at her.

Hiyoko gestured at her arms, making Ibuki snicker.

"What a punch!"

"You're terrible!"

"You did it first!" Ibuki retorted.

"Doesn't stop the fact that you're terrible," Hiyoko muttered.

"You love me anyways."

"Since when?!" Hiyoko demanded, her voice raising a pitch as she blushed.

"Since we became friends!" Ibuki said cheerily, and Hiyoko almost felt disappointed.

That disappointment was soon replaced by horror.

Good lord. The secret admirer had sent them to a path between pairs of cherry blossoms. AKA couple hotspot #1 in Japan! The trees were in full fucking bloom, raining perfectly pink petals on them!

"This is so fucking terri-"

"Terrific!" Ibuki interjected, releasing Hiyoko's wheelchair to dance around the path. She was getting weird looks from the other couples, but she didn't care. Ibuki was too occupied by twisting and turning, dancing with the wind.

Hiyoko wasn't sure if she was supposed to be happy or not. On one hand, Ibuki was smiling, but on the other hand... it was some lame, creepy, stalker-y weirdo who made Ibuki smile. A lame, creepy, stalker-y weirdo who hid behind letters and bribed her with gifts. What a freaking coward.

Not like they weren't braver than her, though.

Hiyoko couldn't say what she meant at all. No matter how much she wanted to, she just couldn't say it.

"Hiyo-chan, check it out!" Ibuki called out suddenly, holding up a bouquet.

Pink amaryllis and forget-me-not.

Ibuki's trademark colours.

Oh hell no.

"I say she explodes like three love letters in," Natsumi declared, tossing a wad of bills on the table. She added two more, saying. "Mahiru says it's more like five, Hajime says four."

"You have too little faith in Hiyoko," Chiaki said smugly, wearing a knowing grin. "For the sake of love, she'll hold on to her anger and jealousy! That's why...! She's going to have her Ace Attorney
breakdown around letter number seven!"

Her dramatic outburst was punctuated with her slamming two coins on the table with far more force than was strictly necessary.

"Be careful with the table. It's been in this family for generations," Peko scolded lightly.

"Stop being a tightass and make your bet."

"Wha- I am not a-" Peko's embarrassed outburst was cut off by Chiaki patting her shoulder. The gamer turned to Natsumi, waving to Peko almost as if to say 'I'll handle this'.

"Looking forward to gaining a grand sum of negative fifty million yen?" Chiaki taunted. "I'm sure you'll love the feeling of being knocked off your high horse!"

"What?! There's no way I'll fucking lose to you!" Natsumi declared with a snarl, her nails starting to dig into the table.

"Ultimate Gamer meets casino games, end result?" Chiaki's smirk widened. "Ultimate Gamer wins."

"Stop being so cocky! Just because you were a hotshot in high school doesn't mean you automatically win every game you see!"

"Nope, but the fact that I'm still a hotshot now does-!"

"You're so annoying! Shut up before I strangle you, bitch!"

"Oh my, do Hajime and Mahiru appreciate that attitude in bed-?" Chiaki winked at Natsumi, and by this point in the conversation, Peko was wondering if letting them break the table was the better option-

"Yes, they do," Natsumi replied with a smirk.

Peko knew.

She should have just let them break the goddamn table.

The letter attached to the bouquet had the address of a cafe written on it. At the cafe, Ibuki got a free orange cake slice and another letter, which brought her to a jewelry store. Skull earrings and a matching ring were given, along with a message to visit the park.

It really was a scavenger hunt. Every time Hiyoko thought they were almost done (AKA every five minutes), there would be another one, which led to another one, which led to another one. New sewing needles, then some cute kitty headbands, then bracelets, stickers, glitter, and nearly everything Ibuki could ever want.

Ibuki just wouldn't stop smiling about each and every gift. She wouldn't stop gushing about how this person knew her so well-

'Hello, that's because they're a total stalker!'

-or how much thought was put into the quest-

'I don't see you being so happy about how much I think about you!'
-or how this person was so devoted-

'Creepy.'

-and generous-

'Disgusting.'

-and how she would love to be their friend.

Which only incensed Hiyoko further. And Ibuki barely noticed, too caught up in the wonder of the trip to even glance in the blonde's direction.

How annoying.

"Come on, we're going to the planetarium next!" Ibuki declared excitedly, holding up the thirteenth letter.

"Why are you so excited?" Hiyoko wondered aloud.

Ibuki stopped to consider the question, answering with, "Wouldn't you be excited? It's a fun game!"

"Do you not care about the fact that someone had to be planning all of this out for you? Does that not creep you out at all?"

"No, it's pretty sweet!" Ibuki smiled. "The fact that someone had to think long and hard to figure out which places I would like is pretty touching!"

"You're so easy to impress," Hiyoko grumbled.

"Are you mad?" Ibuki asked, poking at Hiyoko's forehead.

"No," Hiyoko replied curtly. "I'm not mad at all."

"You look pretty mad and pouty," Ibuki observed.

"You notice how I feel now?" Hiyoko kept her expression carefully neutral, but the venom in her words gave away her true emotions.

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

"You just seem so happy, with this random person giving you gifts, hm?" Hiyoko gave her a pointed frown, resisting the urge to growl at Ibuki. "You never seem that happy when I give you gifts."

"Hiyo-chan-"

"Isn't it weird? I thought a friend would be higher up than a stranger, but maybe I'm wrong! Isn't it shocking?!"

"Hiyoko-" Ibuki was cut off once again, the blonde continuing her rant. If Hiyoko could walk, she would be pacing in the middle of the park.

"It's so annoying." Hiyoko's hands were drawn into fists, almost trembling with anger. "So, so annoying. You find it touching that someone thinks about you so much? How come you don't act like that with me?"
Ibuki looked utterly flabbergasted, mouth hanging open and eyes blown wide by Hiyoko's words. But the ex-dancer wasn't done yet.

"Are you an idiot?! Have you seriously not noticed it?! Or am I just that unnoticeable?!
" Hiyoko snarled at Ibuki, though tears were pricking at the corners of furious eyes.

"I-I, what-" Was the only thing Ibuki could say in return.

"I gave you flowers, called you beautiful, tried to make you cake, but you never say I'm being cute and sweet!" Hiyoko screamed, ignoring Ibuki's intervention of 'But I did-'. "No, apparently, this person who barely knows you is better than the person right here, who has fallen in love with you!"

"W-w-w-what?!" Ibuki shrieked, her face suddenly turning as pink as her bangs.

"I didn't fall in love with the songs, or the pretty voice, like that creep!" Hiyoko declared, slapping a hand to her chest, right over her racing heart.

Their eyes met for the first time, pink staring into orange. But Hiyoko knew there was something behind those bright eyes, saw a side that no one else would.

"I fell in love with shining smiles and dedication to friends and adorable jokes that I will never call adorable," She confessed. "I fell in love with the shrieking harpy who yelled at me for hurting her brother. And then apologized with a fucking bouquet." A pout came on her face as she went on. "I bet that stalker doesn't know you sew. Or that you have grey eyes. Or that you think of the most insane shit when you're about to fall asleep. Or that you're so stupid that you can't tell when someone is in love with you."

"Wait. You love me?" Ibuki asked, still kind of lost. "In a romantic way?"

Hiyoko's dying flame of anger suddenly flared up again as she asked, "Wasn't that freaking obvious?!

"I mean, you kind of make it confusing!" Ibuki retorted. "You go from smiling to angry and back again so fast, and I can never tell what you're thinking! I never know what you actually want!"

Hiyoko gave Ibuki a pointed stare, before letting out a huff. She crossed her arms over her chest and pointed her nose in the air as she stated, "Well, you're constantly joking, so I have no idea when you're actually serious about anything."

"We both have our issues, don't we?" Ibuki chuckled a bit, grinning nervously as she rubbed the back of her neck. "I guess birds of a feather do flock together. Or fall for each other."

"Wait. You love me? In a romantic way?"

"Wasn't that freaking obvious?" Ibuki shot back.

"No, it wasn't! Not at all!"

"Fine! I'll make it obvious!" Ibuki pretended to clear her throat, before kneeling before Hiyoko. "O beautiful princess, goddess of-

"Take it fucking seriously, idiot Ibuki!"

"I love you," Ibuki said plainly, making Hiyoko turn a furious shade of red.

"U-uh... I... I l-lo-l-l..." Hiyoko couldn't work out the knots in her tongue, all of her bravado
vanishing in the face of Ibuki's straightforwardness.

"You already screamed it once, so what's stopping you now?" Ibuki asked.

"It was on impulse, okay?! I-I wasn't thinking about it before... but now..." Hiyoko snapped her mouth shut, her face growing hotter by the second.

"But now?" Ibuki echoed, staring at her curiously.

"I... I can't think of anything but you," Hiyoko whispered.

Ibuki's mouth fell open, colour invading her cheeks. "W-wow."

"What?!" Hiyoko demanded, though she was more flustered than angry. "Stop looking like a dumbass! You're going to pollute the air if you don't shut that stupid mouth of yours!"

"I love you too, Hiyo-chaaaaaaaaaaaan!" Ibuki cried out, pulling Hiyoko into a hug.

While Hiyoko's internal monologue was something along the lines of 'holy goddamn fucking shit is this really fucking happening oh my god fucking-', all that left her mouth was a low grumble of, "fuck you."

"What was that?" Ibuki wondered with a grin.

"I guess I like you too." Hiyoko's words were a massive understatement.

But Ibuki knew exactly what she meant.

"I love you," Ibuki declared earnestly, right before kissing Hiyoko's cheek.

She pulled away, watching Hiyoko's face with satisfaction. Hiyoko's lips were trembling from her attempts to form words, amber eyes wide with shock. Hiyoko couldn't even try to look angry, but even if she could, her blushing cheeks were enough to take all the bite out of her expression.

But not enough to take all the bite out of Hiyoko herself, it seemed, when Hiyoko grabbed Ibuki's collar harshly.

It was hard to say who was more shocked when the embarrassed blonde smashed their lips together: Ibuki or Hiyoko herself.

"I can't believe they did that," Mikan groaned. "They just made the protagonist of the first film the killer's minion?! Really?!"

"It came out of nowhere!" Fuyuhiko agreed. "No build-up, no reason, just, bam, plot twist!"

"It didn't make any sense!" Mikan exclaimed exasperatedly as they left the movie theater, hand-in-hand. "Koharu was always against the Puzzler's ways! Why would she suddenly make a change and become his minion?!"

"And the effects were crappy, too!" Fuyuhiko grimaced at the recollection of fake blood and obvious CGI. "I can't believe we spent money watching that disappointment of a final movie."

"We could have just had a movie marathon instead." Mikan sighed. "And we could have had curry popcorn."
"We can still do that, can't we?"

"Yeah, if you come over." Mikan hummed, before wondering, "Should we watch the spin-off?"

Fuyuhiko gave her a flat stare. "Do you really want to sit through two hours of bad jokes and half-assed romance?"

"No, I just want two extra hours of cuddling with you," Mikan admitted honestly.

"Oh my fucking god, you dork," Fuyuhiko said with a grin and a roll of his eye.

The tender moment was promptly ruined by Fuyuhiko's cellphone going off. He glanced at Mikan, who nodded in understanding. With a groan, he separated his hand from Mikan's and answered, "Who the fuck is it?"

"Your sister, dumbass."

"What do you want, Natsumi?" Fuyuhiko asked irritably.

"I need to know what's going on with Saionji and Mioda! I can't lose this bet!" Natsumi declared and Fuyuhiko could vaguely hear a thumping sound and a sigh that sounded like Peko.

"What makes you think I'm paying attention to them at all?" Fuyuhiko echoed Peko's sigh. "Go bother Hajime about it."

"You know Hajime and Mahiru are setting up the letters!" Natsumi shrieked. "And you and Miss Medicine were the ones who were supposed to shadow them!"

"You told me to take a film! So I took Mikan to a film!"

"You moron! You know that's not what I meant!"

"You think I would want to spend my day following two absolute idiots hook-" Fuyuhiko paused at a tap on his shoulder, turning to stare up at Mikan. He blinked at her, until he realized that she was making 'gimme, gimme' gestures with her other hand. His phone was immediately placed in her hand.

"Don't worry about a thing, Natsumi!" The nurse chirped cheerfully. "I took care of it."

"You did?" Both Kuzuryuu twins asked in unison.

Mikan hummed as she nodded, saying, "Yeah, I just asked a favour from the people at Chiaki's apartment. They were happy to follow Ibuki-san and Hiyoko-chan around with their prototype bird bot. They built a camera in it and tested if it could fly and record at the same time. Isn't that cool?"

"Yeah? I-I guess..." Natsumi said, completely gobsmacked by the revelation. On the other hand, Fuyuhiko was watching Mikan talk with a smile. Dork.

"So, tell me when I win the bet, I put three hundred on letter number thirteen!" Mikan exclaimed, before handing the phone back to Fuyuhiko.

Half a minute of nodding and vague sounds of assent later, and Fuyuhiko's hand was safely back in Mikan's.

"You think it worked?" Fuyuhiko wondered aloud.
"The bird or the bet?"

"Both."

Mikan thought for a second, before shrugging. "No idea! I just know that whatever happens, they'll be happy together."

"Right, they'll be such a weird couple."

"Not like we're particularly normal either," Mikan pointed out.

"Never said that we were," Fuyuhiko stated, and Mikan laughed. She hugged his arm to her chest and rested her head on top of his.

(A few hours later, a mortified Mahiru, a humiliated Hajime, a chuckling Chiaki, a narrow-eyed Natsumi, and a poker-faced Peko were forced to concede a grand sum of six hundred yen to Mikan and Fuyuhiko.)

Like any new couple, there was a time frame where Hiyoko and Ibuki had to try to figure out where they stood. How much affection was strictly necessary at any given time, what constituted a proper date, and whatnot.

Unfortunately, a few days after the start of their romantic relationship, they found themselves faced with a problem.

They (or, well, Hiyoko) weren't comfortable showing romantic affection in front of others. And they were surrounded by people who were.

As if that weren't enough, Fuyuhiko formally began living with them.

Hiyoko almost gagged when she saw Fuyuhiko and Mikan washing the dishes together, the obvious heart-eyes the two shared enough to bring tears to her eyes.

"Thanks again for helping with the dishes, Fuyuhiko," Mikan said, oblivious to Hiyoko's discomfort. Of course. Focus on the boyfriend, why don't you.

"It's only natural, isn't it? I won't let you do all the work." Fuyuhiko rolled his eye. "And besides. Consider it a thank you for the food."

"You're too sweet!" Mikan giggled, smiling at Fuyuhiko.

"Hey, if I'm sweet, you're enough to cause diabetes," Fuyuhiko retorted. Urgh.

"Oh my god, will you two get over your fucking honeymoon phase already?!" Hiyoko shrieked. "We're suffocating over here!" She jabbed a thumb at Ibuki, who had been forced to suffer alongside her silently-

"Speak for yourself," Ibuki stated, pausing to munch on a handful of popcorn. "I'm enjoying this."

*Of. Fucking. Course.*

"Get fucking used to it!" Fuyuhiko snapped. "I'm not stopping any time soon!"

"Me neither! Fuyuhiko deserves the world!" Mikan declared passionately.
"Fucking shit, how are we going to live with these people," Hiyoko groaned, before glancing at the captivated Ibuki. "Or how am I going to live with these people, more likely.

"Hey, we could learn from them!" Ibuki defended, chomping on another handful. "I'd like to- chomp- talk to you like that too!"


"So, tonight then," Ibuki concluded.

"Shut up!" Hiyoko shot back.

"if you're going to bicker, can you take it out of the kitchen please?" Mikan asked.

Hiyoko groaned. "Fine. But it's only so I don't have to put up with this-" She waved an arm at the other couple. "-any longer than I absolutely have to."

"Again, get used to it," Fuyuhiko called out. Hiyoko would have thrown something at him if she could. As it were, she just rolled herself away.

She didn't need super hearing to know that Ibuki followed her. The sounds of footsteps and chewing were obvious enough.

"Don't get crumbs on the bed," Hiyoko huffed as she headed down the hallway."It'll be annoying to clean up."

"So cold!" Ibuki pressed a hand against her heart, flattening the top of the food bag against her chest. "I-I can... feel my heart... S-H-A-T-T-E-R-I-N-G...!"

"Stop being dramatic, dumbass." Hiyoko shot her a sharp glare that could rival Peko's swords in steeliness.

"Then make me~" Ibuki made a kissy face at Hiyoko, who recoiled.

"W-what the hell?! No! Fuck off!"

"Hiyo-chan~ Please, give me love and attention~"

"You are the biggest idiot to ever walk the earth."

"You love me~"

"And I hate it sometimes," Hiyoko admitted, right before pulling Ibuki in for a kiss...

... and swerving away at the last second, hitting Ibuki's cheek instead.

Ibuki wasn't one to be deterred, though. She just pressed kisses all over Hiyoko's face, until she dissolved into a giggling mess.

"What are you laughing about, Ibuki?" Hiyoko demanded, though humour danced behind her eyes.

"I just realized something," Ibuki said before pressing a kiss to the bridge of Hiyoko's nose. Their eyes met as Ibuki pulled away, a smile stretching across her lips. "Thirteen was a lucky number after all."
By the way, there was an explanation for why Fuyuhiko was living with them. One that started with a birthday and ended with an argument.

But that's a story for next time.

Chapter End Notes

EXAMS ARE FINALLY FUCKING OVER OH MY GOD FUCKING A AA A A G G G F F FSWEET SUNSHINE ON A CORN COB LOVER OF DUCKS AND ANA A A POKER FUCKSTICKS MUNCHER LA edit: i cant believe fuyuhiko took mikan to another town to watch a sucky movie just to avoid following ib- actually i can because a) he likes being a little shit, b) he thought mikan would like it and he loves seeing mikan happy, and c) does this dude even NEED an excuse to spend time with his girlfriend
Chapter Notes

i recently learned how to cross-stitch and it just reinforces the idea that fuyuhiko knows how to do it because its a) easier than expected, b) calming (so fuyus dad could have introduced him to calm him down), c) fuyuhiko is TOTALLY the type of person who teaches himself the complicated parts just to sew FUCK YOU into his sisters' shirts.

natsumi loves it but peko doesnt want to wear that in public

See the end of the chapter for more notes

July 1, 4:56 pm

"You're really, really sure about this?" Mikan asked once again, watching as Fuyuhiko stuffed clothes into his bag.

"Of course I am," Fuyuhiko declared, gently grabbing a snowglobe from his closet. Mikan's eyes widened from the sight.

"You kept it?"

"Of course," Fuyuhiko echoed. A cheeky grin made its way on his face as he turned to face Mikan. "It was a gift from you, after all."

He shrugged off his suit jacket and put on a cerulean hoodie, slinging his bag over his shoulder.

"I'm ready to go."

Mikan smiled, moving to loop her arm with his.

"Then let's go home."

June 29, 9:28 am

The only thing you could call it was complete chaos.

Chiaki's apartment had been turned into a whirlwind of activity. Ibuki hung a banner from the corner of the TV to the nearest lamp, Mikan and Hajime were baking up a storm in the kitchen, Chiaki was organizing gifts like Tetris blocks, and Hiyoko was arranging furniture correctly. Everyone found a reason to scream and argue, and in this chaos, two deities of order and leadership were born.

"Try to add more cream," Mahiru advised Mikan, giving the taste-testing back to her. "It needs to be a bit smoother."

"Alright, will do!" Mikan exclaimed cheerfully, rushing back to the kitchen.
"What the goddamn fuck Nanami?! The presents are going to fall- Mioda, if you fucking hang the banner from there-!" Fuyuhiko paused, taking in a deep breath. "Mioda, hang it from the curtain rods. Less dangerous. Nanami, dismantle that fucking present pile and help Saionji fix the furniture. Then you can make the present pile.

"Okie-dokie!" Ibuki cheered, hopping off the top of the pile. The pile of presents shifted and shook, but they didn't collapse with the huge crash Fuyuhiko was expecting, which was better than he could hope for, really.

"Understood." Chiaki went over to help Hiyoko, who was groaning about 'finally can't you idiots see that I am not equipped to be moving huge-ass sofas by myself seriously fuck all of you'.

Fuyuhiko sighed as he went to inform Mahiru of his progress. What a fucking pain-

Mahiru ran up to him, panic in her eyes.

"Koizumi-?"

"Did you see Natsumi?!!" Mahiru demanded frantically, and Fuyuhiko's stomach dropped.

"Shit, I didn't! Where did she go-"

"More like what is she doing-?"

"MERRY CHRISTMAS MOTHERFUCKERS!!" A resounding voice screamed, along with the sound of a door being kicked open. And several dozen party poppers going off at once.

Mahiru and Fuyuhiko both let out a string of profanities, which, for the sake of convenience:will be transcribed like so:

"[CENSORED] NATSUMI- YOU [PROHIBITED] [REMOVED] [EXPUNGED] WHY THE [COVER THE EARS OF THE CHILDREN] WOULD YOU EVEN THINK OF DOING THAT WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU, YOU [The following dialogue has been removed in order to preserve the Teen rating of this fic."

Needless to say, Peko's birthday was bound to be interesting. There was no way it couldn't be, with everyone being so animated.

Peko, on the other hand, was motionless.

Kneeling before Mrs. Kuzuryuu, she kept her eyes on the floor as the older woman spoke.

"So, you're dating Miss Nanami, are you?" Mrs. Kuzuryuu's voice was as cold and unfeeling as a sheet of steel, her words quiet and deliberate.

"I am."

"She will not be a distraction to you, correct?"

"Correct," Peko answered obediently. "I will not allow her to interfere with my duties as a member of the Kuzuryuu family."

"And if you had to choose between her and the ones you swore to protect..."
"I would choose my duty," Peko repeated, absolutely certain of her answer.

"And in the situation that another group were to target her, would you protect her?"

"Of course."

Mrs. Kuzuryuu paused, and for the first time in the conversation, a hint of strain entered her voice.

"And if you lost her?"

"I will not," Peko stated.

"I see." Mrs. Kuzuryuu nodded, before patting Peko's shoulder. A sign that she had met the older woman's standards. "You may rise. I require nothing more from you."

"Of course, Mistress," Peko said formally, before turning to leave.

When she reached the door, she could have sworn she heard something that sounded like, 'history must not repeat.'

Peko dismissed it, though.

Chiaki was immune to blades and poison, as long as strong enough to protect herself from any assassination attempts. Even if she weren't there, Chiaki would be fine.

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**June 30, 12:27 pm**

Mikan was excited.

Not just because she was in a dark room, curled up next to Fuyuhiko, but because it was a surprise party! One where she was in on the surprise! And there were no frog pranks or 'there was no party, surprise!' pranks, just a party!

The group was just waiting for the birthday girl to get there, whispering among themselves in their wait.

"IDIOT IBUKI, DIDN'T SOMEONE TEACH YOU HOW TO NOT BE AN IDIOT?!"

"Nope!"

Er... *trying* to whisper, anyways.

"Shut up, you two!" Fuyuhiko snapped, and Mikan flinched from how close his breath was to her ear. "She's showing up any minute!"

"You're not helping," Natsumi grumbled.

"Urgh, why does it smell like macaroni and cheese?" Mahiru wondered aloud.

"Chi-chan tried to make lunch," Ibuki explained.

"The dumbass almost blew herself up," Hiyoko added. "How do you even make salad explode, anyways?"

Mikan sighed. "That's Chiaki-san, alright..."
"Didn't you say she was making *salad*?" Hajime asked in a whisper.

"I'm not joking." Hiyoko sighed. "She was."

Mahiru groaned, just as Ibuki made a gagging noise at the thought of exploded macaroni and cheese salad. There were three things very, very wrong with that idea.

"Will all of you shut up already?!" Fuyuhiko demanded.

"Yeah, for once, my brother is right! This is Peko's first surprise party, so treat it seriously!" Natsumi added.

"U-uh, sorry," Mikan mumbled.

"*Not you,*" Fuyuhiko hissed. "You were actually keeping quiet."

"Really?" Mikan gasped.

"Really. I mean it, Mikan."

"Ew, ew, ew, they're going at it again-!" Hiyoko's disgusted outburst was cut off by Ibuki declaring, "So cute!"

"We're not very good at this quiet thing, are we?" Hajime chuckled awkwardly to himself, Mahiru groaning once again by Ibuki's side.

"HEY, PEKO, WHY DON'T YOU COME INSIDE?" Chiaki's voice boomed through the door crack, the sound shocking everyone into shutting their mouths.

"Oh god she's never heard of subtlety," Hiyoko hissed in horror.

"Quiet!" Ibuki shushed her.

The group waited in silence as Chiaki led Peko inside. Chiaki pretended to fumble around for a light switch, but, unfortunately, Peko had very good hearing. She had to have good senses, to be a proper bodyguard.

The silver-haired swordswoman heard a whine. A whine that must have been human, in her girlfriend's home. In the dark, when no one had been around.

Naturally, she did what any good swordswoman/bodyguard would have done: She pushed Chiaki behind her, drew her sword, and swung at the source of the sound.

A scream resonated, someone scrambled to get away, Peko swore to save Chiaki from intruders, the swordswoman too caught up in her protective instincts to realize how familiar the voices were, profanity and panic were in the air-

By the time Chiaki managed to flip the light switch, Peko's sword was embedded in Chiaki's couch, just millimeters away from a nervous Natsumi's neck.

"H-happy birthday...?" Natsumi offered lamely, sweat dripping down her neck.

The only way the situation could get worse was if someone else spotted the scene of the attempted murder.

Which, of course, is why Nagisa and Kotoko walked in at precisely that moment, holding gifts in
their hands.

Kotoko immediately pulled a gun out of her skirt.

"Do I seriously have to put down a rapid dog now?" She sighed, pointing it at Peko. And then a smile appeared on her face, though it looked more like a murderous smirk than anything. "Oh well. I'll make this quick, and then we can get to the party!"

"KOTOKO NO-" Hajime's scream was cut off by chaos breaking out once again.

Or, well, it would have, if it weren't for a terrifying redhead.

"All of you, sit down, now!" Mahiru barked, stabbing her finger at the dining table. "No fooling around, and leave your weapons at the door!"

Bowing their heads, Kotoko, Peko, Hajime, and Natsumi complied. Together, they made a tower of firearms, one pair of brass knuckles, a lead pipe, a flail, car keys, a frying pan, an airplane, bindings, a weird vibrating doll, a big rock, a golden sword sheath, a ukulele, a collapsible fishing rod, a seven-branched sword, a rusted knife, a crowbar, a stapler, a crystal ball, a tuning fork, one pair of brass knuckles that was painted pink, knives, and a normal sword. One that nearly reached the ceiling.

Mikan glanced at Fuyuhiko, who shrugged, then at Hiyoko. Hiyoko sighed, before tossing an axe on the pile. Another insistent glance, and Hiyoko added a baseball bat.

Nagisa stared at the precarious pile warily, before his sister came up and knelt before the monstrosity. Ibuki took out her piercings, one by one, and laid them at the edge of the pile.

"Is that everything?" Mahiru asked, eyes narrowed into slits as she looked over the group. Everyone, even the Yakuza, flinched at her glare.

Mikan wordlessly added a switchblade to the pile.

"Good, let's go get the cake then!" Mahiru declared, her mood going from terrifying to cheerful in less than half a second.

No one could defy her orders, and soon, everyone was seated around the table. By the time Mahiru had set the cake down, Ibuki was chatting about a game with Chiaki, Natsumi and Fuyuhiko were bickering, Mikan and Hiyoko were discussing their experiences setting up with the party, and Nagisa and Hajime were stopping Kotoko from trying to "Finish the job" with a butter knife.

Ibuki finished her cake first, pulling a guitar out from under the table and starting to sing.

'Happy birthday!' Ibuki screamed, headbanging as she strummed along. 'TWENTY-SIX YEARS AGO, A BLOODSTAINED DEMON ROSE FROM THE DEPTHS AND-'

The rest of the song could not be transcribed, because most of the guests were covering their ears and cowering away. The only ones who were listening were Natsumi, Hiyoko, Nagisa, and Peko.

"So! What did you think?" Ibuki asked, smiling as she put the guitar away. She was completely oblivious to how most of her friends were sobbing in relief.

"It was a wonderful birthday gift," Peko said with a smile. "Thank you."

Both Hiyoko and Nagisa moved next, before flinching and glaring at each other. They gritted their
teeth together to get ahead in their battle of wills, before Hiyoko went *screw it and screw you!* and passed the present to Peko anyways.

"For you~!" She exclaimed innocently, a bright smile on her face. Peko's eyes widened as she received the book, skimming over the title. "A sword technique as beautiful as a flurry of flower petals. It's said that your sword will sing with the wind when you use it!"

"Thank you..." Peko murmured, touched by the gift.

Not one to be outdone, Nagisa handed over his box next. With a few deft strokes of her butter knife, Peko cut through the wrapping, pulling out a tea set.

"Nanami said you would appreciate it," Nagisa stated. He crossed his arms over his chest, a small pout on his lips. "Though, whether you like it or not has nothing to do with me."

"Thank you very much," Peko said with a smile.

Nagisa gave her a small grin in return, and then Ibuki squealed.

"So, so, so, so cute! So cute, so cute, so cute!"

"Way to ruin the mood," Hiyoko deadpanned.

Nagisa cleared his throat, returning to his previous stoic demeanor, saying, "Moving on."

Now, by this time, the others had somewhat recovered from Ibuki's song. Kinda.

Chiaki seemed to have fallen on the floor or under the table sometime during the song, given how she was nowhere to be seen, Kotoko laughing her ass off, Mikan was still clinging to Mahiru for dear life, Fuyuhiko had his face glued to the table and he showed no signs of getting up any time soon, and Natsumi was still blushing wildly over the performance. Hajime had his hand pressed against his forehead as he gave Peko his gift.

"Me and Mahiru and Natsumi worked together to make you a cat calendar," Hajime explained as Peko flipped through the pages. He was fairly certain that his words were bouncing off her skull, given how intently Peko stared at the photos and how much her smile seemed to glow at the sight. "You like it?"

"I love it," Peko declared.

Hajime leaned over the table to give Fuyuhiko's head a flick. The Yakuza heir groaned, rolled his head to the side, and set a golden sheath on the table.

"For... you," Fuyuhiko groaned.

"Are you okay?" Peko asked in concern.

"No," Fuyuhiko replied immediately.

"Poor thing!" Ibuki gasped. "I'll sing you a 'get better' song!"

Nagisa rolled his eyes, a single word dropping from his lips: "Don't."

"Do it." Kotoko grinned.

"No," Hajime pleaded.
"Please don't..." Mikan whimpered.

"Not again," Mahiru added.

"Yes please!" Natsumi exclaimed.

"Later, then," Ibuki amended. "Maybe after the gifts!"

"We're going to die...!" Mikan sobbed.

"Stay strong, Mikan-chan," Mahiru reassured her with a pat on the head.

And then Kotoko stood, slamming her foot down on the table.

"Kotoko!" Hajime gasped in horror. "What if you break it?!"

"It's fine, it's fine, it's to provide a dramatic flavour!" Kotoko declared, winking at her brother before turning to Peko. Taking on a tone of authority, she pointing at the swordswoman and said, "Pekoyama Peko! I bestow this invaluable gift unto you! As a token of friendship, sisterhood, family ties, and devotion!"

"This coming from the girl who tried to shoot her..." Fuyuhiko sighed.

"Get to it already!" Hiyoko screamed.

With a grin, Kotoko pulled a gun from her waistband and threw it at Peko. Peko caught it, her impassive eyes never leaving Kotoko's face.

"Didn't we say no weapons?!" Mahiru demanded.

"You never said no gifts!" Kotoko retorted.

"Why would you give a Yakuza a gun?! She probably has a million already!" Hiyoko demanded.

"Kotoko... why did you do this?" Nagisa sighed.

"Because it's her birthday, duh!" Kotoko winked, shooting them all a shining smile.

No one bought it.

"I don't want to learn about the inner workings of a typical Yakuza family," Ibuki decided.

"This isn't typical," Fuyuhiko stated.

"What is normal then?" Mikan wondered, staring at Fuyuhiko and Natsumi expectantly.

"If you're the heir, big showy galas. If you're not, quiet home parties with reasonable gifts," Fuyuhiko answered.

"Wow! Thanks for the information, Fuyuhiko!"

"It's nothing, Mikan."

"QUIT BEING SUCH A LOVEY-DOVEY COUPLE!" Natsumi shrieked. "This is sickening! Seriously sickening! I might have supported you, but that doesn't mean I want to watch this!"

"Gross, gross, gross!" Hiyoko added. "Totally gross! Why are you people like this?! It's totally
"disgusting!"

"What the hell did we do to you guys?!"

"Yeah, Mikan-chan and Fuyu-chan are cute!"

"Don't defend them, Ibuki!"

"Well obviously I'm going to defend my adorable friends and-"

All of the fighting fell silent at a single sound. In fact, it was safe to say that everyone quieted down at the sound, eyes and ears captivated by the event.

Peko laughed, reserved and almost-silent at first, before growing louder and less controlled. Every time she seemed like she would stop, she would look up and start again, eyes growing teary from the expressions on her friends' faces.

No, not friends.

Family.

She laughed and she laughed, tears falling down her face as she realized it.

It was chaotic. It was insane. The group bickered and bantered and quarreled over almost everything. They were rowdy, loud, cumbersome, and just plain weird...

And yet, Peko wouldn't want to spend her time with anyone else.

"Thank you. Thank you for a wonderful birthday."

The others slowly shook themselves out of their shock, returning Peko's smile.

"Happy birthday, Peko!"

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And then Mikan remembered something.

She jolted out of her seat, placing a needle and a vial in front of Peko.

"...what's this?" Peko questioned.

"A sedative," Mikan answered simply, unaware of how the others flinched at her words. "Just 10 milliliters can kill someone. Be careful with it."

"...thanks, I suppose," Peko deadpanned, taking the g-

"Hooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooolld up!" Kotoko screamed. "You're telling me that she can give the b-day girl poison, but I can't give her a gun?!"

"What the hell, Mikan?" Fuyuhiko wondered, raising an eyebrow at his girlfriend. "How did you even get that?"
"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH! Mikan-chan's being corrupted, she's becoming a dangerous woman, this is so not good!" Ibuki shrieked.

"Mikan-chan, didn't we say no weapons?!

"U-uh... what," Mikan said flatly in return. "Why do you think it's poison?"

"It's not?" Peko asked.

"No, uh, Chiaki-san told me you've been having trouble sleeping, so I got you the stuff we use to knock patients out on the operating table, since I'm pretty sure Yakuza are trained to be immune to anything weaker and-

"Did she get that idea from a Yakuza movie...?" Natsumi theorized out loud.

"I hope you like it!" Mikan declared, oblivious to Natsumi's words.

"I do," Peko confirmed with a warm smile. "Thank you."

"Speaking of which, where is Chiaki?" Hajime tapped his finger against his chin.

"You'd think she'd come out to give her girlfriend a gift..." Mahiru lifted the tablecloth... ...to find no one there.

"She's gone!" Ibuki gasped.

"A murder mystery?!!" Kotoko and Nagisa exclaimed in unison, Kotoko excitedly and Nagisa nervously.

"No, you dumbasses," Hiyoko pointed to a spot by Peko's foot, "she's obviously up to something."

Peko glanced under her chair, finding a note stuffed under her chair.

'Meet me on the roof.'

"A dramatic development...!!" Mahiru gasped.

"She's going to confess her love!" Mikan looked delighted by the notion.

"They're already dating," Hajime stated.

"Still, it must be pretty special!" Ibuki smiled, lifting Peko up by the armpits. "Go on, go! Meet her up! Have fun!"

"I-I will," Peko promised, heading for the door.

"Ah~ Young love~" Kotoko sighed dreamily.

"They're older than you." Nagisa sighed.

Chiaki stared over the skyline, a metal contraption in her hands. Her feet dangled over the edge of the building, legs poking through gaps in the roof's safety fence. A smile stretched across her lips as she watched cars go by and listened to the sounds of a city below her feet.

She didn't turn around when the door opened, instead raising her voice so Peko could hear.
"Wonderful day, isn't it?"

"It's gorgeous," Peko agreed.

"It's just incredible, watching the world pass by you." The gamer hummed as she -her head up to stare at the clouds. "A chance to relax, take a break from your life, just exist in peace... I can see why you like it."

"Mediation is essential to peak performance," Peko said wisely.

"Yeah, but peace and quiet's only the #2 reason why I like this." Chiaki turned her head towards Peko, a mischievous glint in her eyes. Her fingers curled around the metal thing in her hands as she waited for Peko to humour her.

"Oh?" Peko asked flatly, raising an eyebrow at her girlfriend. "And what, may I ask, is the #1 reason?"

"You." Chiaki punctuated her sentence by leaning over, pressing her lips to Peko's cheek. Peko let out a small squeak, her face reddening rapidly. Chiaki chuckled, pulling away with a satisfied smirk.

"After all, most of my important memories with you were made on high places," Chiaki explained, pulling her legs out from the fence so she could turn to face Peko. "I started to associate looking down on the world, or feeling calm and peaceful with you."

"I-I see." Peko averted her eyes, too flustered to even glance at Chiaki.

"I love you!" Chiaki exclaimed cheerfully, like she was trying to murder Peko.

"I... would hope so," Peko mumbled, completely, totally, unmistakably red, from the roots of her hair to the tips of her toes.

"And so, that's why I'm giving this to you," Chiaki declared, pushing the metal object into Peko's hands. "Happy birthday."

"Thank you, but... what is it?"

"My heart," Chiaki answered, and Peko flinched. "I figured that I might as well give you the literal and the metaphorical thin-"

"Don't you need this?!" Peko demanded.


"Put it back, put it back right now!" Peko shoved the gift back at Chiaki, whose lips twitched and trembled, shoulders shaking in silence. Peko watched fearfully, panicking at the thought of Chiaki shutting down and collapsing or something.

One second passed, then two, then five, and it proved to be too much for Chiaki. Her dam of self-restraint was broken by the raging torrent of her pain, leading to her...

...laughing so hard she fell backwards, not even noticing when her head collided with the roof.

Peko watched, stunned as Chiaki pushed herself up. The gamer wiped at her eyes, though she wasn't actually crying.
"Gotcha~!" Chiaki winked at the silver-haired woman, sticking her tongue out too. "I'm solar-powered, why would I need a heart?"

"D-don't trick me!" Peko protested. "I was worried for you!"

"I know!" Chiaki grinned widely as she took the present back, beginning to toy with it as she spoke. "You've got a big heart like that, and it's so cute." She pulled and tugged and loosened some components, until the thing looked less like a lump and more like a mess of thick wiring with joints at various intervals. "So gullible, too." Chiaki snicked as she managed to extract what looked like a fin from the mess.

"What are you doing...?" Peko asked warily.

Pink eyes stared into Peko's eyes knowingly, before Chiaki stuck out her tongue again. "Secret."

And so, Peko watched as Chiaki twisted joints and popped pieces into place, until the form became more and more serpentine. A finned tail began to broaden, the body moving up and down in a rotund version of a zig-zag. Two sets of legs supported the miniature statue, a menacing set of claws on each foot. The dragon's head was the most detailed, whiskers flowing out, extending to the midpoint of the metal creature's body. A maw of teeth rested below molded eyes, looking ready to devour anyone who crossed it.

"The testers downstairs really like their mechanical animals," Chiaki said, poking the dragon's back with a smile. "Right after finishing their birds, they wanted to make a dragon, though this design is too clunky and has no room for anything like motors or anything. So they let me have it."

"You're... giving me a miniature dragon?" Peko looked towards Chiaki for clarification, who giggled and nodded.

"Like it?"

"It's my second favourite gift today," Peko answered, and Chiaki's smile fell off her face.

"Seriously?! As your cute girlfriend, it's my job to make you the happiest!" Chiaki groaned, pouting and glaring. "Who outdid me?!"

"You," Peko declared. Chiaki's eyes widened as she blushed. "Spending time with my adorable girlfriend was a gift I'll never forget."

"You absolute dork!" Chiaki snorted, before her hand shot out to grab the tie of Peko's suit, pulling her head down for a kiss.

The sudden kiss was what saved their life.

Because if she hadn't pulled Peko's head down, or been even the slightest bit slower, the bullet that grazed Peko's back would have hit her in the skull.

Mrs. Kuzuryuu had a goal.

To reach this goal, she would do anything.

"A sniper...!" Peko cursed her luck, pulling Chiaki into her arms. Chiaki didn't have any time to reply before she was carried towards the door to the rest of the building.
Chiaki's ear was pressed against Peko's neck as the red-eyed woman pushed through the door, her hearing full of Peko's frantic heartbeat.

"It's an attack on the Kuzuryuu family," Peko growled, face darkening at the thought. The swordswoman carried her down the stairs, rushing to get back to Chiaki's apartment.

'What's going on?'

Chiaki kept her head low, unfocused on the world around her, except for the sound of Peko's heart.

'Why did this happen today of all days?'

The sound of her heartbeat was almost hypnotizing to Chiaki.

"They must have been waiting for their chance to dispose of me, so they could move in on the others unopposed-!" Peko muttered, gritting her teeth today in frustration. "But how could they have known, there must have been someone who informed them, this is just too suspicious-!"

'This is my fault, isn't it?'

"I'm sorry," Chiaki said suddenly, before twisting her way out of Peko's hold. She landed on the floor, quickly pushing herself up.

"Chiaki?" Peko tensed, staring at Chiaki warily.

"It's your birthday, so you shouldn't overwork yourself," Chiaki stated calmly. "Your adorable and indestructible girlfriend is going to take care of this."

Peko grimaced, before nodding.

"Take care of the sniper," Peko ordered, blood-red eyes narrowed as she gripped her new sheath tightly. "I'm going to protect my family."

"And I'll be right back, so I can see you being cool." Chiaki smiled, pressing a kiss to Peko's cheek.

"You better," Peko replied, grinning slightly as the two separated.

'It's going to be fine, because I have faith in Chiaki.'

Kuzuryuu Amaterasu had a brother, once.

She would have described him as a living contradiction. Someone who loved life in all its forms, yet didn't bat an eye at unprovoked murder. A sensitive soul who was born into a world of bloodshed and death.

Though she was only born a few minutes earlier, she felt protective of her identical twin. She always looked out for him, tried to make him happy, and fought others on his behalf. Not that he needed it. Her brother was skilled with any and all forms of firearms. So skilled, in fact, that he was the SHSL Sharpshooter.

Thankfully, Amaterasu gained entry into Hope's Peak as well, being the SHSL Yakuza. She remembered being asked many times if they were related, because in spite of their identical appearances, they weren't like each other at all.

While she threw herself into her studies, his schedule was full of interactions with people he would
kill at a moment's notice if he had a reason to. Where Amaterasu seemed cold, uncaring, ruthless, cruel, spiteful, violent, sadistic, rude, and weird, people genuinely liked her brother. And he liked them in return.

Amaterasu wasn't sure whether or not she was surprised when she first learned of her brother's crush. She knew that she was shocked when she learned who it was, but the idea of him in love? It was bound to happen sooner or later, with his endless optimism and hopeless romantic tendencies.

She just had to wonder what the fuck he saw in Kitaki Atsushi.

Seriously. What the fuck.

Atsushi was just a baker. He might have had some ties to the Yakuza in the past, but there was no way in hell he would be able to even yell at someone, let alone hurt or kill someone! He had no place in their world of manipulation and death! The moment he was introduced to their world, he would die!

But her brother ignored that. Her brother invited the baker on a date. Amaterasu assumed they would be fine, because her brother was strong and he could shoot anything-

Atsushi was weak, though.

When the assassin appeared, he froze instead of fled.

He was in the way of the SHSL Assassin's mark. He was collateral damage, he was going to be killed to make her job easier...

He was going to die...

He was supposed to die...

He was supposed to be the one that died, not Fujihiko!

Fujihiko was never supposed to sacrifice his life for the one he loved. But he did. He loved and he died and Amaterasu never forgot. She married the man that Fujihiko couldn't, she bore the children that Fujihiko never got to meet, she lived to build a family as strong as the boy who gave up his life for another.

She knew that Fuyuhiko was similar to his namesake. She knew that inviting a normal person into the world of the Yakuza was asking for death and heartbreak.

But she also knew that there would be no convincing him otherwise. Her son was stubborn, so, so stubborn that he would never change his mind on it.

Her only hope was to try to make sure that they were both strong. So strong that no one would dare oppose them.

To accomplish that, Kuzuryuu Amaterasu would gladly bear the weight of her family's scorn, gladly wear any mask, and gladly take any attack.

So long as they survived, it didn't matter what became of her.

"Shouldn't Nanami have a key...?" Fuyuhiko sighed, rolling his eye as the door was pounded hard enough to shatter a weaker piece of wood.
"The dumbass probably forgot all about it because of her hormones," Hiyoko grumbled.

Ibuki listened carefully, hearing the sounds of rushed footsteps, right before something crashed into the door. "I think they're getting desperate, she just tackled the door."

"SCREW OFF!" Hiyoko screamed at the door. "You're going to break the fucking door! Find your key and enter like a normal person!"

"Absolutely no window entrances!" Mikan added.

The door suffered another series of hits in response, creaking dangerously from the beating.

"They're not going to give up," Nagisa said, resigned as he stood.

"Seriously, what an idiot couple..." Kotoko giggled. "So fun to watch, though!"

"There's something weird about this," Hajime turned to Mahiru, who was staring intently at the window. "Mahiru?"

"That... that's Chiaki-chan, isn't it?" Mahiru pointed at a figure flying through the air, heading to another building.

"That's d-definitely Chiaki!" Hajime gasped. "But if Chiaki's there, then-"

Realization hit too late, the warning of "Don't open the door!" falling on deaf ears as Nagisa's hand dropped from the doorknob.

A group of thugs stood before the doorway, and Nagisa backed away in fear. Most of them stayed outside the room, mostly for intimidation or in case a fight broke out. Two of their female members shoved past Nagisa, wearing sickening grins as they dominated the room. Another man threw an arm over Nagisa's shoulder, immobilizing him in a one-armed hug. Ibuki clenched her hands into fists at the sight.

"Now, now, we're not looking for trouble," A woman in sunglasses said with a wave. The group tensed at the sight of a nail bat slung over her shoulder, knowing that her words were as insincere as possible.

"Yeah, we could be such great friends!" The man holding Nagisa exclaimed. "Just one thing.

"Kuzuryuu Fuyuhiko and Kuzuryuu Natsumi." The last of the trio stared at them with sharp eyes, gripping her knife tightly. "Come with us if you value the lives of your civilian friends. You wouldn't want them to get hurt because of you, would you?"

"Are you serious?" The two of them asked in unison. "No fucking way."

"Your guard dog ain't here to protect you," The large man boasted. "There's no one here to protect you."

"What makes you think that we need to be protected?!" Natsumi demanded.

"The fact that all of you are unarmed." The apparent leader smirked as she waved her nail bat at the pile of weapons. Mahiru flinched, clinging to Hiyoko in her fear. "Thanks for that, by the way, redhead."

Mahiru whimpered.
"So? Your answer, Kuzuryuu and Kuzuryuu?"

"Fuck no," Fuyuhiko hissed.

"Die in a ditch, bastards." Natsumi gave them the middle finger.

"You're asking for things to get messy," The woman adjusted her sunglasses with a sadistic grin. "Good. I'm looking forward to this."

"Get the helpless ones first!" The other woman screamed at the group outside the door. "Slaughter everyone but the targets!"

The crowd outside began to pile in, though there were so many that it was taking a while for all of them to enter the apartment.

Chaos was about to break out, Mahiru realized. A fight for their lives, a duel to the death, something along those lines. She just wished that she could get away, because that group looked like they were ready to kill-

And then Hajime and Mikan calmly walked up to the woman in sunglasses and her second-in-command, bright smiles on their faces.

"Wonderful weather, isn't it?" Hajime asked casually, his smile reflected in dark sunglasses.

"I love what you did with your hair!" Mikan exclaimed cheerily, the other woman too stunned by her nonchalance to respond.

And then, in synchronization, the pair of brunettes kneed their opponent in the stomach, knocking the wind out of them. A knife was swung at Mikan's face, while Hajime dodged a strike from the bat.

"You assholes...!" The one holding Nagisa dug his nails into the teenager's arm, making him gasp in pain.

That was a mistake. A mistake that prompted Ibuki to place her hands on the underside of the table and-

"KEEP YOUR HANDS OFF MY FUCKING BROTHER!" Ibuki roared, launching the table at the door. The first five inside were hit, and hit hard enough to knock them out in an instant. The others paid no heed to that, stomping on their fallen comrades' unconscious bodies to get inside. With the three already in, the total number of opponents became twelve.

Chaos broke out. Ibuki blindly charged after the man hurting her brother, intent on destroying him and anyone who got in her way. Kotoko shot at anyone she deemed a threat with Peko's birthday present, Mahiru ran, Natsumi decked the first guy who opposed her, while Hajime evaded more attacks. Hiyoko and Fuyuhiko found themselves headed in the same direction. Their eyes met once, yet once was enough for both of them to understand.

"I didn't know you were this smart," Hiyoko teased as she rammed into an obstacle.

"I could say the same to you," Fuyuhiko retorted, knocking the obstacle to the ground with a debilitating strike.

They both smirked as they made their way to the weapon pile. Hiyoko got her favourite baseball ball, and Fuyuhiko had his sister's pistol.
"Yo, Ibuki!" Hiyoko called out, grabbing a mismatched pair of brass knuckles for her girlfriend.

"Bit busy for an argument, thanks!" Ibuki yelled back, trying to take on three opponents at once. She was nimble and agile, but she was already covered in a few bruises from hits she wasn't able to dodge.

"Idiot Ibuki..." Hiyoko rolled her eyes.

Fuyuhiko shoved her wheelchair at the fight, and Hiyoko swung at the ones who dared to touch her idiot.

Fuyuhiko turned back to the weapons, knowing that they would be fine. He grabbed a few knives, a few more guns, and the crowbar, before rushing back into the fray, ducking past Mahiru to get away.

Mahiru, despite being in a veritable battlefield, was carrying two pillows, grimacing at the constant sounds of groaning and screaming. She had her eyes on a target, hands clenched into fists at the sight.

Kotoko had been shooting people down from her spot in the corner, her back pressed against the wall so she didn't have to worry about backstabbing. That was a good idea and all, until she ran out of bullets. Then her advantage became her downfall, leaving her nowhere to run when a scowling woman stomped towards her, trapping her against the wall with a bleeding arm.

"Looks like you can't depend on your little toy," The woman drawled, cackling as she raised a knife to Kotoko's neck. Kotoko whimpered as she tried to lean as far away as possible, only to flinch at the feeling of cold steel pressing into her skin.

And then the woman got a pillow to the face, knocking her to the ground. Mahiru sat on her stomach, smothering the assailant with both of her weapons. At least until she got stabbed in the arm. Then she jumped to her feet, accidentally crushing a few of the other woman's ribs.

"Ow, owowowowowowow!" Mahiru yelped, her eyes focused on the knife. The knife that was in her arm. Like, she was bleeding, because there was a knife. In her arm. Holy shit.

Adrenaline was about to wear off for Mahiru, at least until she noticed another guy lumbering towards them. In that situation, she let instincts take over, ignoring her pain and discomfort to lift up her camera and snap a photo. Which, granted, would have done absolutely nothing save blind him temporarily, if Natsumi hadn't climbed on top of Chiaki's couch to give another guy a flying kick to the head. Like a pair of dominos, the falling thug easily knocked over the disoriented man, sending them both to the ground.

Mahiru smiled at the result, looking confident, mature, strong, and various other adjectives.

And then she fainted.

"She was looking cool, up until that point..." Kotoko groaned, unable to even say anything in response.

"Shut up and help me protect her," Natsumi snapped.

"Sure, I owe her for saving my life!" Kotoko exclaimed, before a pair of guns landed at their feet. The pink-haired teen barely looked up in time to see Fuyuhiko heading back towards the fighting. She smirked as she grabbed them, passing one to Natsumi.
"Let's blow them away." Natsumi shot her a lopsided grin, and Kotoko nodded.

Those two were the reason behind the bullets that struck Nagisa's captor in the back. This, combined with Nagisa's acute analytical abilities informing him of the most excruciating area to attack an adult male, or, in layman's terms, a kick to the dick, brought the man to his knees. Nagisa was capable of easily worming his way out of the guy's grip, rushing to help his sister.

Ibuki... well. Even in a fight, she was Ibuki. That couldn't have been more evident than when, instead of actually using the brass knuckles, she grabbed the handles of Hiyoko's wheelchair and used her girlfriend to run over their enemies. It was mostly only effective because Hiyoko had a baseball bat she used to hit them.

Nagisa sighed as he threw a chair at a man approaching Ibuki from behind. Even in a fight, he had to take care of Ibuki.

He dodged swings and sidestepped stabs to get to the kitchen, knowing that there were a few knives he could use to gain the upper hand.

Nagisa passed by Hajime, who had managed to get off his tie. That might seem kind of unremarkable, but he was capable of warding off another attack by wrapping the strip of fabric around the weapon. And he did so. His foot found a platform in the thug's stomach, and he kicked and pulled until the sunglasses-wearing woman couldn't keep her grip-

He flung the nail bat away and cracked his knuckles, smiling menacingly at his now-unarmed opponent.

The nail bat, however, was not done troubling people. Hajime had been so caught up in his fight that he forgot to be aware of his allies and their locations. Which meant that he was completely unaware of the fact that he sent a baseball bat with nails sticking out of it directly at the face of one Tsumiki Mikan.

Mikan yelped, ducking under both the flying projectile and a knife swing. Her boyfriend's words echoed around her head as she scrambled to recall every lesson he ever taught her.

"Mikan, wide swings mean get the fuck out of the way!"

Her attacker was taller than her, this, combined with Mikan being crouched down, gave her an idea.

She leaped up, the top of her head shooting straight into the taller woman's solar plexus. They bother staggered away from each other, a throbbing pain in Mikan's head. She didn't have much time to dwell on it, with how a knife was heading at her face.

A step to the side became a topple to the ground, Mikan's hand shooting out to grab any sort of support as she fell. She grabbed her attacker's wrist, inadvertently pulling the other woman to the ground. On top of her. Which, admittedly, was not a good place to be.

So, Mikan drove her knee into the other woman's crotch, prompting a pained scream. Mikan ignored her urge to wince in sympathy, because someone wise once told her, "When you're fighting for your life, there are no rules."

There was no room for sympathy when someone was trying to kill you. Mikan had to remember that as she moved to get the woman off her. A hard kick to the chest did the job wonderfully.

Mikan scrambled to her feet, quickly scanning the room. Hajime had knocked out and tied up his
opponent, Ibuki and Hiyoko were warding off a big guy, Natsumi was standing guard while Kotoko tied a strip from her shirt around Mahiru's arm, Nagisa threw a knife at a guy who had punched Fuyuhiko-

Wait.

Mikan's eyes widened at the sight of Fuyuhiko bleeding, bruising, flinching, and spitting up blood.

The sickening feeling rising up in her stomach, the loss of reasoning, the inability to focus on anything else that took over Mikan could only be called one thing.

Murderous rage.

This time, the words running through her head didn't belong to another person. The scowl on her face, the grumble in her throat, all of it belonged to Mikan and Mikan alone.

'How dare you,' She thought, instinct compelling her to move closer.

"How dare you," Mikan spat, eyes narrowed into slits as she threw an obstacle into a wall, the surface cracking at the force behind the blow.

'How dare you. How dare you touch the person I love. How dare you hurt him. How dare you think you can get away with this.' Mikan's glare softened, becoming a smile as she picked up a pair of brass knuckles. 'I'll kill you for this.'

The constant mantra in her head became something else entirely, picking up speed and frenzy, single-minded obsession in three words.

'I'll kill you I'll kill you I'll kill you I'll kill you I'll kill you I'll kill you I'll kill you I'll kill you I'll kill you I'll kill you I'll kill you I'll kill you I'll kill you I'll kill you I'll kill you I'll kill you I'll kill you I'll kill you-

Mikan didn't know when she started laughing. She just knew that the eyes of her target turned towards her, shock and slight amounts of fear in those eyes. Good.

The world around them didn't exist, in Mikan's eyes. To her, the only thing that mattered was seeing blood.

She didn't remember how she got close to him, or how she got there. She didn't remember what he was saying to her or why she would even think about caring. She remembered the feeling of bone cracking with every strike, blood on her face and arms and clothes. She remembered laughing as he tried to throw her away, recalled the look of terror on his face when she just stood back up. The sounds of screaming, glass shattering, and somewhat familiar voices rang in her ears. The smell of gunpowder, fire, metal, and blood permeated the room. She remembered wanting to break those bones, break that voice, destroy him for daring to think that she would forgive him. That she would forgive anyone who hurt Fuyuhiko.

Mikan had been in her own world, absorbed in her own mission. She didn't notice someone behind her until the person caught her wrist in a tight hold. Her head immediately turned to the person responsible for stopping her, ready to destroy them for interfering-

Only to freeze as her eyes saw Fuyuhiko.

He silently pried Mikan off the mess of a man, and Mikan didn't fight it. Honestly, she was in too much of a bloodlust-induced daze to pay much attention to her surroundings, aside from the warmth of his hand around her wrist as he pulled her away.
She liked that, but she loved the feeling of his hand in hers better. Why wasn't she holding his hand? That would be better.

Mikan turned her hand over, pausing at the sight of brass knuckles in her grip. Her gaze trailed up, up a bandage stained with blood that wasn't hers, up to the back of Fuyuhiko's head.

Realization set in slowly, Mikan groaning as Fuyuhiko got her out of the room.

"Peko and Nanami are here. We're going to be fine," Fuyuhiko promised, guiding Mikan to sit down next to him in the hallway.

"I'm sorry."

"What for?" Fuyuhiko asked curiously.

"I...I think I was about to do something bad," Mikan confessed, dropping the weapons on the floor as she practically crawled into his lap. She rested her head on his shoulder, body curled up on top of him. "I was mad, because he hurt you."

"It's okay." Fuyuhiko rested his hand on her back, cradling her close to him. "We're going to be fine."

Naturally, everyone had to go to the hospital after that. While Ibuki and Mahiru were injured badly enough to require a few days of hospitalization, the others were in relatively good shape. Good enough shape that they were allowed to leave after several hours of treatment.

Mikan, however, had no interest in going back to her own home. Hiyoko had lied to the nurses, faking tears and pain so she could watch over Ibuki and Mahiru. Noble as it was, Mikan couldn't stomach the idea of lying to her co-workers for whatever reason, and her injuries weren't aggravated enough to require a bed for her. Mikan couldn't even say that she was helping out with the extra work, not with her fingers bruised and slightly swollen. It seemed like she would be doomed to a night in an empty apartment with no one but her thoughts to keep her company...

Until Fuyuhiko offered to give her a ride to his house. Mikan eagerly accepted. She liked the idea of Fuyuhiko's company better than silence.

Though, it seemed like it was silent in his car too. Neither Mikan nor Fuyuhiko spoke much for the first few minutes of the drive, neither one wanting to take the first step towards a proper conversation.

Mikan poked at her fingers, nibbled at her lip, trying to summon the courage needed to just, say something! Anything, ask him what happened, why did he stop her, what was going through his mind, why were they attacked at all, just, open her mouth and say the words-

"What the actual hell were you thinking?"

Mikan's brows knitted together as she gaped at Fuyuhiko. The only reply she could come up with was, "What?"

"What were you doing?" Fuyuhiko asked sharply, keeping his eye on the road. "You... I thought you were actually going to kill him."

"That's because I was trying," Mikan answered.
"What?!"

"I was trying to kill him," Mikan repeated.

"B-But, what the fuck?!", Fuyuhiko is somewhere between bewildered, distressed, and strained, judging by the high pitch his voice attains in that moment. "You couldn't raise a hand against Enoshima, even though you had every reason to hate her! But just then..." Fuyuhiko paused to reconsider, adding, "no, that time with Ikusaba too. You really wanted them dead."

"I did." Mikan nodded.

"But you started sobbing about the idea of killing a woman who tried to have you killed fifty times in thirty seconds," Fuyuhiko pointed out. "The only reason you wanted to kill either of them was because of me, right?"

He hesitated, his voice growing quieter as he asked, "Is it my fault?"

"N-no!" Mikan exclaimed immediately. "It wasn't your fault! I've always been like this!"

"Like hell I'm going to believe that," Fuyuhiko scoffed, before his face fell once again. "I was hoping that you could stay away from what my family does. I wanted you to keep being idealistic and innocent, I guess."

"Am I not good enough now?" Mikan asked, tears coming to her eyes. "If you prefer the way I was over the way I am-"

"No, that's not it!" Fuyuhiko rebutted the idea, before gritting his teeth together in frustration. "I just- Don't kill for me! Don't bloody your hands." He sucked in a breath, before sighing out a soft, "Please."

Mikan paused, her eyes trained on Fuyuhiko.

She could have said no. There was a small part of her that wanted to say no. Mikan wanted to rip out nails and carve bloody lines into the flesh of anyone who hurt the ones she loved. She wanted to make them suffer and beg for mercy, mercy that she would never, ever give that to them, because anyone who threatened the joy she had found, anyone who could take that away from her deserved to die-

But Tsumiki Mikan lived to save others. She lived to help others. Even if those people deserved to die...doing that would make Fuyuhiko upset. He would blame himself and feel guilt over something that he didn't do. Her actions would tarnish his bright smile and fill his heart with regret.

Even if it was to protect him, Mikan couldn't inflict that on the man she loved.

"Okay."

"Wait- really?" Fuyuhiko almost flinched at the brunette's words, taken aback by her easy agreement.

"If it makes you upset, I won't do it," Mikan stated. She grinned at Fuyuhiko, reaching out for his hand. "I love your smile too much for that."

"Just my smile?" Fuyuhiko asked teasingly, taking her hand with a slight grin on his face.

"And you in general, of course," Mikan amended, lacing their fingers together. "And your voice,
"D-don't say something so embarrassing...!" Fuyuhiko grumbled. He turned away, his face a bright shade of pink.

Mikan just giggled in response.

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**July 1, 7:39 am**

The next morning, while Mikan was still asleep, Fuyuhiko woke up to a letter asking him to meet his mother in the dining room. He sighed and complied, but not before kissing Mikan's forehead and pulling the covers over her once again.

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**July 1, 1:12 pm**

The next afternoon, while Fuyuhiko was still talking to Hajime and Peko on the phone, Mikan found a letter at the doorway, asking her to meet Mrs. Kuzuryuu in the dining room. She did as she was asked, but not before hugging Fuyuhiko and telling him she'd be right back.

"Let's cut to the chase. You can't stay with Tsumiki. She's simply unworthy of the position as the heir's lover," Mrs. Kuzuryuu stated, eyes cold as she frowned at Fuyuhiko.

"You're too weak! You're not worthy of my son, you will NEVER be worthy of him!" Mrs. Kuzuryuu snarled, glaring at Mikan with fiery eyes.

Mrs Kuzuryuu said the same thing to both of them. Tsumiki wasn't worthy, too weak, too pathetic, she would die in an instant when brought to their world.

Their responses couldn't have made her happier.

"You don't get to fucking decide that, bitch!" Fuyuhiko declared, slamming his fist on the table. "I've been told all my life that I couldn't interact with anyone outside the family, they wouldn't understand, well, fuck that!"

"Really?" She verbally prodded him, hoping to hear more.

"I love her, and she loves me," Fuyuhiko declared without a moment of hesitation. "Neither of us are willing to let anyone stop us from being together, even if it's you."

"Even if it's your mother, one of the most powerful people in all of Japan and all the world."

"Yep," Fuyuhiko popped the 'p', giving her a huge smirk.

"You really think I'm too weak? You really think I'll die that easily? Then why aren't I dead, Mrs. Kuzuryuu?" Tsumiki asked with a sickly sweet smile.

Mrs. Kuzuryuu didn't answer, wearing a matching expression.

"I won't die, not so soon, after all," Her grin turned undeniably smug, "Fuyuhiko swore that we
would be *married.*"

"Really now?"

"Of course~!" Mikan switched to a cutesy and innocent voice. "So please, welcome me as your daughter-in-law."

"It would take time and effort to train her to be worthy of the position, though," Mrs. Kuzuryuu pointed out. "And it would be considerably unethical to force it upon someone. Do you have any idea of her desires?"

Fuyuhiko drew back, grimacing.

"So you say, but can you so readily say that this relationship will last that long? Surely you've noticed how different you are, in experiences, worldviews, and desires. How can you say that these differences will not tear you apart in the future?"

Mikan's eyes widened at the thought.

Mrs. Kuzuryuu was willing to end it there, plant the seed of doubt in their mind so they could tear it down and prove her wrong later, but...

"I would give it up for her," Fuyuhiko said quietly. "If she didn't want to be put through that, if she didn't want to be threatened and judged and pressured like that, I would give it up for her."

Mrs. Kuzuryuu's cold demeanor crashed to the floor, leaving nothing but a stunned expression.

"I won't let that happen," Mikan declared. "I want to follow him, whether it's as his friend, or as a lover. I know he'll be amazing, I know he'll rise above every challenge, and I want to see that."

Behind the act of the cruel, evil mother who wanted nothing more to tear the two apart, Mrs. Kuzuryuu smiled.

Her son had found a wonderful lover, and she couldn't be happier for the two of them.

**July 1, 3:56 pm**

Fuyuhiko liked climbing trees. The tallest branches of the trees that used to be in his backyard were his haven. Even when he grew older, the desire to look down on the world and escape for a moment remained. Though, fortunately, he was capable of climbing down, an invaluable skill when he heard someone struggling at the bottom of the tree.

He descended a few branches, a fond smile forming when he saw Mikan hugging the tree.

"What, never climbed a tree before?" He called out, prompting Mikan to look up at him. Even with the distance between them, he could see how Mikan pouted.

"No! I grew up in a city!" Mikan called out, grabbing a branch with both hands and trying to pull herself up.
"You're gonna break it if you go up like that." Fuyuhiko started climbing down, not stopping until he was on a branch just above her head. "Get your foot on a surface and push too."

It took a little bit of coaching and prodding, lots of, "try that other branch," and, "Mikan, you're going to twist your wrist," but eventually, Mikan got up to where he was. She sat next to him, clinging to him even though there was little danger in falling.

"What were you doing up there?" Mikan asked, pulling Fuyuhiko even closer to her. Fuyuhiko couldn't help but wrap an arm around her waist in response.

"Thinking."

"About what?"

Something about the entire situation made it so easy to be honest. Maybe it was their heart-to-heart the day before. Maybe it was how he trusted her with his heart and soul. Either way, Fuyuhiko found himself blurting out, "Do you really want to stay with me?"

"Yes," Mikan replied instantly.

"Even if people try to kill you, or if you're always expected to be strong, or if you're expected to be cold and ruthless?" Fuyuhiko stared at her with wide eyes and a silent gasp.

"No matter what," Mikan promised with a smile, grabbing his other hand and interlacing their fingers. "I want to stay with you, no matter what. Okay?"

Fuyuhiko turned pink, suddenly unable to look Mikan in the eye. He ducked his head, only for Mikan to pull his face to her shoulder.

"What the hell did I do to deserve you..." Fuyuhiko mumbled into her collarbone.

"You broke your arm and lost an eye," Mikan joked, kissing the top of his head. "Does that count?"

"Argh, I was going to tell you that I would give up my birthright if you couldn't handle it, only for you to spring that shit on me. You're the worst."

"Do you really mean that?" Mikan whimpered, lips twitching and fingers pulling at his suit desperately.

"Of course not," Fuyuhiko declared.

Mikan laughed, before offering, "I wouldn't want you to give up something so important to you, so I won't ask that from you."

"I don't want you to die, or get caught up in this."

"We'll figure something out," Mikan reassured him.

"Yeah, but for now..." Fuyuhiko smiled against the skin of her neck. "Let me enjoy this."

"You're acting like you're the only one enjoying this." Mikan hummed as she ran her fingers over his short hair.

Mrs. Kuzuryuu grinned, turning back to return to her room.

When she opened the door, her husband was glaring down on her.
"What the actual fuck Rasu," Was what he said to her in greeting.

"What?" She demanded, narrowing her eyes at him. "Is that necessary?"

"Was sending assassins after our children necessary?" He shot back.

"I did no such thing. The gang of thugs was the result of some fourth-rate family misconstruing the information that your children would be at a birthday party. They wrongly assumed that they would be vulnerable, struck, and failed," Amaterasu stated coldly. "It has nothing to do whatsoever with me."

"How did they get that information in the first place?"

"I have no clue," Amaterasu growled. "Now let me into my bedroom."

"Our bedroom," Atsushi corrected.

"Are you really so arrogant that you think you have the right to deny me anything?" Her eyebrow lifted in an arch, her voice gaining a dangerous edge.

"Rasu, I just want to know why-"

"It happened because there were fools who thought they could kill your children," Amaterasu snapped. "Now let me through."

"Amaterasu, tell me the truth," Atsushi ordered.

"The truth is that you are being incredibly stubborn, for someone who has no power over anyone in this family."

"And you're being incredibly stupid, thinking that you're not going to get found out!"

Amaterasu fixed her husband with an elongated glare, before letting her displeased frown become a smirk. With practiced ease, she grabbed a fistful of his top, yanking him down to her eye level.

"You're asking for it, hm?" Amaterasu spat, inwardly noting that it was too long since their last fight. "Let's take this outside, Kitaki."

Atsushi looked like he would protest ("Don't be a weakling-"), before his expression hardened into an emotionless mask. Not as good as Amaterasu's, but still fairly good. Amaterasu was almost proud. Almost.

She would only be proud if he managed to beat her in a fight. And even then, she would never say it. After all, her husband was like his daughter, withdrawing praise would only make him more determined to gain it.

"Come on, then," She goaded him with a plastered-on grin. She didn't have to look back to know that he was following her to the garden.

*Kuzuryuu Amaterasu would gladly bear the weight of her family's scorn, gladly wear any mask, and gladly take any attack.*

*So long as they survived, it didn't matter what became of her.*

"I'll kill you for real, this time," She swore as she thought to herself, *I'll see how much you've grown.*
"Fuyuhiko?" Mikan asked as she noticed him tense in her arms. "What's-"

"They're going to use the garden," Fuyuhiko said, pointing at a spot behind Mikan's head.

Mikan watched as Mrs. Kuzuryuu tried to stab her husband, before turning to Fuyuhiko. He observed them with a tired eye, letting out a sigh.

"They're always like this," Fuyuhiko grumbled. A knife clashed against a gardening spade, and he winced at the sound. "They're going to keep it up for a few days."

"Really?"

"Yeah, it's just... urgh." Fuyuhiko leaned against his girlfriend's shoulder.

"Want to stay over at my place tonight?" Mikan offered.

"I'll need more than a night, if we're hoping to wait this out," Fuyuhiko pointed out.

"For the next three months, then," The brunette amended.

"That's way too long for a fight!" Fuyuhiko protested. "Even my parents would have made up by then!"

"So you don't want to?" Mikan wondered.

Fuyuhiko paused, considering it.

"I mean, would you be okay with it? I wouldn't want to impose..."

"I would love it, actually! It would be nice!" Mikan exclaimed.

"I guess I could get away from this house for a few weeks..." Fuyuhiko smiled, and Mikan gasped.

"Y-you said yes!"

"Why are you surprised?!"

"I didn't- I didn't think you would agree-! And now, I'm realizing, hey, I have roommates, you don't like them much, and I can't give you the same food or the fancy rooms or the tree or-"

"Mikan!"

"And I'm thinking that the apartment is cramped and do you even like the same foods as Hiyoko-chan and Ibuki-chan because I don't know if I can cook the foods you like, also clothes and-"

"Mikan!" Fuyuhiko flicked her forehead, bringing her attention to him. "I don't care about your roommates, I'll be fine with whatever food either of us can cook, your room is perfectly fine, I don't need the tree or the clothes, I just want to be with you!"

They paused, both turning a fierce red in the moment. Another second past, and Mikan's lips quirked up into a smile.

"Okay. Let's g-" And then realization hit.

Mikan pointed at Fuyuhiko's still-quarreling parents, asking, "How do we get down and not get killed by them?"
"I know a way," Fuyuhiko reassured her.

They made their way down, Fuyuhiko helping his girlfriend sneak into the house. They were silent all throughout the trip through the home's long corridors, until they reached Fuyuhiko’s room.

"You're really, really sure about this?" Mikan asked once again, watching as Fuyuhiko stuffed clothes into his bag.

"Of course I am," Fuyuhiko declared, gently grabbing a snowglobe from his closet. Mikan's eyes widened from the sight.

"You kept it?"

"Of course," Fuyuhiko echoed. A cheeky grin made its way on his face as he turned to face Mikan. "It was a gift from you, after all."

He shrugged off his suit jacket and put on a cerulean hoodie, slinging his bag over his shoulder.

"I'm ready to go."

Mikan smiled, moving to loop her arm with his.

"Then let's go home."

A few days later.

Mikan stood next to Fuyuhiko, their shoulders rubbing together as they did the dishes. A small smile came on her face as she dried off a spoon, before a sudden thought struck her.

"How do you think the tradition of Valentine's chocolate even started, actually?"

"Capitalism," Fuyuhiko said without hesitation.

The only response Mikan had to that was a flat, "What."

"People in power wanted some money, so they start a rumour about how giving chocolates is meant to symbolize love or whatever and then it became tradition," Fuyuhiko explained as he scrubbed a bowl clean.

"If that were the case, why is it more traditional to make the chocolate yourself?" Mikan wondered.

Fuyuhiko shrugged. "How should I know? It was just a theory. If you want to know the truth, ask an expert."

"But I feel more comfortable talking to you about random things than anyone else," Mikan stated, as casually as she would say 'dinner's ready' or 'do you wonder about the plot of these old games sometimes?'.

"O-oh, really?" Fuyuhiko tried to be just as casual as Mikan, though he wasn't all that good at it. Mikan nodded, eagerly exclaiming, "Yeah, really! I'm most comfortable around you, Fuyuhiko!"

Fuyuhiko couldn't help but laugh a bit at that. Mikan's grin fell into a small o as she stared at him curiously.
"I was just, can you believe this?" Fuyuhiko asked her with a fond smile. "The first time we met, you ran away. The second time, you fainted. And now?" He set the bowl aside, waving a wet hand at the two of them. "We're acting like a married couple. I can't believe it actually happened."

"Maybe it's the power of love," Mikan suggested, making Fuyuhiko snicker.

"You're a fucking dork."

"Yeah, but I love you a lot!" Mikan retorted.

"And I love you too."

Not even Hiyoko's exasperated groaning from the other room could ruin their kiss.

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**Bonus: An Abridged Version of Nagisa's Reaction to Hiyoko and Ibuki**

"No. Nope nope nope no no fucking way never nope not going to happen no nope huh-uh never get away from my sister no nope no I will murder you no nope no nope no way in hell no you will stop this immediately nope nope nope in a million and fifty-one years no stop no huh-uh stop."

(The original version took forty minutes to complete. Nagisa still doesn't approve.)

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Chapter End Notes

YO ITS ALMOST BEEN A YEAR SINCE SMILE FOR A SMILE WAS FIRST PUBLISHED ON FF.NET SO IM THINKING OF MAKING AN I-CHARACTER Q&A CHAPTER AS CELEBRATION IF YOU WANT YOU CAN ASK A QUESTION IN THE REVIEWS HERE, ON FF.NET, OR ON MY TUMBLR, rainbow-unicorn-banzai-party.tumblr.com!!! SEND IT BEFORE THE 8TH OF AUGUST BC I ACTUALLY GOTTA WRITE THE CHAPTER I HOPE I CAN KEEP WRITING CHAPTERS YOU CAN ALL ENJOY!!! THANK YOU FOR ALL THE SUPPORT UP UNTIL THIS POINT!!!
"Nagisa. You ever stop and wonder if we're the only sane ones in this family?" Kotoko wondered absentmindedly.

"Correction: *I'm* the only sane one. You're just as weird as everyone else," Nagisa shot back, not even lifting his eyes from the history textbook.

"Rude! I'm as normal as a dog on a leash or a bonjour in France! I'm your girl-next-door, childhood friend, sworn sister! I'm perfectly normal!"

"You have aced chemistry just so you could create the spiciest substance on earth and lace your big brother's Valentine's chocolate with it," Nagisa stated plainly, underlining a date that he knew would be on the next exam.

"That means I'm a girl who works hard for her passions."

"Your passions are causing chaos and pranking people."

Kotoko snickered. "You say that like it's a bad trait! Doesn't it add to my character!? I'm more appealing if I'm a cute, fun-loving girl!"

"You're not in a dating simulator," Nagisa said dispassionately.

"At least people want to date me," She retorted smugly. "I got three love confessions yesterday!"

"You got two letters from fans of your old movies and one guy who couldn't stop stuttering around you. Those don't count."

"They totally count! I'm school idol material!"

"You get less love confessions than Ibuki did when she was in high school. You'd need at least five love confessions weekly to become a school idol."

Kotoko pouted. And then grumbled and screamed, all while Nagisa kept studying.

"I don't get it! I'm just as cute and famous and happy and bubbly, aren't I?! Why don't I steal as many hearts?! What does your big sister have that I don't?!"

"A career?"

"No, I have a job, it's to be cute and lovable!"

"...right."

"Oh, maybe..." Kotoko looked down at her chest, before laughing. "Yeah right! I'm bigger than her now, so I'm definitely bigger than her fifty years ago!"

"Ibuki wasn't even born fifty years ago," Nagisa pointed out.

"She's still a grandma."

"I doubt it, considering that she doesn't even have a kid."
Kotoko stuck her tongue out at Nagisa, before continuing her pondering.

"Maybe... are singers more popular? Or is it..."

Her eyes landed on Nagisa, and then widened.

"DAMMIT NAGISA!"

"What did I do now," Nagisa asked flatly.

"You- _you're_ the reason why people don't confess to me!" Kotoko exclaimed, holding her face in her hands. "People must see you around with me all the time and thin that we're together!" She slammed her hands down on the table, her glare so dark and venomous that Nagisa dropped the book and jumped away. "Take responsibility! Fix this!"

"What am I supposed to do?!"

"Break up with me! Do it in front of lots of people too, so no one will ever think we're dating again!"

"I can't break up with someone I was never dating!"

Wrong thing to say, Nagisa realized as Kotoko's eyes hardened, and she grabbed—his hand, her voice suddenly sugar-sweet and a smile dripping with affection hanging on her lips.

"Nagisa, I love you. I've spent sleepless nights, thinking about you and how much I adore all that you do." She stared at him with doe eyes and a hesitant expression. "Do you... do you feel the same way?"

Nagisa groaned. "Kotoko. Asking me out so you can break up with me will not help. We'll just turn into the latest edition of school gossip."

"Damn it!" Kotoko cried out, and the illusion shattered instantly. "But I want to be _popular_!"

"Aren't you already popular?! Even if you're not the school idol, it's-"

"That's the thing! I want to be a school idol, and anything less than that is unacceptable! I won't stop until I get that title!" Kotoko declared, eyes fiery with determination.

Nagisa sighed, picked up his pencil, and ripped a page out of his notebook. The sound was enough to startle Kotoko, and she watched as Nagisa wrote fancy words and complicated phrases.

In a few minutes, he handed it to her.

"By the decree of blah blah blah something, big sis Mioda, lots of words, title, something pass on to Utsugi Kotoko, wait, what?" Kotoko paused, rereading the previous sentence and actually paying attention to it. "Mioda Ibuki, by way of graduation, has forfeited her title of School Idol to Utsugi... Kotoko...?"

"There. You're a school idol," Nagisa huffed, crossing his arms over his chest. His expression was carefully schooled into one of impatience and annoyance.

Though, when Kotoko wrapped her arms around him and squeezed, one would swear his lips twitched into a smile.
Chiaki was beginning to think that she had made a mistake, though she wasn't entirely sure where.

It wasn't the initial set-up. The idea of introducing her kind of dads to her birth parents was just natural. She wouldn't really understand why she wouldn't do it.

So logically, that meant the mess-up happened sometime after that point. Chiaki pulled up her memories of the few precious minutes before the frigid stares and awkward silences set in, trying to understand.

It probably wasn't Kazuichi and Chihiro's names, that was for certain. And her mom only laughed amicably when Kazuichi tripped into the table. Her mother was also surprised, but not all that concerned by the fact that Chihiro was wearing a skirt, so it wasn't that either.

(But then again, that was around the time dad's eye started twitching...)

The only real thing that Chiaki could recall that really stuck out was when she had a request at the dinner table.

"Dad, can you pass the water here?"

*Immediately, there were three hands on the water pitcher, and four shocked faces. Chiaki was just watching the scenario unfold with a blank expression.*

Oh.

Huh. That must have been it.

Chiaki clapped her hands together, a grin on her face from her revelation. The sound was enough to draw everyone's attention, her group of parents peering around the wreckage of the dinner table to glance at her.

"I figured it out," Chiaki stated simply. "You're all my parents and I love you all a lot."

Her father gasped, eyes filling with tears as the broken chair leg in his hands fell to the ground. Her mom did the same with the steak knife, Chihiro with the rolling pin, and Kazuichi with the remote control to the miniature murder bots around their feet.

Chiaki wasn't exactly sure what happened right after that, but then she was hugged by four people and a couple robots. Her mom wondered aloud about the construction and practical applications of said robots, and specifically asked if they could be programmed to be opponents in online matches with a worried expression.
So naturally, her dads had to test it out. On the spot, Chihiro reprogrammed them, and plopped three bunny-bots and a Chiaki on the couch while Kazuichi turned on Mario Kart.

Five victories later, and her mom thanked the two, before plucking a bunny-bot off of the cushion and sitting down herself. Chihiro sat next to her, and the last two dads scrambled for the fourth controller.

At the sight of the bunny-bots' glowing red eyes as they swarmed her dad, Chiaki started to wonder if the mistake was introducing all her parents to each other after all.

Chiaki's bit is obviously written for the meme.

Thinking back on it, Kotoko should have realized something was off when she received that booklet.

She might have glimpsed at it for a second before using it as a bookmark for her animal encyclopedia, but she should have, you know, noticed the title.

If not then, the panicked phone calls Hajime kept making should have also been a red alert. But Kotoko was too busy being distracted by trying to convince Nagisa to date her and break up with her.

So, when Kotoko was completely befuddled when she was herded into a room full of arguing women, she had no one to blame but herself.

"Hajime. Who are the screeching harpies?" Kotoko asked, watching as a blonde in a red dress punched a brunette.

"Mom, cut it out! You too, Aunt Haruka!"

"Don't defend this fucking bitch, Hajime!" The blonde retorted.

"I told you, call me mama!"

Hajime sighed as he slapped a hand over his forehead.

"Can we have one family meeting that doesn't end up in flames?"

"They're... all aunts and cousins?" Kotoko asked warily.

"They're all my moms, technically," Hajime said, watching five women brawl in the living room with a dispassionate face.

"What."

"Didn't you pay attention to the booklet?"

"Aha...ha...ha...ha...no?"

Hajime sighed once again.

"Mom one married mom two and adopted a kid. Mom two was cheating on mom one, they got divorced, mom two married mom three. Mom one married mom four, whose sister was mom five and also in love with her. They fixed it with a double marriage. Mom six was mom four and five's
cousin who helped mom three pay the bills, mom two had an affair with her, mom three retaliated by having an affair with mom seven, mom six and seven retaliated by having an affair with mom eight and nine... and basically, it's a bloody mess of people fighting over everything and passing over ownership of me."

"I... I... wow," Kotoko said in a gasp, at a loss for words. And really, when Kotoko was at a loss for words? That was a sign that they needed to run.

Hajime heeded that sign, lifting Kotoko and running out of the room when mom eight destroyed mom four's dining table.

I always imagined Hajime having a large and chaotic family, but I also always thought he was an only child.

The obvious answer was to make him worse than Chiaki and give him nine moms who fight a lot. There's too much bloodshed for Hajime to get a sibling until he's out of the house. Poor Hajime. And Kotoko.

Nanami's place was neutral territory. Hiyoko wasn't allowed to throw anything at anyone, no matter how stupid they were being, or start fights. The only good part about being at Nanami's place was the fact that no one was allowed to annoy her either. If she wanted to read magazines and monopolize the food, the only distractions she would get were occasional requests to share the chips.

At least until she saw someone trying to peek at her reading from the corner of her eye.

"What," She groaned flatly.

"What are you reading?" Peko asked simply.

Hiyoko rolled her eyes. "Can't you read? It's a fashion magazine."

"I... see..." Peko looked uncertain, before pointing a finger at the photo. The picture of a woman in an ill-fitting, awfully bright orange dress brought a sneer to Hiyoko's face. "So that's supposed to be fashionable?"

"No! Of course not! Read the headline! It's a total disaster!" Hiyoko snarled, flipping the magazine around so Peko could see. "It's like she's turned into a pumpkin! No sane person would ever wear this!"

"Huh? It looks fine to me."

"ARE YOU FUCKING BLIND?! WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOUR SENSE OF STYLE?!"

"I-it's fine if it fits and if it's a colour you like, right?!" Peko asked.

"Oh my god you are fucking hopeless."

"Chiaki likes the way I dress..." Peko mumbled to herself.

"You dress like a goth," Hiyoko retorted. "Are all your clothes black, or are there a couple dark greys in there?"
"No, it's all black."

Hiyoko was completely speechless.

"This is unforgivable. We're fixing this. Now," Hiyoko declared, grabbing Peko and dragging her away. "Nanami, I'm fixing your stupid girlfriend's stupid fashion sense!"

"Have fun," Chiaki said, waving goodbye with one hand, destroying everyone in Mario Kart with the other.

(Peko did like the new kimono Hiyoko got for her. As for the bright reds and whites and sometimes dark blues... well, she could figure out how to make it work, right?)

(Hiyoko said no. Hiyoko insisted on coordinating Peko's outfits.)

"Mahiruuuuuuuuu."

"No."

"But-"

"No, I'm not taking a picture of you punching someone in the face!"

"But I want this historic moment preserved for the centuries!"

"Natsumi."

"Mahiru."

"Oh, don't you use that tone with me, little lady!"

"Four months older doesn't mean you can say I'm small!"

"Well I'm certainly more mature!"

"Yeah fucking right!"

"Then who's a head taller between us, you or me?!"

"...You. Did not just say that."

"I did say that and you have to deal with it- OW! Seriously?!"

"Who's taller now that you're kissing the dirt, huh?"

"Oh that's it!"

"Wha- hey!"

"The answer is: I am."

"I'm going to kill you."

"You love me too much for that."

"Shut up, you."
"Nagisa, Nagisa, Nagisa-chaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaan!" Ibuki cried out, giving him a huge hug.

"What?! What is it this time?!" He demanded.

"I just wanted you to know that I love you so much!"

"You didn't break anything, right?" Ibuki shook her head. "Or lose something, or anything else that would make me mad?"

"Nope!"

"Seriously, what did you do?"

"Is it really so hard to believe that I don't just feel like telling you that I love you?" Ibuki asked, dropping her cheery tone.

"Yes," Nagisa stated immediately. "You norm-"

"This must be fixed!" Ibuki declared, lifting Nagisa out of his seat.

"Woah, what are you-?!"

"You're the bestest little brother ever! Ever, ever, ever, ever!"

"Bestest isn't even a word!" Nagisa protested, struggling to get out of Ibuki's hug.

"I love you so much and you make me so proud and I love you to bits!"

"I get it! I get it! Put me down already! You're so embarrassing!" Nagisa groaned, face bright red.

"Yeah, but that's my job! Older sisters spoil the heck outta the little ones!" Ibuki giggled.

"You're so weird..." Nagisa grumbled.

"I love you."

Nagisa turned away with a huff, stubbornly burying his face back in his book.

But, Ibuki had incredible hearing.

And underneath the sounds of cars outside the window, underneath the sounds of a pencil scratching against paper, she swore she heard an 'I love you too, Ibuki.'

It was the third Monday of the month, so Hiyoko and Ibuki had taken the chance to go on a trip to the beach, to celebrate the ocean's importance. Mikan and Fuyuhiko, however, weren't all that attracted by the idea of a crowded beach and all that entailed, so they elected to stay behind. Naturally, this led to an impromptu movie session and lazy day.

"Hiyoko-chan washes her kimonos by hand, so she has a special soap thing she makes and pours in that old detergent bottle," Mikan explained, hugging Fuyuhiko to her chest like a pillow. "But Ibuki-chan's allergic to the stuff me and Hiyoko-chan use, so she has her own bottle."

"Huh. That makes things easier, I was getting confused when I tried to help out with the l-" Mikan
buried her face in Fuyuhiko's neck, her giggles and little puffs of air tickling him. "-HEY! T-that's, q-q-quit it!"

"I was just, hehehehe, it's just so *domestic!*" Mikan exclaimed, squeezing Fuyuhiko even tighter. "The heir to the throne of the Kuzuryuu family, scion of dragons, leader and slayer of wayward souls, helping out with his girlfriend's roommates' *laundry.*"

"Where did you even get those titles?! You're making my life sound like a bad RPG!" Fuyuhiko protested.

"I thought Chiaki's Dragon Warrior game was actually pretty good," Mikan noted, just as a guy on the screen got his head blown off. "But it's still adorable to see you joining this little family."

"None of you are related," Fuyuhiko deadpanned.

"I mean, me and Ibuki-chan and Hiyoko-chan and Chiaki-san could all be considered sisters," Mikan pointed out. "I've been friends with Ibuki-chan and Chiaki-san for a long time, and we all used to live together, while Hiyoko is my childhood friend/sister who turned evil but then came back to her senses after a redemption arc."

"You do realize that means that your sisters are *dating* each other, right?" Fuyuhiko raised a brow, and despite facing the screen, he could imagine how Mikan's face contorted into an expression of horror.

"U-uh, they're... children? No, no, they're... *step-*children?" Mikan amended lamely.

"Who're the parents?" Fuyuhiko asked.

Mikan hummed, as she thought, before concluding with... "Us?"

"Huh?"

"I mean, the single father of one Hiyoko-chan, Kuzuryuu Fuyuhiko, meeting up with the single mother of Ibuki-chan, Tsumiki Mikan, at the Hanamura Diner," Mikan narrated. "They become friends and eventually fall in love, thus forcing Hiyoko-chan and Ibuki-chan into constant proximity of each other. Slowly but surely, they start to follow in their parents' example and fall in love too."

"Wait, why do we meet at the pervert's diner?!" Fuyuhiko demanded.

"I mean, we had our first date there, right?" Mikan offered.

"Doesn't count as a date if we weren't even friends," Fuyuhiko retorted.

"But still, it led to our first movie night, and being more comfortable texting, too!" Mikan pouted. "I believe the Hanamura Diner is essential to things turning out the way they did!"

"Fine." Fuyuhiko rolled his eye. "We can meet there, but why am I the one raising Saionji?! You're the one who kidnapped her! Take responsibility!"

"Well, your personalities are similar, so she could have gotten it from you!" Mikan explained cheerily.

"If I had Saionji as a kid, I would have thrown her out a window!" Fuyuhiko protested. "You're better at dealing with Saionji, so take her as the kid!"
Mikan thought it over, before gasping. "You're right!"

"Of course I am-"

"The way you teach Ibuki-chan how to embroider clothing is definitely maternal material!" Mikan exclaimed. "You could definitely be Ibuki-chan's mom!"

"Mom?! Are we Hajime and Koizumi?!" Fuyuhiko demanded, and Mikan's face fell.

"We forgot about Hajime-kun and Mahiru-chan and your sister," Mikan murmured listlessly. "I can't believe this."

"Well, Hajime and Koizumi are Natsumi's lovers. That's all there is to it," Fuyuhiko said decisively.

"But do they have children? Do Mahiru-chan or Hajime-kun have siblings? What about Peko-chan?"

"Peko is our sister who has been pining over that cute girl she sees at the video game store for forever," Fuyuhiko offered.

"Our as in us or-"

"Our as in my family," Fuyuhiko clarified.

"Okay, but... Chiaki-san fell for Peko-chan at first sight. Do... do they just... pine for each other?"

"Enough to rival a forest."

"Until Chiaki-san finally asks her on a date and they get together and play games all the time."

Mikan said with a sigh.

"How come you sound so exasperated?" Fuyuhiko wondered, tilting his head back so he could look up at Mikan's upside-down face. "You'd think that Mioda and Saionji would be the ones to get you sighing and stuff."

"Hmm... I suppose I'm more... used to it?" Mikan paused, before rushing to get her thoughts out. "I've listened to Ibuki-chan talk about her crushes before, and Hiyoko-chan is grumpy and huffy no matter what the problem is, so I know how to deal with it? But Chiaki-san... she never used to talk much about herself." She frowned as she thought more and more on the past. "She was quiet, though she always liked to help other out. Helping her was entirely new to me, and it felt weird, because she never seemed to need help at all."

"Yeah, it'd be weird to have someone's personality do a complete one-eighty. It's weird to think how different Nanami is now from one year ago," Fuyuhiko mused, and Mikan tensed.

"One year ago? I-I thought, didn't we meet like, a month before your birthday?" Mikan asked warily.

"Mikan, it's July," Fuyuhiko stated. "It's been a year since we met."

"Y-you mean, definitely, for sure, no way it might not be... tomorrow? Day after?" Mikan's voice was downright pleading for that to be the case, begging Fuyuhiko to give her a small bit of hope-

"I'm pretty sure it was today, actually." With only a handful of words, Fuyuhiko had taken Mikan's small, fragile, desperate hope, and smashed it into pieces. And set the pieces on fire. And scattered
The ashes into the four winds until they fell into the ocean.

The whine that came out of Mikan's lips would have made anyone else think she was the one destroyed by those words.

"I forgot! I totally, totally forgot!" Mikan wailed, her grip on Fuyuhiko tightening until she was almost crushing him. "I can't believe I forgot the day, I wanted to do something way more special and also shower you in gifts and love and-
"

"Mikan, it's fine!" Fuyuhiko exclaimed immediately, trying to squirm out of her grip.

"No it's not! I can't just forget the day I met you! We have to celebrate! Not celebrating isn't an option! That's just, that's a crime, that's like forgetting your birthday or kicking your dog!"

"I don't even have a dog! And would you just listen to me?!" Fuyuhiko finally managed to pry Mikan's arms looser, taking the chance to breathe as he turned to face his girlfriend. "This is enough for me! Spending the day watching movies with you and talking about whatever is enough for me! You don't have to panic or think you have to do anything special!"

Mikan's mouth fell open, her eyes widening. It wasn't long before tears began to gather, and she gently wrapped her arms around his shoulders.

"You're the best, most understanding, most amazing, most wonderful boyfriend in the world," Mikan said, right before she leaned in for a kiss.

"Happy anniversary, Mikan." Fuyuhiko grinned in return, just as their lips met.

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Pandacolyte left the following comment on smile for a smile:

To be honest, I'm surprised that this fic's lasted so long. Everything else I've followed for even half as long has either petered out after 20 odd chapters, or updates around twice a decade.

How are Junko and her sister doing? It's been a long time since we've even seen them mentioned.

Haha, well I hope this fic manages to get finished instead of petering out or slowing to a crawl.

And for Junko and Mukuro...

Mukuro: I'm doing fine. And while Junko stopped talking to me a few months back, I still feed her once a week.

Makoto: Doesn't she need more than that?!

Mukuro: She hates it when I prepare her food for her, so I simply give her a week's worth of provisions.

Makoto: Okay...?

Mukuro: Anyways, I've found a job as a security guard. My co-workers, Nidai and Owari, are loud and spirited, but they get the job done.

Mukuro: I think I can say that I enjoy my life as it is.
Anonymous asked:

Fuyuhiko, do you regret not going to Hope's Peak and getting to meet Mikan sooner?

Fuyuhiko: Not really. Natsumi would hate it if I got there and she didn't. Plus, I was a brat when I was a kid, and I'd hate for Mikan to have that as her first impression of me. It's really for the best that we met the way we did.

Mikan: So cute!

Natsumi: Wooooow, a doting older brother. Who are you and what have you done to the pipsqueak I know and occasionally manage to tolerate?

Fuyuhiko: SHUT UP!

Stephen Martini left the following comment on smile for a smile:

Dear ChivalrousAmour,

Thank you for this wonderful was one of the things that got me through the school year. I just kept refreshing the page in joy waiting for the next chapter. So my question to you is, who is your favorite character to write dialogue for? I know that you will keep making amazing stories so i can't wait to see what comes next.

Sincerely,
A long time fan

I'm so glad you like the fic that much! But, well, the answer...

Ibuki: Is me, right, right, right?! I'm the most sunshine-iest of the characters! my dialogue makes people just get fired up!

Mikan: Please, no emulating people!

Fuyuhiko: Immolate. You mean immolate.

Kotoko: Doesn't this seem familiar?

Nagisa: Startlingly so.

Ahahaha, I like writing for everyone, really, it comes to me naturally most of the time (...except for Mahiru ;-;). But I have a bias towards Ibuki, who can both say stupid things and serious things with the exact same tone, Mikan, who can come up with a lot of non sequiturs (if I remember right, she screams "YOU CAN'T ESCAPE" out of nowhere for no reason if you talk to her at one point), and Fuyuhiko, who is usually the most level-headed of the couple. Usually. Sometimes.

Also, Kotoko and Nagisa have a special place in my heart as the two teenage troublemakers who pop up sometimes.

Anonymous asked:
Natsumi, Ibuki, Chiaki, what do you regret the most in your life?

Natsumi: Letting Hajime stop me from punching Sato in the face.

Hajime: ...that... that isn't something you should regret?

Ibuki: Hmmmmmm... hmm, hm, hm...

Ibuki: Probably dating a girl with a knife!

Hiyoko: WHAT. WHY WOULD YOU EVEN-

Chiaki: I regret telling Hope's Peak and everyone involved to not tell my parents what happened to me and let them mourn my false death for a decade out of a mixture of self-hatred and a belief that I was inhuman and inferior.

Ibuki: ...

Hiyoko: ...

Hajime: ...

Natsumi: ...

Chiaki: Just kidding.

Chiaki: I regret not taking more photos of the maid birthday party. I barely have enough pictures to fill an album.

Hiyoko: YOU F***ING TOOK PICTURES?!

Chapter End Notes

"Mikan, Mikan, wake up," Hiyoko whispered, trying to extract her friend from her bed without waking the room's other occupant.

Mikan responded by pulling Fuyuhiko closer and refusing to move.

"I don't have work..." Mikan moaned. "It's okay for me to enjoy this a bit longer..."

"Don't you remember why you don't have work?!" Hiyoko hissed. "You asked me to wake you up early, because it's your stupid boyfriend's stupid birthday and you stupidly wanted to make him breakfast in bed!"

"I change my mind..."

"Mikan!"

"She wanted to make breakfast for me?" Fuyuhiko asked, eye peeking open, and Hiyoko slapped her hand to her forehead when she realized he was awake the entire time.

"Can you believe it's been a year?" Mikan asked, a dreamy sigh punctuating her sentence as she flipped over a pancake.

"It feels like it's been forever since last year," Fuyuhiko agreed, before blushing adding a, "Notlikeitwouldbebadtospendforeverwithyou," under his breath. Mikan didn't hear it, a fact Hiyoko was eternally grateful for. Mikan would shatter windows with her reaction.

"This is getting ridiculous," Hiyoko groaned into her own stack of pancakes. "When is he getting back to his place?!"

"When you manage to beat me in a brawl," Fuyuhiko retorted without even glancing at the other blonde. Because he was still staring at Mikan. UGH.

"Is that a challenge?" Hiyoko asked pointedly, glaring at him behind Mikan's back.

"You know I'll destroy you," Fuyuhiko stated with a smirk.

"All done!" Mikan turned around, a pile of heart-shaped pancakes on a plate. Immediately, all signs of antagonism disappeared, replaced by friendly smiles and kind words.

"By the way, happy birthday!" Hiyoko exclaimed with a smile too cheerful to ever be true. "I would have gotten you a gift, but I was so worried about what to give you, I couldn't decide!"

"It's okay, I appreciate the thought more than anything else."
Mikan gave them both a wry grin as she set the pancakes before Fuyuhiko. Hiyoko didn't miss how his stack was twice as tall as hers, urgh, Mikan was *such a sap*.

"Hey, hold on. What are you eating, Mikan?" Fuyuhiko asked.

"Ahahaha... there's only enough batter left for Ibuki-chan, so... um, maybe some...sandwiches...?" Mikan offered hesitantly.

"Don't have bread," Hiyoko pointed out.

Fuyuhiko sighed, before motioning Mikan closer to him. He didn't even fucking look flustered as he stabbed a bit of pancake and held the fork out to Mikan.

"H-h-huh?! W-what are you doing?!” Mikan demanded, her face turning pink. At least she was flustered enough for the both of them.

"What does it fucking look like?" Fuyuhiko asked. "I'm sharing."

"Why?!" Mikan asked, and Hiyoko was pretty sure people died around the time they turned that red.

"You of all people should know the dangers of malnutrition," Fuyuhiko stated, and Mikan sighed and nodded and ate the offered bit.

Hiyoko watched as Mikan blushed and mentioned something about "their first date", and wondered if she did that on purpose. And if someone would *please* save her from the two, before she died of second-hand embarrassment.

Thankfully for Hiyoko, salvation did come. Un-thankfully, it came in the form of Ibuki kicking the door open.

The way none of them reacted to the horn-headed woman suddenly bursting in and slapping her palm on the table beyond a curious glance (Mikan) and exasperated groans (the other two) was a true testament to how long they had known Ibuki.

"Okay! The supermarket is holding a sale next week, twenty percent off all the raw food!" Ibuki tossed one flyer in the center of the table. "There was a letter asking Hiyo-chan to take another picture for her health card too!" Hiyoko groaned as she received the letter. "The Kuzuryuu family sent an invitation to Natsumi-chan's birthday party. I took out the knife though." Fuyuhiko’s eyebrow arched over his eyepatch as Ibuki dropped the envelope in front of him. Sure enough, there was a stab hole in it, a small one, though. And lastly, Ibuki pulled out a sticky note.

"Also, Natsumi-chan invited us to skip the birthday party and go sing karaoke or something."

Hiyoko and Mikan and Fuyuhiko all exchanged a glance, before simultaneously coming to a decision.

---

Natsumi's singing was surreal.

Correction: Everything about this was surreal.

It wasn't just the venue, though, it did help.

The Titty Typhoon was two doors down from the Hanamura Diner, comfortably situated between a pharmacy and 'Miss Usami's Magical Love-Love Game Center'. It was made for musicians of all
skill levels, gifted with a stage for decent performers to impress small crowds. For friends, it had karaoke machines and booths for privacy. Patrons could get refreshments and conversation from the bar at any time, though they only served juice during the day. All in all, it was a home for music-lovers and friends to gather and have some fun for a day, perfect for a rowdy group of friends to sing their cares away.

It was also many, many different colours.

The walls supposedly looked like they were made of stone. Supposedly, since no one could see them. Posters for possibly every band, singer, and group known to mankind were plastered over the walls. Some were even layered over old posters. Ibuki herself graced a fair number of them, cheering and screaming from the past, just like she was doing in the present. It was almost eerie how the only difference between the snapshots of the past and the present Ibuki were her hairstyle and clothes. That was not the only eerie part.

When the group first stepped into their booth, Fuyuhiko had turned to Mikan and asked, "Is the couch made of faces?"

To which, she only replied with a nod.

The seats were not the only things in the room to resemble a flattened mass of skulls. The carpet had the same pattern, just in an uncomfortably-bright orange. There were also leopard-print curtains hanging over the seats. And for whatever goddamn reason, the coffee table was a surfboard. Set on top of three speakers.

Yeah. Just the setting alone was surreal.

But, then you added Natsumi, and the strangeness was multiplied by... factor of six, carry the seven, subtract a two...

At least eleven thousand and thirty-seven.

It wasn't just the fact that she had somehow shown up to their five pm karaoke session drunker than a dolphin dropped in vodka, though that did contribute to it. The wobbling voice and unstable behaviour made it even weirder, with her breaking down laughing at the end of a sorrowful lullaby and screaming about bald men after Hajime's song. Her general aura of oddity was not helped by the sparkly princess dress she wore, which glimmered and shone whenever she took an uneven step.

To top it all off, she chose one of Ibuki's songs. One of Ibuki's stranger songs.

One with stunning gems, like:

'Unicorns were never meant to not un-exist, I know in my heart that's not true'

and

'The feel of your blood on my hands is something I won't ever forget, no, no, nope!'

and

'My heart is pounding, almost, almost, almost BURSTING from my chest!'

And it wasn't even Natsumi making up the words! Those were the actual lyrics!
"Why the fuck would you write this?!" Fuyuhiko demanded, after Natsumi had blurted out something along the lines of *'friendship is bright and cheery and good!'*, then followed it up with a lovely description of the feeling of breaking someone's bones.

Ibuki just laughed.

"No one has any goddamn clue," Hiyoko stated. "There are theories about everything from serial killers to drug addicts."

"Pretty sure she was drunk when she did that," Chiaki added, not looking up from her strategy game.

"Strange," Mikan noted, though she didn't seem to care much as she hugged Fuyuhiko to her chest, resting her chin on his head. "You wouldn't expect that out of Ibuki-chan."

"Well, you can't know everything about me!" Ibuki proclaimed proudly.

"...am I the only one noticing that Fuyuhiko is sitting on Mikan's lap?" Hajime asked incredulously.

"Possibly," Mahiru replied with a sip of her soda.

"Is that normal... behaviour for partners?" Peko inquired, looking hesitant as she turned to anyone who wasn't Natsumi or Chiaki for advice.

The tally was something like this:

Mikan and Fuyuhiko obviously said yes. Hiyoko pinched the bridge of her nose and groaned loudly. Hajime shrugged, while Mahiru let out a resounding "NO!". Ibuki followed that up with a resounding "YEAH!", and Natsumi capped it all off by flopping onto Mahiru's lap.

Chiaki, though. Chiaki just smirked. And leaned over. And kissed Peko on the cheek. And then lifted Peko's arms, so she could sit on her lap. Finally, like she was pulling a roller coaster's safety bar over her, she pulled Peko's arms around her.

Naturally, Peko almost died. Metaphorically. Probably.

"There's no way you could separate them now..." Fuyuhiko noted.

"They're staying like that for the night. And forever," Mikan added.

"Are you two currently aware of the position you're in?" Mahiru deadpanned.

"Are you aware of the position you're in?" Hajime pointed at the girlfriend in her lap.

Mahiru blushed, before spouting off denials.

Hiyoko sighed.

"Hiyo-ch-"

"Don't even think about it."

"Awww..."

Hiyoko still didn't let her do it, no matter how much her girlfriend pouted.
"Seriously! We're here to sing, not be super affectionate! Go sing!" Hiyoko ordered.

"Don't wanna! Not until you cuddle me!"

"I'm not touching you until you get up there and sing!"

"They're never gonna get anywhere..." Mahiru mumbled.

"Catch 22 at its finest," Chiaki agreed, before a devious grin broke out on her face. "But Hiyoko-chan's right! We're not here to show off! We're here to sing!" And then she pointed to Mikan and Fuyuhiko. "Okay you two! Strut your stuff!"

"Why us?!" Fuyuhiko demanded.

"Well obviously because it's your fault everyone started this." Chiaki waved a hand at her and Peko to emphasize her point. Peko let out a strange cross between a grunt and a whine in response. "Your lovey-doveyness has compromised the purpose of this meeting, so obviously you guys ought to be the ones who un-compromise it-"

"Denied," Mikan said immediately, hugging her boyfriend even tighter. "I'm too comfy."

Hiyoko rolled her eyes, while Ibuki brightened. Chiaki's grin only widened. They moved in sync, Chiaki snapping her fingers just as Ibuki darted to Hiyoko's side.

"Oh no," Mahiru hissed, recognizing all the key signs of a plan.

"Oh no," Hajime echoed.

Oblivious to all this, Natsumi just let out a soft snore.

"How about a deal?" Chiaki asked with a devilish grin.

"Chiaki, no-" Peko's attempt to defuse the situation was killed by Hiyoko whipping out a bag from underneath her wheelchair.

"One song." Hiyoko started off slowly, her smile growing wider as she pulled an outfit covered in absurd amounts of sequins out of the back, "and Hajime prances around in this, singing to every Disney song known to man."

"Wait wait, hold on, excuse me, I never agreed to that-"

"I want pics!" Natsumi cried out.

"Understood," Peko stated, pulling out her phone.

"I still never agreed to this!"

"Send me those pictures too," Mahiru whispered, though, judging from the indignant squawk Hajime gave at those words, he caught it too.

"Mahiru, you're joking, right-?!"

"W-well, it's for the memories and-!"

"Bull and shit! Mahiru's talking bullshiiiiiiiiiiiiiiit!"
"SHUT UP! YOU'RE DRUNK, NATSUMI!"

"And right! Don't forget right!"

Ibuki ignored the screaming, cheerily announcing, "Five, and you get to dress each other up in super fanservice-y outfits!"

That made the main couple pause. Or, well, more Mikan than Fuyuhiko.

"How fanservice-y are we talking here?" Mikan inquired, in a tone far too innocent for her words.

"Mikan!" Fuyuhiko cried out in protest.

"Just kidding!" Mikan exclaimed quickly, waving her hands back and forth in denial.

"Yeah, right!" Fuyuhiko retorted. "At least ask me instead of agreeing to whatever antics they have planned!"

"I'm so sor- wait what are you seriously okay with me-"

"I'M NOT SAYING THAT I AM BUT-"

"OH MY GOD FUYUHIKO THANK YOU SO MUCH THIS IS-"

"I NEVER SAID ANYTHING, MIKAN!"

"This is... did you plan this, Chiaki?" Peko asked carefully, eyes locked on the strange squabbles.

"No, but this is hilarious anyways," Chiaki answered, using her portable console's camera feature to record the entire thing.

And then she noticed something in the background of the scene. Natsumi climbing out of Mahiru's lapis the redhead defended her camera, her fingers reaching for the mic. This action went unnoticed by the others, who were either watching one of the two arguments or participating in them.

Thus, Chiaki was the only one not caught off guard when Natsumi snatched it up and announced,

"I'M NATSUMI, THIS IS SPIKY-HAIR LIGHTNING EYES, AND I'M GONNA SING A SONG!"

"What the hell, Natsu-"

"The song is called, 'My Mom is a Goddamn Bitch and Fuck Everything!'" Natsumi added with a grin, dragging Hajime into her half-assed song.

Yeah.

Surreal.

The scene was so chaotic that barely anyone noticed Fuyuhiko covering his ears and slipping away. There was too much screaming and too many attempts to stop Natsumi from hurting herself for anyone to notice.

Save for, of course, Mikan.

In their absence, the conflict would escalate to the point that Hajime was used as a projectile at one point, Ibuki had beaten Mahiru in two rap battles, Natsumi had attempted to surf without water and
without a board, Hiyoko challenged Peko to a Girlfriend Fight (in an attempt to see who was the best girlfriend, and, more importantly, who had the best girlfriend), and Chiaki fell off the sofa from laughing too hard.

On the other hand, Mikan almost died.

Again.

Yeah.

"Where are we going?" Mikan asked as she followed Fuyuhiko outside.

"Don't know. Anywhere that's not so fucking loud." Fuyuhiko squinted up at the already-darkened sky, before sighing. "How fucking long were we in there?"

Mikan pulled his hand closed to her face, pulling down his sleeve so she could look at his watch.

"About four-five hours?" Mikan offered with a shrug. "Why? Do you want to leave?"

"I mean, I like them and all, but sometimes they get too loud! I'll head back later!" Fuyuhiko decided, crossing his arms over his chest as he headed towards the park's entrance. He paused to give the nearest bear statue a customary obscene gesture before he went in.

Mikan grinned as she ran after him, quickly catching up to his stride. He was obviously fuming, his face locked into a fierce grimace. Mikan could almost see his ears twitch at every stray sound, and decided to help him out.

"Fuyuhiko, look!" Mikan pointed up at the the sky. Sure enough, he stopped and looked up...

And saw nothing much. The sky was dark, but the streetlights and surrounding buildings were bright, so any stars he would have seen were hidden from sight. Their back was to the moon, too, so he was just staring up into black nothingness.

Mikan did, however, use the moment of distraction to kiss him.

Fuyuhiko almost flinched back from the suddenness. If it were anyone else, the sudden rush of affection would be met with a fist to the face and result in a few flying teeth.

But because it was Mikan, Fuyuhiko just relaxed into the kiss. When they separated, they were both smiling.

(Thankfully, the park was empty, in part due to the late time and the average citizen's desire to not repeat the infamous shooting incident with their own body.)

"What was that for, Mikan?" He asked as they came to a stop right before the park's fountain.

"You seemed like you needed a pick-me-up."

"You're so damn weird..." Fuyuhiko rolled his eye, even though he was still grinning.

"I'm the person I am because I met you, you know?" Mikan stated, reaching out to grab Fuyuhiko's hand. Her smile grew a touch more somber as she clasped her hands around his. "It's all thanks to you."

"Huh? What are you talking about?" Fuyuhiko blinked, trying to process the nurse's sudden change
"I used to dream of something like this," Mikan confessed. A laugh bubbled out of her throat from the lonely memories. "Meeting a patient- no, anyone who would take a look at me and decide they would want to stay with me." She released his hands to dig around inside her bag, still talking. "Filled notebooks with daydreams and fantasies, trying to find a deity who would forgive me for all my faults and fix everything wrong with my life."

She laughed again, but there was no humour behind it. "I had no idea why someone would want to do that, though. I couldn't see anything about me worth loving. So I started dreaming about forcing someone to do it." A sigh punctuated her words. "I came so close to trying to kidnap you..."

"But you didn't," Fuyuhiko pointed out.

"I didn't," Mikan agreed, a warm smile on her face. "I got kidnapped instead, and you came after me. I asked you to stay, and you did. I loved you, and you loved me in return."

Mikan stared him in the eye, and his breath caught in his throat.

She didn't look at him like a god. Her gaze held no sense of worship or reverence. In her eyes, he wasn't defined by his perfection. Every single flaw and imperfection, she accepted without delay. Fuyuhiko didn't have to worry about living up to expectations, or hide his weaknesses, or worry whether or not he was good enough for her. They had come too far for that. Mikan didn't expect him to be anything more than himself. In her eyes, he was a human being, with faults and shortcomings. He was her best friend, her confidant, and someone she loved dearly.

"You are so much better than anything I could have ever imagined."

From her bag, she pulled out three objects.

"I don't need dreams, or fantasies, or anything like that."

A blue journal with narrow script on the cover, covered with hearts-

"I don't need someone to save me from everything. I needed someone to show me that I could save myself."

-a pink journal, the covers bound together and held in place with a lock-

"I'm the person that I am today because I met you."

-and a lighter.

"I'm so glad you were born, Fuyuhiko."

She set the journals aflame.

Now, please keep in mind that this was the same woman who had, in attempted chronological order (key word: attempted), had been bullied severely since childhood, lost her father to unknown causes and lost her mother to insane devotion, met Junko Enoshima, had her childhood friend lose her legs and was unable to do anything to stop it, started dating Junko Enoshima, had her relationship with her childhood friend ruined through no fault of her own, developed a gratitude complex, learned her girlfriend was a despair-loving maniac who manipulated children into murder, got blackmailed and threatened into keeping the murder part a secret but got scarred in demeanor.
anyways, had zero self-esteem, fainted when one of her friends turned out to be a Yakuza, embarrassed herself in front of an entire restaurant, missed a gaming stream because she was treating so many people, felt betrayed because most of her friends were hiding something from her, got shot, got stabbed in the foot and kidnapped, broke down crying reconciling with her childhood friend since she thought said friend was abandoning her again, broke down crying in court, and forgot her one-year anniversary of meeting her boyfriend.

Of course her attempt didn't work out.

She was so focused on being suitably dramatic and stuff that she forgot she was wearing a long-sleeved sweater when she set the books on fire.

Predictably, her sleeve was also caught in the flames. Also predictably, both of them panicked at that.

The next few seconds were kind of a mess. There was a lot of screaming and flailing, which only really ended when the two ended up in the fountain. Thankfully, it was shallow enough that they could sit up easily. Un-thankfully, they were probably now nursing bruises from the whole thing.

"Mikan, I fucking swear, if you ever do that again, I'll fucking kill you!" Fuyuhiko snarled as he climbed out of the fountain.

"I'm so sorry, Fuyuhiko! I just- I just wanted to show you how much you meant to me!" Mikan followed after, shedding her half-burnt sweater as she climbed out. Her left sleeve had managed to get singed before Fuyuhiko tossed her in the fountain. A pity. It was a cute sweater.

"Can't you do that without almost dying?! Because I'd rather have you survive, thanks!" Fuyuhiko was so worried and furious, he almost seemed to dry his clothes with the sheer heat of his glare. Almost. He was still sopping wet.

"I'll try to not die next time!" Mikan promised, before noticing something.

The bandage underneath was falling apart, weakened from heat and water combined. Almost deaf to Fuyuhiko's scolding, almost deaf to every instinct she had as a nurse, she peeled away the old wrapping.

Her skin was reddened and burnt, to the point she couldn't even see the old, faded white lines of writing and insults and jeers and taunts. Scars given to control and intimidate, hurt and destroy, replaced by a scar of her own doing, meant to prove her love.

How fitting.

"Mikan, do we have to get you to the hospital or something?!" Fuyuhiko demanded, startling Mikan a bit. Her lips quirked up when she saw the concern in his eye.

"I'll be fine," Mikan reassured him, pressing a kiss to his forehead. "I swear it."

"You better mean that," Fuyuhiko grumbled. "If you died, I'd kill you twice."

"Don't worry, Fuyuhiko. I'm staying right here, with you."

"Good."

They started walking back together, before Mikan ran up to the nearest trash can.
Mikan couldn't keep the smile off her face as she threw away the bandage. She had a feeling she wouldn't need it anymore.

**Bonus:**

"You must be kidding."

The words left Natsumi's mouth in a rush, no time to think it over. If she paused long enough to think, her momentum would disappear entirely. If she thought, her will would crumble away into dust and scatter to the winds.

"You- you ignore me for what, two decades? Always cast me aside in favour of Fuyuhiko, always ignore me and act like- like I'm a damn couch! Like I'm nothing worth your attention! But then, the moment Fuyuhiko isn't around, you plop me in his fucking place and expect me to be fucking fine with it?!

Her breath rushed out of her lungs, and Natsumi made the mistake of glancing up.

She was so used to her mother's cold, impassive stare, flitting over her like she was nothing more than background decoration. So much of her life was spent trying to stand out, to set herself apart from Peko and Fuyuhiko and everyone else, just to get those eyes to look her way.

Natsumi wondered, in that moment, if her desire, no, her childhood dream, was coming back to bite her.

*Her mother stared into her eyes, eyes serpentine in their sheer, venomous intensity. A hand propped up her chin, fingers tapping at a fanged grin. Natsumi had no idea what thoughts were going through her mother's head, but she did not feel accomplished. She did not feel proud or loved.*

*She just wanted to escape.*

*But her body refused to move, locked in place by her mother's petrifying gaze.*

"And what if I did?" She asked, something cold and clinical flashing in her eyes. "You have always been the spare heir, have you not? Did you expect anything else?"

'Spare heir'

*Natsumi bit her lip.*

*Just a spare.*

*Only kept around if something happened to Fuyuhiko.*

No love, no respect, not even a passing glance, because why give her anything when Fuyuhiko was there? She wasn't the one with the fancy parties or the one-on-one conversations or the pride-

"I still do not know why they insist on excluding you from the celebrations. You and Fuyuhiko are twins, after all."

*She didn't get love, not from her family-*

'I don't need talent to be my brother and my sister's equal. Because... they love me enough to
stay with me despite that.'

She... wasn't worth... worth it, because Fuyuhiko-

'Oh well. I don't need anyone but my brother, my sister, Hinata, and me.

Yeah, that's fucking right! Me! Because I'm worth something, asshole! I'm worth giving up an invitation to the most prestigious school in the entire country! Talent or no, that's something that no one can fucking take from me! So bite me, bitch!'

Who said that she wasn't worth shit?

Who ever said that she was just a spare?

She was never told that by her brother, or her sister, or Hajime, or her dad, or anyone.

No one but her mother said that.

No one but her mother saw her as just a spare.

Natsumi raised her head, meeting Kuzuryuu Amaterasu's gaze.

"I'd expect you to treat me like a goddamn person. I'm your fucking daughter after all! Did you forget that?! Did you forget me, or did you never notice at all?" Her fists were shaking as she screamed, years of frustration and doubt and anger ripping its way out of her throat. "Did you never notice how hard I worked?! How much I practiced and trained and studied, just to be worthy of your love?!"

Her mother only smiled.

Natsumi's eyes narrowed, her posture relaxing with her final words.

"But I realize it now. You're the one who isn't worthy of me."

The sound of applause reached Natsumi's ears.

"You're absolutely right. Congratulations, Natsumi."

Natsumi blinked, her posture slowly slackening. Not relaxing, not at all, but her anger was slowly seeping away, replaced by wariness.

"You win. Good job."

"What... what are you talking about?"

"You've defeated the big, bad, evil monster," Her mother said. "You win."

"Why are you talking like this is... like this is some big game?"

"Isn't life a game? You grow stronger by overcoming your obstacles. And you've overcome your big, bad mother."

"So-so what, was this all some test?!" Natsumi demanded. "Twenty years of neglect, for some test of strength?!"

"You've got it," Her mother confirmed, and Natsumi couldn't even feel mad.
"Why are you so surprised? I've done this to everyone."

"Everyone," Natsumi echoed in an empty voice.

"Your father. Fuyuhiko. Pekoyama. Hinata. Even the mouse, Tsumiki, was it?"

"Everyone in our family," Natsumi whispered.

"Yes. You understand now, don't you?"

Natsumi stared her mother in the eye, and asked-

"What the actual hell is wrong with you?"

Her mother just smiled.
Life went on.

People stopped asking how Mikan got her scars, Hiyoko stopped questioning when Fuyuhiko would leave, and people generally calmed down.

Eventually, everyone managed to reach a point where they all could calm down. And took up knitting. And yoga, and meditation, and various other calming activities. They all sat together and agreed to never cause another shenanigan again, because they were becoming much too mature for such antics. No one ever misbehaved again. No arguments, no fighting, no misadventures. Forever.

... BWAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA YEAH RIGHT.

Hiyoko kept constantly bringing up the idea that Fuyuhiko had to go home eventually, each year giving her argument more strength. Everyone who met Mikan asked about her burnt arm. She responded only with a smile. Ibuki kept singing, Chiaki kept streaming, Peko kept up her skills with a sword, Natsumi still had her fun selling illegal items and pranking others, and Hajime and Mahiru desperately tried to keep everyone in line. And they were still a total mess. They squabbled and shrieked and silly shenanigans still happened every day. Fuyuhiko still snapped and Chiaki still schemed and Ibuki still screamed and Mahiru still supervised and Hajime still sarcasm-ed and Natsumi still steamed and Hiyoko still snarked and Peko still stoic-ed and Mikan still had horrible ideas born out of love.

Obviously, this meant chaos. Not the small, easy pickings of before, no, not tiny arguments or spats.

We're talking something truly worthy of being a grande finale. Our grande finale, the end of the end, sayonara story.

And, like most things in our story, it started small.

Five years after Mikan and Fuyuhiko's first meeting, Mikan had an idea. The kind of idea that was nice and good and all, save for, you know, being the kind of idea you get out of nowhere and can't get rid of. And the kind of idea that was, among adjectives such as 'invasive' and 'questionable', oddly appealing? Despite the general and terrible risk involved.

Anyways, the idea took root in Mikan's head, and she couldn't uproot it. Every time her mind turned to the thought, it grew stronger and stronger and stronger, until, a week later, she cracked.

Her roommates didn't know that, though. In fact, the precise moment she cracked, Hiyoko was at work, Ibuki and Fuyuhiko were starting to sew together.

Ibuki and Fuyuhiko managed to have the following conversation before Mikan walked through the door, an hour later:

"Honestly, why the fuck are your needles so small? I can barely see the eye," Fuyuhiko groaned, before shooting Ibuki a quick glare. "And if you make a joke, I'll kill you."

"Wasn't even thinking of it, Fuyu-chan!" Ibuki lied, like a lying liar.
"Right," Fuyuhiko said with a sigh. "Right."

"You sound like you don't believe me!"

"That's because I don't."

"So cruel!"

Immediately following that outburst, Mikan burst into the room. Fuyuhiko turned to greet her and froze. Ibuki made to do the same, and for once in her life, was stunned into silence.

The reason for which was simple.

Mikan was wearing a familiar maid outfit, for one. The dress she was wearing was torn from the edge of her skirt to her hip, and one sleeve was practically dangling off of her shoulder. Bruises were visible around her neck, face, arms, hands, and stomach. On top of that, her hair was messed up to the point that she looked more like a sea urchin than a nurse, so, there was really only one conclusion to come to.

Mikan had been involved in violence.

And that fact had been painfully clear to Fuyuhiko and Ibuki, AKA the most protective boyfriend and the most protective sister ever.

Did you really think that would go over well?

"Name, appearance, and recount, right now! Ibuki needs to know!"

"Fuck, I'll get the first aid kit!"

Ibuki quickly cleaned up the sewing, setting Mikan down in the newly-vacated spot while Fuyuhiko rushed for the medical supplies.

"Stay right here, Mikan-chan! Rest and tell me all about it!"

"I, mean, ooooka-"

Mikan was cut off by Fuyuhiko dashing back into the scene, already looking her over for injuries.

"Are you hurt anywhere else?" Fuyuhiko asked gently, examining the bruises on her knuckles.

"No, not really," Mikan answered with a carefree laugh. "Those guys were easy to beat! Natsumi-chan's given me a harder time before!"

"What guys?" Ibuki asked, carefully concealing killer intent under innocent curiosity.

"The guys who tried to rob someone while I was going to a job interview," Mikan responded, before grinning. "I hit them with my bag!"

"You gotta work on not getting hurt so badly," Fuyuhiko adopted his teacher voice for a quick second, before shooting Mikan a smile. "But I bet you beat the crap outta them."

Ibuki almost laughed at how flustered and embarrassed Mikan got over that comment, but, well...

"Job interview? In a maid outfit?"
The two successive questions brought Mikan back to reality, and she replied quickly.

"Haha, yeah! You kind of need one to work at a maid cafe!"

And then the other two started freaking out.

"WHAT."

"BUT YOU STILL WORK AT THE HOSPITAL?!"

"HELLO! WHAT THE FCK COULD YOU NEED FROM A MAID CAFE?!"

"YOU HAVE A JOB?! UNLESS YOU GOT FIRED IN THE PAST SIX HOURS?!"

"PLEASE TELL ME YOU'RE NOT ACTUALLY PLANNING ON SHOWING ANYONE THE SIGHT OF YOU IN A MAID OUTFIT!"

"MIKAN DID YOU GET FIRED?! HOW?! YOU'RE LIKE ONE OF OUR BEST NURSES!"

"I'll fucking kill anyone who thinks they can get a glimpse of my girlfriend in something like that!"

"MIKAN WHAT HAPPENED?!"

Mikan, to her credit, did not overreact to this. She didn't underreact, either. Because she... didn't really react at all.

She blinked once, twice, then spoke up. Her voice was slow and quiet, to the point that the other two almost spoke over her. But they didn't, and they distinctly heard,

"I... just need money?"

Their answers were in perfect sync, which really should be considered a huge step in the grand scheme of things, considering how they couldn't get along at all before.

"YOU'RE FRIENDS WITH SOME OF THE RICHEST PEOPLE IN JAPAN! WHY Couldn't YOU HAVE JUST ASKED?!"

"For money?" Mikan asked innocently.

"Yes, for money!" Fuyuhiko exclaimed.

"If you asked, I would give you as much as you needed!" Ibuki exclaimed.

"I'm sorry, but I can't accept that!" Mikan yelled, before rapidly quieting down. She didn't lose any of her determination, though. "I really want to be able to do this by myself! So, thank you very much for your offer, but... I don't think I need it!"

Mikan finished up Fuyuhiko's wrapping, before taking the first aid kit and scampering off to her room. Ibuki and Fuyuhiko stared at spot they last saw her for a moment, before Mikan poked her head back out again.

"And, er, by the way, thank you for treating me and asking! I hope you two had a great day too!"

And then Mikan left through the front door.
Ibuki and Fuyuhiko did what anyone would in their situation would do.

Get their partner in crime involved.

They didn't even bother coming up with half-assed excuses before leaving, already calling their second-in-commands.

Ibuki managed to connect to Hiyoko relatively easily. Unfortunately, Natsumi was busy beating people bloody, and Peko was too busy stabbing sad souls into a state of submission, so Fuyuhiko had to call Hajime.

For the sake of simplicity, both conversations will be transcribed at once, since what Fuyuhiko and Ibuki were saying was mostly identical. Ish.

"...what," Hiyoko said flatly, unable to even muster a response to Ibuki's panicked babbling.

"She is not being threatened by debt collectors," Hajime said flatly, unable to muster up any emotion to Fuyuhiko's outlandish theory.

"You want me to convince her to-" Hiyoko sighed. "No."

"She's not in any danger, Fuyuhiko." Hajime sighed. "Stop worrying."

"I want nothing to do with this! Just let her try to get her money!" Hiyoko snapped.

"Hey, hey, I have nothing to do with this!" Hajime exclaimed defensively. "She's just making her own choices here!"

"No! I am not convincing her to do anything!"

"You don't have to know everything about her, Fuyuhiko. Just let her do this."

"Let her do it herself! Do you know how annoying it is to have someone do everything for you?!"

"There are some things you have to do yourself, you know. Some things that you need to do for yourself."

"Making you feel like you're someone hopeless and helpless to be coddled... like you can't do anything yourself... it's the worst feeling in the world!"

"Trust me. And trust her, okay?"

"She doesn't need someone to hold her fucking hand."
“So just be patient. I know she'll tell you when she's ready.”

“If you try to get me to do something like this again, I'm throwing you out a window.”

“Fuyuhiko, did anyone ever tell you that you're terrifying as hell when you're in love? Because it needs to be mentioned.”

“Yeah, see y- NO! I AM NOT DOING THE KISSES!”

“Right, see you later. I'll tell Natsumi and Peko you said hi,” Hajime said, before shutting off his phone and heading back to the store's front desk. He shot a small grin at his new co-worker before setting up for their first shift together.

“So, I just take money and give them change?” Mikan asked cautiously.

“Yeah, and make polite conversation too,” He added. "If they have questions about anything, tell them to talk to me or Gundham.”

“Alright! Thank you so much, Hajime-kun!” Mikan grinned gratefully. "I'm so glad you could help me with these part-time jobs!”

“Hey, if I get a babysitter in exchange, who am I to say no? I might as well just let you take up permanent custody of Kotoko,” Hajime joked.

“HEY! YOU'RE NOT ALLOWED TO SELL ME!” Kotoko cried out from the other side of the store.

“Not selling if I'm paying her for it!” Hajime retorted.

“ILLEGAL! SO ILLEGAL! SO FLAGRANTLY ILLEGAL!”

“...she knows what the word 'flagrant' means,” Nagisa noted, almost, kind of impressed.

“Oh shut up. You're the one who taught me.”

“I don't recall ever doing any such thing.”

“Because you have a terrible memory!”

“I'm not the one who forgot we had a history test until after we handed it in.”

“Shut up! I'll drown you in kittens!”

“You know how to use flagrant right, but not drown?!”

“IT'S CALLED A METAPHOR! LOOK IT UP, GENIUS HORNS!”

“LIKE YOU CAN TALK WITH THAT RIDICULOUS HEADBAND-”

“WELL AT LEAST THEY'RE NOT MY NATURAL HAIR-!”

Mikan turned to Hajime, her smile suddenly faltering.
"Is this... is this normal?"

Hajime just gave her a tired sigh.

"Yep."

"We don't need to babysit here?" Mikan asked desperately, looking to Hiyoko for guidance.

"Of course not," Hiyoko answered. "As long as they don't have a weapon to your face, let 'em do whatever."

"But what if they steal something? Or the customers are screaming and breaking things?"

"Do I look like I care?" Hiyoko stared at her with unimpressed eyes.

"H...how are you still employed...?" Mikan muttered, in both shock and muted awe.

"Auntie Honoka's brother can't bear the thought of firing the kid she liked so much."

"...you mean that lady who lost her daughter and kept dressing you up in stuff so she could pretend she still had a kid?"

"Yep," Hiyoko agreed.

"I... I feel like that plot thread was meant to be resolved in a much neater way..." Mikan mumbled dejectedly.

"Who wants an entire flashback chapter full of crappy haikus?"

"But it's your special side chapter!" Mikan argued. "And it would have given you a chance to bond with Peko-chan!"

"Yeah, cuz' it was implied that Red Eyes was Auntie Honoka's long-lost daughter! What kind of insane coincidence is that?! I bonded with her just fine over fashion!"

"But your special side chapter might never happen without it!" Mikan protested.

"I don't need it! I'm above Mahiru-tier, and that's all that matters!"

"That's... what even constitutes being above Mahiru-tier?!" Mikan demanded.

"I actually had a romance arc," Hiyoko stated.

"That's just... really sad," Mikan concluded.

"Don't I know it," Hiyoko agreed, before shrugging. "Anyways, just ignore the customers until they hand over money and you'll be fine."

"You're just changing the subject because you don't care anymore..."

"Yep."

"How do you even get paid with this attitude?" Mikan asked bluntly.

"The power of love and cuteness," Hiyoko answered flatly.
"I don't have that..." Mikan frowned.

"You're fucking kidding me, right?" Hiyoko gave her childhood friend the most unimpressed stare she could muster. "I do not even have legs to pull, and yet you're here, yanking them out."

"What?"

"Oh my god, you know exactly why you're doing this! Why would you sign up for all these jobs if you didn't have a goal?!"

"Y-you don't know anything! I have no goals! None at all! Absolutely zero!"

"Why are you lying to me?! You're abso-fucking-lutely terrible at it! You'd have a better case if you just kept your mouth shut!"

"Haha, what are you even talking about, Hiyoko-chan, I am not trying to make any kind of case! What is a case? I don't even know what that means! Hahahaha!"

Being a cashier turned out to be a lively job. But then again, it might have been because of the employees, rather than the post.

"Big Sis Miiiiiiikaaaaaaaaaaaaan," Kotoko called out, leaning on the counter. "I'm booooooreeeeeddddd!"

"N-not now, Kotoko-chan!" Mikan exclaimed hastily as she whipped up a coffee for the customer giving Kotoko an odd look. "Play with Nagisa-kun for now!"

"But he's totally boring! And a jerk! And a pretentious brat!" Kotoko whined, puffing her cheeks out in a pout.

"You're calling ME the brat?!" Nagisa screamed from across the store. "You're the one who-"

"Your iced latte with chocolate swirl, sir!" Mikan quickly handed the concoction to the customer, before turning to Kotoko. "I'd be happy to play with you, but not while I'm working... I can't do both at once, you know."

"Big Brother Hajime can," Kotoko stated plainly, only to bristle when Mikan had to take an order. "Urggegh! You're the worst babysitter ever!"

Mikan's smile twitched as she rattled off the price to the customer. How the everloving hell did Hajime manage to do this.

The only thing keeping Mikan working as a nurse, cashier for two stores, barista, and babysitter was the power of love! How did Hajime manage to be a cashier, barista, babysitter, and Yakuza for no real reason?! Why did he even have that many jobs anyways?! What kind of masochism could even prompt someone to do such a thing?!

(The actual answer was kind of simple. He got hired for a part-time job since there was no one else available, but became so integral to each establishment that they needed him around permanently.)

But the thought brought her back to her reasons for doing everything. The power of love, huh?

Mikan smiled, even as Kotoko and Nagisa started squabbling again and the next customer asked for a cappuccino frappe vanilla double cream latte with swirls and chocolate but hold the milk and a little umbrella on top.
She thought of dept collectors and paying them off as soon as possible. She thought of the relief she'd feel when she could go back to only having to be a nurse. She thought of how she could have taken the easy way out and let someone else do it for her, but didn't, because she wanted to prove to everyone, to herself, that she could do it. She thought of how much more meaningful it was that she was doing it through her own efforts, out of love and devotion, and thought of happiness and peace and their little domesticity lasting forever.

But, most of all, she thought of the ring in her pocket, safely hidden inside its box until the moment she chose to reveal it.

Yeah. It would all be worth it in the end. Mikan was sure of it.
"You sure about this?" Hajime inquired, though he didn't particularly know why.

The answer was obvious in the way Mikan carried herself, looking forward without an ounce of hesitation. She didn't falter as she stepped forward, never stopped to slow down or reconsider. Not once did she think she might have wanted anything else.

Hajime almost laughed at the answer, mentally comparing Mikan's demeanor to how she was years ago. When did stuttering and uncertainty become unwavering determination? When did the unwillingness to refuse others become unwillingness to bow down to the desires of others? When did the girl who would need to be forced to talk to someone intimidating become a woman willingly entangled in the biggest Yakuza family in all of Japan?

Seriously... words couldn't express how happy and proud he was. And to think, this was all thanks to one chance encounter.

Kuzuryuu Fuyuhiko would like to say that he didn't get heated up over the worst things, that he knew how to interact with people normally, and that he knew how to handle his own emotions. Note the 'would like to', because everything after that was a load of shit. He became furious at the drop of a hat, that he didn't know how to talk to people casually outside his own family, and that he had trouble figuring out how to keep himself from flipping out sometimes.

But that was a long time ago, and things changed.

And one by one, bit by bit, the circle of people he trusted grew and grew. They joked around, laughed, and made him feel loved and accepted. He had a place with them, as sure as his name was Kuzuryuu Fuyuhiko and the fact that he was the heir to the Kuzuryuu name. That's why, when emotion got the best of him again and he was on the verge of screaming everything, he knew what to do.

He took in a deep breath, let it all out in a sigh, and stepped forward, a serene smile on his face.

It was time.

"I can't believe Hanamura's place is still open," Fuyuhiko said as they walked side-by-side. "Shouldn't some customer have punched him into oblivion for his perverted antics by now?"

"He's a pervert, but I'm sure he's still a professional, you know?" Mikan shot back with a grin.

"Whatever," Fuyuhiko scoffed, though he looked up at her with a smile. "Doesn't mean I wouldn't look out for drugs in the food if I were you."

"We're not in a freaky Friday flip movie!" Mikan protested jokingly.

They walked down the sidewalk in matching sweaters, simplistic impressions of regalia prints on their chests. Fuyuhiko had jokingly offered his arm to Mikan when they left the apartment, and she didn't let go since. It was a bit lopsided, considering the height difference between them, but they didn't mind.

"Honestly though, how do those movies even work? Swapping brains sounds like it would kill you,
and swapping souls brings up all sorts of questions."

"Actually, there's been talk of a theoretical brain transplant," Mikan mentioned. "There's no way anyone would actually do it, though."

"How come?" Fuyuhiko asked curiously.

"Your brain starts dying after about six minutes without oxygen, so you'd either need to harvest a brain really quickly or come up with a holding tank that oxygenates it while waiting," Mikan started off. "Plus, you need to attach the brain to the spinal cord in order to give the person any control over anything from the chin down, and it's already hard enough to fix normal spinal cord injuries! And there's the possibility of the body rejecting the new brain, which would almost definitely not end well either. And, well, we have no idea what would happen if we just put someone else's brain in your head at all!"

She waved her free hand at the air to empathize her words.

"We have no idea if it would work like your old brain or if it would overwrite your personality like a freaky Friday flip or kill you or create a new personality or what! The idea is so risky that no one would ever agree to do that!"

The sound of a snicker brought her out of her rambling, and she turned to see Fuyuhiko stifling a laugh.

"Has anyone ever told you that you're adorable when you're talking about medical practices?" Fuyuhiko asked with a smile. "Because that's the sort of information you should probably know."

Mikan giggled, before her voice took on an overly-innocent tone. "Why, no! I don't believe I've ever been told that, Fuyuhiko!"

"Never in your life?"

"Nope!" Mikan shot him a grin. "I'm actually inclined to disagree with you on that."

"You'd think someone who calls me cute all the time would recognize her own cuteness..." Fuyuhiko rolled his eye in fake exasperation. "Well, what would it take to convince you of the truth?"

"Hmm... candy, bribes, a few kisses maybe..." Mikan mumbled thoughtfully, before jolting up with an idea. "Or, maybe you could say we're both cute!"

"That's all it takes?" Fuyuhiko asked.

"Hehehe, it seems simple, but are you willing to throw your pride under the bus, just to get me to agree with you?" Mikan retorted.

"It would be a horrible, awful blight against my pride, but if it's for you, I suppose it's not too bad."

Mikan laughed, and soon, Fuyuhiko joined in too. Fucking nerds.

But, hey, they were happy. Maybe a bit too happy, maybe a bit too excited. Maybe the bubbly feeling in their stomachs, the weird electricity in their veins, maybe that was just nerves. Or maybe they were just happy to be together. Who could say?

Who knew what was going through Mikan's head in-between ordering tempura soba with a calm
and steady voice and complimenting her boyfriend of, what, five years? Who knew what Fuyuhiko was thinking when he listed off kusamochi, castella, fried dough cookies, and anmitsu to Komaru, before cracking a joke about sweets to Mikan after?

Everyone had their guesses. People could see the way that, even while they ate, one hand was in a pocket, fidgeting around something that might have been a shining ring. Anyone with eyes could see knees rubbing against each other, desperately trying to relieve anxious tension. And the almost-panicked way words kept spilling from lips, trying to keep the conversation alive like it was suffering through cardiac arrest, hyperglycaemic shock, and a stroke, all at once. Not in that order, though. Probably. About as probable as the chances of the chapter ending without someone screaming.

But, well, cross that bridge when it gets here. For now, there are two things you need to know before going on.

One: Fuyuhiko was feeding Mikan pieces of fruit.

Two: In-between eating bites of food and talking, a box had made its way into Mikan's hand, just waiting for the chance to be opened.

The chance, Mikan thought, came when Fuyuhiko's bowl emptied out, and-

"Mikan-

"Fuyuhiko-

They blinked at each other. Mikan's jaw was held tight, Fuyuhiko was flicking a ring on his finger unconsciously, the two staring for a few seconds before they moved in unison.

"You first," Fuyuhiko offered with a strange expression.

"You sure? It could take a while," Mikan said, frowning.

"I wouldn't offer if I wasn't sure," He retorted.

"O-okay! Just- okay!" Mikan took in a huge breath, before smiling.

"I love you," Mikan confessed, taking ahold of his hands. Fuyuhiko was about to reciprocate, before the earnestness in her eyes and the gravity in her voice silenced him.

She stared him in the eye as she went on. She had a plan, she had an entire speech planned out, a million different ways she saw the situation unfolding, but... in the heat of the moment, she ended up discarding all of it and speaking honestly.

"I- I love you, so, so, so much! There aren't enough words for how incredible you are to me! Your kindness, your bravery, your honesty and sarcasm and heart, everything about you is- amazing!" She exclaimed fervently. "I just want to wake up and see your face every morning! I want to spend my free afternoons at the gym with you and continue learning as much as possible from you! I want to support you in everything, I want to hear you complain about anyone and anything you don't like, or any problem on your mind! I love you, and I want to be by your side forever, Fuyuhiko!"

Fuyuhiko's eye widened as she pulled out her ring, a golden dragon curled in on itself, scales delicately carved into the metal surface, a ruby red jewel for an eye resting above a daunting set of teeth, and-
"So... please marry me?" Mikan asked with a hopeful smile.

Fuyuhiko blinked.

And then he slammed his fist into the table, causing the cutlery to clatter. Mikan flinched, tossing up the ring and fumbling to catch it.

"Goddammit!" Fuyuhiko bellowed as Mikan dropped the ring in the floor. She ducked down to scoop it up, and Fuyuhiko swore again.

"Y-you don't want to?" Mikan whimpered.

"Of course not," Fuyuhiko grumbled, only to hear a choked whine. He quickly added, "I meant, 'of course I don't want to say no'. I just wanted to be the one who asked!"

Mikan jumped, hitting her head on the table. She scrambled to get up, one hand on the top of her skull and the other tightly clutching the golden ring. Fuyuhiko waited until she was sitting back on her chair before he took a box out of his pocket and set it on the table.

"You... got me a...?" Mikan gaped, causing Fuyuhiko to roll his eye.

"You think I'd let myself be dragged to Hanamura's diner if I wasn't trying to put you in a good mood?" Fuyuhiko huffed.

"But- you wanted to propose?!"

"Why wouldn't I?!" Fuyuhiko demanded. "I love you, you moron! There's no one else I would ever want to do this for! You're the only one ever allowed to fall asleep cuddling me, or drag me to places I would never visit alone, or call me adorable! You're the only person I want to share movies with until we fall asleep on the couch! You're the only one I would wait for for hours just so I can welcome you home from work! I love everything about you, from your devotion to others to your stupidly adorable sense of humour to your heart! I don't regret a single moment I've spent with you! And I want to be with you forever, idiot!"

Mikan's eyes widened as he pulled out his ring, twin silver ribbons twisted together to form a series of loops, miniature emerald gems embedded in the metal surface, a single carving in the interior, and-

"Take it."

Mikan blinked.

And then she smiled, holding her own ring out to him.

"Only if you take mine."

"Equivalent exchange?" Fuyuhiko shot her a knowing grin.

"I'm thinking of it more like splitting the bill," Mikan replied with a smile.

"You're such a dork."

"You're marrying this dork!" Mikan exclaimed ecstatically.

"I know! And I love it!" Fuyuhiko declared with a laugh. "I love you!"
"I love you too!"

They laughed together, and for a moment, the world was just the two of them. All that mattered was a) they were together, b) they loved each other, and c) they would continue to stay together and love each other for the rest of the foreseeable future. Everything was perfect.

Until it wasn't.

"WOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO

Ibuki screamed from the next table over, sparking thunderous applause from the rest of the patrons. Patrons that were looking more and more like their friends in horrible outfits by the second.

"Holy shit, you guys actually did it!" Hiyoko declared in damnable disbelief.

"I'm so glad for you two," Peko said with a smile.

"O-oh my god... it's like reaching the end of the Secret of Mana all over again!" Chiaki sobbed, even though she wasn't fucking crying.

"WHAT THE FUCK?! WERE YOU ASSHOLES ALWAYS THERE?!"

"The entire time!" Mahiru replied eagerly, and only then did the couple notice the video camera in her hands.

"Holy shit, it actually happened! It actually fucking happened!" Natsumi had to repeat the same line again at least four times to make sure it actually registered in her head.

"Told ya it would happen!" Kotoko declared triumphantly, holding a hand out to Nagisa, who begrudgingly handed her a total of ten yen.

"You're so immature, agreeing to such an insignificant wager..."

"You're just mad you lost!" Kotoko shot back, which almost immediately devolved into an argument.

"Oh my god," Mikan whispered in horror.

"We should really just... pay and leave," Fuyuhiko mumbled back.

"I have my umbrella in case we need to fight someone. Or if it rains."

"Why? It's not even cloudy out?"

"W-well, just for nostalgia!"

"You're such a sap!"

Mikan couldn't help but laugh at that, which inevitably sparked laughter in Fuyuhiko too. They were so caught up in ecstasy and adrenaline that they barely noticed the chaos the others brought. It was perfect again, until that perfection was shot, beached, shattered to pieces, had those pieces cooked in a fire until they became ashes that were shattered to the winds, all in a single, piercing question from Hajime.
"So... how are you guys going to break the news to Fuyuhiko's parents?"

"Oh shit, that's what I forgot last night!" Mikan screamed in horror.
Mikan impatiently waited for Mrs. Kuzuryuu to finish pouring their tea, complete silence in the all-but-empty dining room. Anticipation mixed with dread pooled in Mikan's stomach, making her gnaw at her lips in the silence.

A cup was placed in front of her, and she took a sip. It was... kind of weird, to say the least. It tasted sweet and herbal and warm like home, but it left her mouth feeling like she downed a bottle of pills after. Or like she got punched in the back of the throat. It was odd, but not all that bad, just something she had to adjust to.

Mrs. Kuzuryuu had the decency to wait until Mikan set down the cup before speaking, even having the courtesy to refill it for the nurse.

"You intend to marry my son," Mrs. Kuzuryuu stated.

"I do."

"And I believe we can agree to skip over the question of whether money or power factored into this decision, as you've already proven your devotion to him, time and time again," Mrs. Kuzuryuu said softly, and Mikan felt her eyes almost pop out of her head.

Her mind scrambled to process the older woman's words. The discussion really wasn't about whether or not she was a gold digger?! What was she even there for then?!

Oh right she still hadn't done anything but gape at Mrs. Kuzuryuu like a dying fish.

"Yes! W-we can!" Mikan exclaimed a little too quickly, before letting out a few coughs. And then a few more coughs.

She may or may not have accidentally swallowed something wrong thanks to that.

Mrs. Kuzuryuu helpfully walked over and punched her in the back, right between her shoulder blades. Or, well, Mikan thought Mrs. Kuzuryuu thought she was being helpful. Punching people when they were choking didn't actually help. But it was the thought that counted! Unless Mrs. Kuzuryuu was just using her choking as an excuse to punch her in the back.

Thankfully for Mikan, Mrs. Kuzuryuu clarified her intentions by guiding the brunette's scarred hand to her cup. Mikan gulped it down greedily as Mrs. Kuzuryuu made her way back to her seat, almost breaking the delicate tableware when she slammed it back down on the table.

"Thank you!" Mikan screamed the moment she regained the ability to breathe.

Mrs. Kuzuryuu smiled at her funny, before saying, "I should be the one thanking you. You're the one who agreed to humour me with a conversation."

Mikan had a response to that, except for the fact that it was obviously the wrong thing to say. She could never be allowed to say that ever. No way in hell and the seven seas.

Thankfully, Mikan had an excuse to stall for time. She picked up the teapot and began pouring
herself another cup. Just in case, she would drink it too, and then she'd be able to think of something that wasn't 'I thought this would be a fight to the death about honour and something-or-other with lots of fireworks and knives and blood and then Natsumi would break a table or something and Fuyuhiko- wait I'm not not thinking of this-

Mikan felt hands on her own and jumped. There was no denying it! Absolutely no way to deny it! She was jumpy and nervous and she really really wanted this to go well because goddammit she loved this man more than anything and she didn't want to ruin her relationship with his mother!

Mikan belatedly realized that Mrs. Kuzuryuu was taking the teapot from her-

Oh.

She had filled her cup to the brim and then kept pouring, which resulted in a pitiful puddle on the table. Her cheeks flared red with shame as she apologized, something that wasn't helped with Mrs. Kuzuryuu's lighthearted chuckle.

"There's something on your mind, isn't there?" She asked, and Mikan nodded swiftly.

"I'm just- everything!" Mikan exclaimed, waving her arms around her head. "I'm really really happy that I'm engaged to the best man in the world and I'm excited, I'm so excited for this, I haven't been this excited since I heard that karma was a thing that could reasonably exist- and, well, I'm nervous! Please forgive me for my transgressions!" She pressed her forehead to the table in the best approximation of a bow she could do while sitting down. "Please entrust your son to me! I'll love and treasure him forever-!"

"Sure."

"-and there will never be a day he will feel unloved and I'll support him to the best of my abilities, no, better than my best! He deserves better than the best of the best and I would become that for him and-"

"...Tsumiki."

"-I know first aid and how to cook and I probably know how to take care of children and he taught me how to fight and I love him, I really, actually, totally love him, he's the best thing that has ever happened to me and I don't know where I would be if I never met him and I love him-"

"You're rambling," Mrs. Kuzuryuu stated flatly, dragging Mikan back to earth with a poke in the forehead. "Did you somehow miss the part where I already said I approved?"

Mikan blinked, the words taking their sweet time to register in her brain. Then, she let out a small, "Maybe?"

Mrs. Kuzuryuu laughed at that. Like. Actual laughter. Not demonic or anything.

Mikan would not be the only person to think that was impossible. Not even her children knew she could make a sound like that. Like, an actual laugh that wasn't caused by manipulating someone or something. She sounded alive and she sounded... happy.

It was a far cry from her previous position as supreme sovereign of serpentine stares. In fact, it was almost enough to make her seem... human.

Mikan couldn't help but laugh too. She walked into the meeting with a head full of worst-case scenarios, but after that, she really couldn't think that the conversation would be all that bad-!
Huh...? Conversation...? What were they talking about again?

"What did you want to talk about in the first place?"

"I just wanted to get to know my future daughter-in-law," Mrs. Kuzuryuu answered. "So, tell me about yourself."

"Huh? What about myself?"

"Anything interesting," The blonde said with a grin. "You can even talk about nursing if you'd like."

Mikan hummed, sipping at her tea as she thought. For some reason, nothing was really coming to mind. Maybe it was the part where she came home from work, then immediately ran to Fuyuhiko's house for the meeting, but her head felt empty of ideas...

"I like horror movies," Mikan answered simply. "I watch them with Fuyuhiko a lot."

"Really?"

"Yeah, it's something fun we do together! Like going to the gym or out for coffee or cooking or shopping." Mikan paused, a thought popping into her head. "Actually, just spending time with him in general is fun."

Mrs. Kuzuryuu made a sound of approval at that.

"So, has Fuyuhiko met your parents just like this?"

"That's impossible," Mikan stated, and Mrs. Kuzuryuu's expression became something that could almost be called somberness.

"I'm sorry for your loss."

"It's fine. You had nothing to do with it."

"How about another question?" The older woman asked quickly. "What's your favourite food?"

"Anything hot."

"Not even a specific kind of food?"

"No, it just has to be hot."

The conversation went on like that for a while. Mrs. Kuzuryuu asked a question. Mikan answered them. Mrs. Kuzuryuu filled her cup with tea. Mikan drank it. This cycle continued, even with Mikan's moments of hesitation and forgetfulness becoming long and more frequent as the night went on.

Mrs. Kuzuryuu learned that Mikan liked dogs and the colour purple and non-elastic bandages. Mikan hated big things and bullies and the idea of being abandoned, though she wasn't as bad as she used to be. When she wasn't working, she was playing games with Chiaki, taking coffee breaks with Hajime, hanging out with Ibuki training with Peko and Natsumi, chatting with Mahiru and Hiyoko, or with Fuyuhiko. Mikan explained how they first met, before the fuzzy feeling in her head became a headache that had her yanking at her hair. Thankfully, Mrs. Kuzuryuu then stated she was almost done with the questions.
"Just two more," She said with a reassuring grin. "Do you trust Fuyuhiko?"

"Yes."

"Would you trust him with your life?"

"Yes, of course," Mikan declared, her voice steady despite the room wobbling around her.

"Then trust him with what comes next, okay?"

Mrs. Kuzuryuu patted her on the head, and Mikan lost consciousness.

Mikan's first thought upon waking up was a question. Something along the lines of 'how did I even get enough alcohol to get a hangover'.

Then she realized something. She was not lying down on a bed or sprawled out on the floor. She was kneeling down, knees digging into tatami mats uncomfortably. Mikan could already feel prickling in her legs. Her state at the time could be summarized with the word 'uncomfortable'. Mikan's arms were tied together behind her back with cord, and her tongue was weighed down with a gag. The sound of someone talking rang in her ears, just in front of her. On either side of her, she could hear some sort of muffled grunts and movement, but when she tried to look at the scene around her, she found that the world was dark whether her eyes were open or not.

'Well. This is new,' Mikan thought to herself, only somewhat sarcastically.

"What the goddamn fuck is going on here?!" A familiar voice demanded, snapping Mikan to attention. The sounds on her left and right stopped, just as Mrs. Kuzuryuu started to speak.

"Did you forget? Your birthday is almost upon us." There was a deliberate pause just then, and Mikan heard steps on the old-fashioned mats. "It's time for your test."

Fuyuhiko growled at that. Mikan thought she heard a gun click. There was the sound of soft chuckle, then she heard another click and a shnk.

"Come now, don't be like that. You wouldn't want to lose everything because of an attitude problem, would you?"

The sounds of movement to Mikan's left became more frantic, almost like thrashing about. The muffled voice to her right snarled.

"Just explain already," Fuyuhiko spat defiantly.

"I appreciate your enthusiasm," Mrs. Kuzuryuu said in a sickly sweet voice. "It's almost driving me to tears, seeing how much you've grown."

"Get on with it."

"Oh, testy." Another chuckle left Mrs. Kuzuryuu's lips, before she spoke again. "You have one bullet. If you choose wrong, I will be the only one leaving this room alive. You have to choose the one you can live without."

...huh?
Mikan's heartbeat echoed in her ears, dread pooling in her stomach.

It didn't take much to realize she was an option in this test. It didn't take much to realize that Mrs. Kuzuryuu had planned this the entire time, even when she thought they were getting along. It didn't take much to realize that her life was on the line here.

"You... you're asking me to..."

"What a smart little boy." The footsteps went toward's Mikan right, and she heard a rushed gasp of air.

"Fuyuhiko!" Hajime screamed, making Mikan's blood run cold. Not Hajime. Not loyal, kind, supportive Hajime. "Shoot the ropes, or aim at the floor, or- agh!"

"With cunning," Mrs. Kuzuryuu began, speaking over the sounds of Hajime gagging and struggling for breath, "you can solve any problem in your way. Find an unconventional solution to almost any situation you could find yourself in."

She walked past Mikan, leaving Hajime wheezing behind her. The thrashing sped up.

"With strength, you can simply demolish anything in your path. No need for complicated thinking. Just point your loyal tool at the enemy and go."

"She's not a tool!" Fuyuhiko retorted immediately.

Peko let out a low growl, and Mikan didn't have to look to know that Peko was glaring at Mrs. Kuzuryuu with the ferocity of nine thousand dragons. Peko had always been brave like that. Brace, strong, and loyal.

"Won't say anything, even when given the chance?" Mrs. Kuzuryuu asked mockingly. "Brings a whole new meaning to 'silent but deadly.'"

Mrs. Kuzuryuu started moving again, coming to a stop right in front of Mikan. Sharp nails scratched at her lips as the gag was ripped out of her mouth.

"And this one..." Mrs. Kuzuryuu began disdainfully. A hand was on Mikan's jaw, forcing her head up. "Well, I'll let Tsumiki defend her own life."

Mikan heard a sharp intake of air from her left, along with a new choked gasp from her right.

Her tongue felt dry in her mouth as she tried to speak.

"Is... is this what you meant by asking me if I trust him with my life?" Mikan asked softly.

"Yes," Mrs. Kuzuryuu confirmed, her voice suddenly void of emotion. Her voice dropped to a whisper as she asked, "Has your answer changed?"

Mikan lifted her head towards the woman in front of her, then imagined Fuyuhuko in the eye. She wondered what he was thinking. If he was being eaten by the idea of choosing which one to discard.

Peko, Hajime, and Mikan.

Strength, cunning, and... whatever she was.

...
...huh? Wasn't she the odd one out then?

The samurai, the strategist, and the nurse. Two vital pieces, then a commodity at best.

Thinking from a logical standpoint, a nurse was redundant when a hospital was available. A Yakuza needed strength and smarts more than a cheap source of bandages. If Fuyuhiko chose to save her, he would be giving up the life of another one of their friends and a valuable ally in exchange for her. As much as she loved him, she couldn't let him do that.

Because Tsumiki Mikan lived to help others.

That included her friends, the man she loved, and the Kuzuryuu family as a whole. She wouldn't let them be burdened because someone more useful died in her place.

"You don't need me," Mikan declared suddenly.

"Mikan, don't even think about it," Hajime hissed.

"You need strength and cunning. You need Peko and Hajime."

"I won't let you die," Peko promised. "I'll die a hundred times before I let that happen."

"You don't need me," Mikan repeated urgently. "I barely know how to fight, compared to you and Peko. Hajime has better plans than I do. If you choose anyone but me, you're holding yourself back because of love."

"Fuyuhiko, you love this woman, don't even think of killing her," Hajime pleaded. "A strategist is replaceable, your fiancée is not!"

"The strategist isn't replaceable either," Peko retorted. "You have dozens of members qualified to be a bodyguard. If you choose me, there will be another in my place."

"As bodyguard, maybe, but not a sister!" Hajime protested.

"You're right. Both of you are precious, in experience, skills, and as friends. That's why he can't lose you two."

"And losing his fiancée is any better?! Mikan, you can't just throw away your life for this! I'm not telling Ibuki or Hiyoko that you're never coming home!"

"Our friends would be devastated," Peko agreed. "You have a life outside of the Yakuza, Mikan, don't let yourself drown to become Fuyuhiko's stepping stone."

"I knew what I was getting into!" Mikan argued. "Everyone did!"

"That doesn't mean I'll just let you die-"

"Will all of you just shut the fuck up for a second?!" Fuyuhiko snapped.

Surprisingly, it actually worked. Mikan shut her mouth, blushing with shame. She assumed that the other two were in the same state too. Probably.

Fuyuhiko let out a huff, and Mikan could practically see him roll his eye.

"Good. Now listen up, because I'm not going to say this shit twice."
The three of them muttered a vague assent at once.

"Rushing in without a plan beyond 'kill everyone in sight' would be suicide. A plan is useless without the strength to see it through. I need strength and cunning."

Mikan nodded, trying to calm her breathing. She shut her eyes despite the futility, and wondered if it would be painful.

"But I need you most of all, Mikan."

"But..."

"Am I seriously the only one who can see it?" Fuyuhiko demanded, almost annoyed at the thought.

"Well..." Hajime spoke up. "I'm assuming you're not blindfolded."

"Hajime," Peko said in her best 'NOT-THE-TIME' voice.

"Shutting up now."

Fuyuhiko just groaned.

"Mikan tries to give up her life to save you. The two of you are trying to offer your life in her place. That's a little something called loyalty, there," He explained, managing to sound bored and uncaring even with the circumstances. "That's pretty fucking important, considering I'm going to be the leader of an entire family. I can't sacrifice a single one of you."

"Then what's your answer?" Mrs. Kuzuryuu asked.

"...if I can't kill any of them, the choice would be between you and me."

Mikan gasped, a sudden spike of nausea hitting her. That nausea became dread clawing at the walls of her stomach as she heard movement, but couldn't know what was happening. She heard the click of a gun and Mrs. Kuzuryuu's hum of approval, but without her eyes, she couldn't know who that bullet would hit.

"How's this for your answer, mom?"

"Interesting." Mrs. Kuzuryuu let out a laugh. "What brought this on?"

"You told me to choose one to sacrifice."

"I did. Doesn't explain why you're choosing this."

"A boss is supposed to be able to give their life up for those that follow them, aren't they?"

Mikan felt the blood drain out of her face.

"I need to be clever, because I need to figure out the best course of action for the family. I need the loyalty of my men, and to be loyal in return. And I need to be strong enough to make hard choices, and even die for everyone else's sake."

"I see, then."

A heavy silence settled into the room, Mikan's heart beating ten times a second. She wasn't even sure she was breathing. The nurse had no idea how long she was in that condition, but then Mrs.
Kuzuryuu's voice shattered the fragile quiet in the room.

"Congratulations, Fuyuhiko. You pass."

It took a second for all of them to process it.

It took about two seconds for Mikan and Hajime to start screaming in elation.

It took ten seconds for Fuyuhiko to get Hajime untied and tell him to shut up. Hajime went to untie Peko, while Fuyuhiko moved in front of Mikan, untying her blindfold quickly.

The first thing she saw was him. His golden eye, the design on his eyepatch, his freckles, his soft hair, his soft cheeks...

If she just so happened to be spurred on by her adrenaline-driven heart and relief, well, who could really blame her?

Chapter End Notes

Alternate ending

"...if I can't kill any of them, the choice would be between you and me."

Fuyuhiko paused, before narrowing his eye at his mother.

"OR IT WOULD BE, IF THE GUN WAS ACTUALLY LOADED."

"...what."

"Oh shit."

"Huh?!"

Mrs. Kuzuryuu said nothing in return, but he had managed to smack the smug smirk off her face.

"Are you serious?! This is practically a staple of the movie industry! The boss ties up your best friend and says you need to be ruthless enough to kill to succeed, but you get shot if you try to kill the guy! You die if you're too weak to shoot, but you die if you're ruthless enough to actually do it! The answer is always to shoot the guy in the room with you, because it's a fake-out test!"

"Oh! You mean in that one Yakuza movie with the drink-pourer lady who got shot and killed for not shooting her husband!"

"Exactly! No one ever tries to just shoot the guy who gave you the gun! If they did that, they would find out way sooner that the gun was never loaded because they were never meant to kill anyone!"

"I have the sudden feeling that you've become way too meta for your own good..." Hajime said with a sigh.
What does that face even mean?

Well, I'm crying because I'm sad I can't see you, but also sort of smiling because I'm really excited for today!

Mikan, you'll see me again in an hour at most.

That's too long, and you know it!

I want to see you as soon as possible! I want to spend every second of today with you!

Impatient nurse.

That isn't even an insult.

Shut up, Mikan.

You're adorable, you know that, right?

I am not having this argument with you on our wedding day!

Great! You're accepting it without a fight!

THAT'S NOT WHAT I MEANT AND YOU KNOW IT

Hehehe, I know!

Urgh, you're the worst.

Do you really mean that?

Of course not.

I knew it.

You're too cute like that!

If anyone else said that, I would shatter their teeth.

Hey! No violence today! For once in my life, I don't want to treat a single person!

It was a hypothetical scenario! I wouldn't force that work on you today of all days!

So... you wouldn't fight anyone, even if they called you adorable.

Yeah.
Because you don't want me to work today.

Wasn't that obvious?

It's more sweet than anything.

I'm really lucky to have you, you know?

Shut up with that crap, would you? If anyone's lucky, it's me.

Denied. I'm obviously luckier since I get to marry you.

Are you kidding me? I'm getting married to the woman of a lifetime!

If I'm the woman of a lifetime, you're the man of a century!

Woman of the millennium.

Then you're

Is there a word for a million years?

How should I know? You're the one who usually pulls out some sort of weird fact out of nowhere.

Is that supposed to be a bad thing?

It's something that makes you Mikan.

That doesn't answer the question!

What do you mean it doesn't answer the question?!

I mean that it doesn't answer the question because you're being vague!

How am I being vague!? It can't be a bad thing because it's something that makes you you, how is that not obvious!?

It's not like I can read your mind!

It should be obvious from how much I love you, moron!

What's that supposed to mean?!

It means that there's nothing about you that I wouldn't like!

Huh?! How come I'm on the receiving end of these romantic declarations?!

I want to talk about how much I love you too!

Save it for the altar!

You're not!

Yeah, I'm not! Every word out of my mouth will be a declaration of love for you, so deal with it!

I graciously refuse!
[Denied.]

[I deny your denial of my refusal!]

[You're adorable, you know that, right?]

[Yeah, I do!]

[Unlike certain one-eyed grooms with freckles and dragon tattoos who constantly wear suits!]

[Wonder who that could be.]

[Isn't it obvious it's supposed to be you?]  

[Nope.]

[You're off by a bit.]

[Huh?]  

[How?]

[It's a surprise.]

[Is that why I was locked out of your change room?]  

[No, you got locked out because we're not supposed to see each other before the wedding!]

[It's bad luck to see the bride before the actual moment!]

[Do you actually believe in that?]  

[Hell no. I just want to see your face when you see it.]

[Hehehehe, same here!]

[Dork.]  

[I love you.]

[I love you too.]

[Would you look at that? Time for me to go.]

[See you soon.]

[I'll see you soon, Fuyuhiko!]

Tsumiki Mikan was no stranger to fear. Heart-pounding terror had pretty much invited itself into her mind one day and stuck around to haunt her. A long time ago, she felt fear's shadow looming over her with every step, anxiety eating at her constantly. She walked on nails in other to do what was necessary to please others in her own eyes, ignoring what people actually said they wanted from her in order to satisfy her own martyr complex.

But that was a long time ago, and things changed.
And one by one, bit by bit, her friends pulled her out of her self-sacrificing tendencies. They made her feel loved and accepted—er, well, more like they helped her realize she was loved and accepted all along, but still. Mikan wasn't the same person she was eighty-odd chapters ago. That's why, when the old fear resurfaced and showed its head again, she knew exactly what to do.

Mikan sucked up her breath, tried to stop her trembling, and put a smile on her face. She turned to Chiaki with a nod, holding out her arm, and they started walking.

Her father wasn't around anymore. Her mother didn't answer the invitation. Hajime was busy being best (right-hand) man, Ibuki and Hiyoko equally busy with being the entertainment, and Mahiru was the maid of honour. Also, Hiyoko couldn't walk. But, even though Chiaki had earned her position through process of elimination, Mikan found that she fit into her role perfectly. She guided Mikan down the aisle and to the altar by the crook of her elbow, a proud grin on her face the entire time.

Mikan noted with no small amount of satisfaction the way Fuyuhiko's eye widened at her as they approached. Several guests echoed his gaping stare, and there was no doubt that it was because of her appearance.

Her wedding dress was backless, a sweetheart neckline held up in place by two thin, transparent straps at her shoulder. Fabric parted around her legs, showing off elegant curves and strong muscles, along with the dragons curling around her form.

In place of a necklace, a scaly neck as pale as a clean bandage gleamed below her throat, twin dragon heads meeting just above her collarbone. Dark purple lilies bloomed across her shoulders, another pair of dragon heads dominating her forearms. The necks split off to curl around Mikan's wrists, a smaller head appearing on each of her palms. Purple petals shifted whenever she walked, a garden of flowers making their way up her thighs. Another pair of heads coiled around her calves, staring down onlookers with blood red eyes. The translucent, glittering fabric skirt that hung around her legs did nothing to diminish the beauty and power of the ink dragons and flowers on her.

Mikan came to a stop in front of Fuyuhiko, a grin on both of their faces.

It was then that she noticed it. His eyepatch, or lack thereof. The cloth she'd grown accustomed to after years together was absent, letting the world see his eye.

A glossy black glass sphere sat in his eye socket, a design engraved into the surface. The design was painted white, popping out on the dark background. Sitting in the middle of a white circle was 常, the character for eternity.

Mikan couldn't help but smile fondly at that. They seemed to think even more similarly than even she realized.

"So, this is what you were hiding?" Fuyuhiko asked with a hushed whisper.

Mikan nodded, before asking, "Do you like it?"

"I love it."

"What about you?" He inquired.

Somehow, Mikan's smile grew even wider, before the priest called on them to say their vows.

Fuyuhiko stepped up first.
"I love you," Fuyuhiko declared. "I swear to love you, treasure you, adore you... for the rest of..."

And then he trailed off, screwing his face up into an intense look of concentration. After a few seconds of thinking, he just gave up.

"Oh fuck it, I'm not good with speeches!" Fuyuhiko groaned, slapping his palm to his forehead. A few guests laughed, and not even Mikan could keep her giggles down for long. "I love you, you know that already! I love everything about you, I love every moment I've ever spent with you- and there's nothing I could ever look forward to as much as a future with you as my wife. I'd walk through hell a million times over to see you smile and renounce any chance a man like me has to reach paradise so I could stay with you forever."

He managed to deliver the last bits with an unwavering gaze and an unflinching smile, pouring every bit of his heart into the words. That simple confidence stole her breath away and made her heart flip in her chest.

Mikan leaned down, pressing their foreheads together as she smiled.

"I love you too," Mikan said clearly, a hint of laughter still in her voice. "I love you more than words can say."

"Doesn't that make the whole wedding vow thing pointless then?" Fuyuhiko asked.

"Oh shush, you! I'm doing my best!" Mikan retorted, laughing and laughing until her smile dropped into a pout. "Darn it. I forgot what I was about to say."

"Well, shit. Looks like you have to skip all that and kiss me," Fuyuhiko suggested with a smirk.

"Not until I get to say my piece!" Mikan exclaimed quickly, before clearing her throat in an attempt to regain some dignity. "Um... I... I love you."

"We've established that already!" Natsumi called out from the crowd, only to be shushed by at least four people.

"And you've made me happy. Happier than I ever thought I could be," Mikan confessed. "I didn't know it was possible to love and be loved like this before I met you. I didn't know it was... possible for me to be loved like this," Her words came out in a hushed breath as tears came to her eyes. But she was still smiling.

"I can't tell you enough how happy you've made me, or how much I love you." Mikan reached up, resting her hand on Fuyuhiko's cheek, her thumb right next to the eye he lost an eternity ago. "All I can do is try to repay you."

"Mikan..." Her name left his mouth in a breathless whisper, and she knew that the moment would be inscribed in their memories for the rest of their days.

"You told me a long time ago, remember?" An airy laugh left her mouth at the memory. "An eye for an eye is the norm. So I'll do my best to pay you back, a heart for a heart, a life for a life, and a smile for a smile, every single day for the rest of our lives. I'll love you forever, Fuyuhiko."

The two barely heard the words of the priest before moving to kiss each other. They barely heard the rapturous cheering, the clapping around them, or Ibuki's incoherent sobbing.

They just knew that that moment, right then, was absolutely perfect.
Until, y'know, it wasn't.

To be fair, it was Natsumi's fault. She thought the improvised vows were actually pretty darn good.

So, before the toasts and the dancing, before the food and all the fun bits, she decided to enforce the development of her friends' and loved ones' improvisation skills. This was made painfully clear to everyone when Hajime stepped up to the podium.

"I had a speech planned out and all, but someone stole my papers and replaced them with this," Hajime admitted, waving around a sticky note. He looked ridiculous, a sticky note in one hand and a champagne glass in the other. "In case you can't read it, it says 'improvise, Lightning-Eyes!' with a smiley face and a heart."

At least four heads turned to look at Natsumi. She looked very proud of herself. The other members of the family found it hysterical, aside from Fuyuhiko's dad who looked like he needed a glass of wine. Badly.

"First of all, thanks to everyone here," Hajime said smoothly, shooting a beaming smile at the crowd. "Whether you're here to support the boss or witness a union of love, it means a lot either way."

("He memorized it, didn't he?" Chiaki whispered to Peko.

"Wouldn't put it past him.")

"My name's Hinata Hajime and I met Fuyuhiko right after I graduated from high school," Hajime stated casually. "He tried to shoot me. Twice. Maybe three times, but my back was turned."

Nervous laughter came from most of the audience, before Natsumi began to cackle. Mahiru had to stuff a tissue in her mouth to shut her up.

"He was always quick to the trigger like that. He yelled all the time, acted like a dick to everyone, and most of the words out of his mouth were either swears or threats. Or both. You'd have to spend a month around him before you managed to get a glimpse of his good side. Or six months, if you did what I did and accidentally got on his bad side."

Hajime's absolute boldness in insulting the boss of the Kuzuryuu family was something that would cement him as the bravest man in the Kuzuryuu family. Or it would have, if Fuyuhiko didn't find it as hilarious as his sister. He managed to hide it better, though.

"But, you wouldn't know that if you met him now. Now, the guy's hidden heart of gold is on display all the time," Hajime declared proudly. "He can actually act polite, act calm, and lead confidently, and you know why? Because he met Mikan." He waved a hand at the two of them at their spot together at their table. "Because they met each other, they improved each other's lives immeasurably and changed for the better."

"And isn't that what love is all about, in the end? Bringing the best out of each other, making each other happy, and wanting to be with each other? Because, if not, they're making me believe in a love that beautiful."

"To the bride and groom!" He concluded, raising his glass into the air.

"TO THE BRIDE AND GROOM!" The guests cheered, the sound of glasses tapping together resonating throughout the area.
"Why does my alcohol taste like orange juice?" Mikan wondered aloud.

"Because that's orange juice," Fuyuhiko answered easily. "Everyone's drinking it."

"Oh."

"You realize that if it wasn't orange juice, you'd get plastered by the third glass, right?"

"Oh! And then I'd go mad and wouldn't remember a thing after!"

"Exactly."

Mikan swore she wouldn't touch a drop of alcohol after that. She wanted to remember every single second of the day.

"I'm passing the stage to the maid of honour, Koizumi Mahiru! Give her a warm welcome, and-"

"WHAT THE HECK DO YOU MEAN YOU STOLE MY NOTES TOO?!" Mahiru's voice screamed, and all eyes turned to her and Natsumi.

"WHAT. WHY WOULD YOU EVER DO THAT."

It was then that Peko just picked both of them up and started walking away, politely saying 'excuse me' to everyone they passed. It was bad enough that their argument had drawn attention, but bumping someone in the head? Totally inexcusable. She apologized to Imp-kun in particular for Natsumi swearing in their ear.

"Well. Uh. I guess the next speech is by Chiaki, who's filling in for the bride's dad," Hajime said flatly, moving on without another thought.

Chiaki walked up to the podium with a bright smile on her face. Until she remembered that she was talking to a bunch of hardened Yakuza members. Then, she cleared her throat, straightened her back, and stuck her hands into the pockets of her tux jacket as she scowled.

"Yo. Name's Nanami Chiaki, motherfuckers," She declared, deepening her voice to achieve the perfect impression of a tough, no-fucks-given Yakuza dude. Or a delinquent, they were the same thing to her. "I've known Mikan for a shitload of years- yeah there's no way I can get through a speech like this, sorry Mikan."

Mikan wasn't sure whether the sound that left her mouth at that was laughter or a mortified whine. She could vaguely hear Natsumi cackling in the background, along with the distinctive sound of
Hajime's forehead being slammed into a table.

"But... I've known Mikan since high school," Chiaki stated factually. "She was shy and scared of everyone. But now she levelled up to the point that she could probably take all of you on in a fight." People laughed at the idea, but then Chiaki spoke again. "No, I'm serious. She learned how to fight so she could stay with your boss."

"They're devoted to each other like that. I have no doubt in my mind that they'd fight their way out of hell for each other. And from this day onwards, those two are gonna be devoted to bringing the Kuzuryuu family to a new high sc- heights!"

She took a hand out of her pocket to raise her glass into the air with a grin.

"To future happiness!"

"TO FUTURE HAPPINESS!"

Mikan and Fuyuhiko tapped their glasses together, before sipping their orange juice. Bubbles rose to the surface of Mikan's drink as she laughed.

"What?" Fuyuhiko asked.

"N-nothing."

"Mikan."

"I was just thinking... even if nothing's going according to plan at all... I still wouldn't have it any other way."

"You know what, Mikan?"

"What?"

"I think I might agree with you."

And then they started hearing cackling.

"No offense, Fuyu-chan, but this party's totally boring! I think this place needs a bit of music!" Ibuki exclaimed, guitar in hand as she headed towards the dance floor.

"Don't forget the dancing," Hiyoko added, following after her girlfriend with a pair of fans.

Nagisa sighed, until Kotoko grabbed him and dragged him.

"C'mon, c'mon Nagisa! This is what you practiced for, right?!"

"H-hey! Stop pulling! You're hurting me!"

The makeshift group took a moment to set up right in front of the dance floor, and everyone expected to have to cover their ears.

Instead, a heavenly voice greeted them.

"Let's get this party started," Ibuki's mother crooned into the microphone. "I'll start off with a touch of gentle jazz for the new married couple."
Mikan and Fuyuhiko glanced at each other. They both knew that the band was not supposed to start up for a while, and that everyone involved probably forgot about the schedule entirely.

They also knew, hey, what the fuck. It was their wedding day. They were allowed to have some fun.

So they went up to the dance floor, hand-in-hand, and laughed. They danced with Nagisa's piano notes, Ibuki's chords, and a soft voice. They stepped on each other's feet, tripped, forgot the steps, and laughed about how bad they were. The song ended, and people started dancing around them, though they didn't quite notice.

They danced in a sea of people, but they only saw each other.

Unfortunately, some things were just not meant to last forever. Peace and calm were two of those things, along with the safety of Fuyuhiko's cake slice.

The poor thing had been crushed when Natsumi threw a table at someone else, screaming something like, "YOU COME IN HERE, ON MY BROTHER'S WEDDING DAY, AND SAY THAT SHIT-?!"

This obviously led to a brawl. People either fled or fought or hid, and while Fuyuhiko knew he could stop it if he tried hard enough, he didn't really want to.

After all, he was kind of busy crouching behind the speaker's podium with Mikan. That was very important.

"Fancy meeting you here, huh?" Fuyuhiko asked with an amused grin on his face.

Mikan nodded with a chortle, before nudging Fuyuhiko.

"Ten yen says at least one person ends up in the hospital by the end of tonight," Mikan offered over the sound of three fist fights and a Mexican standoff.

"Why do I feel like you wouldn't complain about that?" Fuyuhiko shot back.

Mikan waved a hand at the chaos with a flat expression.

"Fuyuhiko, I'm fairly certain that anyone would rather be in the hospital than be here," Mikan stated simply.

"Only fairly certain?"

"Well, I don't know about you, but I like the sound of spending a few days in a hospital room with you."

"Always the dutiful nurse, huh?" Fuyuhiko wondered.

"No, just a woman who fell head over heels for you," Mikan declared.

"You fucking sap." Fuyuhiko laughed.

"You married this sap."

"I know." Fuyuhiko's grin only widened right before their lips met. "And I love it as much as I love her."
thank you to everyone who read this far. it's been a great ride.
A little bonus

Chapter Notes

all the text was taken from either http://help-mywife.tumblr.com/ or http://help-my-husband.tumblr.com/
except for the blue ones thats a tumblr post i found once
Help: my husband makes me miss him so much even though I see him every day.

Help: my husband is too cute and it's so distracting I can't even look at his face when we talk. He just makes me MELT.
Help my wife is the biggest dork in the world and gets excited over things and it makes me fall in love with her more every day.

Help, my wife’s smile is too precious for me to handle.
help, my wife is married to me. i still can't believe it. she's s

help, my wife keeps sending me science pickup lines and i'm trying to be... but it's too damn cute
Help! My wife keeps texting me pictures of beautiful landscapes and saying ‘this is how you make me feel’ and it makes me feel so loved!
Help, my wife won't stop printing and framing my prisma selfies. She says that she likes to have art in the house.
Help, my wife keeps demanding I feed her triscuits in bed by keeping her mouth open until I put one in there.

Help! My wife says things like “what the heck” and it’s too cute for words and just makes me want to kiss her a lot.
Help, my wife is my phone background and my phone keeps running out of battery bc I can't stop turning it on to look at her.
help my wife won’t stop singing “Take Me to Snurch”
Help! My husband attacks me with a barrage of kisses in the morning so I won't oversleep in the morning. I'm mad I can't oversleep but he's so hot that I stay mad for more than 2 seconds.

Help! My wife always wants to skateboard to the store to get beer with me and it's getting tiring trying to impress her with my limited moves!
Help, my wife tells me I'm cute and then proceeds to pinch my cheeks like a grandma.

Help, my wife whistles guitar solos when she's singing in the car and I've never seen anything so cute in my whole life.
help my girlfriend goes to get me chocolate milk everytime im sad or start crying

help, my wife headbangs energetically when she hears a song she likes & i love her enthusiasm but i worry she'll get hurt!!
Help! my wife think she’s a PUNK because she listens to girl bands and wears leather jackets but she’s actually a big softie who is very cuddly and cute and can’t say the word ass without giggling.

Help; when I don’t laugh at my wife’s puns she grabs my head and says ‘ah, the grumpfruit is perfectly ripe!’ and pretends to eat me.
Help, my wife is amazing and deserves all the compliments in the world. Alas, I can only give her memes.
Help- when my husband thinks I'm asleep he tells me he loves me in a tone softer than a whisper but I'm not asleep

help!! my wife makes my heart flutter everytime she laughs at something i said and when i tell her that she laughs harder!! it makes me fall even deeper in love!!
Help my girlfriend keeps smiling at everything I do telling me I'm so cute and I can't get anything done without blushing.

Help my wife has become my alarm clock by means of snuggles and now it takes two hours for either of us to get out of bed.
Help! My (future) husband calls me cute when I fall over and embarrass myself! He calls me cute even when I'm not!
Help, my husband went downstairs to secretly make me coffee/breakfast in bed, but I didn't know so I went downstairs to get coffee and he didn't get to surprise me, but he looked so cute! I really hope he does it again so I don't interrupt him this time.

Help my (Future) husband plays with my hair and softly tells me the things he loves about me to help me fall asleep.
Help my wife started keeping an extra one of her hoodies in her car for me since I get cold but now it's super hot outside but she thinks I look cute in her clothes so I can't take it off.

Help my wife keeps surprise kissing me on the cheek but she's too tall for me to surprise kiss her back! "But she looks so delighted whenever she does it I can't complain!"
Help- my wife says she's giving me kisses when she rams into me in Mario Kart

Help my wife loves her trading card game so much and gushes about it so much, telling me her strategies and combos and stuff that happens in its anime, as well as the huge amount of wins against the most powerful NPCs in the videogames. I don't actually play but it makes me so happy to see her so overjoyed talking about her favorite hobby to me.
Help: my wife wrote me a love letter about the first time she saw me way back when and I just found it. I keep awwwwwwwing and cooing and I can't get any work done now.

Help, my wife and I play mario kart together and she keeps beating me! She gets so excited when she wins it's so cute it hurts my heart!
Help, my girlfriend has to take Nyquil to sleep when she gets sick, and when the medicine makes her sleepy and loopy, I like to ask her really hard questions to hear her (usually nonsense) answers. She gets so frustrated every time, but it's the cutest thing in the world.

Help! My wife is asleep and I want to talk to her but I can't wake her up because she's so cute when she sleeps.

Help, my wife is napping and I miss her but she deserves her rest.

Help, my wife can fall asleep in an instant no matter what she's doing and it's so cute but she can also snore pretty brutally and is so sorry in the morning when I tell her about it, but then I feel bad because it's not her fault!! I love her!!
I don’t care who you are. If your girlfriend falls asleep in your lap, and even after minutes when both of your legs go numb, don’t move. You fucking stay there as I appreciate the cute little thing in your lap. If you move you’re weak and natural selection is coming for you.

It’s funnier to slowly push her off the side of the couch tho.

[Source: christopurr]
Cosmicspread:

u know yr fucked when someone is so fine u can’t even look at them directly u gotta glance at them out of the corner of your eye like yr lookin at the sun

Help, my wife’s smile is too precious

"Awww, c'mon Hiyo-chan! One last song?" Ibuki pleaded.

"You'll wake up the neighbours," Hiyoko retorted. "Save it for tomorrow."

"No, I'll be quiet! I swear! Hiyo-chan!"

"You don't even know what that word means!"

"I do know what it means! And I'll prove it!" Ibuki pulled out the greatest weapon in her arsenal: puppy-dog eyes.

Hiyoko managed to get through about ten seconds of eye contact, before huffing.

"One song. And I can tell you to shut up whenever."

"Got the feeling you won't, though."

"Shut up and sing, Ibuki."

"If you say so," Ibuki said with a knowing smile.

Then she opened her mouth, and gentle notes filled the air.

'I've been thinking
I've been thinking things through from the start
All the twists and turns, all the things that led up to this part
And I remember
I remember bitter insults and harsh scowls
A little girl full of hate
But that was then, and this is now
And my, how things have changed
A proud beauty, standing tall, a noble heart born from a brand-new start
I look at you
And that's the woman I see
And I realize now, I realize now
What I want more than anything else
I want sharp-edged words and a messed-up melody
A song just for you and me

I want glowing lights and drawn-out nights

Spent talking beneath the sheets

I want tender smiles and ticklish kisses

The kind only you can give

I want you, now and always

Forever, and a bit longer too

So Hiyoko, would you please tell me

Would you like to marry me?

The song faded into silence as Hiyoko gaped, flapping her mouth open and shut like a fish.

When she finally managed to say something, the words came out as:

"Roses are red, violets are blue, son of a bitch, I'll marry you."
"Mmm... why the fucking hell's it so bright?" Natsumi grumbled sleepily, rolling over to Mahiru to use her as a shield against the light.

"Probably because it's morning," Hajime retorted as he stepped inside. Natsumi groaned and Mahiru wasn't responding any time soon, but he tried anyways. He leaned over them, placed a hand on Natsumi's shoulder, and shook. "Now get up."

"Don't wanna," Natsumi huffed as Mahiru finally let out a groan.

"There's food."

Now that got Natsumi's attention.

"Good food?"

"You have to get up to find out," Hajime stated as he poked Mahiru in the cheek. Mahiru just let out a string of random babbling, which was an improvement, but also not really.

"You're such a tease."

"Thanks."

"Not a good thing, moron."

"Hey, if you're awake enough to insult me, you're awake enough to get up."

"I hate you."

"Love you too," Hajime replied cheekily.

"Why do you two have to be so loud in the morning?" Mahiru groaned.

"I thought you liked me being loud," Natsumi shot back with a wink.

"Shut up."

"Stop that," Hajime ordered. "The kids are over again."

"They're in university, Hajime," Mahiru corrected dryly. "I think they know already."

"I meant it more in a 'don't give them any ideas' way."

"...they're what together?" Natsumi asked, suddenly sitting up.

"What?"

"HOLY SHIT ARE YOU TELLING ME KOTOKO GOT LAID?!"

"WHAT."

Natsumi rushed out to storm into Kotoko's bedroom. Hajime and Mahiru shrugged at each other, before following the sounds of struggling and screaming.
"GET OUT, GET OUT, GET OUT, YOU STUPID YAKUZA!" Kotoko shrieked, shoving the blonde away. "Stay away from my room! I'm not twelve anymore! Go away!"

"Geez, geez, you don't have to be so forceful!" Natsumi protested, though her face was kinda mushed into the wall for the last bit.

"None of you know how to be quiet at all..." Mahiru sighed.

"Yeah, you've got that right," A disheveled Nagisa murmured as he exited from Kotoko's room.

"...what the hell?"

"Uh... I can explain...?" Nagisa offered sheepishly.

"I knew I should have moved out!" Kotoko wailed, her panicked flinching accidentally dislocating one of Natsumi's fingers.
'Hey, it's me, Chiaki.

Yeah, been a while, huh? Been a while since my last visit to Japan, been a while since I last wrote a letter, been a while since I last saw you.

Might be curious why I'm suddenly writing again, right?

Well, it just seemed fitting, y'know? Last day on earth, might as well do something with these last few moments rather than wait for everything to be over. This battery's finally on the verge of collapsing, and instead of being recharged, I'm going to be buried. With everyone else. Robotic engineers are sad I'm not giving my body to science or something, but these old bones (ha) need a rest. Even if I still look like a high school girl, I'm older than anyone should probably ever live to be. I don't even count in years anymore, I use the generations of Mikan and Fuyuhiko's kids' descendants to tell the time. It's more useful than you'd think, actually.

Wow. I'm talking like a weird old lady. But I kind of am. I mean, two centuries would make anyone old, right? Ha.

It's weird. I was so scared of outliving everyone, so scared nothing would spare me from the pain of everyone I've ever held dear dying before me, but... I'm not really, anymore? I've met great people, but I'm more thankful that I got to meet them than scared or sad about outliving them.

It helps that I've got a theory.

You see, I've noticed a little pattern a while back. A bit of Natsumi in the third-generation Kuzuryuu heiress, a bit of Fuyuhiko in her cousin, a bit of Mikan in the cousin's childhood friend, a bit of Ibuki in the childhood friend's sister, a bit of Hajime in the advisor's son, and a bit of Hiyoko and Mahiru in the twin sisters who tag along.

The positions change every time, but it's the same pattern.

The only one I've never seen is you, Peko.

I think I understand why.

You're still waiting for me, aren't you?

Don't worry. You won't be waiting long.

And I'll tell you all about everything you missed.'

Nanami Chiaki smiled as she set down the pen, looking up at the sky from the roof of Hope's Peak Academy.

The night sky was absolutely breathtaking. She couldn't help but let out a sigh at the sight. One last beautiful, starry night.

When she finally closed her eyes, her last thought of all the skies she could see with Peko when they met again.
"Hey. Are you awake?"

"...mm. Now I am."

"Sorry. Go back to sleep."

"No, wait, what is it?"

"It's embarrassing."

"I'll listen."

"...I'm just grateful to have met you."

"Me too."

"No, I mean- I have no idea where I would be right now if I didn't meet you."

"Okay."

"You've changed my life to the point that I can't ever imagine not waking up next to you every day or anything. I'm... I'm a better person thanks to you."

"I know. It's the same for me."

"Huh?"

"Even if I didn't know it at the time, meeting you was the best day of my life."

"You're adorable."

"You're the one who woke me up in the middle of the night to say how grateful you are to have met me."

"I just had to let you know."

"Well, I know now, and I love you too, so get back to sleep, okay?"

"Okay. I love you."

"I love you too."

"Sweet dreams."

"You too."
i just wanted to say once again: thank you to everyone who ever read this. i couldnt be more grateful to all of you. youre the reason this story went beyond a farfetched idea and came this far. i hope you have a nice day/night/whatever, and i hope this fic managed to make you smile

Works inspired by this one: Bandages and Kimonos by kimonodesu

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