Shun and Yuya are alone in caring for their terminally ill younger sister, Ruri, after their parents disappear. However, when Ruri dies during a trip to the zoo, she is magically brought back to life by a mysterious hippo hat. The hat possesses her and orders the brothers to find the Hippodrum, if they want Ruri’s miracle to continue.

Although neither of them have any idea what the Hippodrum even is, there’s no way they’re going to let their sister die. Together, and along with a mysterious cast all tied together by the same long ago terrorist incident, they will search for the true meaning of the Hippodrum, and decide what it is that they want to protect most of all.

This story was an excuse for me to re-watch Penguindrum under the guise of research XD

If you’ve already seen Penguindrum, then you understand what you're in for. This is mostly a role swap, however, since the characters taking the roles of the original Penguindrum characters are very different from their counterparts, the story will be somewhat different. The meaning, symbolism, and ultimate takeaway may ultimately change a lot as well, as the origin Penguindrum has a LOT of cultural relevance and meaning that I know I can’t perfectly recreate, and may purposefully change in places as well.

If you haven’t seen Penguindrum, one: I highly recommend it, and two: pay careful attention to those tags haha....there's some...interesting things that happen in this story. It's...it's an experience :D

Idk why I really wanted to write this so badly, but for some reason the idea of seeing my favorite characters work through this very surreal story, and seeing how they acted and
changed the story simply by being here, really appealed to me. So let's see how it turns out :)

I hate the word fate.

The train clicks and clatters down the tracks, bumping the passengers up and down ever so slightly. Not one of them reacts, however. Eyes are fixed down at phone screens or open books or newspapers, or staring aimlessly out the windows at the dark tunnel outside.


The train whines to a stop, hissing as it settles. The doors slide open, and passengers put marks into books or tuck phones into pockets as they grab their bags and shuffle off the train, fighting past the people who are trying to push onto it.

*If our lives are already set in stone by fate, then why are we even born?*

People settle back into the spaces vacated by the people before. Phones come out, books open, eyes drift out the windows. The doors slide shut once again, and the train resumes. Silence once again falls over the passengers, as though nothing had even changed save for the indiscernible faces.

*There are those born to wealthy families, those born to beautiful mothers, and those born into the middle of war or poverty*

A high schooler stares out at the darkness, his face reflected in the window, but he doesn’t see his own apple red eyes looking back at him. He jostles slightly as the train bumps along, but his grip on the hand hold over his head doesn’t shift. He doesn’t respond.

*If that's all caused by fate, then God is incredibly unfair and cruel.*

Another high schooler sits in the spot in front of him, head lolled back against the window, arms folded across his chest. He stares out the window past his dark green bangs, as though there is nothing in the world except the darkness just outside the glass. He is in the same uniform, so he might be with the other boy, but there is little to suggest that they even see each other.

*Because, ever since that day, none of us had a future.*

However, when the door rolls open, and the train steams once again, they straighten together, and walk out the doors together. The boy with the apple red eyes and the messy green and red hair brushes some imaginary dust off of the boy with the dark green hair’s shoulder as they step off onto the platform, and slowly mill away from the train.

The train doors slide shut, people take up the places left empty once again, and the journey continues on.

*And the only certain thing was that we wouldn't amount to anything.*
Sunlight dripped through the shades, sending a glow of light over the tiny, messy house. Yuya picked his way over the mess of magazines that had been left on the floor, rolling his eyes at the mess. He grabbed the drapes and flung them open so that light flooded into the house.

“Yuya,” he heard Shun groan behind him. “Fuck. What time is it?”

“Time to wake up,” Yuya said, spinning and putting his hands on his hips with a smile.

Shun yawned, standing in the threshold of the small room he and Yuya shared. He scratched under his baggy shirt. Yuya stuck out his tongue at him.

“Come on, sleepy head,” he teased. “This is what you get for being such a night owl.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Shun said, waving his hand sleepily before slouching over to the table.

The door to Ruri’s room creaked open, and she poked her head out, eyes closed and sniffing the air.

“Mm,” she said. “What smells so good?”

“Breakfast!” Yuya said, smiling and pointing to the table. “Come and sit down, Ruri, I made your favorite.”

Ruri’s eyes opened and her face lit up.

“Miso and eggs?” she said.

“Yup!”

“Yay!”

Ruri clapped her hands, popping through the door and plopping on the end of the table. Everything was already set out, and she put her hands briefly together beneath her chin.

“Itadakimasu!”

Yuya sat down across from Shun, waiting with bated breath as Ruri brought the soup bowl to her lips. He hadn’t made this recipe in ages, so...

“Ah!” Ruri said, her whole face lighting up. “It’s so warm!”

Yuya burst out into a smile. All right, Ruri was smiling!

“It’s always cold by the time they get it to you in the hospital, huh?” Shun said. He picked up his own bowl and took a sip. He blinked with surprise. “Wow, it really is good.”

“Don’t say that like it’s a surprise!” Yuya said.
Ruri cupped her soup in both hands, looking down at it as the steam curled around her face. Her smile grew a bit fainter and...sadder?

“It tastes just like mom’s,” she said.

Shun and Yuya both looked up quickly, and then at each other. Yuya coughed.

“I...I tried my best,” he said. “I’m glad you like it.”

“I helped with the eggs,” Shun said. “Try those.”

“You did not!”

“I told you to use the secret recipe, so I helped.”

“You just told me to watch a cooking show. That’s not helping.”

Ruri giggled over the top of her bowl. The sound made both brothers glance at her, and twin smiles grew over their face.

~ * ~ F L A S H B A C K ~ * ~

Shun and Yuya

Doctor’s Office

“It’s honestly a miracle that she’s still up and walking at all.”

Shun’s hands grind into the fabric of his knees, and he grits his teeth. He can’t look up. Doesn’t want to look up. It is cold, and dark, and expressionless in this tiny room, lit only by the screens that tell him what he doesn’t want to hear.

“You should be ready for her to pass at any time,” the doctor continues, in a monotone, as though they’re not talking about his little sister dying. “There’s little modern medical technology can do for her now.”

He can’t handle it. He surges to his feet and grabs for the doctor’s collar. Yuya stops him, grabbing him under the arms.

“Shun, please,” he gasps, his throat tight and thick. “Please.”

“Don’t you dare say something like that!!” Shun shouts. “If it’s about the money, I’ll find a way to pay for it! If she needs an organ transplant, she can have mine!”

He struggles with Yuya’s grip and Yuya gasps, letting go of him. Shun stumbles and lands on his knees, trembling and heaving for breath.

“You can’t let her die,” he gasps. “You can’t—you can’t let her die.”

He hears Yuya trying not to sob behind him, his breaths muffled against the hands he’s pressed over his mouth. The doctor’s expression doesn’t change.

“Doctors aren’t gods, you know,” he says. Shun isn’t sure if that is supposed to be comforting or not. He grinds his hands into the floor, squeezing his eyes shut against the blur of tears.

“There must not be any god in the world at all.”

~ * ~ E N D  F L A S H B A C K ~ * ~

Ruri flopped onto the couch, flinging her legs into the air.

“Hey, that’s not polite,” Shun said.

“Doesn’t matter,” Ruri said, in a singsong voice. “I can do whatever I want, because it’s Ruri Day.”

Shun blinked. Behind them, Yuya clattered softly in the kitchen, cleaning up from breakfast.
“Ruri Day? Didn’t see that on the calendar,” Shun said.

“Yuya said that I could do anything I wanted today, so that means it’s Ruri Day,” Ruri said, grinning as she flopped her head along the side of the couch, her hair falling in waves over the side of the cushions.

Shun cracked a smile. Sounded like something Yuya would tell her.

“Well then, miss princess of the day,” he said, leaning back on his hands. “What do you want to do with your day?”

“Mmm....”

Ruri flopped her head to look up, staring at the ceiling. Then her eyes lit up, and she shot to a sitting position.

“Oh!!” she said. “Do you think the zoo still has hippos? From when we were kids?”

“I don’t know why they would go anywhere,” said Shun. “Is that what you want to do?”

“Yes!!”

Yuya poked his head out of the kitchen, still in his apron as he dried off a plate.

“If we hurry, we can catch the next train,” he said. “We can spend the whole day there if you want.”

“Yay!”

“Get your shoes on,” Shun said, reaching behind her for his jacket on the couch. “Let’s make that train.”

~ * ~ * ~

“Like I said,” the boy says, tapping his stick on the ground. “The apple is the universe itself—a universe in the palm of your hand.”

“Ehh, what are you on about?” the other says, putting his chin in his hands.

The first boy sits on the edge of the slide, his school hat sliding in front of his violet bangs. He pushes it up off of his forehead, mussing the black part of his hair.

“It’s what connects this world and the other world.”

“What other world?” the other asks, sighing. It seems as though he’s used to these kinds of outbursts from the other. He brushes away his own yellow bangs and waits.

“The world that Campanella and the other passengers are heading to.”

“But what does that have to do with apples?”

“The apple is also a reward for those who have chosen love over everything else.”

He seems very animated about this, thrusting his stick up into the air, like he thinks he’s a preacher.

“It’s what you get when you reach the end of the train line, where the others are all going to.”

“But when you get to the end of the train, you’re dead. Everything’s over when you’re dead.”

“It’s not over. What I’m trying to say is that’s actually where everything begins!”

The boy on the ground sighs, flopping his head into his hands again.

“I’m not following you at all.”

“I’m talking about love! Why don’t you get it?”

~ * ~ * ~
“Niisan, niisan, do your elephant impression.”

“What? When have I ever done an elephant impression?”

“You did, you did once! Do it for me!”

“I was nine, Ruri…”

“Don’t be so shy, Shun, go ahead and do the elephant.”

Ruri flung her arms out on either side of her, walking along the low wall where the flowers had been planted in the courtyard. Shun reached up automatically to take her hand, so that she wouldn’t fall. Yuya was walking backwards so that he could see both of them, grinning. He crossed his eyes at Shun.

“Elephant, elephant, elephant,” he chanted, like he was at a sports game, pumping his fist in the air.

“Elephant, elephant, elephant!” Ruri chanted with him, pumping her free hand.

Shun rolled his eyes, making a face. Yuya laughed.

“I’ll do it if Yuya does his giraffe impression,” Shun said.

“Awww, you drive a tough bargain,” Yuya giggled. “Ruri, look at this.”

He stretched up on his tip toes and crossed his eyes, sticking his tongue out as far as he could. He put his fists up by his head and made some loud smacking noises with his tongue still hanging out. Ruri laughed so hard she almost fell off the wall, but Shun got her around the waist and helped her down. She doubled over laughing, hugging her stomach.

“That doesn’t even look like a giraffe,” Shun said, but he was cracking a smile too.

“It does! You’ll see, I’ll show ya when we go feed the giraffes later.”

“Hippos first!” Ruri said, shooting straight up.

“Hippos first,” Yuya agreed. “I think…this way.”

He paused long enough to check the map that was standing in the middle of the courtyard. Another family passed around them, giggling at each other while he glanced over it.

“Yeah, they’re real close to the front. This way!”

They walked around the map frame. Yuya blinked as he felt a cool hand grab his, and glanced over his shoulder. Ruri smiled widely at him as her hand curled into his, her other in Shun’s. Yuya smiled back, tightening his grip.

Ruri hummed a made up little tune as they made their way through the zoo, taking just a few turns around the lion and zebra exhibits.

“You got away without doing your elephant,” Yuya said.

“I’ll do it later,” Shun grunted, rolling his eyes.

“You have to, because it’s Ruri Day,” Ruri said, smiling wide. “Ah! Hippos!”

She released both of her brothers’ hands and darted forward, leaping up onto the lip in front of the enclosure fence and leaning over it. Yuya followed, walking up beside her and leaning his elbows on the edge of the fence.

There were three big hippos in the enclosure today, lazily chewing at whatever hippos ate on the ground. One of them sat in the water, eyes half closed so that they could only see the top of its head. Its ears flicked a bit from the flies buzzing around it. One of the ones on land lumbered forward a few steps to get to more of the food on the ground.

“They’re so big,” Ruri said. “They look really huggable.”

“Don’t do that, they’ll eat you,” Shun said.
“They will not!”

“Hippos are really a lot tougher than they look, you know; they’re the most dangerous animals in Africa.”

“But they look so big and slow,” Ruri said. “Right, Yuya-nii? They look really cute.”

“They really do,” Yuya said. “On land they have a lot more trouble, I think, because they’re bigger.”

Ruri’s hair fluttered in a breeze, staring with a shining awe at the great creatures. Yuya looked over them, too. Man, but they really were big. He wouldn’t want to tussle with one, even if they were slow. He wondered what kind of evolution had caused them to grow like that, large and lumbering and harmless looking, but not at all bothered by what fate had thrown at them.

A faint buzz attracted Yuya’s attention, and he leaned over, looking across at Shun past Ruri. Shun frowned at his phone.

“Work again?” Yuya said.

“Yeah,” Shun said. “Sorry, Ruri, I’ll be right back. I’ve got to take this.”

“You work way too much,” Yuya said. “Take a break once in a while.”

“Yes, mother,” Shun said. “I’ll be right back.”

He flipped his phone open as he quickly walked away to take the call. Yuya watched him go. He really was getting called a lot. How much could the coffee shop really need him on the phone all the time? It didn’t make much sense to Yuya, but he didn’t want to press it, either.

He could think about that later. For now, today was all about Ruri.

He took Ruri’s hand and smiled as she glanced down.

“Hey, the gift shop is really close,” he said. “I’ll buy you anything you want today.”

Ruri’s eyes lit up. She leaped down from the lip of stone and followed him around the hippo exhibit towards the gift shop. The doors jingled as they walked inside. Yuya tugged his phone out of his pocket so he could text Shun where they had gone, while Ruri dropped his hand to run across to the display of stuffed animals.

“Ah, look!” she said. “This one is really soft.”

Yuya looked up from his text, and smiled at the elephant stuffed animal that Ruri was holding towards him—he stopped smiling when he saw how much it was. Oof. He wouldn’t go back on his promise, but he hoped Ruri would pick something else.

“It’s super cute,” he said.

Ruri gave it a squeeze, and then put it back on the shelf.

“I can just make niisan be an elephant for me, though,” she said.

Yuya smiled, putting his phone away and following her into the store.

“You’re gonna have to fight him to do it,” Yuya said with a laugh.

“He has to, though,” Ruri said, grinning. She leaned down to pick something up out of a basket, and spun towards him while putting it on her head. “Because it’s Ruri Day, and that means I’m the queen!”

Yuya blinked briefly, as he considered what it was that Ruri was wearing.

It was a funny sort of hat in the shape of a hippo’s head, with the big nose and tiny ears, and big, shiny black eyes. It was a pretty dark red in color, and it had long, cute white tassels hanging down from the ends.

“Ruri, that’s—that’s so cute,” he said, taking it the whole picture of her wearing it.

“Isn’t it?” Ruri said, spinning so that the tassels spun around her. “Can I get this, Yuya-nii?”

“If that’s what you want already! I’ll go pay for it.”
Ruri passed him the hat, and he walked around the displays to get to the desk. He tapped his fingers along the desk while he waited for the transaction.

“There you are,” Shun said, appearing from behind a display of polar bear toys. “Can’t find a damn thing in this zoo.”

“Didn’t you get my message?”

“Just a few minutes ago. Where’s Ruri?”

“She’s—Ruri?”

Yuya blinked, looking back over his shoulder. She had just been over there by the stuffed animals, right? Didn’t she come with him to the desk?

“She was here a second ago,” Yuya said, turning around.

“Here’s your purchase, sir,” the cashier said, smiling. Yuya took it absently.

“Well, she couldn’t have gotten—”

A voice cracked through the door.

“Hey, someone call an ambulance! A girl’s collapsed out here!”

Ice froze the two boys momentarily to their spot. Yuya looked up to find Shun staring at him with mirrored, wide eyed horror. Oh god. Oh god, no, please be someone else.

Shun bolted for the door first; it took Yuya a second to break through the terror to go after him. They burst outside into the sunlight.

Straight across from the shop, a small cluster of people had gathered around someone sprawled over the ground. Someone with long, dark violet hair pooled all around her.

“Ruri!!”

“Ruri!”

~ * ~ * ~

Ah. I’m dying.

She can see them through the glass, through her fuzzy, blurring vision. They are both pressed up against it, their faces smushed, their fists frozen against the barrier. It’s hard, though, to see them very clearly from where she’s lying across the bed. She can only hear the beeping of the monitor.

It was fun…really. It was all I could have hoped for.

She tries to smile. She wants so desperately to smile, so that the last thing they see is how happy she is, how thankful she is.

I love you. Please don’t cry.


The heart monitor flattens out, and it’s over.

Chapter End Notes

forgot to mention age changes in this story: Shun and Yuya are both 16, and Ruri is still 14 in this story :)
Tolling

Yuya sniffled. It sounded so much louder in the otherwise empty medical room. Empty, except for the table in the middle with the sheet over it. Shun couldn’t look at it, or at Yuya. He just crumpled against the wall, barely standing upright, his head pressing into the hard metal.

Yuya sniffled again—it was painful how hard he was trying not to make any sounds, but Shun could hear him gasping and heaving for breath in between choked sobs. His lips felt dry, and so did his throat. His voice cracked when he spoke.

“We need to call aunt Asuka,” he said. His voice sounded hollow, even to himself. “We can’t fill out all the paperwork by ourselves.”

He swallowed, and it felt like sandpaper.

“We’ll have to start planning the funeral. Figure out where to bury her.”

He felt Yuya grab his shoulder, and knew that Yuya wanted to hit him, or something, but his hands were so weak, and Yuya could never hit anyone. So his hands just dug into Shun’s shoulders, dragging on the sleeves of his jacket, and he almost crumpled to his knees.

“How can you—be so cold,” he mumbled. “S-she’s dead, Shun… just… just let us cry first…”

Shun felt them, then, the prickle of tears. He tried to rub them away. He reached blindly behind him for Yuya, grabbing him around the shoulders and dragging him into a tight hug. Yuya made a faint attempt at smacking at him before simply crumbling into his arms, face pressed into Shun’s chest and sobbing, soaking his shirt front with tears. Shun stared up at the far corner of the ceiling, leaning into the wall. He couldn’t hold himself and Yuya up anymore. His back pressed into the wall as they both slowly slid to the floor.

“Why did it have to be her?” Yuya sobbed. “W-why her? She was just so happy about everything… even just being with us made her happy… it’s not fair. Why did it have to be her?”

Shun’s arms tightened around Yuya, but he still couldn’t look down.

“I guess… this is our punishment.”

Yuya’s breath caught and he inhaled with a shudder, fingers tightening into his shirt.

“It should have been me,” he mumbled. “It should have been me.”

Shun opened his mouth, but he wasn’t sure what he could, or should say.

“Survival Strategy!”

The voice cut across the room, and Shun flinched, eyes dropping down to—Ruri. Ruri, sitting straight up in bed, her voice still ringing with the strange shout.

For just a second, Shun only stared. That was—he was—not imagining that, right? Ruri was sitting straight up, with… with a weird, hippo hat on her head. Shun shot to his feet so quickly that he accidentally sent Yuya flying back.
“Hey—what—” Yuya started. Then he caught Shun’s expression, and slowly looked back over his shoulder. His face whitened, and his mouth dropped open.

Very slowly, as though she were on a robotic track, Ruri’s head turned towards them. Something was…off about her eyes. They looked too purple. Her mouth opened.

“I have come from the destination of your fate,” she said. Her voice sounded wrong, like it was ten years older. “Rejoice, for I have decided to extend this girl’s life. If you want to keep the girl alive…”

The hippo hat slipped, and fell off her head. For just a second, Shun just stared at the hat in her lap. Then he looked back up at his sister, to see her ordinary magenta eyes blinking back at him.

“Oh?” she said. “Niisan? Where am I?”

“Ruri!!”

Yuya threw his arms around her first, squeezing her so tightly that she briefly gasped. Shun didn’t hold back then, either—Yuya was holding her, so she was real and solid and alive. He threw his arms around the both of them, squeezing them as tight as he could without being afraid of breaking them.

“Oh my god, Ruri, you’re alive,” Yuya sobbed. “You’re alive, you’re alive, you’re alive—ah!! I gotta—tell—the doctor!”

Yuya scrambled free of the hug and bolted for the door.

Shun remained where he was, his arms tight around her—she was warm and solid and breathing and he could feel her heart thrumming against his chest and he couldn’t help but sob, softly, into her hair.

Her hand rose up to stroke his hair.

“It’s okay,” she said. “I’m here, niisan. I’m here.”

~ * ~ * ~

“You sure you’ll be all right, you guys?”

“Just go, Yuya. Grab my work for me.”

“Okay, okay—Ruri, take it easy, all right? I’ll be home right after school! I’ll only stop for groceries!”

“Bye, Yuya-nii, have a good day!”

Yuya waved back at them as he slipped on his shoes, hopping down off the entry hall towards the door.

“Call me if you need me, even if I’m in the middle of class.”

“We’ll be fine, worrywart,” Shun said, cracking a smile at him.

Yuya stuck his tongue out at his older brother, and pushed through the door. He immediately almost tripped over the box sitting in front of the door.

“Ack! What is this? Shun, did you order something?”

“What? No,” Shun said, frowning as he poked his head out the door.

Yuya almost reached for the box, but then he shook his head. He was going to miss his train.

“Well, it’s addressed to us, so you and Ruri can deal with it—I’ll see you guys!!”

“Bye!”

Yuya leaped over the box and hurried down the street, looking back over his shoulder to wave until Ruri and Shun were out of sight.

He just barely made the train.

Ruri’s still with us, he thought, staring out into the darkness of the subway. Somehow, the universe
decided to give us a miracle.

He half smiled, and the feeling buoyed him up through most of the day. It did distract him quite a bit from lessons, but he made sure he got down the homework numbers and extra worksheets for Shun.

He made a bolt for the door as soon as the day was over, not responding to anyone calling his name. If he wanted to get on the soonest train home, he’d need to get to the station as soon as possible!

He hurried along down the street, fixing his bag as he jogged along. It would suck if it opened and he lost all of his worksheets…he’d lose time having to pick them up.

“Yoo, Sakaki-kun!”

Yuya yelped as arms crashed around his shoulders, almost taking them both over.

“S-Sawatari-san,” Yuya gasped. “Hey, you’re choking me…”

“I haven’t seen you in class for days!” Sawatari laughed, squeezing him tighter even as Yuya tried to wriggle free. “What’s going on? We should hang out today. Let’s find a café and flirt with some girls.”

“Urgh, sorry, not today, Sawatari-san!” Yuya gasped, finally getting free. “I have to—”

“Come onnn, it’s been forever! Ooh, hey, Sakaki-kun, look, look, they’re from You Show Girls’ Academy!”

Yuya ducked his head, flushing as Sawatari made some annoying noises at the three girls that walked past them. He covered his face with one hand.

I’m not with him right now, I swear.

The girls, for their part, just giggled. They didn’t seem offended, which was good, Yuya thought.

~ * ~ INTERLUDE ~ * ~

She covers her mouth to hide the giggle at the boy trying to give them compliments; there’s none of the cat calling malice in this high schooler that she and her friends are used to, so she’s all right with it. He seems rather sincere and he has a funny sort of smile, and he doesn’t follow them when they keep walking. His friend looks suitably embarrassed, too, and she gives the friend another glance over her shoulder. She snickers; he’s clearly trying to sneak away now that his friend is distracted. She can only see the back of his mussed green and red hair as he hurries off towards the station.

“We should really go to that new café today, don’t you think? Hey, Yuzu, are you listening?”

Yuzu blinks and nods, looking back to her friends.

“That sounds great, Masumi. Let’s go check it out.”

~ * ~ END INTERLUDE ~ * ~

Yuya sighed with relief. He’d managed to get away, and get to the station on time—

He patted his pocket and froze. Oh no. His station pass…where was it?

He turned in circles while he patted all of his pockets, as though that would make it appear. He swore—oh geez, now he remembered…he’d taken it out of his pocket to make sure it wouldn’t slip onto the floor while he changed back out of his gym clothes…and then left it on top of his clothes in the locker. Oh damnit…he’d have to go all the way back to get it, and then he’d be late for the train, and by then all the best produce would be picked over—

He felt a faint tap on his leg. Hm?

He looked down.

For a second, he thought that he really must not have woken up yet this morning, and that he was still dreaming. Was that…a hippo?
The hippo was short and chubby, no taller than his knees, and standing on two legs. It was a bright pink in color, and it looked more like a stuffed animal than an actual living creature. But its tiny black eyes blinked up at him, like it was very much alive. And it was holding his station pass. That's what it had tapped him with. That was...odd.

Yuya slowly reached down and took the pass, looking at it. Yes, it was very much his pass.

“Um,” he started, looking up.

But the hippo was gone.

Yuya stood there on the sidewalk for almost too long, just staring at the pass, until someone bumped into him and he remembered that he needed to get on the train. Maybe he was more tired than he had thought.

He hopped off the train at his station, and hurried up the stairs to get to the grocery store. He knew what he wanted to make for dinner tonight, and he’d need a few extra things that they didn’t have yet. He needed some lettuce…

“Oh, come on,” he moaned, reaching the display and finding it completely empty of lettuce. He had gotten on the right train, how could they be out already!!

He felt something cool tap against his legs, the coolness spreading through his pant leg. He looked down.

There was the hippo again. It was almost standing in exactly the same position as last time, just holding out the wrapped up half head of lettuce out to him. Yuya leaned down and took it, blinking.

“Thank…you…?” he said, looking past the lettuce.

The hippo was gone again.

Yuya paid for his purchase and tried not to think about it. Maybe he was just really exhausted. Maybe he was still dreaming. Either way, it was usually a bad idea to start questioning things like this. It would either make him look crazy, or he’d find out something was really going weird in the world. He could do without weird today.

Thunder rolled over head as he stepped out through the doors. He groaned. Oh geez….the rain was really coming down! He hadn’t seen that in the forecast, and he hadn’t brought his umbrella.

He stepped off to the side out of the way of the doors, standing under the awning. Could he make a break for it, maybe? He’d be soaked by the time he got home…maybe he could buy a cheap umbrella in the store.

The by now familiar tap on his leg drew his attention, and he looked down. There was the hippo again, this time holding an umbrella. As Yuya stared at it, it popped the umbrella open, without moving any other bit of its body save for a blink.

The doors slid open, and a mother and her child came through. Yuya decided to just risk it.

“Um, excuse me,” he said, catching the mother’s gaze. “What’s with this hippo?”

The mother and her daughter both looked down at where he was pointing. Then the mother frowned, and grabbed her child’s hand, hurrying them away.

“What hippo?” the girl asked.

“Sh, don’t talk to him, honey,” the mother said.

Yuya stood stock still for a moment. He looked back down at the hippo and the umbrella.

What…the hell…?
lovely cover art was done by dark-angel-of-muses (AngelOfMuses on ao3), please check out her Tumblr and her art!

The door slammed open and Shun heard the tell-tale sound of Yuya struggling out of his shoes. He glanced up from where he was chopping the vegetables for dinner.

“Shun,” he gasped, staggering into the doorway. His school uniform was pulled over his head, but he was still soaked. “You are not going to believe what weirdness I've seen today.”

“You're soaked,” he frowned, setting down his knife and padding over. He grabbed the towel off of his shoulder and pushed Yuya's jacket out of the way. Yuya spluttered as Shun rubbed at Yuya's hair to try and at least get some of the water out. “Didn't you get the umbrella? I sent it out with one.”

“Huh?”

The door creaked open again, and Yuya's head whipped around. There was the little pink hippo, trodding in out of the rain. It closed the umbrella and set it gently aside against the door. Yuya's eyes were drawn then to the sound of vegetables still being chopped, and Shun saw his eyes bulge slightly as his gaze caught on the little dark blue hippo there. His eyes flickered next to the living room, where Ruri was probably still sitting on the couch and knitting with the yellow hippo.

Yuya grabbed Shun's arms.

“Shun, what the hell,” he said.

“That's what was in the package you almost tripped over this morning,” Shun said, nodding at them. “I don't really get it, but they're intelligent enough to understand basic instructions.”

“You are being incredibly calm about this.”

“Hey, they're helping with dinner.”

“Shun, no one else can see them,” Yuya said. “I tried to point it out to someone and they didn't see it; they thought I was crazy.”

Shun blinked. Then he cracked a smile, clapping Yuya on the shoulder.

“Funny,” he said. “You're a real jokester.”
“Shun, I’m not lying—you don’t think there’s something— weirdbut this?? What even are they?? We’re the only ones who can see them!!”

“That’s right.”

Both of them briefly froze, and glanced slowly over their shoulders. Ruri was standing in the threshold between the kitchen and living room. She looked suddenly very serious, her face blank and stony, her stance stock still and straight. She stared at the two of them; in the light, her eyes looked like they were a dark blue-purple instead of magenta.

“Ruri?” Yuya said tentatively.

She was wearing the hippo hat, the one from when she had woken up in the hospital. The one Yuya had bought her at the zoo.

Ruri stared at them for a moment longer. Then she inhaled.

“Survival Strategy!!” she shouted.

Immediately, the world warped and bubbled around them, and they were not in their house anymore. Shun could barely comprehend it as lights and colors all flashed around them, stinging his eyes and tingling down his skin so that his hair stood on end. He felt in turns like he was falling through thick molasses and then dropping through light clouds and then his stomach dropped out from under him and everything briefly went black before rainbow lights in colors he had never seen before opened up over his head and he was—well, he wasn’t sure where he was.

He blinked and squinted. They were…on some kind of platform. A long, intricate stairway of tiny steps spread out from the bottom of their platform up to a second platform high above them. And standing on that platform, looming over them, was Ruri.

Only…Shun thought, his stomach twisting. Was it actually Ruri? Something about her seemed strange, wrong. Not just the scenery, or the fact that she was suddenly clad in an intricate, long dress in shades of brown and maroon, with a tight corset and the fancy hippo hat on her head. Something about her eyes were…too hard and cold.

“Listen up, you lowlifes who will never amount to anything,” she snapped. “Find the Hippodrum.”

Shun felt like some kind of spell had broken and he inhaled suddenly—he hadn’t even known he wasn’t breathing until now. His body seemed to loosen up, as though a moment ago he had been frozen solid—it was then that he realized that his hands were cuffed together.

“What the heck??” Yuya yelped, and Shun glanced over—Yuya was here too, staring at his own cuffed hands. “R-Ruri, what’s going on? What’s wrong with you?”

Shun turned his eyes towards Ruri standing over them and thought there’s no way that’s Ruri. But then who is it?

Ruri just stared down at them over her nose. Then she stepped down onto the first step, her heels making a loud, echoing sound with each step.

“I said,” she said. “Find the Hippodrum.”

“Ruri, what are you talking about?” Yuya asked again.

“Incorrect—I am not your sister.”

She took her next step down the stairs and paused, her skirt flaring up and then vanishing in a sparkly cloud.

“I have come from the destination of your fate. I am extending this girl’s lifespan, but for that, a price must be paid.”

She took another few clicking steps down the stairs and made a strange pose, this time her gloves disappearing.

“The hat,” Shun said, it suddenly dawning on him. “She’s being possessed by the hat.”

“What?? It’s a hat! I bought it at a gift store Shuuuuun—”
Yuya's sentence ended in a cry as suddenly the floor opened up underneath him and he dropped out of sight.

“H-hey! Yuya!”

Shun found that he couldn’t move his feet—he was trapped where he stood, as the not-Ruri approached him, now clad in only the corset, hat, and bloomers. She put her hands on her hips, still standing high enough to look down on him.

“Let’s initiate the Survival Strategy,” she said, her voice cold.

Shun choked as Ruri reached down and shoved her hand into his chest. He felt something hot and warm blossoming in the space where his heart should be, her hand feeling cold and made of bubbles, and then something snapped in half and he couldn’t help but scream.

The rainbow world vanished, and the heat in his chest faded—he felt a little colder. A little more empty.

~ * ~ * ~

Why are people born?

Ruri’s room is dark and quiet, as though nothing of any strangeness has occurred. Mobiles of her origami cranes twist silently from the ceiling, eyeless faces staring about the room.

*If people are born only to suffer the hard life, is it meant as some kind of punishment? Or a cynical joke?*

Under the canopy of her bed, she sleeps soundly, hair splayed out over the pillow in beautiful, dark waves, as though she is shrouded by some kind of veil. Her face doesn’t stir from sleep.

*If that’s the case, animals that adhere to the survival strategies programmed in their DNA are far more elegant and simple.*

Shun leans over her from his chair beside her, elbows on his knees. He reached out to brush her bangs out of her eyes. Her eyelashes flutter, but she doesn’t awaken.

*If there really is an existence worthy of being called a God, I want to ask him just one thing.*

The sound of her breath echoes in the room, as though reminding him of how loud the absence of it was when she laid on the hospital bed, shrouded and unbreathing.

*Is there really fate in the universe?*

The covers are a bit crooked, so he adjusts them, tucking them gently around her so that she stays warm. Goodness knows she needs the rest.

*If a man ignored fate, and ignored his instincts and DNA to love someone else... Dear God, is he really human?*

She looks so peaceful. His chest feels a little hollow, but that’s probably just the lingering sadness. When he briefly rests his hand on her chest, out of a faint fear that she’s stopped breathing again, her heart feels extra warm against his hand. She’s alive. Really alive.

*Just wondering.*

He leans his face down—he can feel her breath on his lips, and wonders if she can feel his breath on hers.

*I hate the word "fate."*
I love the word “fate”.

She smiles politely at the other woman at the sink, who smiles back in between checking her makeup. She takes up her spot at the other sink.

*Because, you know how they talk about “fated encounters”? A single encounter can completely change your life.*

After rinsing her hands, she leans in close to the mirror, checking the part of her magenta hair. She swipes her bangs aside across her forehead, and then checks to tighten her pigtails.

*Such special encounters are not just coincidences. They're definitely... fate.*

The other woman is on the phone, saying something about makeup, and lingerie, and the man she’s going on a date with today. She glances curiously across at the woman out of the corner of her eyes, eavesdropping. Maybe the woman has some tips she can borrow.

*Of course, life is not all happy encounters. There are many painful, sad, moments.*

The woman keeps talking on her phone as she leaves, but she’s gotten some good ideas out of it. She takes down the name of the shop the woman mentioned where she bought her lingerie into the memo of her phone. She’ll look it up later.

*It's hard to accept that misfortunes beyond your control are fate.*

She flips the phone back to the home screen, and hesitates as she glances at the image she’s made her background. Her parents are smiling and happy, and the girl in between them also has a large smile—though the glare from the lights over the mirror has obscured her eyes.

*But this is what I think: sad and painful things definitely happen for a reason.*

She clicks the phone shut and shoves it back into her pocket. She looks up at herself in the mirror. *Big smile, she tells herself, and after a beat, she manages it, a big shiny smile that convinces even her. She’s cute, she tells herself. She won’t lose—definitely not.*

*Nothing in this world is pointless.*
“So what do they even eat, do you think?”

Yuya frowned over the top of his breakfast at the hippos. His own pink hippo was currently pressing its nose against the edge of the table, tiny black eyes staring at Yuya’s fish. Yuya put his bowl down and picked up one of the fish in his fingers, poking it curiously towards the hippo’s nose. It whuffled at the fish, and then its comically large mouth opened wide and snapped it up, chewing curiously.

“At the zoo, the lady said she feeds them herbivore pellets and alfalfa,” Ruri said. “And lettuce, vegetables, and sometimes melons.”

“Urgh,” Yuya said. “That’s going to be so expensive…”

“Looks like they like rice,” Shun said, letting the dark blue hippo eat rice off his chopsticks.

Yuya almost thought about telling him off for the germs, but he was way too tired to at the moment. The whole craziness with the hippos even existing was enough. He wondered why he even bothered asking what they ate—clearly they weren’t normal hippos. Normal hippos weren’t pink and blue and yellow, weren’t this tiny, and didn’t walk on two legs.

As Yuya was thinking about it, a tiny cockroach scurried across the floor and the pink hippo automatically lifted up a can of bug killer out of nowhere, spraying the bug until it died. The hippo’s face didn’t change an inch—it would have been creepy if it wasn’t also somehow cute, like a stuffed animal.

“Well, hopefully they’ll eat cheap things…” Yuya started.

He stopped when his eyes swung back towards Ruri, and almost at the same time, Shun also looked at her.

She was wearing the hat again.

For a moment, Shun and Yuya simply stared at her. She finished her bite of food, and wiped off her lips with a napkin. When her eyes opened, they were once again the strange, dark purple-blue.

“Survival Strategy!” she cried out.

Immediately, the world warped again. Yuya’s head spun as colors and shapes all flooded around him and he almost felt like he could hear strange music playing in the back of his head.

When he finally snapped back to full awareness, he was back in that strange place again, standing on a platform that looked up at Ruri in her strange dress, the world between them swirling with strange colors and designs.

“Listen up, you lowlifes who will never amount to anything,” Ruri snapped. “Find the Hippodrum.”

“Wait, you mean that wasn’t a dream??” Yuya said, swinging his panicked gaze towards Shun.

Shun, however, had his eyes fixed on Ruri, his jaw clenched tight and cuffed hands in fists.

“What is the Hippodrum?” he asked. “Why do you need it?”

“Get on the train departing at 0810 hours and wait in the third car by the second door,” Ruri said, as though she hadn’t heard a word.

She stepped purposefully down the steps with her heels clicking with authority. She flung her arms back and the ruffles on her gloves disappeared.

“A girl named Hiragi Yuzu will get on the train at the Standard-Academia station.”

She reached the halfway point of the stairs, and this time, her skirt flared and disappeared in a puff of sparkles.

“She will have the Hippodrum. …probably.”

“Probably?” Yuya said. “You don’t even know?”
“If you fail to retrieve it, you can consider your sister’s life forfeit.”

Shun and Yuya both flinched.

“R-right, okay, we’ll do what you say then.” Yuya said quickly. Whatever alien lifeform had come and possessed Ruri, he didn’t… want to jeopardize Ruri’s safety again.

Ruri reached the bottom of the stairs, stepping instead on the heads of the blue and pink hippos so that she remained on a higher platform from the other two. She flipped her hair back as she looked down at them over the top of her nose.

Who… was she? Yuya found himself thinking. She wasn’t Ruri so…

“Let’s initiate the Survival Strategy,” Ruri said.

Yuya quickly stood up from his seat as the train chugged to a stop, eyes peeled for any sign of the mysterious Hiragi Yuzu.

“What do you think we’re looking for?” Yuya said.

“Judging by the time of day, an office worker, or a student,” Shun said, also standing up.

Yuya glanced around for the hippos as the train quickly began to fill up with people, shoving and pushing the brothers to the middle of the train car. Ugh, it was so tight in here! How were they going to find anyone, especially someone they didn’t even know!

“Maybe the hippos can look for them,” Shun whispered as they finally managed to get into a place where they weren’t being pushed around.

Yuya lit up. That was a great idea! He looked around for the hippos and…

The pink hippo was currently crushed between two people’s legs, and the blue hippo was being stood on by a man in a suit. Yuya’s eye twitched.

“Well, they’re useless,” Shun groaned. “Yuya, let’s…”

Yuya’s pink hippo attempted to roll free of the legs it was stuck between. The people on either side of it just shifted and squeezed it more—could people feel the hippos, or were they invisible to the touch, as well? The hippo rolled upwards between the people on either side of it, and then wriggled free with a pop. Yuya quickly grabbed the hippo in his arms—it was surprisingly heavy, and he almost fell over.

“Geez, you’re hopeless,” he groaned,

“Hey!!”

Yuya looked up, confused. A girl in a school uniform was glaring at him, her dark hands tight on her bag.

“Did you just fucking grope me?” she said.

Yuya’s mind immediately blanked. He definitely hadn’t groped her, of course, but… oh. Oh no. The hippo. The hippo had been stuck between her butt and someone’s else’s when it got free, so that must mean…

That answers one question, he thought lamely. They can be felt by other people.

“I—no, I—” he spluttered. He was so flustered that he couldn’t come up with a goddamn thing—make something up, dammit! He used to be an actor in middle school! He couldn’t tell the truth about the hippo, but he could come up with a lie that made sense!

“Oh, sorry, I think that was me,” Shun said suddenly, leaning down. “My bag got stuck and I wasn’t looking when I tugged it free. Sorry about that.”

The girl blinked, her ire vanishing with brief surprise. Shun had on his, as Ruri called it, award-winning poker face, and he didn’t drop the girl’s gaze. Finally, the girl shrugged.

“I guess that makes sense,” she said. “Just be more careful next time.”

“Will do.”
Yuya breathed out with relief. *Thanks, Shun.*

“Masumi, come on,” another girl in the same uniform said. “We’re going to miss our stop.”

“Oh, shit, thanks, Yuzu,” Masumi said, whipping around.

Almost as one, Shun’s and Yuya’s heads snapped up. *Yuzu??*

Yuya caught a glimpse of bright pink pigtails bouncing as their owner stepped off onto the platform. Shun pushed forward, grabbing his own hippo by the scruff and hurrying off after her. Yuya hugged the pink hippo tight as he quickly squeezed through the brief path that Shun had made.

They gasped out onto the train station, and looked back and forth.

“Fuck, where’d she go?” Shun grumbled.

Yuya’s mind sparked briefly with a memory.

“The uniform is for You Show Girls’ Academy,” he said. He remembered seeing the uniform the day before yesterday, and remembered Sawatari saying as much.

“Do you know where that is?”

“Vaguely.”

“Good—you go up ahead, I need to grab something.”

“Huh??”

But Shun was already darting up towards another set of stairs, and Yuya groaned. He hugged his hippo and hurried towards the other stairs, blinking against the sunlight. They weren’t too far from their own high school—which they were, apparently, going to skip to tail a stranger. Ugh. This was so wrong.

Yuya only half remembered where the school was, but luckily, he caught a glimpse of those pink pigtails up ahead in the crowd. He set the hippo down.

“Okay, listen,” he said. “I want you to try and keep up with her. So that if I fall behind, you can tell me which way to go. Okay?”

Shun had said they were capable of understanding basic instructions, but Yuya still felt silly telling the expressionless, ridiculously cute hippo what to do. Especially since no one else could see said hippo, and it would look like he was talking to air. The hippo blinked at him. Then without any real response, it turned around and hurried after the girl. He hoped it was going the right way.

He started off down the street after the girl and her friends himself. He felt…weird about this. He knew how creepy it was for girls to see a guy following them. He doubted she’d listen to his crazy explanation for it, either; she’d just call the cops. And she’d be in the right for it…he was kind of stalking her.

*Sorry, Hiragi Yuzu,* he said helplessly. *But if we don’t, Ruri could die.*

He at least tried to make sure they wouldn’t see him, keeping up until they reached the school. Right…the school.

Yuya hesitated at the gate after he stopped seeing anyone going in, peeking around the wall.

“What are we supposed to do now?” he said, glancing down at the hippo. “Find a girl’s uniform and sneak in?”

“That was Plan B.”

Yuya bit back his surprised yelp, whipping around with his back slamming into the wall. Shun had arrived, with a shopping bag tucked under his arm.

“Oh my god, don’t do that to me,” Yuya said, putting a hand over his heart.

“Sorry,” Shun said. “Come this way, I have an idea.”

Yuya followed Shun to the building across from the school. They made their way to the roof,
where Shun set up a laptop, flipping it open. He opened up a file and started flicking through—

school profiles?

“Where’d you get this?” Yuya said.

“Someone I know at my old cram school was into this stuff.”

“What stuff?”

“Hacking.”

“That’s illegal, Shun.”

Shun just shrugged until he found an image of Hiragi Yuzu.

“She’s in class 2C,” he said. “Lend me your hippo.”

He plucked the hippo out of Yuya’s arms and turned it around.

“Hey, be gentle with Pinku,” Yuya said.

Shun blinked, looking up at him.

“Pinku?”

“Yeah,” Yuya said, blushing. “That one’s Pinku. The blue one is Ao, and Ruri’s is Kii.”

Shun raised his eyebrows, half smiling.

“You named them colors,” Shun said.

“It’s easier than saying ‘the pink one’ or ‘the blue one’ all the time,” Yuya said. “And it’s cute.”

Yuya pouted defensively, and Shun cracked a smile.

“I guess it does make it easier,” he said. “Don’t worry, I’m not going to hurt ‘Pinku.’”

Yuya stuck his tongue out at Shun for making fun of him.

Shun pulled out a roll of duct tape next, and both hippos jumped a bit at the sound of the tape

unfurling. Yuya watched as Shun attached a camera to the top of both of their heads, and taped a

walkie talkie to Ao’s chest. Shun tested the second walkie talkie for the volume, keeping it as low

as possible.

“All right,” he said. “Let’s send them in.”
Yuya sighed, leaning back on his hands. Shun leaned towards the computer, watching the bouncy feed from the hippos trotting around the school after Hiragi Yuzu. He sipped on the juice that Yuya had brought back for him. It was warm already; he had forgotten it was there for a decent amount of time.

“This feels wrong,” Yuya said. “We’re basically stalking her.”

“She could have the Hippodrum,” Shun said. “If we want Ruri to be all right, we have to do this. For Ruri.”

“For Ruri,” Yuya echoed. He sounded vaguely upset, though, and Shun winced. Yuya was just…too moral for this. He felt bad dragging him along on it. This should be Shun’s job, as the older brother, to do the hard things so that his siblings would be okay. Yuya definitely wouldn’t just leave and go to school if Shun asked him, though, so he didn’t ask.

So far, there had been no sign of the Hippodrum—whatever it was, anyway. The hippos had looked through Hiragi's bag, through her desk, even her lunch, which Pinku appeared to be stealing food out of.

*How are we supposed to find something when we don’t even know what it is?* he thought. Maybe she hadn’t brought it with her to school. If it was something powerful enough to save Ruri, maybe she wouldn’t bring it places with her.

“I have to leave early today,” Hiragi said through the camera speakers. “I’ll catch you guys later!”

She waved at her two friends, one of which was the dark haired girl that Shun had had to get off of Yuya’s case earlier today.

“Keep going after her,” he said into the walkie talkie, so that Ao would finally turn around and follow Pinku. “Yuya, let’s pack up, she’s leaving school.”

Yuya finished his juice and grabbed Shun’s empty can from him, tossing them both into his bag to throw away later. Shun closed the computer and tucked it into his school bag, and then the two of them bolted back for the door that would lead down to the street.

Hiragi was already walking through the gates by the time they got down to the sidewalk,
hesitating in the alley beside the building so that they wouldn’t be seen. Pinku and Ao toddled out of the building and followed her down the street in single file, like they were some kind of strange ducklings.

“Stay low,” Shun said.

“You don’t have to tell me that,” Yuya muttered.

~ * ~ * ~

“Kii-chan, what should we make for lunch today?”

The little yellow hippo made a whuffling sound that made Ruri giggle. She had stuck one of her own little wing clips on Kii’s head around one ear, and she looked really cute.

“Hmm, I agree, I think cup ramen sounds delicious,” she said.

She didn’t make it into the kitchen, though, before the phone rang. She hesitated a moment before walking over, nervous in spite of herself. Sometimes the phone rang while her brothers were away, and most of the time they were strange people asking about debts and mortgages and other things that she pretended didn’t happen when her brothers asked.

The caller ID, however, read with the address of her brothers’ school. W-what could they be calling for? Were they both okay? Ruri picked up quickly.

“Hello? Sakaki residence.”

“Ah, is this Ruri-chan?” the voice on the other end said. “This is Tatsuzaki, I’m your brothers’ teacher.”

“Oh, no, not at all, I was just wondering if they were still back at home with you,” Tatsuzaki said. “They didn’t show up at first period, and they’re still not here.”

Ruri’s lips parted. Then relief flooded through her as she realized her brothers hadn’t gotten hurt. Relief was quickly replaced with irritation, and she huffed, putting her free hand on her hips.

“It sounds like they’re skipping,” she said. “I’m so sorry, Tatsuzaki-sensei. I’ll call them and tell them off.”

“Just as long as they’re both all right,” Tatsuzaki said with a pleasant laugh. “Sorry to bother you!”

~ * ~ * ~

By some stroke of luck, Hiragi never, ever seemed to turn around. She had a sort of bouncy step that made it seem like she was in an excellent mood, and when they got a little closer to her sometimes, Shun could catch the sound of her humming slightly. Wherever she was headed after skipping the last half of school, she was incredibly excited about it.

Shun and Yuya followed her to a department store downtown. She wandered into a bookshop, glancing through a few shoujo manga before picking up a magazine emblazoned with the popular idol duo Double B.

Yuya dragged Shun off to the side and grabbed for a random book, opening it up to pretend to be reading. Shun copied him, picking up the first non-suspicious looking book about birds in front of him.

“What do you think she’s doing?” Yuya whispered. “Do you think the magazine is the Hippodrum?”

“Don’t be stupid,” Shun said, but he took another glance just to be sure.

She had a suddenly very serious face, her expression screwed up with thought as she gnawed absentely on her thumbnail. She was muttering to herself, as though reading some of the words inside. Shun wondered what the article was about that had her so hooked.

Yuya’s pocket buzzed, and Shun jumped in spite of himself. Yuya gasped and almost dropped his book. He quickly set it down and fumbled in his pocket for the phone.
“We don’t have time to be answering calls,” Shun hissed.

“It’s Ruri!” Yuya hissed back, and Shun paled. Was she okay?

Yuya quickly flipped open his phone and listened. He immediately flinched back from the speaker.

“I—I’m sorry, Ruri,” he said, looking chagrined. He covered the mouthpiece with one hand and whispered to Shun. “Our teacher called home to find out where we were. She’s mad.”

Urgh, Shun thought. He’d apologize to Ruri for being a delinquent later.

“Yuya, she’s leaving,” he said, suddenly noticing that Hiragi had vanished.

Luckily, Ao was waiting outside the store, pointing in the direction she had gone.

“I’m sorry, Ruri, I’ll call you back—I promise it’s important! I’ll see you when we’re home!”

Yuya closed his phone and both of the bolted back out into the street.

This time, Hiragi didn’t wander. She made a beeline for her destination, and without hesitation, dove right into the next store. Shun made to go in right after her, but Yuya grabbed his arm.

“Shun wait,” he said.

“What? We’ll lose her!”

Yuya pointed wordlessly at the sign over the shop. It took Shun’s brain a good few seconds to process what he was looking at, and then he felt his face drain of color.

“Oh,” he said, realizing what Yuya was pointing out. The store Hiragi had chosen was a lingerie shop. Yeah—he and Yuya weren’t getting in there without getting some suspicious glances, that was for sure.

“I’ll go in,” Yuya said. “You wait outside.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’ll blend in better than you,” Yuya said, with a weak smile. “Wait for me, okay?”

He clapped Shun quickly on the shoulder. Then he shrugged off his jacket, which was for a boy’s only school, and tied it off around his waist before walking in as though it were the most normal thing in the world. That was Yuya for you—he was a pretty damn good actor before he quit drama club to stay home more often.

Shun leaned against the wall beside the door and tried to act as normal as Yuya did. He was… someone’s boyfriend, waiting outside for them to buy something. Yeah. That was a good cover story. He tried to make himself believe it while he folded his arms and tried to look appropriately sullen for having been dragged along on such a silly excursion.

A few moments later, Yuya burst back out and grabbed Shun’s wrist, pulling him back around the back of the store.

“What’s going on?” Shun said.

“She snuck out the back, I think she’s going up the fire escape for some reason,” Yuya said. “Sorry, someone thought I was actually trying to buy something and the salesperson kept following me around and making suggestions.”

Shun almost laughed, but Yuya looked mortified enough already, so he held it back. He and Yuya ran to the back of the store and to the fire escape, clambering up and trying not to make any extra noise.

When they reached the height of the shop’s exit, Yuya paused, looking around.

“She must be higher?” he said, leaning over the railing. Then he paled. “Oh my god. What is she doing?”

Shun ran to the railing and leaned over as well, looking up.

“Holy shit,” he swore.
Hiragi was far, far above their heads, sidling slowly across the tiniest little ledge along the building’s side. She pressed her whole body against the wall, only the balls of her feet able to stand along the ledge. Wind caught at her hair and skirt, making it look like she’d be tossed off by a breeze.

One foot slipped off. She cried out—Yuya almost threw himself over the railing with his arms spread out as though he could catch her from here, and Shun had to grab him by the collar and haul him back before he fell.

With a massive, massive effort, Hiragi hauled herself back onto the ledge, continuing forward.

“What is she doing?” Yuya said, sounding like he was about to have a breakdown. “She’s going to get herself killed!”

“Is it…the Hippodrum?” Shun said, almost just thinking out loud.

Hiragi paused at an alcove, gasping for breath. He could hear her breaths even from here. She wriggled her phone free and leaned dangerously upwards with it. Shun heard the faint click of the phone app taking a picture. A photo? Of what?

She put her phone away and began to sidle back. Shun couldn’t take his eyes off of her until she reached the fire escape high above them and disappeared from sight. Yuya let out a huge, heaving breath, slumping over the railing.

“Who is this girl?” he mumbled.

~ * ~ * ~

Shun passed Yuya another can of juice, and sat down at the bench with his back to where Hiragi was sitting. She appeared to be waiting for someone, her phone resting in her lap as she leaned against the wall around a streetlamp. It was starting to get dark already. Shun couldn’t believe they’d been following this girl all day, and they were still no closer to even what the Hippodrum was.

“Do you think we should just ask her?” Yuya said. “I don’t know…she seems nice. Maybe if we ask her, she’ll know what it is.”

“If she has something powerful enough to save Ruri, do you think she’ll want to give it up?”

“Well…maybe if we explain that it’s for Ruri. Maybe she and Ruri would be friends, even.”

Shun wished he could have as positive an attitude as Yuya. Hiragi seemed like a nice girl, but she did odd things. She was definitely up to something. Everyone always was.

He leaned surreptitiously back with his arm across the bench, glancing at Hiragi. She tapped her foot, looking almost a little impatient. Suddenly, though, her eyes lit up, and she shot to her feet.

“Tatsuzaki-san!” she called, waving.

Yuya jumped, quickly turning around to peer through the bushes around their bench. Shun blinked with surprise, too. Wasn’t that…

“Oh, Yuzu-chan,” their teacher said, coming into view. “We seem to be running into each other a lot!”

There was no doubt about it, it was him: the tall, lanky, dorky looking older man that taught their homeroom classes, silver hair as messy and uncombed as ever, the green streaks drooping into his hazel-yellow eyes a bit. That was Tatsuzaki Zarc, their teacher—what was Hiragi Yuzu doing waiting for him? Did Zarc have something to do with the Hippodrum?

“How’s your family doing lately?” Zarc asked.

“They’re doing all right,” Hiragi said, swinging her bag in front of her and smiling. “Oh!! I almost forgot, I had something I wanted to show you!”

She dug in her pocket for her phone and unlocked it, swiping through the apps. The photo, Shun thought. The photo she had gone out on a literal limb to get. What was it of?

She turned the phone towards Zarc, and his eyes widened.

“That’s a red-rumped swallow’s nest!” he said. “Those are rare—where did you get this
Yuya and Shun exchanged a glance. A…bird’s nest? Hiragi giggled, turning the phone back towards her.

“It’s a se-cret,” she said. “But when I saw it, I knew you’d love to see it, too!”

“That was really kind of you, Yuzu-chan, thank you!” Zarc said, smiling. He ruffled her hair briefly. “Say hello to your parents for me, okay? And walk home safe.”

“I will!”

Zarc and Hiragi both waved at each other, and Zarc continued down the street.

Hiragi, however, made absolutely no move to return home. She stood and watched Zarc off into the distance for a bit. Then she smiled. Only, this was not the same sweet smile that Shun had seen out of her all day—*that* was a conniving smile if he had ever seen one.

Hiragi began to trot off in the same direction as Zarc.

“Yuya, let’s go,” Shun said.

“R-right.”

They followed Hiragi down the street, who was, it seemed, following Zarc. She tucked herself neatly behind telephone poles and waited behind corners just perfectly to avoid Zarc seeing her.

*She’s done this before,* Shun thought. *She knows exactly all the right hiding places along this route.*

Hiragi waited patiently along the side of the wall surrounding Zarc’s house as he fumbled with his keys, trying several different ones before he finally got himself inside. As soon as the door closed, Hiragi was darting around the wall and disappearing into the shadows of the yard.

“Now what? What is she doing?” Yuya said.

“Ao, Pinku, follow her,” Shun said.

The hippos toddled after Yuzu, going around the wall and into the yard. Shun watched from the computer, eyes narrowing. Hiragi was nowhere to be seen. Where had she gone?

Ao’s camera finally swung around and he saw a vent panel on the ground. The shaft beneath the house was looming dark and open.

“Look inside,” Shun said through the walkie talkie.

“Huh? You don’t think she went in there do you?” said Yuya.

The hippos crawled into the shaft—they were tiny enough that they could stand upright inside, but anyone Shun or Yuya’s size would have to belly crawl. As they got farther in, a light appeared.

There she was. Laying on her back directly underneath Zarc’s house, Hiragi was fiddling with a small radio. She tuned it to a channel that appeared to be talking about birds—and if Shun had to make a guess, it was the same channel that Zarc was listening to up above her. Hiragi smiled and set the radio down, letting out a huge, contented sigh.

“Oh my god,” Yuya mumbled. “She’s not…is she?”

Shun nodded. Hiragi rolled over on her stomach in the feed from the hippo’s cameras, and pulled out a small book from her bag. It was a pink diary, with a heart emblazoned on the front. And now she was going to write about her schemes, huh?

But she flipped open to a page that was already filled in. Ao leaned in closer with the camera to see what was there. Shun only caught a few sentences, but an uneasiness spread through him.

*I found a swallow’s nest downtown and showed a picture to Zarc. He was really surprised!*

Hiragi stamped a little pink stamp at the bottom of the entry. It appeared to be the kanji for “destiny.”

“Yeah,” Shun finally said, in response to Yuya’s question. “She’s Zarc’s stalker.”
Her room submerges beneath a heavy darkness of water, where voices from the past echo to the future without quite reaching it.

“Mama, I love your curry!”

The water fills the spaces of the dark, empty room, bubbles murmuring softly between the stuffed animals set along the dresser. The bed’s canopy flutters softly in a quiet current.

“Yuzu-chan, you’ve got some on your face, hold still.”

“That tickles, mama! ...Mama, are you okay? Why are you crying?”

The darkness swells in the depths of the water, as though its growing tighter somehow.

“I’m just happy, Yuzu-chan, that’s all. I love you so much.”

“Aww, your mama is hogging you, Yuzu-chan—I guess I’ll have to give you a big hug too!”

“Eee!! Mama, papa, you’re choking meee, heehee!”

The water ripples over the single photograph, tucked between the fat stuffed animals. Two parents, smiling. One girl, laughing. A perfect picture.

“I love you, papa! I love you, mama! I love curry!”

~ * ~ * ~

Yuzu nibbled on her toast, staring at nothing. Her eyes were elsewhere, on plans and internal diagrams and the image of the diary entry she had re-read this morning. Today was the twentieth. Today was an important, important day.

She smiled, grabbing the maple syrup and turning it over to draw on her toast. She traced out a heart, and then, carefully in the center of the heart, “Yuzu + Zarc.” She smiled.

Today will be a special day, Zarc-san, she smiled.
This would be a good luck charm for today. She lifted the now decorated toast to her mouth.

She was startled out of her thoughts by the sound of her father bursting into the room, half running over to the couch to grab his bag and start rifling through it. In the surprise, she accidentally smushed the bread in half—smudging her writing.

“Yuzu, have you seen my—oh!”

He pulled out the offending folder, grinning sheepishly.

“I have a meeting tonight about licensing new equipment for the school, so I’ll be home late, all right? Make sure you get home safe.”

Yuzu’s fingers tightened on her toast, but she forced a smile.

“Um…papa. It’s the twentieth, you know.”

Her father blinked, looking confused at her for a moment. Then recognition dawned in his eyes, as his gaze flickered to the calendar where Yuzu had written, in curly pink letters “Curry Day.”

“Oh, geez, I’m sorry, Yuzu,” he said. “I’ll have to eat curry out tonight. Can you eat with your friends today?”

Yuzu looked down at the table and plastered on another smile.

“Sure, papa. Have a good meeting.”

“I love you,” he said, running over and kissing her quickly on the side of the head before bolting for the door.

“Papa, you forgot a shoe,” she called after him.

She heard him fluster and fumble, and then the sound of him getting his other shoe on and running out the door. She stared down at the smudged up remains of her good luck charm on the toast for a long moment.

Then she squeezed her eyes shut and let out a deep breath. Well, she didn’t need a good luck charm, anyway! She knew what she was doing, and she had the diary. She finished her toast in two bites, and shoved up from the table.

*Today is curry day*, she reminded herself. *Today is a good day.*

~ * ~ * ~

“So you’re sure she left?”

“Saw her get on the train.”

“Do…do you think there’s anyone else inside?”

Shun rang the doorbell, making Yuya jump in spite of himself. They waited for the sound of the bell to fade away into the background. Then Shun shrugged.

“Doesn’t seem like it.”

Yuya swallowed, shifting nervously from foot to foot. They were standing outside the Hiragi house, and he felt like everyone could see how badly they stuck out. And that felt like it was saying something, because the Hiragi house looked ridiculously out of place as it was; it appeared to be some kind of performance arts school, with the living area on top of it. Colors splashed over the sides and there were pipes and tubes sticking out of the ceiling, making it look more messy than quirky.

Shun was already pulling out a pair of white gloves, and a small packet of lockpicking tools.

Yuya didn’t want to ask him where he had gotten those.

“This is…wrong, don’t you think?” he said.

“It’s for Ruri,” Shun said. “Or we lose her again. Is that what you want?”

~ * ~ FLASHBACK ~ * ~
Shun and Yuya

The Hat’s World

They’re in that rainbow, swirling world of light and colors again, with Ruri in the hat and dress glaring down at them.

“Listen up, you lowlifes who will never amount to anything.”

“Ruri, isn’t this enough?~” Yuya says, feeling dizzy. He’s been here three times, and it still doesn’t feel like more than a strange dream. He’s not sure he knows how to differentiate reality from imagination anymore. “I—I know you get bored alone at home, but how are you ever going to get better like this?”

Ruri blinks at them, tilting her head. She begins her walk down the stairs, pieces of her outfit disappearing in order, like usual.

“I see. So you still don’t realize what’s happening. You still believe I am your sister.”

“Do we have any confirmation otherwise?” Shun asks.

Ruri purses her lips in a very un-Ruri-like expression. She reaches the bottom of the stairs, stepping down onto Pinku’s and Ao’s heads, so that she remains taller than them, clad only in her corset and bloomers once again.

“Your sister,” Ruri says, “is allergic to peanuts. Correct?”

Yuya and Shun blink, glancing at each other. They nod silently.

Suddenly, Ruri is standing in front of them, and there is a table with a jar of peanut butter sitting alone in the middle. Ruri herself is, suddenly, in what appears to be a giant shelled peanut costume, with a hole in it for her face. Without dropping their gazes, Ruri picks up the jar, twists off the top, and produces a spoon from nowhere. Like they’re in some weird dream, Ruri begins to eat the entire jar of peanut butter at an almost unnatural speed. She wipes her lips as she puts the jar down, looking decidedly not allergic.

Yuya thinks that this is the strangest recurring dream that he has ever had.

“Now do you believe me?” Ruri says, tilting her head, making the hat’s tassels wobble back and forth.

Shun and Yuya both appear to have lost the ability to come up with words. Ruri sighs, closing her eyes.

“Unfortunate,” she says. “Then I will have you both experience the nightmare again.”

She grabs the hat and yanks it off her head—and collapses. The rainbow, spinning world around them immediately desaturates to a frozen gray, everything stopping in its tracks.

“Ruri!!”

Shun throws himself forward first, getting to her and dragging her into his arms. Her head flops limply, and Shun’s face goes pale. Ruri is gray and colorless and Yuya can’t breathe.

“She’s not breathing,” Shun says, his voice cracking. “Yuya, she’s not breathing.”

Yuya snatches up the fallen hat and jams it back on her head.

Immediately, the world flashes back to its color and movement and sound, and Ruri’s eyes open with that unnatural dark-purple blue. Her eyes fix on the pair of them.

“Now do you understand?”

~ * ~ END FLASHBACK ~ * ~

Yuya swallowed, and grabbed the gloves that Shun offered him.

“For Ruri,” he mumbled, pulling them on.
Shun popped the door open, and cautiously peered through the crack.

“Make sure there’s no one in there,” he ordered Ao.

Ao marched into the room like a soldier, looking jerkily back and forth. They waited for a few moments before the hippo returned, nodding and saluting. Empty.

Shun pulled the door the rest of the way open and slipped inside. Yuya only hesitated for a breath before he followed.

The house opened up into a long hallway, first. Shun walked down it, giving a cursory glance through the large glass window in the wall.

“Probably won’t be in the school,” he said, walking past it. “If it belongs to Hiragi, it’ll be in the living area.”

Yuya privately agreed, but he took a glance through the window as he passed. There was a big stage inside, currently decorated with a jungle set made out of cardboard and PVC pipe. Yuya smiled in spite of himself. It looked like fun. This seemed like the kind of school he would have liked to have gone to, if he didn’t have to stay home for Ruri. He hurried after Shun, who was already at the end of the hall opening up the door that led to the stairs.

They headed up the dark stairs and found themselves in the living room then. Yuya flipped on a light.

Shun was already examining the TV set, looking underneath on the shelves.

“We don’t even know what we’re looking for,” Yuya pointed out again.

“Maybe we’ll know it when we see it,” Shun said, shrugging as he flipped through a magazine.

Yuya grimaced, but he joined the search, looking under the couch, peeking in the drawers. He glanced at the calendar on the wall. Today was…curry day? Hm. He looked away and continuing searching through the kitchen drawers.

He felt like a terrible person. They really should just ask Hiragi if she had the Hippodrum. Or they should question that thing possessing Ruri more. She had only said that Hiragi probably had the Hippodrum. They could be doing all of this for nothing.

Pinku wriggled past him on the counter, presumably also looking. Yuya grabbed it when it started eying a jar of plums.

“No, Pinku,” he said. “Not for you. I’ll feed you when we get home. You just had breakfast.”

Pinku squirmed a bit in his arms, so Yuya let it down, but kept one eye on it. That hippo was constantly eating; it was going to ruin Yuya’s food budget. The interaction, however, caused Yuya to look up and see Shun, who had moved over to the door with a colorful sign hanging from it. “Yuzu’s room,” it read in bright pink, flowery letters.

Yuya immediately darted over to Shun, grabbing his shoulder.

“No,” he said.

“If it belongs to Hiragi, it’s probably in her room,” he said.

“That’s a girl’s private room. You can’t just…go in.”

“So what do you want to do? Waste time trying to make friends with her so that you can eventually get invited over, and then betray her trust anyway by stealing something?”

Yuya flinched a little, and let his hand slide down from Shun’s shoulder. He bit his lip.

Shun sighed deeply.

“I get it,” he murmured. “I get it.”

He shook his head.

“You don’t have to go any farther, Yuya. Save your innocence for Ruri.”

“Shun, wait…”
Shun was already opening the door, and Yuya stepped forward.

“If someone has to look, I’ll—”

Shun, however, just quickly took Yuya by the shoulder and pressed his forehead to Yuya’s.

“I’m just taking a quick look—I’m not going to steal her underwear or something. Stay here.”

His warmth vanished, and then he was disappearing into the next room, closing it behind him. Yuya’s shoulders slumped. He was…bad at this. He wanted Ruri to be safe, too, but…

Shun emerged a few minutes later, shaking his head.

“Nothing,” he said. “I guess we’d better try following her again—”

The door down the stairs opened with a creak.

Both of them froze, staring at the door. Had that been their imagination, or…?

The knob started turning.

Shun moved faster, bodily grabbing Yuya under the arms and dragging them both back behind the couch in the blink of an eye. They were tucked away and hidden by the time the door swung open.

“Curry day, curry day, curry day is to-day!” Hiragi sang softly to herself, giggling.

“What is she doing home so early?” Yuya hissed.

“Hell if I know,” Shun whispered back. “Stay quiet.”

They pressed quietly against the couch while Hiragi clattered around the kitchen, humming and laughing to herself. Yuya almost tried not to even breathe. He hoped Pinku and Ao weren’t getting into trouble out there; he hadn’t had time to grab either of them.

Luckily, as though they had read his mind, Ao appeared around the couch, dragging Pinku by the ear. Pinku had plums shoved in its mouth, and was turning sort of purple from the sourness.

“I told you,” Yuya mumbled, taking Pinku from a saluting Ao.

The thick, warm smell of curry flooded through the room, making Yuya’s stomach twist a bit in spite of himself. It smelled so good .

“And the secret ingredient is apple jam,” Hiragi hummed to herself.

Yuya’s stomach grumbled. Shun’s eyes snapped to him, eyes wide. Quiet , he mouthed. Yuya grimaced helplessly at him. How was he supposed to make his stomach stop??

The kitchen went briefly quiet. Oh crap, oh crap, had she heard him??

Then the couch squeaked, and Yuya flinched, closing his eyes. She was going to look over the top and see them, she was going to look—

He heard the sound of a book falling open, and opened his eyes. She wasn’t looking. She had just…sat down on the couch.

“It’s going to be perfect,” Hiragi muttered to herself. “Exactly as written…it will go exactly as written.”

Yuya remembered, then, from their spying on her before: the diary that she had opened up beneath Zarc’s house, with the prewritten entry. Yuya glanced at Shun. Was she crazy or something?

Shun, however, looked thoughtful, not looking at Yuya.

“Exactly as written,” Hiragi said again, like some creepy, culty mantra.
“Do you smell that?”

“Smells kinda like curry…”

“Why would a train car smell like curry?”

Yuzu hummed a little song to herself, kicking her legs back and forth. The curry was still warm in her lap through its cloth wrapping, and it smelled like love. Today was going to be perfect. She would go to Zarc’s house and surprise him. He’d probably just be eating pre-packaged meals again, and he’d be so happy to see her with homemade curry. They’d eat it together and smile and laugh and talk about nothing.

She continued to hum as she got off the train and headed towards Zarc’s house. It was a route very familiar to her by now, and she could have walked it blindfolded. She felt like skipping, but she couldn’t really do that with the curry in her hands, so she refrained.

~ * ~

F L A S H B A C K ~ * ~

Yuzu

The Family Kitchen

“Thank you for having me over again, Hiragi-san.”

“You know you’re always welcome, Zarc,” her father says, smiling at him as he puts down the two plates of curry. “I can’t believe you’re graduating from high school already.”

“Time goes by fast,” Zarc laughs.

Yuzu peeks at him through her bangs, sitting in the chair that was still too big for her ten-year-old legs beside him. He is only inches away from her, their elbows can almost touch on the table.

Yuzu’s father sits down on the other side, smiling at the pair of them. His eyes soften a bit, and something in his expression goes a little sad. Yuzu is too busy looking at Zarc to fully notice.

“Well, even when you go off to college, you know there’s always a spot for you here every curry day,” he says.

Zarc nods thankfully, and takes a bite of the curry. His entire face lights up. For a moment, he is sparkling, just like the stars reflected on the ocean, and Yuzu feels her heart quicken.

Her heart is as warm as the curry in that moment, and realizes that this is destiny.

~ * ~ E N D F L A S H B A C K ~ * ~
Yuzu inhaled, hesitating in front of Zarc’s door, hand raised to knock with the curry tucked warm against her chest. It made her heart beat a little faster. She swallowed—goodness, but she really wasn’t used to coming right to the door. Sometimes she dropped off meals from her father, but most often, she was used to crawling in through the ventilation shaft. Coming through the front felt special.

*Someday, I’ll come through the front all the time, she thought. We’ll move in together, and things will be perfect.*

She inhaled once more, and then knocked lightly. She began to smile wide, waiting for Zarc’s big dorky smile to answer—

“Oh, Zarc, you’re back quickly—oh?”

Yuzu was pretty sure she could hear a record screeching to a stop in her ears as someone who was very much *not Zarc* answered the door.

She was tall and unfairly gorgeous, slender and supple with long, model’s fingers resting against the door. She stood with such an easy grace that Yuzu might have thought she was posing for a photo rather than actually just standing like a normal person. Her long, silky silver hair rolled down her back, pale face expertly designed, her beautiful, sparkling eyes like twin peridot gems.

*What*, Yuzu thought, as her brain chugged back to life, *is she doing in Zarc’s house?*

She flipped through a few hundred possibilities in the space of a second. She was a housekeeper. Yuzu had accidentally knocked on the wrong door. She was a coworker stopping by to touch base on something from work.

She refused to let herself think the only, actual logical conclusion.

*Zarc’s girlfriend.*

“Oh, are you…one of Zarc’s students?” the woman said, touching her fingers to her lips. Her eyes crinkled slightly, as though she were trying to place Yuzu’s face.

Yuzu hated every single tiny motion she made with a burning, furious passion—it was so *perfect*, even the way her hair slipped a bit over her shoulder, looking slightly disheveled, looking purposeful.

“I—yes,” Yuzu said, without thinking about it.

“How nice of you to visit!” the woman said, clapping. “Zarc isn’t back yet, but he will be soon! You’re welcome to come in.”

*It’s not your house to welcome me to!!*

Yuzu plastered on a smile, however, and thanked her, stepping out of her shoes in the foyer and following her to the living room. It was actually the first time that Yuzu had been this far in Zarc’s actual house. She had peeked in through the windows, but being actually here was something else. She sat gingerly on one end of the table while *the woman* went about pouring tea.

*The woman* came back with two tall glasses of iced tea, smiling as she sat one down in front of Yuzu. Yuzu mumbled out a thank you. The curry felt suddenly burning in her lap. She wondered if the woman would ask about it.

“So, ah…sorry, but I don’t think we’ve met,” Yuzu said.

“Oh, of course,” *the woman* said, laughing. *Even her laugh* was pretty. *What was this?? “I’m Grace! Grace Tyler, darling. It’s lovely to meet you; Zarc always says how much he loves teaching.”*

Yuzu nodded woodenly. The name sounded familiar somehow, but she couldn’t come up with anything at the moment. Her brain was being so slow to keep up that it took her a moment to realize that there was another scent in the room that wasn’t coming from her own pot. Her eyes wandered automatically towards the little kitchenette, and Grace’s eyes followed her gaze. There was…a pot on the burner.

“Oh,” Grace said, smiling. “I’m making dinner—Zarc said it was curry day. It’s so cute, isn’t it? He’s like a child sometimes.”

She laughed, and Yuzu’s hands tightened around the pot.
You couldn’t understand, she thought, shaking slightly. You couldn’t possibly understand—you don’t have any place in this. Get out of the way, you don’t belong in between us!!

The door fumbled open, then, and Grace smiled.

“Oh, he’s home,” she said, standing up. Yuzu tried not to look at how perfectly even her baggy shirt and sweatpants hugged her figure. “I’ll be right back!”

She floated gracefully over to the door as Yuzu heard Zarc’s voice come through.

“Hey, Grace…yeah, I got the yogurt you said you needed, is this right?”

Yuzu’s eyes wandered back to the curry pot. It looked just like hers.

It would be so easy.

She stood almost without telling herself to. She stumbled forward into the kitchen, quickly dropping her curry pot on the counter beside the burner and flipping off the cloth covering. She tugged it out from underneath the pot and shoved the cloth into her skirt pocket.

Then she looked at the pot on the burner.

She hesitated for only the briefest moment, biting her lip in anticipation. Then she squeezed her eyes shut, bit down hard, and slapped her hands around the pot.

Immediately, hot, burning pain seared through her hands. She bit hard enough into her lip that she nearly drew blood, biting back her scream. She moved the pot to the counter and then slid her own pot into its former place. Clapping her now burnt palms around the still burning hot pot again, she yanked it from the counter and made a bolt for the sliding glass door on the other side of the living room, leaving her shoes behind.

She didn’t stop running until she was at least two blocks away, holes ripped into the bottoms of her stockings and mud tracked along her ankles. She couldn’t feel her palms anymore.

It’s…all right, Yuzu thought, breathing hard. It’s all right. It all went as written. He’ll be eating my curry tonight.

She had done what she needed to do. It was fine. It was…fine.

A hiss startled her awake again, and she looked up to see a giant gray cat with matted fur in the road in front of her. It hissed around the fish in its mouth, glaring at her.

For just a second, all she could see was that woman sneering at her, dangling Zarc the way the cat dangled the fish.

Zarc’s mine now, the face was saying. You can’t have him anymore, darling.

“Go away!!” Yuzu shouted at the cat. “Go away! I won’t lose!!”

The cat jumped, startled, and bolted off. Yuzu was left there, shaking and gasping, her hands feeling like lead around the pot.

~ * ~ * ~

It happens almost like a comedy routine. Ruri is complaining about her brothers—they skipped school again today! What delinquents they’re turning into. Kii-chan is nodding agreeably. Kii-chan is a good listener.

A cat barrels down the street, crashing into Kii and sending it flying into Ruri’s legs. Ruri almost collapses, but manages to catch herself—although the cat has lost the fish it was carrying, and Kii has decided that it wants it. The cat and the hippo are now playing a game of tug-of-war with the fish, and the cat is getting really, really fluffy and angry.

Ruri tries to grab the fish from the middle—Kii can’t eat something that big without it getting cut up, anyway—and the fish suddenly pops free and both combatants go flying.

Kii flies backwards, comically far and fast as though gravity doesn’t have the same effect on the strange little invisible hippo.

The only problem is, there’s someone walking into Kii’s path.
“Watch out!!”

Too late. The hippo crashes into the girl’s legs. She yelps, crashes down to the ground, and the pot in her hands flies upwards.

Ruri flinches at the sound of the pot crashing into the ground, the gloppy sound of curry spilling all over the girl’s face.

Ruri hurries over, wincing.

“Oh gosh,” she gasps. “Are you all right??”

The girl groans, wiping curry out of her bright pink hair. Her blue eyes look dizzily up at Ruri.

Ruri extends a hand—this was her fault, even if the girl can’t see the hippo!!

“Here, my house isn’t far—you can come clean up! I’m so sorry!”

~ * ~ * ~

Shun sighed heavily, staring at the door. He exchanged a glance with Yuya. Yuya looked dead on his feet, practically swaying.

“Well,” Shun said. “I guess we’d better just…accept it.”

“Not only did we lose Hiragi-san after Zarc’s house, but now we have to get scolded by Ruri,” Yuya moaned, slumping over. He raised his hand up in a fist towards Shun, exhausted. “Play for who has to go in first?”

Shun lifted his own fist and they half-heartedly pumped them at each other.

“Rock, paper, scissors … ugh.”

Yuya sighed, dropping down his losing scissors from Shun’s winning rock. He reluctantly pulled the sliding door back and peeked around.

“We’re home,” he called softly.

Ruri appeared in the entryway in a second, her hands on her hips, pointing her ladle at them.

“You two!!” she said, her voice ringing. “You are in so much trouble!!”

“I’m sorry, Ruri!!” Yuya said, jumping forward and clapping his hands together in a bow.

Ruri huffed, putting her ladle hand back against her hips. Her hair was pulled back in an uncommon bun today, all of it in a fluffy mess right at the back of her neck.

“Well, you’re lucky. Today you’re off the hook, because we have a guest,” Ruri said.

Shun peeked in, blinking with surprise.

“A guest? Who’s here?”

Ruri smiled then, and turned back towards the door to the kitchen.

“Yuzu-chan! My brothers are home. Come meet them!”

Yuya flinched, looking up from where he was starting to take off his shoes. Yuzu…?

“I’m sorry, did you say…?” Yuya started.

Then the girl peeked out from inside the kitchen, shoulders slightly hunched with nervousness. She smiled hesitantly, waving a shy hello. There was no doubt about it—it was her, the girl they had been practically stalking for the past two days.

You have got to be kidding me, Yuya thought, dizzy.

“This is Hiragi Yuzu-chan,” Ruri said. “Be nice to her, you two!!”

~ * ~ * ~

Yuya was trying to catch Shun’s gaze, but Shun wouldn’t look right at him. Not yet, not in front of Ruri. They didn’t want to act more suspicious than they already seemed.
Hiragi sat across the table from Shun, looking a little awkward, kicking her legs slowly back and forth under the table. She had only barely touched her curry so far, looking a little nervous to be in someone else’s house. Ruri sat between her and Yuya, smiling enough for all of them.

Shun and Yuya had been following Hiragi for two days now, and Shun couldn’t believe for a second that she hadn’t noticed them in at least one of the locations they had been in together. She probably recognized them, somehow, and he didn’t want to give her any more ideas about what they were up to.

When he was sure that no one was looking at him, he reached behind him to the counter, to turn down the photos of their family against the counter.

“Wow, Ruri, how’d you know I was craving curry all day,” Yuya said. His laugh, at least, sounded genuine. There went his actor’s persona again. At least it was better than telegraphing how uncomfortable he was.

“Yuzu-chan was telling me about how in her family it’s curry day today,” Ruri said. “And I kind of ruined hers so…I thought to make up for it, I should invite her over for dinner!”

“It’s really good,” Shun said, smiling at her. “You did a great job.”

“Yuzu-chan did most of it,” Ruri said.

“Oh, wow, you’re a good cook,” Yuya said.

Hiragi jumped a little, as though surprised to be included in the conversation.

“Oh, no,” she said, waving her hands quickly. “I’m only actually good at curry.”

“Still, being good at one recipe usually makes it easier to get good at others,” Yuya said. “I could only make miso soup for a while.”

“And now Yuya-nii does almost all the cooking,” Ruri said, giggling.

He had to come up with some excuse to ask her about the Hippodrum. Or something. Get her to let something slip. Maybe there was something about that diary she was keeping.

“So, Hiragi-san,” he said.

“You can call me Yuzu,” she said.

He shrugged.

“Yuzu-san. I hope we weren’t dragging you away from anything important you had to do today.”

Yuya looked sharply at him, clearly a “that’s too direct!!” sort of glance. Yuzu, however, glanced down at the table, her face getting a little serious for a moment.

“No, I think I had done what I had to already,” she said. “It went a little off the rails for a moment there, but everything ended up going according to plan.”

Her hand almost automatically reached to the bag beside her, touching the top of it briefly. Shun’s eyes flickered to the bag—the hippos had already gone through it, and he knew there was nothing more than her school supplies and that diary in it.

Maybe the diary was the key after all.

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Yuzu waved at Shun on the platform as the train left. Well…that had been an interesting way to end the day. Not wholly unpleasant though…Ruri was a nice girl. Her brothers seemed respectively over eager and too stoic, but not unpleasant people. Ruri had insisted that Shun walk her back to the train station. They hadn’t talked really at all; Shun didn’t seem much for words. She had thanked him for having her over, and that Ruri seemed like a nice girl, and Shun had simply agreed on both counts.

Now she was alone again, though, and she sighed as she slipped into her seat, the train chugging along. She pulled out her phone to send a quick text to her father.

*Ate curry out with friends tonight. It always tastes better with family, though.*
She deleted the second sentence, and just sent the first.

Only then did she tug free the diary and flip it open to today’s date.

_**I made curry for Zarc today and we ate it together. He was so happy! I saw a scary cat on the way home though.**_

She pulled out her stamp, and pressed the bright red “Destiny” to the bottom of the page.
Today was going to be perfect. Today had to be perfect.

Yuzu re-read the diary once more as she stepped off the train, careful to move around the bustle of people.

_We met at 10:00 at the lake. We had lunch at 12:30. At 1:30 he held me really tight and my heart exploded. At 4:00, we kissed for the first time by the pond._

Yuzu’s heart fluttered. Oh gosh, today absolutely had to go right this time. No more of that curry day failure, she was going to get this right!! Fate would come true today! She tucked her diary away and hurried up the steps, tracing her way back to the colorful house tucked away in the quiet neighborhood.

The Sakaki house was certainly easy to find, she thought as she approached. The outer walls were painted in at least five different colors, sticking out like a rainbow thumb in the middle of all of the other drab houses. And the inside of the house was just as messy and colorful as everything else— it fit the family, she thought.

She knocked lightly, and then waited, hoping she wasn’t here too early. But she needed to finish up here so that she could make it to the park on time…

The door opened, and Ruri appeared, her eyes bright and excited.

“Welcome, Yuzu-chan!” she said, quickly hugging her.

“Thank you for having me,” Yuzu said, hugging her back. “And thank you so much for agreeing to help…”

“Of course! You have to make sure your date goes well,” Ruri giggled, gripping Yuzu’s hands and drawing her inside.

Yuzu blushed, slipping out of her shoes.

“It’s not really a date,” she mumbled.

“Suuuure,” Ruri said with another giggle. “Oh, good timing, Yuya-nii! You can help Yuzu-chan with cooking!”
Yuzu glanced up to see Yuya appearing in the door, yawning. He rubbed at his eyes with one hand, baggy shirt slipping around his waist.

“Sorry I overslept,” he mumbled.

Then his eyes caught on Yuzu and he did a double take, almost comically falling over against the door frame and just barely catching himself. Yuzu tried to swallow her laugh, putting a hand over her mouth. Geez, he was kinda clumsy.

“Wait, huh??” he said, staring wide-eyed at Yuzu.

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It smelled so good, Yuya thought with a sigh. At least Yuzu had brought her own ingredients, because he would have died at the idea of making this much food that his family wasn’t going to eat.

“What’s this all for, anyway? An army?” he said, pulling off his apron and tossing it over his arm.

“Yuzu-chan has a date!” Ruri said, grinning as she flopped over the table.

Yuzu flushed almost as pink as her hair. Yuya forced a smile.

“Oh. That’s nice.” That’s not a date, that’s stalking, Ruri.

“There’s a bird-watching group meeting today,” Yuzu said, twirling her finger around the end of her pigtail. “I thought I’d make sure to bring enough if anyone else wanted to share.”

“That’s really sweet,” Ruri said.

“Where are you guys going bird-watching?” Shun asked, leaning out of the kitchen with his can of juice.

Yuzu blinked, considering him for a moment. It was as though she were debating whether to tell him or not. Then she shrugged and looked back at the lunch that she was wrapping up in cloth.

“Heartland Park,” Yuzu said.

Shun nodded thoughtfully, then glanced at Yuya.

“Hey, isn’t that where you were going today?”

Yuya almost dropped the thread that Shun was throwing him, but he managed to snag it just in time.

“Oh, yeah,” he said. “I wanted to run past that direction. I could help you carry that lunch there, if you wanted? Since we’re going the same way.”

Yuzu looked briefly like she wanted to decline. Yuya knew why; it was because she didn’t want him to interfere with whatever plan she had for Zarc today. Yuya almost felt sorry for Zarc.

Finally, she shrugged and gave him a quick smile.

“That’d actually be really nice of you, thank you, Yuya-kun.”

“You going soon?” Yuya said. “I’ll just grab my shoes quick.”

He stepped into the kitchen, and Shun caught him around the shoulders briefly.

“I think it’s the diary,” he said, voice low.

“Huh?”

“That pink diary she has in her bag. The one we saw her reading when she was underneath Zarc’s house. I think that might be the key we’re looking for.”

“How do you know?”

Shun looked down, his eyes narrowing briefly.

“A hunch,” he said. “Try to see if you can sneak it away from her today.”
Yuya felt a twist of nerves and guilt. Yuzu might be…interesting…but that didn’t mean she deserved to be stolen from.

“Why aren’t you coming with me?”

“Something came up. I have to check it out.”

“Don’t make something up, Shun. Work again?”

“Yeah.”

“What happened to you taking fewer hours?”

Shun just shrugged, and released Yuya’s shoulders, walking away with his juice. Again with that; Shun never liked to talk about his job. It was just a coffee shop, right? But he was getting calls all the time. He hoped his gut was wrong, and that Shun hadn’t gotten himself involved in those gangs he used to mix up with in middle school again. He didn’t come home with bruises anymore, so he probably wasn’t fighting, but...

He shook his head. That wasn’t important right now. What was important was Ruri, and finding the Hippodrum.

He turned back out into the kitchen to follow Yuzu towards whatever nefarious stalker plan she had today.

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Yuzu sighed with relief, checking her watch. She was early! She had plenty of time to meet up with Zarc right at the perfect time.

She turned to Yuya.

“Thank you for carrying it all this way, but I can take it now,” she said. “Wouldn’t want to keep you.”

“Oh, I uh—I can at least carry it to where you guys are meeting,” he said.

Yuzu frowned at him, tilting her head. Come to think of it, what a weird coincidence that he just happened to be heading this direction on this day, when she had stopped by his house. He blinked back at her, but his face didn’t betray much. He looked sincere. Maybe he was just being nice.

Or maybe he liked her. Ugh. That would complicate things.

“I don’t want to assume anything, but I feel like I should be up front with you—if you have feelings for me, I already have feelings for someone else.”

That got his expression to falter, and for a moment, he just spluttered.

“That—that wasn’t why I was helping!!” he said. “I don’t—no, I don’t have feelings for you, not like that, I—we just met—”

Yuzu just shrugged. Whatever…he was kind of weird, wasn’t he? Her eyes wandered, and she tilted her head at the billboard in the park near the gate. There was a big poster for a new stage production beginning soon, full of lovely colors and sets. It depicted a beautiful young woman with long silver hair holding hands with a young, pretty blond man (who actually, on second look, might have also been a woman). She perked up with some interest—it looked like it was being put on by a troupe she really liked, and the production was called The Tragedy of R. “A star-crossed forbidden love story,” the subtitle read.

Yuzu’s cheeks heated up a bit and she covered them with her hands. Maybe seeing that poster was a good luck sign for her today! She loved musical theater, and that subtitle, well, it had to be a reference to her own fated star-crossed romance with Zarc! It was a perfect sign that today was going to go according to fate!! All right! She was going to do her best! And maybe she could even convince Zarc to go with her to that show...it would be such a great date idea!

She let herself be swept, for a moment, into a brief, vivid daydream: herself, clad in a princess dress of flowering petals that swished when she turned. Zarc, swooping in to catch her, dressed like a fairy-tale prince and veritably sparkling when he smiled. Of course, fairy tales like that weren’t real, and she logically didn’t believe that Zarc was going to actually turn into a prince, but she couldn’t help but find the daydream childishly warming. She’d have a fairy tale of a different
kind, at the very least.

Unfortunately, she was so lost in her thoughts that she didn't hear Yuya right away.

“Yuzu,” he said, grabbing her arm. “Yuzu, there's a—”

Yuzu automatically tried to tug her arm free from him, shocked out of her thoughts from being grabbed so suddenly. Her foot caught on the stone and she squeaked, tumbling backwards—landing against something very large, soft, and warm.

The thing scrabbled and hissed underneath her, before it finally got free and she hit the ground—and then the worst scent she had ever smelled exploded over her face.

Her eyes teared up and she clapped her hands over her mouth and nose. Oh god, what was—

She coughed as she sat up, looking through blurry, teary eyes to see a black and white shape bolting away to the bushes. Oh god. It was a skunk. She had just been—oh god, she was supposed to meet Zarc in just a few minutes!

“Oh my god, I'm sorry, I tried to—are you okay? Are you hurt?”

“I stink,” Yuzu mumbled, feeling her throat close up and her eyes well up with tears. “Oh, god, no, I don't have—what am I supposed to—”

She could barely breathe, she smelled so bad. What was she supposed to do now?? What was...all her good luck for...?

Yuya was hovering over her, brow furrowed and eyes wide with concern. He bit down hard on his lip, looking up towards the clock in the middle of the park, and then down at Yuzu, and then up again. He closed his eyes briefly. Then he grabbed her wrist with his free hand, hauling her up to her feet and pulling her along.

“H-hey,” Yuzu choked out. “What are we...?”

“There's a bathroom over here,” Yuya said, marching them towards a set of public bathrooms.

“What? We can't just—wash the smell out—”

“You can switch clothes with me,” Yuya said. “That should—at least dilute most of it. You still have some time, right?”

Yuzu kept one hand over her nose, and her eyes bubbled up with more tears.

“But...but why?” she mumbled. “Why are you...?”

Yuya stopped, pausing before the bathrooms. For a moment, he didn't look at her. Then he glanced over his shoulder, and his face looked...sad? But he was smiling a little.

“Today is important for you, right?” he said. “If I can do something to help, then I want to.”

He released her arm and rubbed under his nose briefly then, his cheeks going somewhat red.

“Besides, it's kind of my fault. If I hadn't grabbed you, you wouldn't have fallen on it.”

Yuzu sniffled slightly. She cast her eyes down so that Yuya wouldn't see how close she was to just breaking down.

“Stupid,” she said. “It wasn't your fault at all, you were trying to help.”

She rubbed at her eyes quickly. She couldn't...look all red and ruddy when she saw Zarc.

“Are you sure?” she said.

“Positive,” Yuya said. “We look about the same size, right? I'm sorry you won't be able to wear your cute outfit, but it's better than nothing, right?”

Yuzu swallowed, and nodded. She was so tired all of a sudden, and she just wanted to get it over with.

“Oh, this is the girl's bathroom though...” she said, as Yuya led them in through the doors.

“It's fine, no one's here,” Yuya said.
Yuzu ducked her head down. Why was he being so nice? Like he had said before, they had only just met...well—well she couldn't very well just look a gift horse in the mouth. She really didn't want to show up to see Zarc smelling like this.

She ducked into the stall next to the one Yuya had taken. She wrinkled her nose up at the smell—she felt bad making Yuya wear her clothes instead...it would smell bad. She swallowed. No, Yuzu, she reminded herself. You have to make today perfect. If he's willing to do this...

They passed each other their clothes under the stall. Yuya's clothes were a little baggy on her, but they were comfortable, and didn't smell as bad. She peeked out of the stall when she heard the water running, and saw that Yuya was already finished changing. His nose was wrinkled up from the smell, and he appeared to be mixing something up in a small bottle of hand sanitizer.

“What are you doing?” Yuzu asked, sneaking out.

“Well, I don't have all the things that would really help,” he said, frowning. “But I'm using the hand soap to hopefully help you get some of the smell out of your hair.”

He shook up the bottle, and then turned towards her.

“Here, put some of this on your palms,” he said. “Just run it through your hair a bit, and then wet it down—you can use the hand dryers to dry your hair off.”

“How do you know how to do this?” she said, taking the bottle and doing as he said.

He grimaced.

“When we were kids, Shun thought it would be funny to play chicken with a skunk,” he said. “Our mom made him take a bath in tomato juice afterward, and he hated it. Didn't help, either, and I had to share a room with him—so I looked for better options for next time.”

Yuzu giggled in spite of herself.

“That sounds like it must have been fun, with your siblings around all the time.”

“They can be a pain,” Yuya said, rolling his eyes. But then he smiled. “But it's nice, too. It'd be pretty lonely without them.”

Yuzu nodded, feeling her own smile slip a bit. She took Yuya's advice to dry off her hair in the hand dryers. She still smelled faintly when she put her hair back up in its pigtails but...it was better than nothing. She absolutely couldn't let anything about this day go wrong.

“Thank you,” she said. “Really, Yuya-kun...thank you so much...I don't know what I would have done if...”

“Hey, it's no problem,” Yuya said. “You just have a good day, okay?”

He hefted the lunch back off of the sink. Yuzu bit her lip.

“Um,” she said. “You know, it'd be okay if you hung out...nearby at least. There's plenty of food here and all. You can join us for...lunch...at least...”

“I thought this was a date?”

“I mean, it is! That's why I said you can stay nearby! Besides, we'll need to switch clothes back eventually!”

“Oh-okay,” Yuya said, holding up one hand. “Thanks, Yuzu-chan.”

Yuzu felt her cheeks flushing, and she hmphed. She checked her watch.

“Oh! There's only three minutes!! Let's go!”

She grabbed Yuya's wrist and dragged him out of the bathroom, back out into the park.

All that other stuff was dealt with—now she had some destiny to complete.

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Shun flipped open his phone, frowning at the message that glowed on the main screen.
"I know what you're looking for."

He should have expected this. If there was something powerful enough to save Ruri's life in the world, then there must be other people looking for it. He closed the phone, which detailed the time and location where he should meet them. He leaned back in the booth, glancing out across the small cafe. It wasn't quite as big as the one that he worked at part-time, and definitely for a cheaper clientele. Well, it was appropriate for his budget, anyway. Yuya would probably be pissed at him if he knew that he had bought even this cheap coffee, but he didn't want to look out of place.

He took a sip of the tepid, coffee flavored water, glancing out the window.

How are we supposed to find something when we don't even know what it is?

He hoped that this meeting with the strangers also searching for the Hippodrum would help him glean some clues, while Yuya pursued their other lead. Now he just had to...

"It's been a while, Kurosaki."

Shun blinked, glancing up. He wasn't sure who he had been expecting, but it hadn't been him. Tenjo Kaito looked down at him over his nose, lip slightly curled, arms folded tightly against his chest. Shun sighed, setting his cup down. What a bad coincidence...

"What do you want?" he said.

Another shape popped out from behind Kaito, leaning down and grinning at him. He had a lollipop stick shoved between his teeth as always, which made him look younger than he already did. Shiunin Sora. And then on the other side of him, leaning out and sending him a cheery smile was...yay. Dennis was here too.

"Looks like the gang's all here," Shun said dryly.

"Awww don't act so happy to see us, Shun-chan," Sora giggled at him, sticking his tongue out between his teeth.

"I'd almost think you weren't expecting us, or something," Dennis said with a laugh.

"I really wasn't...oh. Oh fuck. You sent that message."

Kaito scowled at him.

"What, were you expecting someone else?"

I've been played, Shun thought, matching Kaito's scowl. "I thought I told you guys I was done."

Kaito put his hand on the table, leaning down over him. Shun was actually the same height as he was, but Kaito was taking advantage of the fact that Shun was sitting down. Usually, Kaito wasn't so riled. He was kind of a nerd, really; usually holed up in his office doing whatever science shit he did, working with his high profile scientist father as a child genius. He wasn't the type to normally be seen hanging out with low-class people like Shun, sugar addicts like Sora, or wannabe Broadway stars like Dennis.

But the four of them all had had something in common at one point, and that was...the game. Shun dug his hands deep in his pockets. He didn't want to think about it. Yuya and Ruri had thought that he was in a gang back then, and they weren't necessarily wrong. He did get into a lot of fights after the games. The truth was that it had been...well, gambling. The illegal, underground kind. And these three asses harassing him now had been, well, sorta like a loose team. They worked together to make as much as they could and then split it. It usually involved cheating, and misdirecting people from seeing their friends cheating. It sometimes also devolved into them playing games against each other, just to see if they could beat each other.

"I don't owe you guys any money," he said sourly. "When I left the tables, I was square."

"That's not the point," Kaito said. "You were good, Shun. You don't think I'm going to let you off so easily, do you?"

"You can't avoid it forever," Sora said. "Gambling was way too much fun for you. I saw how hyped you got off the excitement."

"Yeah, well I have better things to do now," Shun said.
"Better things to do? Like make clean money for that cute sister of yours?" Dennis said with a smile, flipping some hair behind his ear. "You were making much more than that playing with us, Kurosaki-kun."

"Shouldn't you guys be glad that I stopped? I'm not winning money off of any of you anymore," Shun said.

"Yea, but you're not on the team anymore," Sora said, pointing his lollipop at him. "Plus...I don't like having a losing score with you."

He gave his lollipop a very pointed lick, half closing his eyes, and Shun groaned. He shoved out of his seat, leaving the half-finished coffee behind.

"This was a waste of time," he said. "I'm out of here."

He shoved past Kaito, making sure to hit his shoulder hard against Kaito's, and headed for the door.

"Don't think this is over, Kurosaki," Kaito called after him. "You don't get out of this so easily."

Shun rolled his eyes and pushed out of the door. He really had bigger things to worry about right now.
We met at 10:00 at the lake.

Yuzu jiggled in her seat, barely able to remain still. After all of the trouble it had taken her to get here, now there were only a few more minutes....

She and Yuya had taken up a bench overlooking a small artificial lake in the middle of Heartland Park. The light of the morning sun danced over the water like glimmering diamonds, and the sky was a beautiful blue overhead. It was the perfect day.

Yuya had set the lunch down in the middle of the seat between them, perched on the very end of the bench—probably to avoid wafting too much of the smell in her direction. She didn't smell it herself anymore, but she wasn't sure if that was because her nose had decided to finally stop noticing it.

“Ah, Yuzu-chan, is that you over there?”

Yuzu shot to her feet at the voice, whipping around.

Zarc smiled and waved at her, looking at her with his usual goofy grin. His hair was a bit mussed, as though he had forgotten to brush it this morning, and a pair of binoculars hung down against his chest. He looked a bit rumpled, but it only made him look a cuter. He was dorky and sweet like that.

“Good morning!!” Yuzu said, trying not to squeak.

“I hope you weren't waiting long,” Zarc said, jogging up to the bench. “Oh?”

He blinked, glancing at Yuya as Yuya turned around.

“You brought your boyfriend with you today?”

Yuzu's heart plummeted like a stone into her chest and for a moment her throat twisted into a bow, tying off her words.

“No!” she burst out finally, waving her hands. “No, god no, he's—he's just—”

“I'm just a friend,” Yuya said, hopping up and bowing. “It's nice to see you, Tatsuzaki-sensei. I was just helping Yuzu-san with carrying the food, and she was nice enough to offer to let me stay for lunch.”

“No!” Zarc said, blinking with recognition. Yuzu's ears perked up at 'Tatsuzaki-sensei' as well. Hang on...was Yuya...? “Sakaki-san, I almost didn't recognize you from behind—so you and Yuzu-chan know each other?”

“We just met recently,” Yuya said, smiling and waving one hand easily. Oh, he was good. He must have some acting experience, because he was completely smooth and easy in the way that he picked up on the conversation. It actually got Yuzu to remember to breathe, and settle down.
“Yeah, um, I hope it was all right to invite him, I didn't want to just shoo him off after he came all this way to help me out,” Yuzu said.

“Oh, of course, the more the merrier,” Zarc said with his usual big grin. Yes! A smile! She was already winning today! “Actually, speaking of which…”

“Oh, Zarc, are these your students?”

The new voice was high, smooth, and sweet, and it made Yuzu's stomach twist. She had the feeling of remembering before she actually saw the woman and remembered that horrible feeling that she had wanted to forget.

She looked resplendent, making Yuzu feel horribly inadequate in her borrowed baggy clothes from Yuya. The woman was wrapped in a beautiful, spring green sun dress that offset her pale skin beautifully, long silver hair cascading down off her shoulders like molten platinum. A pretty sunhat rested neatly on her head, the brim tilted just so, and when she smiled she lit up like a model.

“Yuzu-chan, let me introduce you,” Zarc said, and Yuzu felt her stomach roiling at the familiar way that he put his arm around her waist when she approached. “This is Grace Tyler.”

Yuzu's head spun. She had wanted to pretend that curry day had never actually happened, that that woman hadn't been in Zarc's house, that she hadn't been real. But no, she was, she was right here, and Zarc was holding her so lightly and familiarly like they were already together—if they were together, Zarc would have told her! He would have told her if he was seeing someone. He was a family friend, her father would have heard about it at the very least.

Yuzu realized that her hands were balled up into shaking fists, and she quickly released them. She forced a smile.

“It's nice to meet you,” she said, as smoothly as she could manage. “I'm Hiragi Yuzu.”

“Oh!” Grace said, raising one hand to her mouth. “You're Yuzu-chan? Zarc's told me so much about you.”

She was acting remarkably calm...maybe she had somehow forgotten that Yuzu had come to visit before? Maybe she hadn't noticed the curry swap? Yuzu needed to relax. She had to relax. Fate was on her side for the day—she wasn't going to lose.

“Good things, I hope,” Yuzu said, laughing lightly. “He's been a friend of the family for a long time.”

“I'd probably have starved without your dad letting me take bento during college,” Zarc said with a laugh. “Oh, Yuzu, did you know Grace is an actress? You used to be in drama club, didn't you?”

“Oh, uh...in middle school...” Yuzu said, looking quickly down. She had quit after she had found the diary and figured out what it was that she was supposed to be doing. She didn't have time for that anymore.

Actually, now that she gave the woman a second glance...she looked like that actress in the theater promo she had seen earlier...

“Oh, really?” Grace said, eyes lighting up. “How lovely!”

“I remember when you were little, you said you were going to be the best actress in the world,” Zarc said, smiling and ruffling her hair. Yuzu flushed and ducked her head.

“I was a kid,” she muttered. And I'm not anymore! I'm not going to lose to you, Grace Tyler!

Zarc glanced up.

“Hey, I think everyone's gathering up over there, let's join with everyone,” he said. “You can leave the lunch there, we won't be going very far.”

Yuzu put on a bright smile and nodded. She had to act like everything was okay, and just be herself—fate would take care of the rest. She knew it would.

Zarc grabbed his binoculars and hurried excitedly off towards where the group was gathering together, like an excited child. Yuya started walking awkwardly after him, glancing back towards Yuzu, and Yuzu hurried to keep up.
She felt Grace's hair brush past her arm as the woman matched pace with her, and Yuzu looked up involuntarily.

Grace's peridot eyes were staring intently down at her. Yuzu felt like she was being pierced right through, and she shuddered. What was Grace looking for? She wasn't going to give up. Maybe Grace had noticed that Yuzu was trying to take Zarc back from her?

But then Grace only smiled, and it seemed a nice, gentle expression. She kept walking and outpaced Yuzu.

Yuzu felt a strange chill pass down her spine. What had that been about?

~ * ~ * ~

We had lunch at 12:30.

“Ahh, they flew away again,” Zarc said, sighing as he lowered his binoculars.

Yuya set down his own pair, which Zarc had lent to him. He felt immeasurably awkward. What was he even doing here? Yuzu had offered for him to stay until lunch, but he was here to try and sneak a look at that diary of hers. He felt kind of bad about it. Maybe he should just ask her? Say something about how he had noticed it and thought it was cool? No, that was stupid, no one would ever show an acquaintance something so personal. He’d have to try and get a look when Yuzu was distracted. That probably wouldn’t be hard; she had been making very, very obvious passes at Zarc for the past hour and a half, and all of her attention seemed to be on him. She made a show of looking at her watch and then smiling as she casually brushed past his arm when she let her arm back down.

“Why don’t we take a break for lunch?” Yuzu said brightly. “I’m sure if we all take a moment to relax, the birds will get comfortable enough to come back.”

“That sounds like a great idea,” Zarc said, smiling at her.

Yuzu spun around almost too quickly, towards where they had left the wrapped lunch on a bench—and her face went white.

“Hey!!” she shouted, bolting across to the bench. “Hey, stop that!!”

Yuya whipped around. Oh geez...Yuzu couldn’t catch a break today, huh? Yuzu swung her arms wildly at the birds that had come down on the lunch, but it looked like most of it was unsalvagable. How had that even gotten open...?

Yuya’s eyes dropped down to his feet, where Pinku was attempting to wriggle quietly away, rice grains scattered around its large mouth.

“Are you kidding me?” Yuya said, grabbing it by the arms and shaking it a bit. “I just fed you! Why would you do that??”

Pinku just wobbled expressionlessly in Yuya’s grip and he groaned. Dammit, he’d ruined Yuzu’s day again...he should have kept a closer eye on his hippo...

He glanced nervously up at Yuzu’s back. She hadn’t turned around yet, and Yuya thought that maybe she was about to cry. Her shoulders shook ever so slightly. Then she turned around and gave them all a smile. Yuya’s heart panged. It was a fake smile, but she was trying her best.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “Looks like I made all that food for nothing...I hope the birds enjoyed it, at least!”

“Oh no, I’m sorry, Yuzu-chan,” Zarc said, frowning.

Grace put a hand to her lips, laughing softly.

“That’s just the worst,” she said, in a sweet voice. “I brought extra myself, so you two are welcome to share.”

“Ah, great, you’re always on top of that kinda thing,” Zarc said.

Yuzu went a bit red in the face, but kept smiling.

“Thank you, Tyler-san,” she said.
“Please, call me Grace,” Grace laughed. “Sakaki-kun, would you help me lay out the blanket?”

“Oh? Uh, sure,” Yuya said. He set Pinku down and jogged over, hoping he didn’t smell quite as bad as before. He had been trying to keep distance until it faded, but he couldn’t tell himself anymore if there was anything to smell.

He took the blanket that Grace handed him, and helped her and Zarc lay it out. Grace beckoned Yuzu over to help her unload her basket, and Yuzu did so, despite the irritation sparking in her eyes.

_I wanna go home_, Yuya thought, sitting awkwardly down between Grace and Yuzu. _I'm done being in the middle of this weird ass love triangle._

While Grace finished setting out the food, Zarc had grabbed a book out of his bag, opening it up to a spread of different birds and starting to chatter about the ones they had been looking at today. _How old was he? He was acting like an excited five-year-old._ Yuzu leaned in, eyes sparkling as she hung on every word.

Yuya glanced over at the two of them, feeling awkward. He was probably the only one here aside from Yuzu who knew what Yuzu’s actual intentions were. What did Yuzu see in him, anyway? He was kinda dorky. From having him as a teacher in class, Yuya knew that he often lost homework, gave people full marks on tests because he didn’t want to grade them, or forgot that he had assigned things. His desk was a disaster of papers and he was always falling and tripping in the halls, dropping things and making other people have to stop and help him. Yuzu seemed like the type who’d prefer someone more reliable. Yuya couldn’t even imagine how the two of them had met, Zarc taught at an all boy’s school and Yuzu attended a girl’s school.

He was so focused on thinking his own thoughts, that he didn’t notice what Grace was doing until she did it. Yuzu’s eyes popped with surprise, as in midsentence, Grace had popped a miniature sandwich into her mouth, reaching across the blanket to reach her. For a second, Yuya felt like the world froze. Whaaaat.

Yuzu looked like she was thinking the same, taking a half second to even close her mouth around the sandwich, putting one hand over her mouth so that she wouldn’t spit.

“What was that for??” Yuzu demanded once she had swallowed.

Grace gave her a very innocent looking smile.

“I noticed you weren’t eating,” she said sweetly. “I wanted to make sure you’re getting enough to eat.”

Yuzu blinked at her, and Zarc actually looked uncomfortable, glancing quickly between Yuzu and Grace. He bit his lip, and then reached for his own sandwich and quickly pushed it into his mouth, as though to have an excuse not to say anything. Yuya almost wanted to follow suit—the tension was suddenly palpable and he thought he was going to start sweating.

Yuzu finally smiled, but it was a thin, angry sort of smile, barely concealed behind her polite expression.

“Well, thank you for caring so much,” she said, just as sweetly as Grace.

Yuya resisted the urge to put his head in his hands. He didn’t know that much about love, but he had a feeling that he had just witnessed a declaration of war.

~ * ~ * ~

At 1:30 he held me really tight and my heart exploded.

Yuzu took her brief respite from being right in Zarc’s line of sight to seethe.

The birds had not, in fact, come back, so Grace had suggested they take a walk around the park. Fine by her. It would work better for her plan for the next phase of today.

She glared at the back of Grace’s head, wishing that looks really could kill. Grace had done that on purpose at lunch before. She was trying to stop Yuzu from talking to Zarc by doing something...so inappropriate. Yuzu’s cheeks actually burned with embarrassment. Who did this woman think she was?? Yuzu and Zarc had a much stronger and longer relationship.

_I won’t lose_, she thought, burning up with anger.
Yuya trailed somewhere behind Yuzu, awkward as ever. She tried to ignore him. He wasn’t the issue right now, and they could always meet back at his house to swap clothes again. She knew where it was.

Yuzu glanced up around at the trees. It was getting a little more woodlike on this half of the park, where a nature reclamation group had worked really hard planting a lot of huge trees. Perfect.

She ran over the scenario in her mind, reaching into her bag for the secret weapon; a jar with a caterpillar inside.

*The caterpillar ‘falls’ on my head. I move to brush it off, thinking it’s a leaf. I panic for a moment when I see it, and flinch and cry out. Zarc whips around and when I stagger back from the shock, he leaps forward to grab me.*

That would make fate come true for sure. Yuzu smiled to herself, scooping the caterpillar out of the jar and dropping it on her head as surreptitiously as possible. Calling on her old drama days, she used her other hand to brush the caterpillar off, and then flinched.

“Ahh!!” she cried, flinging her hand out. “Oh my god, where did that come from??”

Zarc whipped around at the sound of her cry. Yuzu made her move to stumble forward, and he reached for her.

“Yuzu-chan, are you okay—”

“Ow!!”

Grace flinched, flinging her hand up, and Zarc’s eyes flickered back to her.

“Oh—ow,” Grace said, clearly biting back a swear and flapping her hand. The caterpillar appeared to have smacked her hand when Yuzu had flung it. “It—it bit me.”

“Oh shit, you’re allergic, right?” Zarc said, grabbing her hand. “I’ll get you something to put on it.”

*It bit her?? It’s a caterpillar!!*

Yuzu opened her mouth wide, anger ready to pour out of her throat at the lie, but then something else smacked her on the head and she bent forward with shock, letting the thing flop to the ground and—

Oh. Oooh my god, that was a snake, that was a snake—Yuzu’s heart almost exploded in her chest.

Yuzu actually shrieked, falling backwards, arms wheeling as the thin green snake squirmed and flailed on the ground in front of her feet—

“Yuzu!!”

She fell back against Yuya, and he grabbed her, dragging her backwards against him.

“Oh my god, oh my god,” Yuzu mumbled, trying to breathe. “That was on my head.”

“Sh, it’s okay, it’s just a garden snake. It can’t hurt you. It was just as scared to fall on your head as you were to have it fall on you. See?”

Yuya kept talking, low and soothing, as Yuzu watched the snake desperately flip itself back onto its stomach and shoot into the bushes, disappearing. She slumped against Yuya’s arms, heart still hammering. Her eyes bubbled up with tears—somehow, Zarc and Grace had walked out of earshot before that had happened, and Zarc hadn’t even seen it.

“I hate this,” she whispered. “I hate this. I want to go home.”

“Maybe you should,” Yuya said. “It’s been a long day already, huh?”

Yuzu flung herself forward out of Yuya’s grip then, suddenly remembering where she was. Her cheeks flushed a bright red. Oh geez.

“No, I can’t,” she said. “The day isn’t over yet.”

*Four o’clock, she thought, heart hammering desperately. Four o’clock. I can make it til then.*
She stalked towards the end of the path, coming out of the forested part of the park and back towards the lake. She looked around, wondering how far Zarc and Grace could have gotten. Ah, there they were...

She felt her heart rise up in her throat. They were both inside the gazebo looking over the lake. Grace sat primly on the bench while Zarc was in front of her, holding her hand and applying some kind of ointment to it. Yuzu bristled. Grace had done that on purpose, too. Yuzu was sure of it. Just to get Zarc away from Yuzu. Well, Grace didn’t have fate on her side.

Yuzu started to stalk towards the gazebo, but checked herself, and walked a little more smoothly, trying to look okay. Grace said something to Zarc, and Zarc nodded, standing up and walking out of the gazebo. Yuzu’s heart jumped. Where was he going?

She reached the gazebo, and Grace looked back at the sound of her feet, smiling.

“There you are,” she said. “Where’s Sakaki-kun?”

“Catching up,” Yuzu said. “Where’s Zarc-san?”

“I asked if he’d get us drinks,” Grace said, smiling. “There’s a vending machine over there; he’ll be right back.”

“Oh. All right then.”

Yuzu wanted to take advantage of Zarc being alone to go after him, but with Grace staring at her, she felt like that might not work out. Yuzu bit her lip, shifting briefly from foot to foot. Then she sighed, and stepped up onto the gazebo to sit on the opposite side of the bench.

“By the way,” Grace said, putting one finger to her lips. “That curry was quite good.”

Yuzu almost gave herself whiplash from her flinch. She grabbed her pants, digging her fingers into the fabric. Her heart was so loud in her ears that she could barely breathe.

“I’m...sorry?” Yuzu said, feigning ignorance.

“Don’t worry. I got rid of your shoes,” Grace said, smiling lightly at Yuzu. “Zarc doesn’t know.”

Yuzu couldn’t breathe, her heart was swelling too largely in her chest. So this was how the woman was going to play.

Before Yuzu could think of something to say, though, Grace was sliding across the space between her and Yuzu, pressing Yuzu against the very edge of the bench and almost pushing her off. Her perfect pale fingers snapped out and cupped Yuzu’s chin, staring at her as though memorizing the shape of her face. Yuzu couldn’t breathe—she was so close, so close—

Yuzu broke free of the spell, leaping up and jerking away, scurrying back from the bench. Grace only smiled at her, as innocent as a child.

“I most certainly won’t lose,” Grace murmured. “I hope you realize that.”

She smiled brightly again, and then stood up, swinging her bag and hopping down from the gazebo, humming as she swung her bag back and forth.

Yuzu’s heart hammered in her ears. Four o’clock. She had to hold out until four o’clock. She wouldn’t lose after that. Her wrist shook as she looked at her watch. Only...fifteen minutes. She had to find a way to make sure Zarc kissed her in fifteen minutes.

Her eyes slowly, slowly slid towards the lake.

~ * ~ * ~

Yuya groaned. Yuzu had left him behind again. He needed to get a look at that...

Huh?

He glanced down, blinking. Yuzu’s...bag. She had dropped her bag. It must have been after that snake scared her...

He reached for it, and then curled his hand away. Oh, god, this was hard. Yuzu was...weird, but she didn’t deserve to get snooped on...
“For Ruri,” he mumbled.

He grabbed the bag by the handles, slipping his hand inside. He found the diary immediately. It was thick and sturdily bound, and a bright pink on the cover when he pulled it out. He bit his lip as he shrugged the bag’s straps onto one shoulder, and cracked open the diary.

It didn’t look very special, he thought. Pink pages with little heart designs on the edges of the pages, scribbled across with a sort of shaky hand. There were some stick figure doodles in between some of the text, or scribbles of cats or hearts. He flipped through a few pages, glancing at the dates. He stopped when he realized that one of the dates was for today. She had already filled in a page for today?

He frowned, looking across the entry.

Zarc and I spent time together today. We met at 10:00 at the lake. We had lunch at 12:30. At 1:30 he held me really tight and my heart exploded. At 4:00, we kissed for the first time by the pond.

Was this...a to-do list? Or no, it was written as though it had already happened. He checked the next page. There was an entry for tomorrow, and many days afterward in it. His skin crawled. What...what was this? Some kind of future note?

He checked his watch, putting the diary back in the bag and heading after Yuzu to give it back. It was a quarter to four already. She couldn’t possibly believe that she was going to manage to get Zarc to kiss her by then, did she?

Even if he didn’t have a girlfriend, that’d be illegal, Yuya thought, grimacing. He had to find her and give her her bag back...and also maybe casually ask her about the diary.

He came out of the forest and glanced around for some sign of Yuzu and the others. Oh, there was Zarc and Grace over there, walking towards a gathering group of the other birdwatchers. But where was...?

He heard a splash, and his head whipped towards the lake. A huge ripple was sloshing up and down on the other side of the gate, like, really huge. No ordinary rock or duck would have made a splash that large.

But...a person would...

Oh my god.

Yuya flung the bag to the ground and bolted to the fence. He hit the railing, grabbing it and trying to peer desperately into the water. It was dark and deep—much deeper than he had expected a run of the mill park lake to be. Oh god, oh god, she hadn’t—had she?

Best way to get a kiss, CPR, he thought, his face draining of heat.

Where was she? She had to surface eventually, right? The water was stilling, ripples smoothing out, and still he couldn’t see anyone under there, not even any movement. Could she have really just jumped in? Did she know how to swim??

Yuya squeezed his eyes shut.

Fuck me, he thought.

Then he clambered up onto the railing and dove in.

The water was cold, and it was much darker under here than he expected. He forced his eyes open, blinking through the blur for any sign of her. Maybe she hadn’t jumped in and he was stupid. Well, he’d be stupid and wet, but if she had fallen in...

There!!

He caught sight of a ripple of pink, and pushed himself down into the water. There she was, just hanging there in the water. Her eyes were closed, and she didn’t appear to be trying to hold her breath—fuck, she must have hit her head or something.

With a great effort, he got his arms underneath her and pushed upwards towards the light.
He had only been under for a few moments, but it felt like days when he finally broke the surface of the water and gasped for breath, dragging Yuzu’s head above as well. She flopped in his arms—yeah, something was definitely wrong, she didn’t appear to be conscious. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

Yuya wasn’t the strongest swimmer, but he did his best to drag her through the water, going under a few times before he finally got around the railing to a slope of earth, pulling her by the arms onto the beach. For a second, all he could do was sit there, gasping, his chest aching. He felt like he was going to pass out.

He pulled himself towards Yuzu then, though, and put his ear to her lips to check for breathing. Fuck. She really wasn’t breathing, oh my god.

Sorry, he thought vaguely at her, grabbing the buttons of her borrowed shirt and popping them open to get to her chest. He draped his vest over his arms to protect her privacy, and then dug the heel of his palms over her heart and started to pump. He still remembered CPR, thank god.

Thirty pumps, count them, and then tilt the head back and give two breaths through the lips.

He didn’t hesitate, but he sent her another mental apology as he tilted her chin back and put his lips over hers, puffing two breaths down her throat. He pumped her chest again, and then two more breaths, and then more pumps—

She started breathing again, gasping and spluttering. Her eyes fluttered open and closed but it was clear that she wasn’t seeing anything at all. Her head twisted to the side and she threw up; it was mostly lake water, but some of lunch came up with it, and Yuya winced.

He felt a hand on his shoulder, then, and looked up blearily to see a white-faced Zarc standing over him.

“She’s okay,” Yuya mumbled. “I think.”

“You did great,” Zarc said, clearly trying to remain calm. “I’ll—I’ll take care of her now, okay? Go get some water.”

Yuya just nodded, exhausted all of a sudden, and dragged himself to his feet. Grace was waiting on the other side of the fence when he clambered over, holding a towel that she had just pulled out of her bag.

“That was amazing,” she said, putting the towel over his head gently. “You all right?”


He glanced back to see Yuzu slowly coming to, propped up in Zarc’s arms.

“I think so,” he mumbled.

~ * ~ * ~

Yuzu groaned, her vision coming back slowly. She...where was she? She couldn’t quite remember what had just happened.

“Yuzu—Yuzu-chan? Come on, please, wake up...”

Her throat ached, and her head was pounding. She blinked, squinting.

Zarc’s face came into view over her, white-faced and panicked. O-oh, she thought, suddenly realizing the feeling of an arm under her back and propping up her head. He was holding her...he was really warm.

“I’m...okay,” she said, flopping her head against his chest. “I think...?”

Oh! She remembered now. She...she had jumped into the lake, to try and get Zarc to come after her, but...but then what had happened? Her foot had slipped on the railing and her head had smacked against it as she slid in and then...

Lips, she thought, eyes widening slightly. She remembered...warm lips on hers, and...

She looked up at Zarc’s lips parting.

“Oh thank god,” Zarc murmured, hugging her gently. “I’m going to take you to the hospital, okay? Just to make sure you’re all right.”
He’d kissed her, Yuzu thought, her chest buzzing. Fate had come through after all.

She smiled and let Zarc gather her up gently in his arms.

“Okay,” she whispered.

_We met at 10:00 at the lake. We had lunch at 12:30. At 1:30 he held me really tight and my heart exploded. At 4:00, we kissed for the first time by the pond. On the way home, I heard something about a boy with a white jacket getting pushed down the stairs...kind of scary ;^;_

Destiny had come true...or at least, the only parts that were important, had. She sighed and snuggled her face against Zarc as he carried her. It was an all right way to end the day after all.

"Is this really even necessary?"

Kaito leaned back against the railing, frowning at nothing, phone held to his ear.

"I mean...he left. Maybe we should just leave him alone."

"And just let him walk away from everything that you so carefully put together?"

Kaito grimaced. It was getting quiet out here near the train station, as everyone had already filtered away from rush hour. The sun dripped between the buildings, orange and red seeping down the sides of windows. Sora and Dennis had taken their leave already, so it was just him, waiting for his train back to Heartland station.

He had to admit that the other person had something of a point. He had been meticulous in putting this team together. Analyzing everyone's strategies and strengths at the table, convincing them to join up together, planning out each of their wins and losses so that no one would realize that they were coming out so far ahead on top. It was a necessity for him by now. Working with his father was fine, he enjoyed it, but the high-profile nature of the work made him feel like everything he did was scrutinized. Playing the tables had been the absolute opposite: he didn't want anything to be scrutinized, or they lost the game. It...relieving. The stakes were real but everything was in shadows, and he could focus on something that didn't really matter.

And he had to admit that without Shun, his plans weren't quite coming together. Shun had been a crack hand at draws even without their cheats.

"Fine, but I'm not really sure what you're getting out of this."

The voice on the other end didn't respond for a moment.

"He walked away from a contract with you. I have business with him as well. We really must crush him soon."

"What?"

"I simply want repayment. As I'm sure you do as well."

Kaito grimaced again. He had...honestly just been ready to let Shun completely go, and focus on other things. Hell, he understood. If Haruto had started getting as bad as Shun's sister, he would have quit the tables too and focused on him. He wasn't entirely sure why he was letting this other man pull him into tracking Shun down.

"All right. Whatever. I guess that works for me."

He hung up without waiting for a response and shoved his phone in his pocket, then turned towards the stairs into the station. It was getting colder, so he zipped up his white jacket.

He turned down the hall and towards the escalators. It was completely empty and silent down here, but he didn't think about it. His train would be here soon.

He stepped onto the escalator.

He heard the tiniest breath behind him, and started to turn. Was someone behind him?

Hands punched into his shoulder blades before he could turn around. His foot went off the edge of the escalator, arms wheeling, trying to grab for the railings, his body twisted and spun around, facing the way he had come—
He hit the ground so hard that his vision whited out, and before he could see more than the faintest shape of someone standing at the top of the stairs, he blacked out.
“What do you mean you can’t send a goddamn ambulance??”

Yoko is trying to keep her voice steady, but it cracks at the end. Shun knows she’s trying not to worry them with her anger. But he knows. He knows how bad it is.

In the other room, their father puts another wet cloth on Ruri’s forehead. Even from here, Shun can hear how heavy her breaths are. The fever is bad. Yuya crouches against the wall, hugging his knees and pressing his face into his legs, trying to hide how hard it is for him to breathe through the sobs.

Yoko swears at the person on the other end as the storm rages hard outside. The radio crackles and statics between the newscaster saying this is the worst typhoon they’ve seen in years. Yushou walks into the room and Yoko shoves the phone at him.

“You talk to them! They’re saying there’s no more ambulances!”

Yushou puts his hand on top of hers before taking the phone from her.

“No, I understand, it’s a bad storm,” he murmurs. “But my daughter is sick; her fever is only getting worse... I understand but there has to be at least one out now that you can divert towards us to pick her up—”

Yoko lets out a strangled sound. Her fists curl up and shake, and she stares at the wall like she’s ready to punch it. She swears out loud, then, and stalks into the room, yanking the blanket off of Ruri. Shun jumps, watching with widening eyes as Yoko carefully pulls Ruri onto her back, tying the blanket behind and around her like a sling to hold her against her back. Yushou pauses in the middle of his call as Yoko walks into the room and heads for the door.

“You, Yoko, you can’t be—”

“They’re not coming for her! We have to get her there ourselves!”

She pauses only long enough to kiss him on the cheek, and then heads for the door. She has to bodily shove it with her shoulder to get it open against the wind, and immediately cold air blasts
into the house with rain within it. Yuya gasps, head snapping up, and then scrambles to his feet.

Shun bolts for the door after Yoko. Yuya is hot on his heels, but Yushou manages to grab him, and Shun can hear him kicking and screaming for only a moment before the typhoon blasts every other sound away.

It’s bitterly cold and he is instantly soaked all the way through. The rain cuts through him like a knife and blasts into his eyes, soaking his eyelashes and making it impossible to see. He blinks through it stubbornly and angles for the shape of his mother running through the wind.

“Mom!” he shouts. “Mom! I’m coming too!”

Yoko almost skids to a stop, water splashing from her shoes as she whips around with wide eyes. He sees her form a swear.

A shadow passes over his vision, he sees his mother’s face go white, and he turns his head up to see the mirror, left in someone’s trash pile, going flying through the air directly for him.

“SHUN!”

~ * ~ * E N D  F L A S H B A C K * ~ * ~

The woman shifted awkwardly at the door, clearly aware of the surprise in Shun’s expression.

“Aunt Asuka?” he said, blinking. “What...what are you doing here?”

“Sorry for stopping by unexpectedly,” she said, looking down, her hair shifting over her eyes. “Can I come in?”

Shun nodded wordlessly, holding the door open for her and using his foot to push Ao out of the way. The hippo attempted to punch his foot, but comically fell back over after bouncing off of it.

“Where are Yuya and Ruri?” she asked as she stepped in, hesitating for a moment in the living room before sitting down at the table.

“They had to stop by the hospital for Ruri’s check up,” Shun said. “They’ll be home in a few hours. Probably going to stop on the way back for groceries.”

Asuka nodded vaguely, pushing her hair behind her ear. She looked distracted. Shun frowned as he sat down on the other end of the table.

“So really, what brings you all the way out here?” he said. “Is something wrong?”

Asuka bit her lip, looking down at the table. She traced the grain of the wood with one finger.

“I can’t afford to keep up with the payments on this house anymore,” she said. “I think I’m going to have to sell it.”

Shun didn’t respond for a second. He couldn’t. It didn’t register right away.

“You’re kicking us out,” he said.

“It’s not like that, Shun,” Asuka said, pain flickering over her eyes.

Ao headbutted the table. Asuka couldn’t see the hippo, but she did jump a little at the table moving, glancing to the side with a frown to see what was there. Shun stood up with a snap.

“I didn’t make you tea,” he mumbled. “Hang on.”

He walked over to the kitchen, grabbing the kettle and trying not to slam it onto the burner. He could feel Asuka’s discomfort behind him even without seeing her.

“I...I think it would better for the three of you to move in with relatives, anyway,” Asuka said gently. “I don’t like the idea of you all living here alone.”

“We’re not alone,” Shun said. “And the way you said that, it sounds like you’re planning on separating us.”

“If I had the space, I’d take all three of you, you know I would,” Asuka said.

“And what about Ruri? She’s sick.”
“I’d take her, and make sure that she’s well taken care of. You and Yuya would be able to move in with my brother; he said he’s more than willing to take you.”

Shun turned the kettle around so that the steam wouldn’t ruin the cabinets. He didn’t want to respond. Didn’t trust himself to. He could hear Ao sending rapid fire punches at a couch cushion like a makeshift punching bag.

“Your parents aren’t coming home, Shun,” Asuka whispered.

Shun almost crushed the tea box in one hand.

“How much,” he said.

Asuka hesitated.

“What?”

“How much do the house payments cost? How much would it cost for us to stay here?”

“Shun...”

Shun whipped around, gripping the counter behind him for support.

“I’m working all the time now! I can pay for it! Just tell me how much it is!”

Asuka blinked back blurry eyes and looked down at the table. Shun couldn’t breathe, all of a sudden. It was all driving into him at once—the idea of separation was too much. He couldn’t let that happen, ever.

No matter what it took.

~ * ~ * ~

Ruri hums as she knits, adding more rows to the long, bright green fabric. Kii is making a mini version of Ruri’s project, the fabric piling up over its tiny stubby legs.

Yuya is in the other room with the doctor, talking about her scans. She wonders what they say about her condition today. She feels amazing, and she’s not sure why. It’s a miracle, Yuya said. It certainly feels like one. She kind of wishes she could have been in there to hear about it. Shouldn’t she get to hear about her own condition more than Yuya would?

Some static shock of intuition makes her glance up. She sees nothing when she looks down the long white hospital halls. Just a feeling, then?

She starts to look back down at her work.

Someone walks across the end of the hall, going down towards another section of the hospital. She glances at him, and wonders if that was why she felt like she should look up. She doesn’t know him, though. He is tall, probably as tall as Shun, with neat gray hair trimmed just over his red glasses. A huge red scarf flutters down his back, wrapped around his neck several times over. He carries a bunch of white flowers in his arms.

Then he is gone again, and Ruri looks back at her work.

Hm. She wonders if she can make her own scarf as big as his.

~ * ~ * ~

“I didn’t think you were the type to do hospital visits.”

“I didn’t think you were the type to get pushed down escalators. But here we are.”

Kaito snorted, half glaring at the man who was currently fluffing out the flowers he had put into the vase. His violet eyes flicked behind his glasses as he glanced towards the pile of balloons, flowers, and fruit baskets on the table.

“You’re quite popular.”

Kaito grimaced. He wasn’t entirely sure why, but it seemed he had some kind of fan club. Haruto had laughed when he saw it, and said that he had seen Kaito’s picture in a magazine from an interview he had done about his research. Apparently he was an eligible bachelor, or something. What a pain.
“I didn’t ask for it,” he grumbled.

The man sat down on the edge of the bed, and Kaito jumped in spite of himself. Why was he getting so close? Then again, he shouldn’t be surprised. Akaba Reiji had always been something of an odd one, since the day that Kaito had first met him.

“So it’s true that you don’t remember anything about before you fell?” Akaba said.

Kaito shrugged.

“Just that someone pushed me,” he said. “I turned around, and tried to see who was there, but...”

He trailed off, eyes narrowing automatically. Hang on. Something was coming back to him.

“No, wait,” he said slowly. “I do remember something. I thought I saw...”

His eyes trailed to Akaba’s red scarf draped over the edge of the bed. It was quite a distinctive accessory. Very distinctive. He stiffened as he lifted his eyes to Akaba’s, but Akaba wasn’t just sitting on the edge of the bed anymore.

Instead, he appeared to be pointing the barrel of a very, very strange looking weapon directly at Kaito’s forehead.

“My apologies,” he said.

~ * ~ * ~

Today I had a lunch date with mama. I haven’t told her about him yet. But I think I’ll keep it a secret a little while longer. I still want to be my parents’ treasure for a little longer.

“Is the seafood curry good with you, mama?”

Yuzu’s mother blinked out of some kind of daydream, looking at the menu and then at the waiter who had just arrived.

“Oh, yes,” she said, folding her menu. “I think that will be fine.”

“Oh, and look how cute this is!” Yuzu said, pointing at the dessert. “The parfait comes with a little hippo figure.”

“Do you want that?”

“If it’s okay.”

Her mother nodded, and then nodded to the waiter to order one of those too. She tucked a strand of red hair behind one ear, perfectly done nails glinting from the light of the huge window. The waiter cleared their menus away.

“You like hippos, don’t you?” Himika said, giving her a faint smile.

“I really do,” Yuzu said, smiling brightly back. “Remember back when I was a kid, we used to go to the zoo a lot, and see the hippo exhibit.”

“Oh, did we do that?” her mother said, folding her hands on the table. “You’ve always had such a good memory, Yuzu-chan.”

Yuzu grinned hugely at that. She still had the photo of the three of them in front of the hippo exhibit, and she grabbed her phone to start looking for it so she could share it. Her phone charm dangled off the end, a fat hippo mascot holding a heart.

“Oh, and remember how we all got matching phone straps after that?” she said.

“That sounds like something you’d like,” Himika said. She blinked, then, as the faint sound of a buzz came from her pocket. She pulled out her phone and glanced at it. “Sorry, Yuzu-chan, I’ll be right back.”

“All right.”

Himika carefully extracted herself from the table and opened the phone as she walked a bit away.

“Yes, I’m with my daughter right now...it’s my visitation day...oh of course.”
Yuzu turned a bit in her seat to watch where her mother went. She held up her phone camera, letting the hippo charm dangle down in front of the screen.

*Matching straps for a matching family*, she thought, zooming in on Himika.

Himika turned slightly, and the phone charm dangled free from her hand off of the phone.

It was not the hippo charm that Yuzu had.

Yuzu felt her stomach twist and tighten, tying her throat into a knot as she stared at the little snake charm through her phone camera. She shut her phone with a snap and turned back towards her plate, staring pointedly at it until Himika returned.

*It’s all right. That’s not the most important part of today.*

The meal passed in a blur, and then she was waving goodbye to her mother and heading back home on foot. She opened up the diary as she walked.

*I bought a mont blanc for Zarc on the way home. Mont blancs are his favorite!!*

She hummed to herself, leaving the cake shop with her little box of happiness. Fate was going her way lately. Today would be the day that Zarc realized that she was the one he should be falling madly in love with.

She continued humming as she walked down the street towards Zarc’s house, glancing briefly into cafe and shop windows as she passed. Her heart froze in its chest.

Through the glass, she could see that Zarc had frosting on his lip. Grace smiled patronizingly as she leaned across the table to wipe it off with a handkerchief. They each had a half finished mont blanc on their plates.

Yuzu dropped her own box and stomped on it. The frosting squeezed out of the box and onto her shoe, but she ignored it. She left before Zarc or Grace could see her.

This day didn’t feel quite real, she thought, stumbling towards home. It felt like...a rushed sort of blur. She should re-read the diary for tomorrow. Make plans. Her brain felt so dead that she couldn’t even pull it out of her bag. She wanted to sleep for a week. Maybe when she woke up, destiny would be on the right track again.

“Yuzu-chan?”

Yuzu startled, looking up.

Behind her, Ruri and Yuya stood on the street, both of them laden down with grocery bags. Ruri tilted her head, looking concerned.

“Are you all right?” she said.

Yuzu realized as the scene blurred in front of her that she was about to cry. She covered her eyes with one hand, blinking them away.

“I’m fine,” she said. “Allergies, I think.”

She heard a foot scrape over the ground, and then a soft hand rested on her other arm. When she took her hand away, Ruri was in front of her, smiling.

“Would you like to come by for dinner?”
Shun

The Typhoon

The wind roars around Shun’s ears, his eyes screwed shut in anticipation of an impact that never comes. After a few choked breaths, he manages to open his eyes.

Yoko crouches over him, her arms wrapped around his side. He can see that the shoulder of her shirt has been ripped open, and there’s a nasty, bleeding cut that washes down her arm from the pouring rain. Glass glitters on the ground around them.

“M-Mom!” Shun gasps, grabbing her shirt. “Mom!!”

She gasps for breath, Ruri still tied to her back, and manages to stagger to her feet. Her eyes are ferociously alight, with a heat all their own radiating out of the cold typhoon as she looks down at him. She nods, and puts her arms underneath Ruri behind her again.

“Let’s go,” she calls out over the rain. “Stay with me!”

Shun gasps, eyes widening. Then he nods, and hurries to keep up.

His mother bolts along the street through the pouring wind and rain, apparently completely unnoticing of the blood down her arm. Shun keeps looking up at it, checking to make sure the wound isn’t bad, and then up at Ruri, whose face is flushed and fists tightened against their mother’s back.

The warmth of the hospital feels strange when they’re finally standing in a quiet room, dripping water onto the floor as they look over a finally, soundly sleeping Ruri.

Yoko puts a light hand on Shun’s back, and Shun jumps, looking up at her. She is not looking at him, her eyes instead focused on Ruri. The doctors put her arm in a sling, and she complained the whole time that there were better things to be doing with their time, that she was fine.

“Listen, Shun,” she said. “Someday, you’re going to have something you want to protect, no matter what. That will be your strength.”

Shun looks down at Ruri, then, and his hands curl up into determined fists.

He already has something that he wants to protect.

~ * ~ E N D  F L A S H B A C K ~ * ~
hanging out with people today. She wasn’t up for it. She wasn’t sure why she had accepted Ruri’s invitation.

“Shun’s still not back,” Yuya complained, looking up at the clock. “I guess we’re eating without him. His own dam fault.”

Yuzu gripped the seat of the chair, biting the tip of her tongue. She hears a soft tap and looks up, seeing Ruri tilting her head and smiling at her.

“We don’t want to keep you too long,” she said. “Do you need to get home soon?”

“Oh...no, it’s all right. My dad works late.”

She tucked a free strand of hair behind her ear, feeling a rumble of distress that she shoved down. No. She wasn’t going to think about the horrible day today. Ruri and Yuya had been nice enough to invite her over, and she needed to try and be happy. She picked up her spoon and scooped up some curry and rice, blowing on it before taking a bite.

Ruri attacked her meal happily, but Yuya kept looking at the clock between sparse bites, brow furrowing with worry. He seemed like a huge worrier. Wasn’t Shun a little older than him? He could probably take care of himself...he’d be okay.

Yuzu took another bite. It was warm and delicious and she almost wanted to cry, suddenly. She blinked tears away, making a show of rubbing her eyes like she was tired. When was the last time she actually had dinner with other people? She couldn’t remember. She was so often eating her meals late and alone, sitting in the kitchen in the dark because she was too depressed to turn on a light.

“Hey, uh...Yuzu-chan?”

Yuzu blinked, glancing up at Yuya across the table. He looked awkwardly, and took a moment to scratch under his hair before continuing.

“I hope this doesn’t sound uh...forward of me? But I noticed that diary you’re always carrying around and I thought it looked kind of cute...I guess I was just curious about it.”

Yuzu felt her heart plummet into her stomach and she almost choked on her next bite. She coughed, pounding her chest a few times with her fists. Eyes watering as she sat up, she stared at Yuya.

“And?” she said. “What do you want to know about it?”

“Uh...I...” Yuya fumbled. He bit his lip. Ruri, for her part, just looked back and forth between them, still chewing happily and not seeming very invested in the conversation. “I guess I was wondering if I could...borrow it...?”

Yuzu stared at him.

“What could you possibly need with it?”

“It’s—it’s complicated.”

“It’s complicated? Why are you looking at my private stuff, anyway?? That diary is important, I can’t just give it to people!”

Yuya stared at her incredulously.

“How is it important? Isn’t it just a day planner?”

Yuzu felt her cheeks flush, and she shot up from the table, sending her chair to the floor with the movement.

“You looked at it??” she said, her voice almost raising to a shriek in her mortification.

“It fell open when you dropped your bag!! I just saw a bit by accident when I put it back, at the park!” Yuya said, throwing his hands up in surrender.

“I can’t believe you!! That’s so inappropriate! Why would you even—”

She stopped midsentence as she realized that Yuya’s eyes had turned away from her, and his face had gone white. She blinked, and glanced over to where he was looking. Why was he looking at
Ruri with that strange expression?

And come to think of it, when had Ruri put on that silly looking hippo hat?

Ruri demurely set down her spoon onto her finished plate, eyes closed as she dabbed at her lips with a napkin.

When her eyes opened, they had changed to a strange, haunting dark blue-purple.

“Survival Strategy!!”

Had Yuzu been in control of her body in that moment, she thought she might have thrown up. The world dipped and spun around her. She felt like she was being dragged along by the base of the spine on a roller coaster, spinning around, dropping up and down, lights going on and off in colors she hadn’t thought were possible.

She snapped to herself with a gasp, dizzy and disoriented. Her new surroundings didn’t help with either of those issues, either, as she found herself staring at a physically impossible location. High above them at the end of a series of strange stairs, stood Ruri, clad in a ridiculous dress and staring down at them with those cold eyes.

“Listen up, you lowlifes who will never amount to anything,” Ruri said.

Yuzu actually felt herself flinch. W-what had happened to Ruri? And hang on! Why was she handcuffed??

“Ruri?” she said. “H-hey...Yuya, what’s happening??”

Yuya stood next to her, also in cuffs, and he honestly just looked defeated, head and shoulders slumped.

“What is this?” Yuzu said. “Yuya!! What is happening?”

“That’s...uh...” Yuya started, fumbling for a moment. He looked at a total loss for words.

“The...alien lifeform possessing Ruri, I guess...?”

“WHAT??”

“Hiragi Yuzu,” Ruri snapped, making Yuzu whip back to her. “Give up the diary to him.”

“What? No! That diary is—it’s my destiny! I can’t give it up!”

Ruri snorted at her, raising an eyebrow.

“I’ve had enough of listening to your bullshit, you stalker bitch,” Ruri said.

Yuzu flinched. A horrible, twisting sensation warped through her and her eyes bubbled over with tears.

“R-Ruri, how could you...? Why would you say that?”

“The diary is of no use to you. Return it to that lowlife beside you.”

Yuzu felt like she was about to bubble over, though with tears or anger she wasn’t sure. The initial shock at Ruri talking to her like that was wearing off, and she was beginning to see the possibility of Yuya’s admission that Ruri was being possessed.

“You—” she started.

The floor opened up under her feet. She shrieked as suddenly she found herself dropping down into the darkness. Where was she going? No, hell no! She wasn’t done talking to that fake Ruri yet!

With some herculean force of strength, she punched her legs in front of her and her hands behind her, skidding down the sides of the tunnel to a stop. It was hard with the cuffs on her hands and ankles, but she managed to wriggle herself up the tunnel by pressing into the sides, reaching the light up above again and pushing herself out of the hole. Yuya stared at her with an open mouthed, comical shock.

Yuzu, however, couldn’t be bothered to acknowledge him. She was—she was mad. Who did this fucking hippo hat girl think she was? She had been working hard to get as far as she had; to
call that bullshit was—well, she wasn’t okay with it!! And to make Ruri say such nasty things!

With another cry, she pulled her hands and ankles apart and shattered the cuffs like they were made of nothing but air and imagination. Immediately, she bolted for the stairs, running up them two at a time towards Ruri.

Ruri actually blinked with surprise, taking a step back. Not fast enough, however, as Yuzu’s fingers grabbed for the hat. That had to be the source; it had appeared just before this whole crazy thing had started!

The second the hat was yanked from Ruri’s head, she found herself dizzily back in the Sakaki’s kitchen, and she staggered back. Hat still in hand, she bolted for the door.

Yuya screamed at her, but she wasn’t listening. This thing was what had taken Ruri, so she’d get rid of it! With a mighty cry, she pushed out the door and flung the hat out into the rainy evening.

Yuya immediately shoved past her, bolting out the door without even getting his shoes. Yuzu staggered back against the door. What the hell? Did he WANT his sister possessed by a hat?

She heard a clatter behind her in the kitchen. An ominous coldness flooded through her, then, and she turned slowly around.

Ruri lay sprawled on the floor, her skin gray and her eyes half open, staring at nothing.

“R-Ruri?” Yuzu said, her heart suddenly clenching hard in her chest. She stepped forward towards the girl on the floor. What...what the...

Ruri wasn’t breathing.

~ * ~ * ~

Shun waited on the fifth train car, near the second door. It was empty at this time of evening. He could hear the train’s movement much louder in the absence of people, like a patter of faint gunshots in his ears. Ao sat backwards in the seat beside him, ramming its head against the seat over and over again.

The door opened at the other side of the car, but he didn’t look up. He simply waited in his seat, with his hands in his pockets, until the tall man in the dark coat, hat, and sunglasses reached him. Only then did he flicker his gaze up, as though he hadn’t been waiting for him.

He dug into his pocket and pulled out the thin white envelope, holding it up. The man took it gingerly, pinching it between two black gloved fingers. With his other hand, he pulled a much thicker brown envelope out of his trench coat pocket, stamped with a black hippo face on the front. He passed it to Shun, who tucked it inside of his coat.

Without any further acknowledgment, the man headed for the opposite door he had come from, and slipped through. He seemed to vanish as soon as he was on the other side of the glass, not that Shun was watching him go.

Shun grabbed Ao by the scruff of the neck and pulled him away from his headbutting session. The train pulled to a stop at his station, and he stepped off onto the dark platform, making his way up the stairs to the drizzling, rainy day back towards home. The envelope felt hot and heavy in his pocket, and he tried to ignore it.

He stopped at an ATM and deposited the fat stack of cash from the envelope into the machine, keying in to send over to aunt Asuka’s account. He discarded the envelope in a nearby trash can and headed back home, opening up his phone and dialing Asuka’s number.

“Hey, I just deposited enough for the next two payments...no, don’t worry, I didn’t do anything illegal. It’s savings from my job at the coffee shop.”

He hesitated at the voice on the other end, nodding though no one could see him.

“So, it’s okay for us to stay in the house a little longer right? That will work?”

He smiled slightly as the call ended, putting his phone away. Good. He was doing his part. The others would never even have to know it had been an issue...

“Shun!! Shun!!”

Shun stopped in the middle of the sidewalk, blinking through the rain. Was that...?
A truck trundled past him, nearly spraying him with water. Yuya bolted down the sidewalk towards Shun, soaked and disheveled, his socks torn and wet. He flopped his hand towards the truck, eyes wide and wild.

“The truck!” he screamed. “Shun, the truck!”

What about the...

Shun turned towards the truck, currently pausing at stoplight. In the light rain, he saw something fluttering in the wind, something stuck up on top of the truck.

_The hippo hat._

Shun’s blood turned to ice. He immediately whipped around and bolted for the truck. God, no, the light was turning green!

He grabbed an unlocked bicycle off a nearby rack outside a shop. He leapt onto it and bolted after truck. Ao bounced out of his grip and into the basket in front of him. They whipped around the corner and skidded through the rain. If it got onto the highway, it would be over!!

Shun was already dying, his heart crawling up his throat, vision blacking out at the edges from the strenuous activity. He was athletic, but keeping up with a truck on a bike??

The tassel fluttered in the rain, and he made a grab for it. He missed and the bike wobbled, nearly tossing him and Ao both off. He grabbed the handlebars and righted himself, swearing. A little closer! Just a little closer!!

Ao leaned off the edge of the basket and almost fell off. Hey, maybe that was it!! Shun grabbed Ao by the leg with one hand and pushed the hippo forward like it was a gripping claw. Ao briefly flopped in his arm, almost tossing them both off balance again, but then pressed its other leg against Shun’s hand and reached up through the rain as far as it could. The tassel flopped just out of reach, Shun pushing his legs to pedal faster, faster, faster!

Ao grabbed the tassel.

The hat was more stuck than it looked because grabbing it didn’t immediately yank it free. Shun choked as the sudden resistance of the truck yanked him off the bike.

For a brief moment, he and Ao hung in the air. Automatically, Shun reached past the hippo, curling his own hand around the tassel, praying that the hat wouldn’t rip before he hit the pavement.

He smacked hard into the ground. The hat popped off from his weight, and he crashed against the pavement, skidding a few feet forward from the momentum. He rolled, losing hold of Ao, but managing to cup the hat tightly against his chest.

His skin burned, and his clothes were ripped by the time he came to a shaking, stuttering stop. The world spun and his ears rang. He...he needed to get off the road, before someone else hit him.

Just a few minutes, he thought, slumping. Just a few more minutes. Then he would get up.

Ao punched him in the shoulder, and he started. His vision glittered for a moment from the dizziness, like shards of glass in the air. Ruri.

He had to get back to Ruri.

~ * ~ * ~

Yuzu pressed her hands against her mouth to still the sobbing. Yuya couldn’t bring himself to say anything, slumping against the wall, not caring about the water damage he was doing to the plaster. His feet were torn and bloody from running down the pavement without shoes.

He stared, dead-eyed, up at the ceiling. Yuzu sobbed softly, rocking back and forth on her knees.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I didn’t know, I had no idea, I didn’t know, I’m sorry——”

Yuya thought maybe he should be mad at Yuzu. After all, she had thrown away Ruri’s life support. But he couldn’t be mad. How could she have known? Yuya hadn’t explained. All she had known was that Ruri was possessed by some cruel and unusual creature.
The door flung open, and Yuya rolled his head towards it.

He immediately stirred back to life as he saw Shun stumble in through the doors, clothes torn, skin bruised, but punching the hippo hat out in his hand. Yuya ignored the pain in his feet to scramble up and snatch the hat, staggering and stumbling back to Ruri’s prone from on the floor. He didn’t know what he needed to do; did she need to wear it to come back? Did he just give it to her? He shoved the hat between her hands, heart hammering.

The color leaked back into Ruri’s face, and her eyes fluttered. Yuzu choked on a gasp. Ruri squinted and blinked as life came back to her eyes, and her chest began to rise and fall again as though she had never stopped breathing. She looked up curiously at the two of them hovering over her.

“Oh?” she said. “Did something happen?”
“I’m sorry, but who are you?”

The flowers slipped out of Shun’s hands and onto the floor.

Kaito stared at him blankly, lips parting. His brow furrowed slightly beneath the patch over his forehead. Shun’s mouth went dry. What…? Why was Kaito looking at him like that?

“That’s not funny, Kaito,” he said. “I know you were mad at me, but that doesn’t mean…”

Kaito frowned at him.

“Don’t tell me you’re another…fan or something,” he said. “I’m not seeing anyone other than my family; please go.”

Was he faking? No, Kaito was too straightforward. He wouldn’t fake something like this. This was too roundabout for him. Shun took a half step forward, and his foot crunched softly onto something. His eyes flickered down. What was that?

It looked like a tiny exploded firework, a splattered white ball on the floor with a stamped face of a black hippo on it. He looked up again at Kaito, at his suddenly blank and empty eyes, and the patch on his forehead as though something had struck him hard in the head, when Shun knew from the reports that Kaito had fallen down the stairs backwards and hit the back of his head.

His phone buzzed in his pocket, and he pulled it free.

*I know the item you’re looking for.*

~ * ~ * ~

The train ride to Yuzu’s house was spent in a very, very awkward silence. Yuya rested his head on his hand, and his elbow on the side of the seat, looking away from Yuzu who sat beside him. He wasn’t really sure where they were going, or why…but here he was, on the crazy train, and not getting off any time soon.

~ * ~ * F L A S H B A C K * ~ * ~

**Yuya and Yuzu**

**Sakaki House**

“I’m sorry, but I…I can’t give it up.”

She won’t look at him, and he knows that she’s crying.

“I can’t. It has my future in it…until that’s completed, I can’t give it away.”

“Can’t you…I dunno. Make copies of it, just in case?”

“I can’t…I’m sorry, I wish I could explain, but I don’t even know how to.”
She swallowed.

“She...I don’t want that to happen to Ruri again either but...but not until I finish my destiny. I have...just a little bit longer, okay? And then you can have it.”

He’s not sure what he’s saying until he does.

“He’s not sure what he’s saying until he does.

“Let me help, then.”

“What?”

“I’ll help you...do this...destiny thing. It’ll go smoother if you have someone to help, right? And then I’ll give the diary to the thing possessing my sister and...and I guess we both leave happy, right?”

~ * ~ * E N D  F L A S H B A C K * ~ * ~

“So, what do you need me to do?”

Yuya looked nervously at the modest pile of boxes stacked up in the middle of Yuzu’s room.

“Well, you can help me move this stuff, first,” Yuzu said, nodding at the boxes.

“Where....?”

“I didn’t accept your help so that you could ask questions.”

Yuya winced, and nodded. Fair enough. He already knew more than she thought, better to leave her in the dark about how much. He harrumphed as he hefted one of the boxes into his arms. It was pretty light, but this was a lot of stuff. They’d probably need to take a handful of trips back and forth.

“You’re moving everything?” he said, looking around her room to see how much had been packed up. All things considered, it seemed she hadn’t packed all that much.

“As much as we can; the necessities at the very least have to be moved by tonight.”

He frowned, wondering exactly what her game was today, but he didn’t want to ask and reveal how he’d basically been stalking her for the past few days. He knew it had something to do with Zarc, at any rate.

He shifted forwards and tried to walk towards Yuzu’s door, but his foot caught on something and he nearly stumbled. Yuzu leaped forward, eyes wide.

“Hey!! Watch where you’re stepping!”

Yuya yelped when Yuzu smacked him in the back of the head with a fan she seemed to have produced from nowhere, making him jump back. He almost fell into the pile of boxes or dropped his load, but he managed to catch himself in the middle.

In front of him, Yuzu hunched over the pair of stuffed animals on the floor, looking legitimately concerned as she looked them over. They were just a little bit creepy; kind of old and a bit musty and worn looking as though she had had them for years. One was a small red elephant with huge ears and a curled trunk, and the other was a big pink salamander.

“You could have hurt Zo-chan and Sal-chan,” Yuzu said, scowling at him as she hugged the stuffed animals to her chest.

“Sorry,” Yuya said, wincing. “Uh...are you bringing those with you too?”

“Of course. They’re family.”

She carefully tucked the stuffed animals on top of her rolling trunk, tying them lightly to the collapsible handle.

“All right, let’s get a move on,” she said, throwing a bag over her shoulder. “Hurry up, we don’t have much time to get everything moved by tonight.”

She marched from her room, dragging the suitcase behind her, and Yuya hurried to keep up with his full load.
“Why is there such a time limit?” he said. She pulled the door open and held it so that Yuya could go through, and Yuya was surprised to see that her face had gone beet red.

“None of your business,” she muttered.

He winced when she slammed the door behind them, and marched off down the stairs and then down the hall out towards the street. Yuya hurried after her.

The boxes weren’t super heavy, but after carrying them for more than fifteen minutes, Yuya’s arms started to feel the strain. He couldn’t think of anything to talk about around the exertion, so he kept to himself until they finally reached the train station and filed onto a car. It was the middle of the day, both of them were skipping school once again, so the train was, thankfully, mostly empty. Yuya sighed with relief as he was finally able to set his boxes down on a seat. He stretched and massaged his arms a few times. Geez. This was going to take forever. They’d have to carry things from her house, to the station, and then to Zarc’s house, because...where else could they be going? Then they’d have to go back for the next load.

Yuzu sat down on one of the empty seats and dragged her rolling suitcase up to her knees, so that she could rest her hands on top of the stuffed animals on top of it. Yuya hesitated for a few moments before sitting down three seats apart from her. He didn’t want to crowd her, or anything. Yuzu didn’t attempt to make conversation, and Yuya wasn’t sure what he could say that wouldn’t incriminate him, so he decided to just let the awkward silence take over. He focused instead on Pinku, who was busy chewing on something it had found underneath the train seat. Yuya grabbed it by the scruff of the neck while making sure Yuzu wasn’t seeing him grabbing at air, and then proceeded to pull the disgusting piece of dry gum out of Pinku’s giant mouth.

“You can’t eat that,” he hissed at the little hippo, shaking it slightly. “Geez.”

This was like having a child. He surreptitiously slipped Pinku a bit of granola bar from his pocket. Yuzu seemed to be lost in thought, so she wasn’t paying attention to him feeding an invisible hippo.

Finally, the awkward train ride ended, and Yuya hefted up his boxes again, setting Pinku on top to keep an eye on it, and followed Yuzu off the train.

Sure enough, he recognized this route from when they had followed Yuzu to Zarc’s house the several times before. Yuzu walked very purposefully, not pausing to hide or look around corners, as though completely confident that she was supposed to be here. Yuya felt like he was going to die if they ran into anyone at all, even if no one would know what they were up to.

“Um,” Yuya said, as they walked back around Zarc’s house into the backyard. “Isn’t this...Tatsuzaki-sensei’s house?”

“What about it?”

“Oh, I uh, just remember the address from the teacher contact forms at school, and uh...”

Yuzu just huffed, and didn’t respond. So much for getting her to admit what she was up to so he wouldn’t have to hide how much he knew.

“Just set the stuff here for now,” Yuzu said, putting her bag and suitcase down behind a set of bushes and gesturing beside it. Yuya set the stuff down and grabbed Pinku off the top of it before Yuzu could throw a blanket from her bag over it. It didn’t really do anything to hide the stuff, even though the blanket was a similar shade of green to the bushes. It was definitely suspicious looking.

Yuzu dusted her hands off and stepped back to consider her handiwork. Clearly, she decided it was in the clear, because she nodded and smiled.

“All right,” she said. “No stopping now, we still have a few more trips to make.”

Yuya sighed. This was going to be a long day.

~ * ~ * ~

“Don’t play dumb with me, I know one of you must have sent this. What kind of sick joke is this?”

“That’s not either of our emails, Shun-chan,” Dennis said, pointing at him with his straw. “I think you’re getting a little too worked up, hm?”
Shun tightened his hand around his phone, where the message was still scarring the screen. *I know the item you’re looking for. Was this about the Hippodrum? Were Sora and Dennis somehow involved?*

Despite his agitation, Shun had a feeling that they weren’t. Both boys looked back at him with varying degrees of confusion. Dennis, of course, was smiling that easy smile of his like usual, but there was none of the normal sparkle in his eye, and Sora wasn’t even smiling around his giant lollipop for once.

He’d found the pair of them on the roof of the mall, at one of the tables where food court overflow would usually end up. Today, however, the space was entirely empty save for the three of them. Empty round tables with chairs in varying states of being pushed in or left out yawned open into the empty, flat day. The sky was nearly white with the clouds, as though pasted flat against the dome over their heads, and despite there being a city several stories beneath them, from up here you could barely hear the faintest hum of traffic. It felt, Shun thought, like they were locked inside a large, glass box.

“Do you know what happened to Kaito?” he tried instead.

“He fell down the stairs,” Sora said around his lollipop. “Nerd.”

“Pushed down, I heard,” Dennis said. “Probably some scientist rival, right?”

He laughed lightly. It echoed off the taller, half constructed buildings, and made Shun’s hair raise on end.

“I mean after that,” Shun said. “He’s acting strangely.”

“Isn’t that normal for him?” Dennis said.

“Why do you even care? You said you wanted out of the group, anyway,” Sora said, pointing at him with his lollipop.

Shun dug into his pocket, retrieving the little exploded ball with the hippo stamp on it. He pointed it at them, watching for some change in their expression that would tell him that they knew what it was, but they both only blinked at him.

“Listen,” he said. “If you guys got involved, I wouldn’t blame you, but get uninvolved. You don’t know what you’re dealing with.”

“Ehhh, and you said Kaito’s acting strange?” Sora said. “You’re the only weird one I’m seeing right now.”

“Yeah, Shun-chan, you feeling okay?” Dennis said. “I think your head’s gotten scrambled. Maybe that’s why you left the game, right?”

Shun opened his mouth to argue, but the words lumped in his throat when he saw the red dot appear on Dennis’s forehead.

It happened so quickly and yet in slow motion. He froze for a moment too long, shocked at the little red dot that wiggled slightly, then his heart leaped into his throat and he realized exactly what that meant and his hands reached forward to try and shove Dennis out of the way.

A loud crack echoed off the sides of the water tank on the opposite building and Dennis’s body jolted, head whipping backwards. He smacked his milkshake off the table when his arms flailed upwards.

Sora jumped up so fast that he knocked his chair over with a clang, his own drink hitting the ground and exploding open. Shun heard him swearing but he didn’t pay attention, trying to reach for Dennis’s shoulders instead.

Dennis laid back against his chair for a moment, but his chest was still rising and falling, so he was alive. After a beat, he sat up slowly, squinting with a dizzy look in his eyes.

There was what appeared to be a small red ball stuck to his forehead. A ball that had a hippo stamped onto it.

“What the hell was that?” Dennis said.

“You’ve got something on your head,” Sora said, looking a bit pale from the shock.
Shun’s heart thrummed so loudly that he couldn’t hear anything else. He couldn’t look away from the thing on Dennis’s forehead. It looked like the white wrapper he had found in Kaito’s room, just red. The world seemed to tighten for a moment, like his ears were about to pop.

He saw Sora’s lips moving but he didn’t hear the words. Didn’t have time to force a word out of his suddenly shocked frozen throat when he saw the red dot appear on Sora’s forehead next.

Sora tripped and stumbled from the impact of the item striking his forehead next, and tripped over the chair on the ground, falling with a yelp to the other side of the chair.

“What’s the big idea?” Sora shouted.

Shun started to half turn towards the direction he thought it must have come from, somewhere behind him in the scaffolding of the half finished building behind him.

And then Dennis’s eyes bulged, his head jolted back, and he screamed.

Shun nearly threw up. He couldn’t quite physically comprehend what Dennis’s convulsing body was doing for a moment as the world seemed to go red and black and all he could see was the terrifying silhouette of Dennis’s head flung back as blackness, like ink, exploded out of his forehead through the sphere on his head.

Shun’s throat convulsed with bile as Dennis finally crumpled, hitting his head against the table and then slumping to the ground.

Sora had barely gotten to his feet again, and his face went white when he saw Dennis on the ground. Still, he didn’t even have the chance to even swear before he stumbled.

Shun did actually throw up in his mouth this time as the scream ripped out of Sora’s throat, his tiny body twisting and convulsing, black exploding out of his forehead and into the sky.

He slumped face first over the fallen chair and went still, and Shun choked back another heave. He whipped around this time, eyes searching the scaffolding wildly.

“Who’s there?” he yelled, voice ricocheting off the imaginary glass box. “WHO’S THERE?”

There was no response. Only the sound of Shun’s heavy, desperate breathing echoed in his ears. He couldn’t stop shaking.

Ambulance, he thought suddenly. I need to call an ambulance.

He grabbed for his phone in his pocket, hands shaking so badly that he dropped it with a clatter. When he reached down to pick it back up, movement caught his attention, and he whipped around again to see Dennis sitting upright slowly again, blinking.

The little red ball on his head had gone a stark, crumbly white, and it dropped from his head and onto the ground, where it splattered like a used up firecracker.

“Fuck, Dennis,” Shun said, jumping forward, hands hovering over his shoulders. He wasn’t sure if he should touch him yet. “Are you okay?”

Dennis just blinked, looking up at him with the blankest eyes that Shun had ever seen in the usually emotionally open boy.

“I’m...fine,” he said, tilting his head. “But who are you?”

Shun choked on his heart. Dennis looked blankly at him, the same suddenly dull eyes that Kaito had had when Shun visited him.

Sora stirred next, the ball dropping from his forehead and hitting the ground when he sat up, staring at Shun with the same blank eyes.

“I was wondering that too,” he said. “Who are you, anyway?”

Shun couldn’t hear anything again, except for the thrumming of his heart echoing off the sides of the imaginary glass box.
He lowers the sights of his weapon from his eye, the light playing off of his glasses. Far below, he can hear the echoing cries of the young man still on the mall roof. Shouting. *Who's there. Get out here. Show yourself.*

Reiji does not comply, of course. But he considers the young man for a moment, staring down at him from his hiding place among the scaffolding on the building over. He is much taller than the last time they met, but that is to be expected. Even from here, Reiji can assume that he's grown taller than he himself. How annoying.

His eyes are the same, however. Even from a distance, Reiji can see them: hard like flint, sparking from contact with the air as his gaze flashes around, looking for the source of the attack.

“You want to be faced head on, as always,” Reiji murmurs to himself. “Unfortunately, that cannot be. Not yet. Be patient, Shun.”

He spares a passing glance for his two targets. Both easily dealt with. They are awaking now, and Shun whips around to run to them, to check on their status. Reiji does not linger any longer. He shoulders his crossbow and turns away.

The second phase has been completed.

~ * ~ * ~

The train hummed underneath them lights from the tunnel zipping past like streaks against the dark. Yuya rested his chin on his hand, elbow on the side of the seat. The train was really almost empty at this time of day, and it was kind of eerie. He wasn't used to it.

Tentatively, he spared a glance for Yuzu. She sat several seats away from him, staring straight ahead across the train car. The diary was in her lap, her fingers curled half over it.

*What's so important about this?* he thought. *I don't...understand.*

“Uh, Yuzu,” he tried, and Yuzu startled, glancing over at him. Yuya forgot what he was going to say as soon as her eyes met his. For a few seconds, they just stared at each other.

“What?” she finally said.

“Uh,” Yuya said, fumbling for something to say. “What is...all of this for, anyway? Why are you working so hard?”

Yuzu frowned at him, and Yuya thought she was going to make some comment about how he wasn’t here to ask questions again.

But instead, she looked down at her diary, and curled her fingers tighter around it.

“This diary is my destiny,” she said. “And I have to fulfill it.”
She had said something like that before, not that Yuya understood at all. This time, however, she elaborated a little.

“This is the starting point,” she said. “I have to lay the groundwork, to complete Project R.”

Yuya felt a heat rise up his cheeks. Project R? What did that mean? “Relationship”? Or...uh...he didn’t want to think about the other word he was imagining that started with R, but considering Yuzu was stalking Zarc...it wasn’t wholly out of range to assume what her next unfortunate step would be. God, Yuya was not prepared to be an accomplice in this.

Yuzu, however, did not elaborate any further, going back into silence again. Yuya let it hang for a few more moments, and then found that it was too thick, he was choking on it.

“Why Zarc?” he finally said.

“Huh?”

“I mean...why Zarc? Why’s he the one you’re after, of all the other options you could probably have? I mean...you’re smart, and determined, Yuzu. There’s got to be other people out there.”

“No,” Yuzu said immediately, her eyes flashing. “No, it has to be Zarc. It has to be. If it’s not, then I won’t be...”

She stopped, and looked back down at the diary. Her knuckles were white from gripping it, and her hands shook.

Yuya didn’t press again.

~ * * ~

“Ugh, okay so...this looks like it’s going to be the last of it, right?”

Yuya looked up when Yuzu didn’t answer, blinking. Where’d she go?

Yuzu stood in the doorway from the stairs leading up from the school. She was...breathing pretty hard, and she looked red-faced. Yuya grimaced. She wasn’t thinking naughty thoughts about Zarc again, was she?

“Yuzu?” he tried again.

She stirred, blinking. Her hand fluttered up to her forehead, pressing against it.

“Right,” she said. “This will be the last trip. And then...”

Her face went even redder, a darker shade than her hair. And then her knees seemed to give out from under her, and Yuya yelped, running forward.

He just barely managed to catch her under the arms.

“Yuzu? Hey, Yuzu, are you okay?”

Yuzu slumped against his chest, mumbling something incoherent. Yuya tried to heft her by her armpits, but he was barely shorter than she was, and so it was an awkward grip. He hauled her away from the stairs, at least, so that she wouldn’t fall down. The couch, he’d move her to the couch.

He carefully half led, half dragged her towards the couch, Yuzu stumbling along in his arms. Once they nearly reached it, however...

Yuzu’s face jolted up, her eyes wide and face beet red, and for a moment, Yuya thought she was going to smack him with her fan again for holding her.

“First night,” she squeaked, and then she fell forwards, taking Yuya down with her onto the couch.

Yuya’s yelp was lost as she crashed down on top of his chest, crushing him into the couch. She was mumbling incoherently again, something about how embarrassing it was and oh god was it already that time and she wasn’t ready and she didn’t know how it worked, and...

“Y-Yuzu! Hey, Yuzu, calm down!!”
She didn’t seem to be able to stay still, practically shoving her face against him and mumbling, her hands flopping against him. Yuya tried to grab her by the shoulders and heft her back up, but she was very insistent in her sudden delirium.

“Oh, Yuzu, you left the door open...”

Yuya blanched. Slowly, he turned his head towards the door to see a frozen looking man standing in the doorway, bag slung over one shoulder and his mouth slightly hanging open. Oh, fuck. That must be her dad.

“Oh—I’m sorry! This isn’t what it...augh!”

Yuzu giggled and shoved against him again, cutting off his words. Her forehead bumped his, though, and he suddenly realized how hot her face felt. He managed to get one hand out from under her and press it against her forehead.

“I...I think she’s got a fever...uh...”

Burning hotly with shame himself, he waited helplessly while the man seemed to keep staring for a full minute. For a second, he looked like he was about to get red-faced himself, face twitching.

Finally, he shook himself awake, and Yuya’s words seemed to process.

“Has she been overworking herself again?” he said, almost grumbling. “Hang on.”

He dropped his bag and crossed the space over, pulling Yuzu easily off of Yuya and into his arms. Yuya sighed with relief, arm flopping down.

Yuzu giggled faintly, snuggling up against her father as her eyes fluttered, still mumbling weird things. The fever had really gotten to her, Yuya thought. Maybe that was a good thing...it would keep her from whatever nefarious plan she was up to.

Her father took Yuzu down to her room, and Yuya was sitting up by the time he came back.

Yuya flushed.

“Um...I’m sorry about that,” he said. “I, uh...”

Luckily, a tired smile just grew over the man’s face, and he shook his head.

“You must be a friend of Yuzu’s, right?” he said. “I hope my daughter hasn’t troubled you too much. Can I get you some tea?”

“Um...okay, thank you,” Yuya said, feeling like it would be weirder to refuse and run after what her father had walked in on.

Yuya sat awkwardly at the table, across from the man he now was introduced to as Hiragi Shuzo. He hadn’t touched the cup of tea in front of him yet, letting it cool.

“So, how do you know Yuzu?”

“We uh...met at a birdwatching group,” Yuya said. It...it wasn’t totally a lie. Sure, he had seen her before, on the train, but the birdwatching thing was where they had officially spent time together.

“Oh, you must be...right,” Shuzo said, nodding. “No wonder. I bet that uniform drew her to you.”

“Huh?” Yuya said, looking down at his own school uniform.

“We have a family friend who works there,” Shuzo said. “He used to go to the same school, you know?”


Yuya wondered, briefly, if he should tell Yuzu’s father what she was doing. She was the creepy one, for sure, but...it was still dangerous, what she was doing, right? Should he tell her father? Maybe he could do something.

“I’ll help you, in exchange for the diary.”

Yuya shuddered, and swallowed the words on his tongue. He couldn’t...he couldn’t tell. Yuzu
would never forgive him, and he’d never get the diary for Ruri.

“So,” Shuzo said, running his finger around the rim of his cup. “How long have you and Yuzu been dating?”

Yuya almost fell off his chair.

“W-w-what?? Oh—oh god, no, I mean—not that there would be anything wrong with that but uh—we’re just friends! She—uh—”

He almost said “she likes someone else” but then thought even that would be letting on too much about Yuzu’s private business. Shuzo, however, immediately brightened from the first ‘no’ and he smiled broadly.

“Oh! I see, that’s fine.”

He actually...hummed a little bit. Oh. Ohhh. So that’s how dads with daughters were, huh.

Yuya almost laughed.

Glad that was over with, Yuya eased himself back down, and took up his cup, taking a quick sip. He should really be heading back soon, anyway.

“I don’t think I got your name, by the way,” Shuzo said.

“Oh, r-right, sorry,” Yuya said. “I’m Sakaki Yuya.”

Shuzo blinked, lips parting for a moment. For a second, his brow furrowed.

“Sakaki...?” he almost seemed to recall something, but then shook it off. “Well, it’s good to have met you. I was starting to worry about her, you know...were you the one she got curry with the other day?”

“Oh, uh, yeah, that was me, and my brother and sister,” Yuya said. “She came over and we made curry.”

Shuzo smiled and nodded.

“I’m glad to hear that,” he said. “I work a lot so...I miss a lot.”

He rubbed the back of his neck.

“Thank you, for taking care of her,” he said. “It’s been hard, after her sister...”

Yuya blinked.

“She has a sister?” Yuzu had never indicated anything of the sort. Yuya realized too late the look in Shuzo’s eyes. “Oh. I’m...sorry.”

He shook his head, and stood up.

“I won’t keep you any longer, Sakaki-kun. But thank you again for being friends with my daughter.”

Yuya hopped up and nodded quickly, shaking his hand when it was offered to him. He spared Yuzu’s room the briefest glance before he hurried off.

Yuzu had a sister...

~ * ~ * F L A S H B A C K * ~ * ~

Yuzu

Hiragi Household

“Papa...I have to go to the bathroom...”

There isn’t a response. She’s too quiet. Quietly, she hugs Zo-chan and Sal-chan to her chest. It’s so dark. She’s scared to get out of bed—what if the monsters under the bed grab her? She opens her mouth to call again.

“We can’t keep living like this.”
The voice is quiet, but with Yuzu’s hyperaware senses in her childish terror, she hears it clear as day. Mama. That’s mama, in the kitchen. Curiosity overcoming anxiety, Yuzu slips out of bed, dragging Zo-chan and Sal-chan after her. She cracks her door open and peers down the hallway. There’s a light on in the kitchen. If she peeks her head through, she can just barely make out the shape of her parents.

“We have to.”

“That’s easy enough for you to say!”

“Himika, please...you’ll wake her.”

“You always do this. You always make it sound like it’s my fault.”

Yuzu pushes her head a little farther out her door, leaning. The shadows of her parents look frightening in the dim lighting, in the haze of her exhaustion. Childlike imagination twists the scene, and for a moment, she feels like she can see them clear as day, only papa has become her elephant, Zo-chan, and mama has become the salamander, Sal-chan.

They’re sitting across the table from each other, Papa curling and uncurling his trunk over and over, mama with her little salamander antenna smoking like a fantasy creature.

“Yuzu’s starting to understand things. She’s getting old enough to understand. We can’t start by bringing the pain into her birthday.”

“Into her birthday? Curry Day is — it’s not just her birthday, Shuzo, it’s Ray’s — ”

“I know, that and you know that! But Yuzu...we can’t do that to Yuzu.”

“It’s the day Ray died, Shuzo! You can’t expect us to just forget that!! It’s our duty as parents to remember her!”

“Remembering and dwelling on it are two different things!!”

Yuzu flinches as papa’s trunk slams against the table, and mama’s skin begins to turn red hot and flaming while she waves her claws up and down.

“We still have Yuzu! We’ll pour the love we had for Ray into her! That’s the agreement we made five years ago!”

“I can’t do it! Yuzu isn’t Ray!”

“But you’re still Ray’s mother! This is our fate as a family!!”

Papa stabs his tusks angrily into the table.

“This is our fate? That’s wrong, I won’t accept it!!”

Mama turns to flames entirely now, like she’s going to set fire to the table and everything around it. Yuzu can’t see, then, for the tears, and she stumbles back into her room, hugging her stuffed animals.

“This is our fate? That’s wrong, I won’t accept it!!”

Maybe...... she thinks. Maybe...if I could....become Ray instead...mama and papa would be happy again...?

~ * ~ * ~ END FLASHBACK ~ * ~ * ~

Dizzy. Dizzy, dizzy, dizzy. Yuzu wasn’t entirely certain she had gotten on the right train, it was hard to read the schedule with her swimming vision, but habit helped her choose the right one, and get off at the right station. The air felt so cold against her chilled, feverish skin, but she stumbled onwards anyway, her slippers catching on the gravel.

Muscle memory took her to Zarc’s backyard. The whole journey felt like a blur, from popping open her window, to leaving the roll of fabric beneath her blanket to simulate her being there, to clambering out and climbing down dizzyly to the ground and making her way to the train station.
First night, she kept thinking, clutching the diary to her chest. It has to be tonight. Tonight has to be the first.

She could see through her feverish vision that a light was on in Zarc’s house, glowing through the shades. He had just gotten home, she thought, remembering his schedule. She had time to set up.

She went to where she had hidden her things behind a bush, and took out only the essentials that she could find, dragging them all one at a time into the ventilation shaft. She rolled out the mats to cover the dirty floor, and her futon next, and dragged in the hot plate for making dinner. She clicked on her radio to catch the sounds of what was happening above her, tuning into the same station as Zarc would be listening to.

Overhead, she could hear the faint sounds of Zarc walking around. Yuzu opened up the diary and read the entry again, smiling.

It’s Zarc and I’s first night together. The first task we complete together is making dinner. I bought us both new toothbrushes, blue for Zarc, and red for me.

Yuzu set the diary aside, and began to make dinner, listening to the sound of Zarc humming overhead. She smiled broadly, even as her vision continued to swim.

I did it, she thought. Destiny...

~ * ~ * ~

“Yes. Yes. Of course. No, that won’t be necessary.”

Akaba Reiji neatly folded one leg atop the other, leaning his elbow against the couch arm, other hand pressing the phone against his ear. The luxuriously soft room flickered from the light of the fireplace, sending glitters of flame light across the thick plush couch, the soft carpeted floors, the dark paneled wood walls.

Reiji shifted the phone to his other hand, holding it to the same ear. With his other now free hand, he began to gently stroke the head of the little black hippo sitting in his lap.

“Of course. We are on schedule,” he said. “Project R won’t be a problem.”

Chapter End Notes

title art provided by dark-angel-of-muses on Tumblr! (or AngelOfMuses on ao3). Please check her out!
Yuzu

Hiragi Household

“Don’t hold back, please eat as much as you want.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Papa always smiles very kindly at Zarc, and he smiles now as he sits down across from them. He rests his chin on his hands, and then his eyes get a little distant.

“Zarc-kun...thank you for always being Ray’s friend.”

Yuzu feels the familiar shudder go through her every time the forbidden word, “Ray,” is spoken in the house. She sneaks a glance at Zarc.

He is smiling, the same kind of distant smile as papa.

“Ray was my everything as a child,” he says. “You don’t need to thank me.”

She trails just a half step behind him, walking back towards his home. He is so much taller than her, and it makes her feel small. Was Ray much shorter than him, too? Did he laugh when she asked to walk him home, like he did when Yuzu said she would, like he thought she was cute? Were their walks home this quiet?

“Zarc?” she asks.

He blinks, glancing down at her.

“Was Ray that amazing?”

She’s desperate. Desperate for something, anything, about the girl who came before her. Papa tells her not to worry about it, that it doesn’t matter, that he loves her as much as he loved Ray. That it doesn’t do to dredge up the past. Mama just gets a horrible, hollow look in her eyes, and tells Yuzu not to ask again.

Zarc’s eyes go distant for a moment, and he hesitates. He motions, then, to the park that they’re walking past, and leads the way to a small bench. He sits down, and waits for Yuzu to clamber up beside him. Her feet can’t reach the ground, so she kicks them slowly, quietly, back and forth.
“Do you know how to ride a bicycle?” Zarc says.

“Mmhm.”

“What if I asked you to ride a bicycle like when you didn’t know how? Could you do it?”

It’s an odd question. She frowns.

“I don’t think so. I’d fall.”

Zarc isn’t looking at her, instead, he is staring off into the distance at nothing at all. She lets her eyes flicker to the park. A cat sits in the lane, licking its paw. There is no one on the swings, but they move a bit in the breeze anyway.

“More like you’ve forgotten what it’s like when you couldn’t, right?”

She nods.

“You could say Ray was the one who taught me how to ride a bicycle,” Zarc says. He seems to be staring at the cat, now. “The world looked...different, when I was with her. More open...the wind streaking around us as life moved past in brilliant colors.”

Yuzu clings desperately to every single word. She doesn’t want to miss a single thing. Who was Ray? She has to know.

“But I can’t go back now. I remember how to ride the bike, but...something is gone.”

He reaches out one hand, opening and closing it. The cat has disappeared.

“It’s like...Schrodinger’s cat.”

Yuzu tilts her head, her pigtails brushing against her cheeks.

“Like what?”

“It’s a cat that’s half alive, half dead. It’s somewhere in between. It doesn’t know where or what it is.”

“Poor cat...”

Zarc looks down at his knees. Then he smiles, shaking his head. He pats Yuzu on the head and ruffles her hair, so that her head gets pushed back and forth.

“But, well...if that’s fate’s design, then everything must have a meaning, right?”

Fate. There’s that word again. She knows what that means. Her hands curl into fists in her lap as she hops up when Zarc does.

Everything must have a meaning.

She remembers the little pink diary that she found tucked in her drawer. Her sister’s: Hiragi Ray’s diary. Yes. Everything had a meaning. There was a meaning to why she had the diary, and a meaning to why she was born the same day her sister died.

If she can just become Ray.

If she can only just become Ray.

~ * ~ * E N D  F L A S H B A C K * ~ * ~

“So...how long are you going to stay down here?”

Yuzu rolled her head towards Yuya. He was laying on the other side of her curtain, just barely visible through the crack in the folds.

She rolled her eyes at him.

“You’re not dumb, Yuya. You know I’m going to do this until I complete my mission.”
“And uh....what is...that mission, exactly?”

She pursed her lips. She didn’t have to tell him anything. Then again, he had been just going along with her for a while now. Maybe she could let him in on at least something.

“Until Project R is complete,” she said. “That’s how long this will take.”

“And uh....what does that mean? R-Relationship?”

His face was beet red and he wasn’t looking at her when she rolled her head towards him. Why did that make him so embarrassed? Geez, boys were so immature.

“No, don’t be stupid,” she said. “Project R is....”

She realized she didn’t want to tell him, and folded her arms on top of her chest.

“It’s a noble and important mission that I have to complete. There.”

Yuya’s blush faded when he glanced across at her, grimacing.

“Yuzu, I hate to be the one to point this out while we are literally sitting beneath your crush’s house but...you know Zarc’s not gonna go for you right? He’s got a girlfriend, and he’s...you know. Too old?”

Yuzu nearly broke through the skin on her lip when she bit down. Yuya words clattered and echoed in her head, making her stomach twist. For the barest second, she felt like she was going to scream out loud— then her hand fell on the diary, and everything quieted. She inhaled once, and then out. Forget it. She had to forget it, forget the sudden panic and the screaming in her head and remember instead what her duty was and what she had to do. She curled her fingers around the diary and used it like a lifeline.

Before she could answer Yuya, though, her phone buzzed. She reached into her pocket and dragged it free, opening up the screen and glancing at it. A smile broke over her face.

“Tell that to destiny, then,” she said, feeling vindicated as she turned the phone towards Yuya. “Zarc just asked me out on a date!”

~ * ~ * ~ A Conversation ~ * ~ * ~

“No.”

“I’m not asking you do do anything unnatural. I’m just extending an invitation.”

“We agreed we’d keep her out of it. We agreed we wouldn’t involve her.”

“Honestly, darling...you’re getting so worked up about this. I don’t understand. Don’t you care about her, too? Do you want to cut her out of your life entirely? Or are you just too guilty, looking at her and seeing her face, instead?”

“I don’t know what you’re up do and I don’t like it. I don’t like not being able to predict you.”

“Just bring her, all right? Just trust me when I say all I want is a chance to show off for her. That’s it.”

“She’s not her. Don’t pretend that she is.”

“Funny. Isn’t that what you’ve been doing all this time?”

“...”

“My, was that too deep, darling? I’m not going to apologize for the truth.”

“Fine. Fine. I’ll invite her. But I have a condition: a promise you have to make for me.”

“Oh? And what’s that?”

“We have to make us official. No more dancing around the subject. We finally stop kidding ourselves and actually do this.”

“And you think that’s going to be the end of it?”

“No, but I hope that it is. I hope we can make this bullshit end with us. That’s all I want.”
...you’re a terrible liar, darling. But very well. I accept your terms.”

~ * ~ * ~

Ugh.

Yuzu’s day started out so good. Zarc sent her a text inviting her to attend a performance with him — clearly a date. He had said someone had given him two tickets that he needed to use; clearly an excuse to ask her out. She’d heard about the way that boys did that, tried to downplay what they were actually doing and feeling. She’d dressed up super cute, too, ready to play up her feminine charms as she had studied in all the gossip magazines she could find.

And then....yeah.

She looks stilted, Yuzu tried to think, looking down at the shining stage below them. It was a lie, though: Grace Tyler looked incredible on stage, like she belonged to it.

She and Zarc were right in the middle of the auditorium, a perfect distance away to see everything that was happening and not have anyone in the way of a clear view. The stage was set with a gorgeous backdrop and set pieces, made to look like the balcony of a French castle with a glowing Paris in the background. Yuzu could absolutely see the professionalism in the lighting, the sparkling and period appropriate dresses, and the sound design.

She only grudgingly admitted that Grace was actually a very good actress.

Grace practically shone on the stage below them, and it wasn’t just because of the stage lighting. She was dazzling, her brilliant silver hair piled atop her head in a traditional French design, her violet dress billowing around her. Each perfect motion was excellently in character, and honestly, if Yuzu hadn’t known she was the lead of this play, she wouldn’t have recognized her.

“My queen, please, let us be away from here,” one actress in a men’s uniform cried out. “If you but ask it of me, I would spirit thee away from this place, and prevent thy tragic fate.”

Grace folded her hands against her chest, and even from this distance Yuzu could see the glitter of actual tears in her eyes. Yuzu crunched her hands into her lap. She was good and it was annoying her.

“Ah, I cannot,” Grace cried. “For I am queen, and they are my people. Should they ask of me my life in return for my sins, I would gladly give it all up to atone!”

Well, she’s good, but the writing is a little...over the top.

She glanced at Zarc to try and get a feel for what he was thinking, though she was a little unnerved by the possibility.

Gah! Is he crying??

Zarc’s head rested on one hand, and while his face looked mostly expressionless, his lip was actually trembling slightly, and his eyes were glazed over with a thin layer of tears. Yuzu looked back down at her knees and tried to space out so that she wouldn’t have to pay attention to any more of the production.

“Now that was a show,” Zarc said, as they filtered out through the doors with the rest of the crowd in the wake of the show’s ending. “That last line hit so hard.”

He seemed in good spirits, though, if Yuzu had to be honest, she wished it wasn’t because of Grace.

“Ahaha, yeah, she’s really good,” she agreed blandly. “Thanks for taking me to see this show; it was fun.”

“Let’s go congratulate her on her performance,” Zarc said, pointing.

Yuzu glanced where he was gesturing, to see the doors opening up on the other side of the hall. The actors, still in their final scene costumes, were exiting. Before Zarc could even raise his hand, however, a huge crowd let out a scream behind them, and Yuzu gasped, people flooding past her and knocking her against the wall in their rush. In seconds, Grace was completely surrounded by legions of adoring fans, chattering and squealing.

Yuzu just sat against the wall for a second to catch her breath. Heat flared across her face,
however, as Zarc gently got her under the arm, helping her right herself. His hand didn’t leave her right away, either—or did she imagine him lingering?

“Man, I guess we can’t get close to her,” Zarc said, rubbing the back of his neck.

“Aw, that’s too bad,” Yuzu said, more to distract from her flushed cheeks than anything.

She saw Zarc glance at her out of the corner of her eye, and again, she couldn’t be certain if she imagined it or not, but she thought she saw his face soften. A small smile came to his lips.

“In that case, why don’t you and I grab dinner someplace? I’ll treat.”

Yuzu’s heat flared all the way to her ears. H-her and Zarc? Just her and Zarc?

“That would be—” she started.

Zarc frowned then, though, and looked down at his phone. Another smile broke over his lips.

“Ah, looks like Grace is one step ahead of us,” he said. ”She’s made us a reservation.”

Yuzu slowly, slowly deflated. She had been...so close...

Still, when Zarc looked up at her after putting his phone away, he still had that soft, gentle sort of look on his face, and he smiled at her again.

Well, she’d take the small victories, at least, knowing that right now, that smile was just for her.

~ * ~ * ~

“Hm? A party?”

Yuya looked up from the other side of the table, wobbling a pen back and forth between two fingers. He had a bunch of papers spread out in front of him that Yuzu wasn’t sure if it was math homework or financial statements for balancing the house budget. It could be either, knowing Yuya.

“Yeah,” Yuzu said, looking down at her hands on the table. “Zarc and Grace invited me to a fancy party, and they said to bring you along.”

She frowned, remembering Grace’s smile, which always looked eerie and condescending no matter what in Yuzu’s eyes. The way she had said “oh, and bring your boyfriend along with you.”

Not my boyfriend, she thought, feeling offended just at the thought. Not with this...dork.

“And do you really want me to come, or will I just get in the way?” Yuya said, raising his eyebrows at her.

“You said you want to help me,” Yuzu said, briefly glaring at him. “So I need you to come and help.”

“And by help, I’m assuming you want me to be your wingman.”

“Would you not make it sound like that?”

Yuya rolled his eyes, and then crossed them at her, sticking out his tongue. Yuzu bit back the urge to laugh—what a silly face. She reached across the table and smacked him lightly on the top of the head.

“Be serious! This could be an important turning point. This party could be my chance to get Zarc alone.”

“Have you considered like...doing it the right way? You know, like...just... confessing to him?”

“You don’t have to come with if you’re going to be like this.”

“No, no, I’m coming, I’ll come,” Yuya said, holding up his hands. He stayed like that for a minute, as though he had spaced out. When he spoke again, Yuzu felt like the words echoed around the house.

“I dunno if this is a dumb question, but uh...Yuzu, are you happy like this?”
Yuzu stared down at the wood grain of the table.

“Don’t ask stupid questions,” was all she could respond with.

~ * ~ * ~

“Wow, I’ve never been to anything so fancy before,” Yuya said, staring with his mouth hanging open like a fish. Ugh, how embarrassing.

Yuzu fidgeted, smoothing down the fabric of her little black dress and tightening the strap of her clutch around her wrist, just behind her bracelet. She peered out among the party. It was late, and the stars were just starting to poke out, not that that stopped the festivities, with large area lamps all around the lawn.

They were in the Academia district, a high end college town on the other side of the city from Yuzu. This was definitely where the rich people lived, she thought with some hesitation. Even her best dress felt woefully underprepared compared to some of the fancier ladies here, not to mention the fancy decor, the huge mansion house, the expensive looking food. She didn’t even see anyone her or Yuya’s age around, and suddenly, she was very glad that Yuya had agreed to come.

“Okay, this is our attack plan,” Yuzu said, tucking her bangs behind her ears only for them to immediately slide forward again. “You track down Grace, and engage her in conversation. I’ll draw Zarc away in the meantime.”

She looked over her shoulder to see if Yuya was paying attention, only to see that he wasn’t there at all. The tiniest spike of panic stabbed up through her throat, and she spun around.

There he was. He was hovering over one of the food tables, talking to one of the servers. Anger replaced her panic, and she stormed over. He yelped when she smacked him with her fan, bending over and holding the back of his head.

“Hey!” he said.

“Are you even paying attention to me?” she said, grabbing his shoulder and shaking him slightly.

“Sorry, Yuzu, I just thought I’d bring some home for Ruri...”

“You can do that later! First, we have to find Grace and Zarc...”

She trailed off, glancing around the party at the unfamiliar faces and realizing she hadn’t seen either of them anywhere. This was Grace’s party, right? Where even was she, not to mention Zarc? Weren’t they going to meet them at some point?

She heard the faint tapping of a finger against a microphone, drawing her attention to a small constructed stage at the end of the tables. Yuzu recognized the woman as Grace’s costar from the play, her thick curly brown hair in waves down her back.

“Good evening, everyone,” she said, sounding much more cutesy and excited than she did when playing the role on stage. “We’re all here today for our star of the hour, Grace Tyler...and she has something she’d like to share with everyone, so please give her your attention! Darling, it’s all you now!”

A faint smattering of polite applause filled the lawn, as Grace appeared coming up the steps from behind the stage. She smiled and nodded at her costar as she took the microphone. She looked radiant as ever, tonight in a dark, diamond studded blue dress, her hair curled and falling over one shoulder.

“I would like to thank every one of you for coming out to see me today,” Grace said, smiling as she carefully looked all around the lawn as though checking each person individually. “I never feel so blessed as I do surrounded by friends like you.”

Another smattering of applause.

“I have a very important announcement to make tonight, and one I’m sure will upset many, so for that, I apologize,” she said. She took a breath. “After the final run of Tragedy of R, I will be retiring from the Maiami Troupe.”

Yuzu’s hand slid off of Yuya’s shoulder. What?? She could hear a few shocked whispers passing among the guests, clearly as startled as she was.
“But from all endings, comes a new beginning,” Grace said. “I have someone I’d like to introduce.”

She turned slightly towards the back of the stage, beckoning. Someone came up the stairs, took her hand and allowed himself to be brought on stage beside her. His arm slid lightly around her waist.

“This is Tatsuzaki Zarc,” Grace said. “And as of this evening, we are engaged to be married.”

Immediately, the entire world went dark and silent. She was plunged, she felt, into a dark abyss of water: choking, but not struggling, drowning quietly. Grace’s mouth kept moving, and Zarc was still standing there with his arm around her waist, but Yuzu couldn’t hear anything. She felt the earth going out from underneath her, and then everything went blissfully dark and silent.

Chapter End Notes

god it's been a week since i've posted anything so i forgot to post this oOPS thanks for y'all's patience, I am back to (hopefully) a normal posting schedule!
She crunches into a corner. She shakes. Her hands quiver, pale against the pink book she has pressed against her face. She’s left the covers in an empty pile at the foot of the futon, but there is no sign that it was ever occupied. That he was ever here today.

The moonlight through the sliding door plays down her skin and makes her look like a ghost, like someone who doesn’t belong to this world, like someone who was never supposed to exist.

She clings to the book like a life raft in the black ocean that surrounds her, blotting out her vision. But it can’t keep her afloat today, no matter how many prayers and apologies she whispers into its pages.

*I’m sorry*: over and over.

*What is wrong with me:* again and again.

*I was about to*—: thought never finished.

*I’m not strong enough:* too many times.

She hits her forehead with the book and tries to get the words from the page knocked into her brain. *Remember fate remember fate remember fate* —

She has to banish the feeling in her chest, the tears rolling down her cheeks. She has to eliminate them.

She has to forget that when she threw back the covers and found no one there that her first thought was an unending, eternal relief.

*~ * ~ * ~ E N D F L A S H F O R W A R D ~ * ~ * ~*

“...and then she just straight up passed out in the middle of the party, and no one noticed except me and I had to carry her home. Honestly, she’s so much trouble.”

Shun plopped a cup of tea in front of Yuya and Yuya mumbled out a thank you. He let the green tea scent ripple over his nose for a moment before taking a tentative sip.

“So she’s not giving up the diary until she gets with Zarc, huh?”

“I haven’t talked to her since the announcement but...I’m hoping maybe this will make her give up.”

Shun slipped into the seat across from Yuya, resting his elbows on the table and his fingers lightly around his own cup. The kitchen was dark save for the one light over the stove, and their voices were quiet, so as not to wake Ruri upstairs. He briefly dipped one finger into his tea, swirling it slightly just to feel the heat on his skin.
“If she’s the kind of person I think she is, I don’t think she’ll give up,” he said.

“That’s what I thought,” Yuya said, groaning softly.

He reached down under the table almost automatically, grabbing his hippo by the scruff of the neck and hauling him on the counter. Pinku had crumbs all over its nose, as though it had been licking them off the floor. Shun winced when Ao headbutted him in the shin, and he, too, reached for his hippo, pulling him up into his lap and holding it there even as it squirmed and tried to punch him with its stubby legs.

“We need that diary, Yuya,” Shun said softly.

Yuya’s lips pressed together, which meant he had heard the edge in Shun’s voice.

“You think I should just steal it from her.”

“If she’s going to be like this, it might be our best option. We don’t know our timetable. We don’t know how much time we have.”

Yuya frowned and wouldn’t meet Shun’s eyes. Shun felt just a little bit guilty. This was his fault, after all...he shouldn’t have suggested that Yuya go along with her plans in the first place. Yuya was...too soft. That wasn’t a bad thing, but Shun had put him in this unfortunate position.

“Well, then try to help her move her timetable up, if she’s still into it,” Shun said, taking a sip from his tea. “If she can’t get Zarc in a permanent relationship, maybe one night’s all she needs to get it out of her system.”

Yuya’s face immediately went bright red.

“Shun, that’s illegal.”

“If that’s what it takes to get the diary, I think it’s worth it.”

“You want me to try and...try and get an engaged adult teacher to sleep with someone half his age.”

“It’s that or we lose Ruri.”

Yuya’s flush turned pale, and he stared down at the table again. Pinku wriggled across the table on its belly and began to gnaw absently on Yuya’s sleeve. Ao bit Shun and Shun grunted, releasing the hippo to the floor. It immediately began to use his leg as a punching bag, and Shun did his best to ignore it.

“We’ve got two options, Yuya,” Shun said. “Either get her to finish her plans so that she hands over the diary, or say fuck it and steal it from her. You’re in charge of this half of the operation, so I’ll let you decide what you want to do. But you have to decide.”

Yuya nodded almost imperceptibly, not meeting Shun’s eyes.

“Yuya. There isn’t an option where we don’t get the diary.”

“I know,” Yuya said, and his voice crackled a bit with irritation, dampened by the clear sound of a lump in his throat.

Shun didn’t want to push him. But he had to. He had to, or Ruri was gone.

“Shun, did you deposit your paycheck from yesterday yet?” Yuya said, clearly trying to change the subject.

“Yeah, why?”

“Just thought I’d do some shopping. We’re running a little low.”

“Oh. Right. You need to pick up your prescription tomorrow too, yeah?”

Yuya’s eyes flickered to the calendar, where Shun had seen the little circle indicating the day for Yuya.

“I’m going to cancel it.”

Shun had been halfway up from the table, thinking about getting another cup of tea.
“What?”
“I’m going to cancel it. It’s...we can’t really afford it anymore with Ruri’s medical bills. And it’s not like it’s necessary, you know? I mean. I can handle not growing facial hair.”

Yuya tried to laugh, but there was a faint look of upset in his eyes.

“Yuya, you can’t just...quit your hormones cold turkey.”

“I’ve been researching it; for someone my age it’s really not that big of a deal. Besides, it just makes this family all more complicated, don’t you think?”

Yuya gave him a goofy sort of smile.

Shun crossed around the table and took Yuya by the shoulders, turning him around and pressing his forehead to his. Yuya blinked with surprise, accidentally letting a few tears escape his eyes.

“Don’t worry about the money,” Shun said. “No, don’t say anything, Yuya. I’m the only who worries about the money, okay? You just keep getting what you need.”

“Ruri is the priority...”

Shun squeezed his shoulders.

“The priority is this family. Let me take care of it. All right?”

“Shun...you’re not doing anything wrong, are you?”

Shun just smiled, bumping his forehead briefly against Yuya’s and making him wince.

“You just do what you have to do,” he said. “I’ll do what I have to do.”

Yuya opened his mouth, probably to argue, but then his phone buzzed. Shun leaned back while Yuya fumbled for it for a moment, flipping it open to look at the message.

“It’s from Hiragi?”

Yuya nodded.

“I...I guess I’m going to go meet her someplace.”

Shun nodded, too, as Yuya stood up. He nearly reached for Yuya’s shoulder again, but then retracted.

“Do what you have to do,” he said.

~ * ~ * ~

“And are you going to explain why we’re at the school in the middle of the night, and why it looks like you’re about to summon a demon in the middle of the science lab?” Yuya said.

“I didn’t bring you onto my mission so that you could ask questions,” Yuzu said tersely.

It seemed to be her refrain nowadays, so Yuya didn’t press any more. Yuzu would explain when she was good and ready. Though Yuya had to admit that the sight of this room was...unnerving, to say the least.

Yuzu had cleared off all of the tables and pushed them together. A large magic circle looking thing like something out of an anime was drawn on the floor in chalk around the table, and there were candles lit all around the room. Yuzu’s laptop was sitting on another counter, screen glowing against the dark. There was something on the table, too, covered in some kind of cloth.

Yuya tugged at his collar.

“It’s hot in here,” he said, already feeling sweaty. “Is it the candles, or did you turn up the heat?”

“It has to be the right temperature,” she said. “Now come on, I’ll explain what you have to do.”

She was back to her usual self, looking collected, snapping out instructions, looking for all the world like she hadn’t just been dealt a devastating blow in her mission.

“So you’re still...doing this, huh?” he said. He had almost said “still on your bullshit” but thought
“I can’t give up,” Yuzu said. “The diary is very clear. Fate will work in my favor. Besides, I only need one night.”

It sounded all too much like what Shun had said, and Yuya’s face heated up from something other than the hot room. She wasn’t really planning on trying to sleep with Zarc, right? God, he was going to be in so much trouble if the police got involved. What a story he’d have to tell them. Maybe he could plead insanity.

Yuzu beckoned him over to the computer, and Yuya reluctantly followed. The screen was turned to some weird ass looking occult site, black with pink letters and an image of...a frog. A very fat, slimy looking frog.

“What is that?” Yuya said, wrinkling his nose. He heard a faint ribbiting sound from behind him, and he felt suddenly very, very nervous.

“It’s a special breed of frog used in certain spells and potions,” Yuzu said. “I happened to get a hold of one. I’m not a fan of using measures like these, but we’re on a much tighter timetable.”

His conversation with Shun earlier rose to the top of his mind, and he swallowed through an uncomfortable lump.

“I don’t think it’s going to work,” he said.

Yuzu shot a look at him. Maybe she wasn’t as collected as he had thought she was, because there was a desperate irritation sparking in her eyes.

“I can’t give you the diary for Ruri until I complete my mission,” she said.

Yuya winched. Yuzu and Shun both, they were both double teaming him with that.

Do it for Ruri, do it for Ruri, do it for Ruri.

Yuya squeezed his eyes shut, feeling sick.

“If it doesn’t work, then I’ll have fucked things up again,” he said. “Like I have for you, over and over.”

“Don’t be silly,” Yuzu said. “Listen, if you’re just uncomfortable about undressing in front of me, I’ll turn around—”

“What if I don’t count?” Yuya said, a horrible spike of nerves twisting his stomach. “I might not count, Yuzu. It says you need a teenage boy, what if I don’t count?”

“What are you...talking about?” Yuzu said, blinking at him.

She looked legitimately confused, not the same snappish girl from before, and Yuya felt suddenly lightheaded. He held his head in his hands, trying not to look at Yuzu for fear she’d see the tears in his eyes.

“I haven’t been taking my hormones in a few weeks,” he said. “I’ve been trying to wean off of them because I know we can’t afford them anymore, because Ruri’s been in the hospital for so long, and I don’t even know, Yuzu, what if I was making it up in the first place and just making all of our lives more complicated just like I make everything with you worse, what if I—”

“Hey!! Yuya, hey!!”

Yuzu gripped Yuya’s shoulders suddenly, wide-eyed.

“Hey, it’s okay, I’m sorry, I don’t know what I said, but it’s okay, Yuya,” she said. “Hey. Hey, breathe, okay?”

Yuya had realized how badly he was crying until she had grabbed him, and then he realized that he wasn’t quite breathing. He leaned into her hands, covering his mouth with one hand while he
tried to get a hold of himself.

“T’m sorry,” he said. “I’m just so useless. I can’t do anything to save Ruri, I can’t be as hard as Shun is, I keep screwing up your plans, and I doubt I’m enough to even have a stupid frog lay eggs on me for your love potion.”

Yuzu’s fingers dug into his shoulders for a few minutes, just holding him. She was biting her lip, looking really confused.

“Yuya...um,” she said. “Are you...you said hormones. You’ve been taking...hormones?”

Yuya swallowed and nodded.

“I wasn’t a boy when I was born. Or at least, I didn’t think I was a boy when I was born. It happened later. And it just made everything so much more complicated for everyone.”

“Oh, Yuya,” Yuzu said. “I’m...I’m sorry. I brought you to do something stupid like this...”

“It’s my fault. I keep screwing you up. I messed up your picnic lunch, and I looked at your diary without asking, and I keep getting in the way of this because— fuck, Yuzu, if I’m honest, I don’t want you to do this. I think you’re so much better than this. I think that I don’t understand why you’re doing what you’re doing and that you deserve better.”

Yuzu’s hands slowly slipped away from Yuya’s shoulders. For a moment, she hugged herself, looking down at the floor. After a beat, she leaned back on the counter beside her laptop, staring at nothing.

“If it means anything,” she said finally. “I don’t think you make your family’s life worse by being the person you are.”

Yuya opened his mouth, but Yuzu kept talking.

“I think you’re lucky, Yuya. Your family is...it makes me wish for something else when I’m with you. You all love each other so much, and I don’t think being who you are changes anything about that.”

She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, still not looking at him.

“I forced you into telling me a difficult secret. I’m sorry,” she said. “So I guess I’ll share one too, to make it up to you.”

She bit her lip, looking up at the faraway dark ceiling. The room was thick with heat and it was hard to breathe.

“I don’t love Zarc.”

Yuya nearly choked on the air that rushed out of him.

“You...what?”

“I don’t love him. He’s a nice guy and I like him. But I don’t have any romantic feelings for him. I don’t want to marry him or anything.”

“Then...then what on earth is all this for??”

Yuzu just sighed.

“Because it doesn’t matter what I want. It doesn’t matter what Hiragi Yuzu wants, because Hiragi Yuzu is an unnecessary existence. Hiragi Yuzu is someone I’m trying to erase.”

“Yuzu, what are you...”

Yuzu finally looked at him, and this time, she was smiling. It wasn’t a happy smile, but it wasn’t sad, either. He wasn’t sure what it was.

“Sorry,” she said. “I said I’d only share one secret in exchange for yours today.”

Yuya still felt like he was about to start crying. Like he was going to break down right in front of her. He clenched his jaw.

Then he huffed, and turned around, starting to pull his shirt off.
“Just put the stupid frog on my back,” he said. “I don’t know if it will work, but we may as well try.”

~ * ~ * ~

Yuzu stared up at the ceiling, mere inches away from her nose. The picture she had taped there of Zarc stared back at her, grinning that dorky grin of his. Somewhere up above her, she knew that Zarc would be sleeping soundly by now. If she had gauged her entry correctly, she would be laying right underneath him.

One hand rested on the diary beside her. It was a familiar feeling, her fingers tracing over the slightly embossed designs of hearts on the front, over and over again. Sometimes she wondered if she would wear marks into the diary, wear down the pink, slightly fabric-like front, but it never happened, no matter how many times she handled or held it, like it was something frozen in time.

*I slipped today*, she thought. *That was wrong of me.*

She should open up the pages of the book, refamiliarize herself with the words, remember what it was she was supposed to be doing. But every time she gripped hold of it, all she saw was Yuya’s face— saw Yuya’s crimson eyes in the dim science lab, holding hers, saying over and over “you deserve better than this.”

She closed her eyes to try and wipe the image away, tears bubbling to her eyes. The love potion had been a failure. Yuya had laid there on the table with the frog on his back for hours, both of them sweltering in the heat, and it had never laid a single egg.

All it had left her with was an impression of words she didn’t want to hear anymore.

She pulled the diary to her forehead and pressed it there, as though the words could rise up through the pages and consume her, could swirl through her mind and blood until Hiragi Yuzu no longer existed.

She breathed in the scent of the diary until she no longer saw Yuya’s face when she closed her eyes. Her breathing slowed. Even though the diary was not open, she saw the words against her eyelids instead. Her destiny: her fate. Her purpose.

*Project R.*

“And as of this evening, we are engaged to be married.”

Yuzu choked. She was underwater again, lost, drowning, scrabbling at her throat and struggling to breathe while the darkness below her glowed with a thousand eyes of a thousand things that wanted to rip her apart. Grace’s face, blurred by water above her, seemed to smile and wave while she sank, stealing everything Yuzu had left away.’

*No, I can’t I can’t I can’t I can’t I can’t—*

The diary clutched to her chest, she rolled onto her stomach. Her throat squeezed until she could barely breathe but she was moving anyway, struggling to get out from under the air vent. She fumbled blindly for the grill and kicked it free, not worrying about the noise.

The diary was a burning brand against her skin, the words *Project R* ringing over and over against her bones and rattling her down to her heart.

“We’re engaged to be married.”

The water was dragging her down, pulling her away from everything she had clung to, the riptide yanking her away from anything she might grab hold of.

Out of time. Out of time. The love potion had been a failure. She had to take matters into her own hands.

She stumbled to the sliding door. She knew where Zarc kept the spare key. She forced the door open, glass sliding free. She knew this house like the back of her hand, even in the dark, and her feet found their way without tripping. Heart hammered in her chest against the book, bouncing back and forth as though the diary were a prison it were trying to break down the doors of.

She found herself standing, trembling, in the doorway, one hand braced against the frame as she stared down at the heavy lump on the futon in front of her.

*Project R.*
If I want to keep Zarc and everything else I love then I have to tie him to me.

She was breathing so hard that she couldn’t hear her own heart and she was surprised she hadn’t woken him. She took one step. Another. The diary was burning the truth of what she was planning to do into her skin like a mark she would never escape.

I have to have his child.

She grabbed the covers with her free hand and lifted them back.

The futon was empty.

The diary burned on.
“Hey...”

She didn’t respond. Yuya hugged his knees, back leaning against the wall. Yuzu stood stock still in the middle of the room. The setting sun outlined her frame like a shadow cut out of the light.

Very, very slowly, she slid down to her knees, and then slumped sideways to the floor. He thought he could hear her mumbling over and over, something like “this isn’t happening.” He sighed, letting his chin rest on his knees. It felt weird, sitting inside Zarc’s bare, empty house. It still smelled lived in, but it looked abandoned. Not a trace of him remained. It was just another house on the market now. He felt like he was trespassing, but in comparison to the other things he had done these past couple of days, it barely registered for Yuya anymore.

“Come on,” he said, without getting up. “We’ll need to move your stuff out from under the house again, right? I’ll help you.”

Yuzu still just laid there, back to him, mumbling. Yuya sighed again.

Pinku was crawling around the floor on its stomach, nose whuffling against the floorboards. It found something in one corner, crumbs, maybe, and began to lick them. Yuya was too tired to try and scold it from eating stuff off the floor today.

Zarc had given him the postcard this morning after school. It was a sappy sort of thing, a pink background with a picture of a blushing Zarc with Grace holding one of his arms in a heart shaped photo frame. It announced both their engagement and their new address.

“I had to stay out there all night last night,” he had said, yawning widely as he handed Yuya the card. “Had a leak in the new place. But I’ll be moving in for real tomorrow. Come by and visit us with Yuzu-chan sometime.”

Yuya had a feeling that if he was getting a postcard, Yuzu would have gotten one too, and heard the news. He had been right, of course, and found her exactly where he had expected to find her.

“Maybe...” he started. He stopped briefly, wondering if anything he said would make things worse. “Maybe this is better, you know? Now you don’t have to force yourself anymore.”

Yuzu still wasn’t responding. Had she just shut down, entirely? Did her brain short out? Maybe up until now, the engagement hadn’t seem real for her. But one way or another, Zarc was getting married...even without that, Yuzu really hadn’t had a chance. What sane teacher was going to go for a student half his age?

Yuzu still wasn’t moving, so Yuya finally pushed himself onto his hands and crawled towards
her, leaning over her head.

“Hey,” he said. “Come on...you’ve gotta snap out of it sometime. You’ve got to keep living at some point.”

Yuzu’s eyes were covered by her bangs, and he nearly reached to brush them away, but thought better of touching her. Instead, he crawled over to where she had dropped her bag, where the diary had fallen out. He scooped it up with her bag, hesitating in the middle of tucking it back inside.

Shun would have told him to steal it right then. For a moment, his fingers tightened on it. He thought of Ruri, laughing at something stupid on television.

The image faded in the face of Yuzu, melted and defeated on the floor. His grip relaxed.

“Listen, I really don’t know what you’re getting out of this diary, but it’s really not doing you any good,” he said. “Make your next love something normal, okay?”

Yuzu finally shifted, her bangs falling to reveal her eyes glinting in the sunlight.

“Don’t touch that,” she said, in a dull, angry voice.

Yuya blinked, and then Yuzu was snatching the book away from him, shoving it into her bag and zipping it shut before pulling that from him too. She stood up with a snap.

Her bangs and pigtails were mussed, half coming out of her scrunchies. She looked...dead, Yuya thought with a shudder. Like she was some puppet moving only because the strings commanded her too. But there was a spark of wildness behind her eyes, too, something that made Yuya feel nervous.

*She’s going to do something drastic*, he thought. *She’s not going to let this go.*

He stood up. She was just a little bit taller than him, but not so much that he couldn’t reach her head. She jumped a bit when his hands got into her hair.

“What are you—” she started.

“I’m just fixing your hair,” Yuya said, working out one of her big blue hair clips and letting one pigtail free. “Don’t worry, I’m really good at this. I help Ruri with her hair all the time.”

Yuzu opened her mouth as though to complain, but then she closed it again. She wouldn’t look him in the eyes as he gathered her hair back up and replaced the hair tie. He fixed the other one, next, and then gently brushed the bangs from her forehead. This time she did brush his hand away, a faint, irritable blush growing over her cheeks.

“I’m not a child,” she said.

“I know,” Yuya said. “But you looked like maybe it would make you feel better.”

Yuzu glowered at him, but her shoulders slumped. Her fingers slipped a bit on her straps.

“Are you still willing to help me?” she said.

He wasn’t sure what she still needed help *with*. She wasn’t still on this, was she? How far would she ask him to go?

Still, she looked...small in that moment. So he smiled.

“Isn’t that what friends do?” he said.

She actually flinched, eyes widening. Her lips parted and she stared at him. Then her face tilted down, hiding her eyes behind the shadow of her bangs again. Yuya wondered if he had said something wrong.

“Hey, I’ve got an idea,” he said, touching her elbow. “Let’s not worry about moving you out today. Let’s just go do something fun, get your mind off things. What do you say?”

“I...”
“Come on,” Yuya said, grabbing her hand and squeezing it. “Trust me, okay?”

Yuzu shifted on her feet, but she didn’t take her hand away.

“Fine,” she said. “All right. But just once.”

Yuzu halfheartedly picked up one of the big fluffy zebras in the gift store bin. She stared at its big, soulless black eyes for a moment, then shook her head and put it back down.

It was surprisingly quiet, save for the hum of the artificial lighting overhead. Yuya hadn’t stopped talking for more than a moment since they had arrived at the zoo, and it was only now that he had run off with the promise of getting juice that it was silent.

Yuzu breathed out once in a rush. She could smell the thick scent of animals and manure from every time the door opened to the outside. It was...still the same, wasn’t it?

She opened up her phone, looking down at the picture. It was her, or a much younger her. Her mother and father leaned down on either side of her. Her father was making a dorky peace sign like usual, grinning so big it looked like he would burst. Mother had a much more restrained smile, but it was a rare image of her with her hair down around her shoulders in thick, curly waves.

She closed the phone and her little hippo charm landed on top of her fingers.

“Look, papa, it’s got an orange!”

“Oh, it does, it kind of looks like a yuzu, doesn’t it? It was made just for you, then!”

“Mama, can I have one?”

“We’ll get one for each of us then, Yuzu-chan.”

She stuffed her phone back into her pocket and made a beeline for the other side of the store, where they were selling phone charms. She walked down the wall, running her fingers over each bin. Elephants, snakes, monkeys...no hippos. She cracked a wry smile.

“Of course they wouldn’t still have the same one,” she muttered.

“Ah, Yuzu, there’s where you went! I got juice.”

Yuzu glanced up to see Yuya running between the shelves, a can in each hand. He smiled that huge, winning smile of his, and she couldn’t help but tentatively smile back.

“Thank you,” she said, accepting the juice he hadn’t her.

“No problem. I was getting thirsty anyway,” Yuya said. “So...how are you doing?”

He said it so earnestly that Yuzu nearly laughed. He was just...she didn’t know what he was. He was always trying so hard. Before she knew he was doing it for the diary, to save Ruri, but now...what was he going to do so much trouble for?

“Isn’t that what friends do?”

She nearly flinched again from the memory, sending a tingle down her arms. Why did that hurt? She didn’t want to think about it.

But Yuya was smiling at her, and...something about it was relaxing.

“I’m...feeling better,” she said, and was surprised to realize that it wasn’t a lie. “Um...thank you, Yuya. For putting up with me.”

“I thought you needed a break,” Yuya said, his smile getting bigger and even more sparkly. Yuzu felt a sudden heat right over her heart. Was it her imagination or did she feel...nice?

“I think you were right,” she said, her shoulders slowly slumping. She felt like a weight was dissipating from her shoulders. The smoky tendrils of the night before was something she could forget, something that was no longer choking her. Here, she was...safe. It was okay. The diary, for once, was not burning a hole in her bag, sending a cloud of smoke over her and making her
Oh, she thought. Had...had the diary felt that awful to her?

“Oba-san, oba-san, hurry up, hurry up!!”

“Slow down, Ayu-chan! You’re so excitable.”

Yuzu’s eyes twitched. For second, her gaze moved, almost of its own accord.

~ * ~ * ~ A S C E N E ~ * ~ * ~

She envisions them like her childhood nightmares. Sal-chan appears, in all her flaming salamander glory, antennae smoking and flaming around her head. The others appear like snakes, gigantic boa constrictors slithering on either side of her mother Sal-chan.

“Oba-san, look! It’s a big snake toy!” the smaller snake says, wrapping its tail around the plush.

“You really like snakes, don’t you, Ayu-chan,” Sal-chan says.

“Uh-huh!! I love them!”

“Don’t overwhelm her, Ayu-chan, you’re always running so fast,” the big snake says.

“Oh, it’s all right, she’s fine,” Sal-chan laughs.

The little snake coils around Sal-chan’s feet.

“By the way, oba-san...parent’s day at school is coming soon, and...and all the other kids say their mamas are coming. Would you come with me?”

Sal-chan’s antennae spark with surprised embers.

“Oh well...we’d have to ask your father about that...” she says, turning towards the other snake.

The snake’s eyes are as dead and lifeless as the stuffed toys, staring back at Sal-chan.

“Actually,” the snake says, curling up around Sal-chan’s chest now, squeezing her slowly. “I know this is sudden, but I wanted to ask you.”

The snake’s mouth stretches open wide, and attached to its forked tongue is a diamond engagement ring.

“Oh, goodness,” Sal-chan says, smoking up the room. “Yes, of course.”

The smoke is choking her, and she drops her juice can. She hears someone calling out her name but there is nothing left but her and the horrifying scene in front of her.

She is losing.

She is losing everything.

She runs, ignoring the voice shouting out behind her.

She runs but she can’t outrun the smoke.

~ * ~ * ~ E N D S C E N E ~ * ~ * ~

Yuya laid with his face planted into the table, arms limp and hanging off the sides of the chair. Pinku was lying on its back in front of him, looking sick to its stomach.

Ruri peeked through the railings to peer down at them, her hair falling around her shoulders.

“He looks like he’s moping, Kii-chan,” she whispered.

Kii made a whuffling sound that Ruri was pretty sure was agreement. Ruri peeked down again, rubbing her chin.

“I’ll bet it’s Yuzu-chan,” she said. “What do you think, Kii-chan?”

Kii pushed its nose up against the railings and blew out through its nostrils.

“Good, I’m glad we’re in agreement,” Ruri said. “Let’s initiate the operation!”
She hopped lightly to her feet, rounded the railing and grabbed hold of the pole, sliding down to the ground with a whoosh and ruffle of her skirt. Yuya immediately sat up at the sound, whipping around in his seat.

“Ruri, be careful!” he said. “Use the stairs!”

“It’s all right, I’m getting much stronger,” Ruri laughed, flexing her muscles.

By the time Yuya was out of her chair, she had managed to slide across the floor in her socks and bump against him, wrapping her arms around him where she fell. Yuya nearly fell, but adjusted quickly, grabbing hold of her to steady them both.

“What’s this for?” Yuya said, and she could hear the smile on his voice again.

“Yuya-nii was moping,” she teased, squeezing him. “So I thought you could use a hug.”

Yuya’s light embrace slackened for a moment.

“I’m really obvious, aren’t I?”

“You always are,” Ruri said, grinning as she looked up at him and poked him on the nose. “Let’s go outside!”

She let go of him and hopped back to the living room floor, letting Yuya splutter and then hurry to keep up.

“Ruri, you need to take it easy,” he said as she was already hopping into her boots and opening the door. “It’s cold outside!”

“It’ll feel refreshing! Come on!”

She laughed as she skipped out of the house and to the sidewalk. The streetlamps were on, glowing against the dark sky and sending pillars of light against the concrete. The nippy air swirled around her arms as she reached the edge of the sidewalk before the road and looked up.

They lived in the middle of a city, and it was hard to see the stars. But she could still make some of them out, faint pinpricks in the smoky black sky. She sucked in a deep breath of the cold air. It tickled going down and she laughed. Kii-chan made a muffled sound that sounded like it was trying to imitate her laughter.

She felt something soft and warm wrap around her arms, then, and looked back over her shoulder to see Yuya wrapping a sweater over her. He looked funny, flushed and winded. She giggled.

“You don’t have to worry so much,” she said, but she slipped her arms into the sweater while Yuya held it against her shoulders.

“If I don’t, who’s going to?” Yuya muttered.

“If you keep making that face, you’ll get your face stuck the same way Shun’s is.”

“Oh god, do I look like him?”

Yuya rubbed at his cheeks furiously as though he could wipe the face away. Ruri couldn’t help but laugh. She fell backwards a bit, hugging her stomach. Yuya smiled then, too, tentatively at first, and then he was laughing, too, and the sounds of their laughter echoed off the dark and quiet neighborhood all the way to the distant hum of cars and the soft barking of a dog.

Ruri came back from her giggles first, wiping a tear out of her eye, and Yuya had to lean against the fence for a moment.

“That’s better,” Ruri said. Yuya looked puzzled when Ruri reached up and cupped his cheeks in both hands. “Smiling suits you much better, Yuya-nii.”

Yuya blushed.

“Ruri, that’s sappy,” he said.

Ruri smiled, releasing him and doing a brief spin to make her skirt flare out.

“That’s what I do best,” she said, giving him a sweeping bow. Yuya rolled his eyes, but he was still smiling.
She dropped down onto the fence beside him, leaning against it so that she could crane her neck back far to see what little stars she could see.

“It’s beautiful out tonight, right?” she said.

“It’s the same every night.”

“But every time you get the see the night sky is happiness,” Ruri said. “You never know when the last time you’ll see it will be.”

She felt Yuya stiffen next to her. She slipped her hand across the fence to touch his reassuringly.

“Did something happen with Yuzu-chan today?” she said.

For a long moment, there was no answer. Only the distant sound of cars and the faint sound of someone opening and closing a door sounded through the neighborhood.

“I think I must have done something wrong, but I’m not sure what,” he said. “I...I guess I don’t understand her. I want to. I’m not sure why, but I want to.”

Ruri let her head rest against her brother’s shoulder, closing her eyes and breathing in. Then she hopped off the fence, turned around, and clambered on top of it. Yuya yelped. He leaped up and tried to support her as she pushed herself up, standing with her boots wedged into the fence. She pulled the clip in her hair free so that it could briefly burst out behind her, and then she reached down for Yuya’s hand.

“Come up here,” she said.

“Ruri, that’s dangerous!”

“Come on!!” she insisted, tugging on him.

Reluctantly, he followed her up on top of the fence. He clung to her hand ferociously while he found his balance, as though just waiting for her to fall. She waited for a few moments, while a gentle breeze blew between them and rustled their hair, until she finally felt him relaxing.

“This is the top of the world,” she said.

“Ruri, we’re like...maybe two feet off the ground.”

“Then why are you so worried?” she teased.

Yuya muttered something, and she laughed. She let the wind blow between them again.

“I think the top of the world is wherever you’re with someone you love,” she said. “I think it’s special just being with you and Shun. And with Yuzu-chan, too. Every time I’m with all of you, I feel so happy that I think I could fly.”

She squeezed his hand, reaching up towards the stars with the other.

“I think Yuzu-chan doesn’t realize it, but I think she feels the same,” she said. “Being with the people you love is happiness. And I saw her happy when she was with us.”

She leaned forward a bit to see Yuya’s face, smiling big. He looked so lost and uncertain, her poor big brother. He was so awkward and worried and never knew what to do.

“So just keep smiling for her the way you do for me, okay, nii?” she said. “And Yuzu-chan will feel like she’s on top of the world too.”

Yuya bit his lip. He didn’t quite look at her, yet. Then he sighed, and hopped gently from the fence while still holding her hand. He turned around and helped her down from the fence by her waist.

“Okay,” he said. “I’ll do my best, Ruri.”

Ruri hugged him again until he put his arms around her, too, and she smiled against his chest.

*Being with you and Shun is happiness,* she thought, to herself this time. *But this miracle can’t last forever so...make sure you find someone that’s happiness for you after I’m gone, okay, nii?”*
“Whew!” Yuya gasped, sliding down against the back of Yuzu’s door. “Moving out a second time is really exhausting.”

Yuzu didn’t respond. He chanced a peek at her through his bangs. She was sitting leaning against the wall, staring at nothing. She hadn’t said more than a few words all day, just enough to tell him what to pick up and what to carry as they moved all of her stuff out from under Zarc’s old house. He had actually been surprised to get her text asking for help in the first place. He had almost assumed she wouldn’t want to see him again after...after whatever had made her flee during the zoo. He still wasn’t sure what had happened. He wasn’t sure if he should ask.

“Yuzu?” he said.

She seemed to stir out of her thoughts.

“Thanks for your help,” she said. Her voice was hollow, like she was speaking through a tube from far away. “I appreciate everything, Yuya.”

“It’s not a problem,” Yuya said. “Are...uh...are you okay, though?”

Yuzu didn’t answer that, turning around and heading down the hall, back to the living room. Yuya scrambled to his feet and followed. Yuzu was already in the living room slinging her bag over her shoulder and picking up a small wrapped box.

“You can have the diary,” she said without looking up.

Yuya froze in midstep, nearly falling over. His mouth hung open.

“I— what?” he said. “Are you serious?”

Had she finally given up? A cold relief exploded through his chest and his shoulders slumped. Thank god. Yuzu could live a normal life after this...and if he got the diary to that hat possessing Ruri, maybe they could, as well.

“As long as this final task goes smoothly, I won’t need it anymore,” Yuzu said. “So once I’m done, you can have it. I’ll bring it over tomorrow morning.”

The relief was immediately halted in its tracks, curdling in his blood.

“What task?” he said.

He looked with suspicion at the wrapped box in her hands, now, nervous about what might be in it.

“It’s not important. You don’t have to help with this one,” Yuzu said. “You won’t have to help me with anything else ever again. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

She headed towards the door, still not having given him even one look in his direction. Yuya scrambled to follow, jumping into his shoes behind her and following her out the door.
“Wait, but where are you going?” he said. “Yuzu, are you going to do something dangerous?”

“Don’t be stupid,” Yuzu said, rolling her eyes. She shifted her box to one hand and dug into her bag with the other. She pulled out a very familiar looking sappy postcard with “we’ve moved!” sparkling on the front. “I’m just going to see Zarc and Grace.”

Yuya glanced at the box.

Something was certainly off about Yuzu. He wanted to believe the box was just a congratulatory gift for the newly engaged couple, but after everything Yuzu had tried in the past couple of weeks, he couldn’t imagine for a moment that she would give up. She had seemed okay, yesterday, but something had set her off. And even Yuya could tell how hollow her eyes looked, as though she were already dead and standing only by sheer will from beyond the grave.

He didn’t know what she was about to try, but he knew that he couldn’t leave her alone.

“Oh, you’re going to congratulate them?” he said. “Good for you, Yuzu! Hey, I actually got one of those postcards too, so maybe I’ll tag along; I want to see my teacher’s new place.”

Yuzu blinked at him. Her expression didn’t change even an inch, so he couldn’t tell if she was angry at him for intruding or not.

“Suit yourself,” she said, shoving the postcard back into her bag. “Keep up, then.”

She turned like a puppet on strings, and started walking down the sidewalk, nearly leaving him behind. He hurried to keep up.

He needed the diary, he couldn’t deny that.

But...if he was honest with himself...

He needed Yuzu to be okay, too.

~ * ~ * ~

“Whoa! So this is how celebrities live??”

Yuzu tried to keep her irritation in check, looking away from Yuya, who had pressed his face to the windows to stare down at the glowing city below. Why had he he come with her? This was just going to make everything more difficult.

“Sorry about him, he invited himself along,” she said, looking up at Zarc coming back with a tray of tea.

Zarc just chuckled, setting the tray down on the coffee table and taking up a spot on the armchair next to the couch.

“It’s fine, I gave him an invitation anyway. I kind of figured you two would come by together.”

Zarc’s golden eyes glinted from the chandelier over head, glancing towards Yuya briefly. Something in his face twisted down— or was it just a trick of the light? And then he was smiling again.

“I was making the same face when Grace brought me over the first time,” he called to Yuya with a laugh. “It’s a far cry from the place I used to rent, right?”

It was a very nice apartment, Yuzu had to grudgingly admit. Something that a celebrity like Grace could afford easily. Smooth, smoky floors, huge windows taking up most of the wall to look down at the city scape below, a full bar along the back end.

“I’m a little worried about the weather, though,” Zarc said, glancing at the television he had left on. “Maybe I should walk you guys home.”

“Oh, we’ll leave before the typhoon hits,” Yuzu said, smiling and waving her hands. “I just wanted to stop by and say congratulations on the new place.”

She shifted her box from the couch to the coffee table.

“I brought a little housewarming present, I hope you’ll share it with Grace-san!”

Yuya wandered back over to the couch, sitting gingerly on the other end as Yuzu popped the top
off of the box and then reached inside to lift out her creation.

“Oh wow!” Zarc said, eyes lighting up. “Did you make that yourself, Yuzu-chan?”

“I’ve been practicing,” Yuzu said, smiling proudly.

It was a very pretty little pastry, if she could be so confident in herself. She had made the mont blanc to look like a fluffy curry plate, two of Zarc’s favorite things. She knew exactly what she was about.

“Oh wow, I feel bad now,” Zarc said. “Grace just left this evening for her last national tour; she won’t be in tonight.”

“Aw, that’s too bad,” Yuzu said. She had known this, of course. She had planned for this exact moment. “Well, you can always save it for later...”

“Nah, she won’t be back for a while, let’s just have some between the three of us tonight,” Zarc said with a smile. “I’ll get a few plates, one second!”

He hopped up and made his way towards the bar. Yuzu pressed her hands into her lap. Her heart was hammering. Sweat pooled under her armpits. No, that was bad. She had to erase those feelings. Those were Yuzu’s feelings. Yuzu’s feelings didn’t matter.

“Wow, you really went all out on this,” Yuya said, startling her.

He leaned forward with his elbows on his knees, studying it.

“You really did just want to congratulate them, huh?” he said.

“Why are you saying it like it’s a surprise?” Yuzu said, sniffing even as a jolt of nerves passed through her.

Yuya just half laughed, and said nothing else. Zarc reappeared with forks and plates then, looking very excited. He was such a dork, Yuzu thought. Such a sweet, kind, excitable man.

Yuzu cut off a few slices and put them each on a plate. She balanced hers on her knees and made a face of nervousness, looking between Yuya and Zarc while they took up their plates and stabbed a bite.

“Does it taste okay??” she said, trying to sound worried.

“This is great, Yuzu-chan,” Zarc said. “You’re getting really good at this; your practice is...is...paying...”

He blinked, then, looking confused. Yuya’s hand slipped on his plate and he set it down, squinting with some confusion.

“I’m not sure...” Zarc started.

Then he slumped, and the plate slipped out of his hand and fell cake first into the floor, the fork clattering. Yuya slumped face first onto the table.

Yuzu waited. One second. Two. Neither of them stirred.

She stood up, set her untouched plate down on the coffee table, and walked over to Zarc. His eyes were half open, but he was clearly passed out.

He was heavier than she had expected. She hadn’t quite planned completely for this. It had been a last ditch effort, after all. Still, she managed, dragging him under the shoulders back towards the door of the bedroom, which she kicked open lightly and then angled him through. Thunder crashed outside as she did so, and the lights in the apartment went completely out, leaving her in the dark. That was fine. The dark suited her better right now.

With some effort, she managed to haul him onto the bed. He laid there heavily. Was he snoring? It was almost cute.

She wiped the thought away. She couldn’t think about anything at all or she would lose herself again. She would lose herself to the guilt and panic that had assaulted her the night of her first attempt when she had found him not home. She couldn’t lose her purpose.

Hiragi Yuzu had to die tonight.
And Hiragi Ray would take her place.

Yuzu went back for her bag on the couch. The sight of Yuya made her pause—but only for a moment. She tucked away all memories of his face and his words. Those had been for Hiragi Yuzu. And Hiragi Yuzu did not exist.

She returned to the bedroom, letting the door fall closed behind her. She wasn’t sure how long the drug would work, so she didn’t have much time. She dumped the contents of her bag. She sat on the end of the bed, extracting a tube of nail polish of the same color and brand that Grace wore, and quickly put on a few coats, using a drying medium to dry them out and harden them immediately. She took up a small bottle of the same perfume Grace used, spraying it lightly on her wrists. She slipped off her school uniform, then, leaving herself only in a thin black shift.

It was cold in this room, she thought, but the thought felt far away, echoing, as though it weren’t really hers. That was all right. She didn’t need to have thoughts.

She shuffled her bag and pulled out the final piece. A long, silvery wig. It would look like Grace’s hair without close scrutiny. She took her pigtails out and pushed them underneath the wig as best she could, stuffing herself into it.

Did she feel like Grace? Did she feel like Ray?

She felt like nothing. Just a hollow puppet girl with the burning smoke of the diary from her bag choking her.

She climbed up onto the bed over Zarc. He breathed softly, now, head lolled to the side, eyes closed. Briefly, she cupped his face with one hand. She supposed she should feel something, right now. Lust, at the very least. She felt nothing.

“This is your destiny,” she mumbled to herself. “You have to do it. You have to.”

She didn’t have time to waste on ceremony. She slipped her fingers into the button of his pants and pulled it free.

A hand snatched hers and yanked it back.

~ * ~ * ~ F L A S H B A C K ~ * ~ * ~

Yuya

Zarc and Grace’s Apartment

There is something wrong with this cake, he thinks immediately. He mimes taking a bite, but Yuzu’s eyes are mostly on Zarc. He does not have to fake it too much. Pinku already has its entire mouth around Yuya’s portion and is swallowing it before Yuya can stop it.

Less than a minute later, Pinku is face first on the floor, knocked out, and Yuya knows what Yuzu is planning.

He fakes it, at first. Hoping that maybe it’s a lie. Maybe she won’t. Maybe she’ll realize what she’s doing and stop.

So when Zarc blinks and squints with a sudden sleepiness, so does Yuya. When Zarc slumps forward, Yuya does too. He lies, silent, monitoring his breathing, while he listens to Yuzu dragging Zarc one step at a time back to the bedroom. Waits while she comes back for her bag and leans down to check if he’s still asleep. Moves silently to the door and waits, back to the wall, listening.

He hears only rustling for a bit. Then the creak of the bed.

She’s actually going to do it. He can’t let her do it.

Before he can open the door, he hears a faint voice inside.

“This is your destiny,” she whispers, but her voice is cracked. “You have to do this. You have to.”

Yuya doesn’t know what to think, but he knows a cry for help when he hears one. He flings the door open.

~ * ~ * ~ E N D  F L A S H B A C K ~ * ~ * ~
Yuzu stared at him, wide and wild eyed. She looked wrong in that silver wig, her own hair peeking out from underneath it.

“Don’t,” he said. “You don’t want to do this.”

She yanked her arm from his grip.

“You faked it,” she said, voice trembling. “You little...you were faking.”

He grabbed her wrist again and tried to pull her away. He wanted Yuzu to be okay— but what she was doing was something unforgiveable, and he couldn’t let her go through with it.

“You don’t want to do this,” he said.

“How the hell do you know what I want?” Yuzu said. “Let go of me.”

“I won’t.”

“Fuck you, Sakaki Yuya, fuck you, let go of me.”

“I’m not going to let you do this to him, or to yourself! You don’t need to do this! Fuck your destiny!”

She swallowed back her scream as though still worried about waking Zarc up. Yuya tried to grab her shoulders and wrestle her off the bed. She smacked at him, at his face, at his chest, but it was wild and weak and her blows just bounced off of him. She knocked one hand off of her and when he tried to grab her again, her struggles made him overshoot. His hand caught in her wig and he went face first into the floor, wig coming with him.

He could have sworn his thump was so loud that it would make the whole building shake, and almost as one, both he and Yuzu froze.

The lights flickered back on.

Yuya pushed himself to his knees, gasping for breath. Yuzu was just sitting there, still straddling Zarc, her hair mussed and sticking in places to her face. Her face was so white that she could have been cut out of paper.

Yuya opened his mouth with another plea— please stop this, please just go home, please—

The doorbell rang.

Yuzu nearly screamed, clapping her hands over her mouth. Yuya flinched, hands knotting into the wig. The bell rang again. Then a voice came in over the intercom.

“Darling~” Grace said. “My flight was canceled from the typhoon, so I’ve come home for the night. Are you awake?”

Yuya and Yuzu both looked at each other at the exact same time.

“The autolock isn’t letting me in, I think the power outage knocked it out....Zarc? Are you in there?”

~ * ~ * ~

Yuya hit torso first into the railing of the fire escape, gasping for air. Rain poured down from the roof over head, and while the stairs of the fire escape shielded them from most of it, the metal was wet and slippery under his feet and he dropped painfully to his knees.

Yuzu was hyperventilating behind him, collapsing back first on the stairs. She hadn’t had time to put her clothes back on and she was still in just that thin shift that barely covered any part of her. She looked cold and bedraggled, her things sticking out of her bag from where she had shoved them all at once.

It was just now hitting Yuya exactly what Yuzu had planned to do, and exactly what he nearly walked in on.

His chest heaved, but there was nothing in his stomach to puke out. Pinku had its head through the railings, getting soaked as it made pitiful hiccuping sounds as though in response to Yuya’s own burst of horror.
“What is wrong with you?” he finally gasped out, gripping the railings to support his trembling hands. “What the hell were you thinking?”

“What the hell were you thinking?” Yuzu gasped, bangs plastered nearly over her eyes. “That was my last chance...that was my last real chance and you ruined it!”

“If I hadn’t stopped you, Grace would have walked in on you— on, you know, raping her fiance!”

Yuzu flinched. Her mouth dropped open and her face went even whiter. After a beat, her trembling hands reached up and knotted into her hair, digging into the sides of her head and she curled her face up towards her knees.

“I’m sorry,” she gasped. Was she talking to...to Yuya? “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry.”

“Yuzu...” he mumbled, feeling a little guilty despite everything. Water leaked down onto his head as he crawled forward. He touched her knee gently, but she flinched as though he had burned her.

“Don’t touch me!” she screamed. “You ruined it, you’ve ruined everything, you’re always trying to stop me!”

“I— of course I’m trying to stop you! Are you listening to yourself?”

Yuzu flinched back and forth, sobbing.

“I’m sorry,” she gasped. “I couldn’t be her tonight, I couldn’t be her. I couldn’t erase Yuzu. I couldn’t get rid of her, I couldn’t get rid of Yuzu.”

“Would you— shut up!!” Yuya shouted over a sudden booming shake of thunder. “Shut up! Why do you have to erase Yuzu? What’s wrong with being Yuzu?”

“You don’t get it! You’d never get it!”

“I don’t want to get it! Not being Yuzu means you’re trying to rape people!”

“He should have been with me in the first place! That was supposed to be my destiny, I was supposed— Project R was supposed to happen!”

“Project R, Project R, this is all you fucking talk about! You’re ruining yourself, and for what? Tell me right now, Yuzu, tell me right now or so help me—”

“It’s Project Relation!” Yuzu screamed at him. “It means Relation! I have— I have to have Zarc’s child, or everything I love will disappear!”

Yuya felt something inside him just give out. Of all the crazy shit he had heard today...he wasn’t sure if it was Yuzu’s panicked breakdown, or if it was the truth that she was trying to get Zarc to impregnate her, or the rain and the cold and the wet or just the horrible heavy sickness growing in his stomach, but he felt like he all at once lost the ability to stand up again.

“Are you...are you crazy?” he said. “How is having his kid going to make— anything better?”

“You wouldn’t understand,” Yuzu gasped.

“I’m trying to understand! You won’t let me! How am I supposed to help you if you won’t let me?”

“You don’t want to help! You want to help Yuzu! Yuzu needs to disappear!”

“I happen to like Yuzu!” Yuya shouted back. “Why does she need to disappear?”

“You don’t get it! My family— my family fell apart when Ray— I have to be her, I have to become Ray, or I lose everything. I have to be her and everything I love will be eternal.”

Yuya slumped onto his hands, shaking his head slowly. He didn’t get it. He didn’t want to. And yet, he did. Somehow, he did. She just wanted her family back. How had it come to this?

“This isn’t how you do it,” he said, voice cracking with desperation. “This isn’t how you make it happen. You talk to them. You tell them the way you feel,”

“I have to follow destiny,” Yuzu insisted, rocking back and forth slowly. “I have to.”
“And what about the way they feel?” Yuya gasped, feeling angry again all at once. “It doesn’t matter what Zarc, and Grace, and your parents want? It doesn’t matter at all?”

Yuzu’s eyes cut through him like glass.

“I’m not the only one here,” she said, voice trembling, tears rolling down her face. “You’re faking, too, I can tell—you, and Shun, and Ruri, all pretending to be a happy little family and you’re just fake, I can tell, you’re trying to hold together something that’s not even real—”

Yuya briefly whited out. He heard Yuzu squeak and he flinched back. Had he grabbed her? His lip trembled, his hands shook, oh god.

“Yuzu,” he gasped.

“No, forget it,” Yuzu said. “Forget it! I’ll—I’ll do this by myself from now on. I don’t need you.”

Her eyes were so red. His hands shook so badly.

Before she could grab her bag, he did. The wig came out when he yanked the diary free and stumbled back against the railing. Yuzu’s eyes widened and she leaped to her feet. She winced at the cold wet metal under her bare feet but she stepped forward anyway.

“If this is what this stupid book is doing to you, I don’t want you to have it,” he gasped.

“You need that for Ruri, Yuya, don’t think about—”

“If this is what it does to you, then I don’t want it for Ruri, either!” he shouted.

And he flung it down from the fire escape as hard as he could.

Yuzu screamed. She shoved past him to get down the stairs after it. For a moment, all Yuya could do was slump against the railings. His ears rang, the rain water was finally spraying him as the winds picked up and soaking his shirt, and he couldn’t think past the fuzz in his head.

She’s going after that stupid book again, he thought. Her broken eyes and tangled hair flashed over his head. He dropped her bag and bolted down the fire escape after her.

He heard the roar of a motorcycle as he hit the bottom of the stairs, squinting through the rain pouring down his face. He pushed his bangs from his eyes and squinted for some sign of Yuzu in the dark and rain. Where was she? Where had the diary gone? Was she still looking for it?

No, wait, there she was!

He saw her, soaked and bedraggled, staring at something in her hands.

“Yuzu!” he called out.

Like a zombie, she staggered forward. Bare feet splashed into puddles as she staggered off the sidewalk and into the street, not looking where she was going, one hand out in front of her as though reaching for something ahead of her or trying to find something in the air.

She was in the street. Headlights flashed through the pouring rain.

In slow motion, he heard the truck lean hard on its horn and saw Yuzu not even look up.

He flung himself into the street with his hands out, panic searing his eyes to white.

“YUZU!” he screamed.

His hands struck her hard in the back and sent her flying. His eyes twisted up to see the headlights on top of him and then the ground was no longer under his feet and the stars were no longer over his head.

He hit the ground once and then nothing existed anywhere.
“They’re so big,” Ruri said. “They look really huggable.”

“Don’t do that, they’ll eat you,” Shun said.

“They will not!”

“Hippos are really a lot tougher than they look, you know; they’re the most dangerous animals in Africa.”

“But they look so big and slow,” Ruri said. “Right, Yuya-nii? They look really cute.”

“They really do,” Yuya said. “On land they have a lot more trouble, I think, because they’re bigger.”

Something flickered. Ruri frowned. Had something been moving in the enclosure? Something other than the hippos? She leaned further over the railing, squinting. But there was nothing.

A phone buzzed behind her, but she stared at the hippos.

Rolling. Yellow.

“Work again?” Yuya said.

Tiny black eyes. Glinting at her from under the hippo’s legs.

“Yeah,” Shun said. “Sorry, Ruri, I’ll be right back. I’ve got to take this.”

Tiny ears twitch. Big nostrils quiver. It’s peeking out over the top of the hippo now.

“You work way too much,” Yuya said. “Take a break once in a while.”

Eyes blink once. Ruri blinks too. It’s gone.

“Yes, mother,” Shun said. “I’ll be right back.”

She feels the heavy presence of eyes on her. She looks, quickly, to the left.

Shun flipped his phone open as he quickly walked away to take the call.

There. There’s a child, standing and staring at the hippos, arms limp at their side. Their long lavender hair tangles down their back. An odd hippo-shaped hat rests on their head. They are
not looking at her, and yet she can feel them staring.

She blinks, and they are gone, too.

Ruri stirred briefly, leaning back from the railing again. Had she really seen something?
Then Yuya’s hand was on her head, ruffling her hair, and she giggled, coming back to him.
“Hey, the gift shop is really close,” he said. “I’ll buy you anything you want today.”

~ * ~ * ~

“Ruri, that’s—that’s so cute,” Yuya said, eyes lighting up.

“Isn’t it?” Ruri said, spinning so that the tassels of the hippo hat spun around her. “Can I get this, Yuya-nii?”

“If that’s what you want already! I’ll go pay for it.”

She hands it to him, bouncing from her toes to her heels a few times.

Tiny black eyes. Glittering from around the corner. Its face is too big to really peek just one eye around the shelves. It's looking at her.

Ruri blinked, lips parting. She stared and blinked once. No, she wasn’t imagining it. The tiny yellow hippo stared at her. Its nose was twitching; it wasn’t a stuffed animal.

It turned away and disappeared.

“Oh! Wait, hippo-san!”

She jogged to the shelf and looked around. Where did it go...? Ah!

Curly yellow tail vanishes around the corner. It’s going down the hall at the end of the gift shop.

“Hippo-san?”

She followed it to the back of the gift shop, and through the back door. The sounds of people chattering over merchandise and the cash register clanging disappeared, and she was surrounded by silence in the long, dark hallway. Was the gift shop this large, even? She didn’t think there would be space for this back here.

Whuffling nose pokes around the corner. One stubby leg waggles, like it’s beckoning her.

“I’m coming, wait!”

She ran down the hallway, the sound of her boots ricocheting off the walls around her. She reached the end of the hall and looked both ways. Oh, there it was! It was waiting for her. As she approached, it stuck one stubby leg out and leaned forward, pushing into a button. Ruri jumped a little at the sound of the elevator opening, she hadn’t even noticed there was one there. The hippo hopped inside.

“Where are you going?” she said.

It did not answer.

Ruri hesitated for only a moment. As the doors began to slide shut, she bolted through them. She stumbled, nearly hitting the other wall from the force of her movement forward, but she recovered in time, grabbing hold of the bar.

The elevator clunked once, and then she felt it starting to go down. She turned around. There was the hippo, standing in the corner next to the buttons. Her eyes followed the buttons as each one lit up, one at a time. They were going down...all the way down to the basement. The basement? Of the zoo?

The final light lit up, at B2. Well, that wasn’t too far.

The hippo hit the panel hard.

The whole panel flipped over, it was on some kind of hinge, swinging around to a second side with far too many buttons. The hippo leaned forward, stubby leg still held out, and hit the very
The elevator hums as it heads down, down, down, farther than any human has the right to venture. She thinks, perhaps, the world grows colder as she goes farther down, but perhaps it is only her imagination. She and the hippo stand silently, politely, and neither makes a sound while the lights tick down to the final floor.

The elevator kerchunked to a stop. Ruri felt a breath curl out of her lungs, as though she hadn’t been breathing and hadn’t realized it.

The doors slid open. The hippo stepped outside and into the grass.

Ruri stared through the doors. A blue sky shone above, and a faint breeze rustled the bright green grass. Beautiful trees swaying softly in the wind, the sun staining patterns through their leaves onto the ground. In the distance, all by itself with no roads or other signs of civilization, a building rose from the earth.

“That’s...our library,” Ruri said, to no one in particular.

She stood in front of the library, with her books in her arms. The doors slid open and she joined the line of faceless people on the way to the circulation desk.

“Returns?” the woman at the desk asked.

“Yes, please,” said Ruri. “Could you see if you have a book, as well?”

“What are you looking for?”

“Super Frog Saves Tokyo.”

“Hm...I’m sorry, I’m not seeing that title in our records. Are you sure you’re not mixing up the title?”

“No, that’s all right. I think I remember where I saw it here before.”

She runs her fingers over the spines. She knows she saw the book here once before. She hears a squeak and glances over. The hippo is making a funny post, half bent over backwards with one leg poking at some of the shelves. She smiles. “Are you looking for the book too, hippo-san?”

The hippo spun away down the shelves and disappeared around the corner. Ruri straightened up.

“Hippo-san, wait for me!”

She rounded the corner...and stopped.

The door clicks. Panels slide up and down and to the side, like a sliding puzzle of blue and white that she cannot comprehend. The hall is dark. It’s so dark that it feels like it’s choking her. What is this door doing here? It wasn’t here before. For the first time, she feels that something is odd.

The hippo reached up on the very tip of its toes as the door clicked to a stop, and pulled on the handle. The door edged open.

Ruri followed it inside.

A long, endless staircase spreading off to the right met her advance, and as she took the steps down, the light reappeared. Books, she saw. Thousands and thousands of books, all with green covers, filling the shelves all the way up to the top of the unseeable ceiling and all the way along the endless wall.

Super Frog Saves Orpheus

Super Frog Saves the Mistress

Super Frog Saves Assassination Forest

Super Frog Saves Othello

Super Frog Saves Will o’ the Wisp

Super Frog Saves

Super Frog Saves
“It’s electrifying, isn’t it?”

Ruri jumped, her hand darting away from the shelves where she had been checking each title.

The hippo had gone ahead, and it was standing at the bottom of a ladder. It looked...well, for a better word, it looked angry, despite its unblinking black eyes and unchanging face. Ruri looked up at the top of the ladder. She couldn’t see him very well at first, but then the light from the sky showing through the ceiling above finally caught his magenta-violet hair, and he slid down the ladder all at once to land with a graceful thunk. The hippo leaped out of the way and began to run in frantic circles.

When he turned to smile at her, she found that she wasn’t sure how to feel. He was young. Not much older than her. His eyes were a deep magenta, and almost seemed to not have pupils in the light. He was paler than she as, and the apron he wore did not seem to suit him.

“Who are you?” she said, her voice echoing across the vast expanse of books.

He smiled again, but it didn’t seem kind. He bowed to her with one arm in front of him.

“I? I am Yuuri. Welcome to the Hole in the Sky Library.”

He stood again, tilting his head with his ever present smile.

“Is there anything I can help you find?”

Ruri shifted from one foot to the other. She glanced at the hippo, which was now laying stomach down on the ground, whuffling through its nose and staring at her.

“Super Frog Saves Tokyo,” she said softly.

“Ahh,” Yuuri said, clapping his hands together. “You must have a very deep longing for this book, to have come here for it. I shall do everything in my power to retrieve it.”

“ Weirdo.

They are walking down the stairs. They seem to go forever, these stairs. If she looks across the darkness, there is a mirrored side to this library, with more stairs, and more books. Endless and endless ages of them.

“Is this really an annex of the library?” she said.

“It is,” Yuuri said. “But it’s been a long time since we’ve had a visitor.”

“Oh?”

“It takes a very special sort of person to find their way here.”

“So, am I special then?”

“It’s a joke. But when he looks over his shoulder and smiles, she thinks that perhaps he doesn’t think so.

“Special,” he agrees. “It means you have been chosen by fate.”

He stops abruptly and tugs a yellow book from a shelf of yellow books: Super Frog Saves B-Trio.

“I do believe I have found your book.”

~ * ~ * ~ F L A S H B A C K ~ * ~ * ~

Ruri

Childhood

“This one!! This one looks great!”

Rin jabs her finger at the screen excitedly, and Ruri and Selena crowd around to look. The image is of the three of them, holding their instruments in dazzling poses, like the idols they’ve seen in magazines.
“I love it!” Ruri says.

“It’s a great one,” Selena agrees.

“Great!! I’ll put that one on our application for the audition,” Rin says, pulling the form out of her bag and slapping it on the desk for all of them to see. “I filled it out last night!”

“On top of things as always,” Selena said, leaning in and looking impressed. Then she blinks, frowning. “Oh, but...”

They all look at the single empty space as one. Ruri puts a finger to her lips.

“Group name....” she says thoughtfully.

“The Zebras!” Rin blurts.

“That sounds like a comedy routine,” says Selena.

“Um...the Hippos!! Hippos are cool.”

“Ew, no way.”

Rin pushes Selena, and the light of the setting sun glints over her bracelet, sending glitters over the tables. Selena pushes her back, and her big blue bracelet sparkles too. Ruri raises her hand to the cold metal around her own wrist, twisting it thoughtfully.

“Triple B,” she says, almost just thinking out loud.

The two squabbling girls look up at her, blinking.

“Huh?” says Selena.

Ruri holds up her wrist, and points to the bracelet, smiling.

“Let’s be Triple B. B, for bracelet—cause we all have one!”

The other two look down at their own bracelets. Then Rin bursts into a smile.

“Triple B!” she says triumphantly. She scribbles the name down. “Okay!! We’re ready for tomorrow! Don’t forget, wear your matching ribbons for the audition tape; we’ve got one day till the deadline!”

~ * ~ * ~ E N D  F L A S H B A C K ~ * ~ * ~

Yuuri considered her over the top of the book. The pages were hiding his mouth, so she couldn’t tell if he was still smiling. She looked down.

“Something like that happened, huh?” she said softly.

“No?” he said. “Not the one you were looking for? Then let’s continue.”

“Why are you showing me these?” she said.

“How about this one?” Yuuri said, without responding. Suddenly, they were in a new section, this time with red books. He pulled another book from the shelf and popped it open: Super Frog Saves Sakaki Ruri.

~ * ~ * ~ F L A S H B A C K ~ * ~ * ~

Ruri

Sakaki Home

“There! Don’t you look cute, Ruri-chan.”

Ruri opens her eyes. Her hair is in two big, puffy pigtails, tied up with a bright blue ribbon. She looks closer. Her heart clenches. Oh no— the pattern is wrong...where are the birds? What’s with these clouds?

Papa puts his hands on her shoulders, smiling at her from behind, his face shining in the mirror.
“You’re going to do perfectly at your audition, Ruri-chan,” he says.

“No!”

He blinks with surprise as she whips back to him.

“This is the wrong one! It’s not the matching ribbon!”

Papa tries to console her, gently patting her shoulders.

“They were sold out of the one you needed, Ruri-chan, I thought this one would be close enough...”

“It’s not!! It can’t be! I have to match, papa! You...you promised! Papa is a liar!”

“Ruri, Ruri, shh, shh, it’s okay.”

She leaps to her feet and whirs on him, grabbing his shoulders back.

“You promised, papa! You have to get the right one!”

“Okay, Ruri, it’s all right. I’ll go to the store in the next town tomorrow and get the right one.”

“No, no, no, tomorrow’s not soon enough! Papa, you have to get the right one, you have to keep your promise—”

She tries to push him with her tiny hands and she loses her balance. Her foot goes out from under her and she kicks into the mirror. She hits the ground. The mirror wobbles.

“RURI!”

There’s a flash and a whoosh and then the crack and shatter of glass and she feels blood on her hands but it’s not hers.

“Papa?” she gasps, from underneath him. “P-papa?”

She sits on the very edge of the bench, hands fisted into her skirt, trying not to cry. Yuya is sniffing on the other side of the bed. Shun holds his hand. He tried to hold Ruri’s hand, first, but she couldn’t do it.

It’s her fault.

“The blood loss was a little worse than we expected...he should stay here tonight, until he stabilizes. It’s likely that the cuts will scar...”

Ruri curls down, presses her face into her knees. She chokes.

“Ruri...? Is Ruri-chan all right...?”

Ruri sits bolt straight up. Papa is awake. A bandage covers one cheek and part of his eye. His entire arm is bandaged up. He smiles at her anyway, lifts his other arm from the bed towards her.

“Ah, thank goodness,” he breathes. “I’m so glad you’re not hurt, Ruri-chan. You have an idol audition tomorrow, right? You’re going to do great.”

Ruri’s eyes bubble. Her hands tremble.

“P...Papa!!!” she chokes. “Papa!”

She flings herself onto his chest, sobbing and crying. Her fault. It’s all her fault.

~ * ~ * ~ E N D  F L A S H B A C K ~ * ~ * ~

“I can see that one’s not the one you’re looking for, either.”

Ruri looked up towards the hole in the ceiling, to the blue sky. They’d gone down a lot of stairs, but it never seemed to get any farther away.

“Is it the next part you wanted to hear? The story continues in this one.”

He smiled at her, holding up another book. They were in a section of purple ones, this time.
Ruri

Elementary School

“And that’s why I don’t have my matching ribbon. I’m sorry. Please record the audition tape without me.”

She smiles as brightly as she can manage. For a moment, however, Rin and Selena say nothing.

“AHHHH!” Rin says then, the bursting cry startling the both of them. She punches both arms into the air. Her outburst hangs for a moment, and she doesn’t move. Ruri relaxes. Ah. Rin will yet at her now. That’s what she wanted, she thinks.

“What can we do to make your papa feel better?” Rin says, then, and Ruri’s lips part.

“...huh?”

“Your papa! He got hurt, so there’s something we can do to help him feel better, right?”

“That’s right!” Selena says. “We gotta do something for Ruri’s papa…”

Ruri stares at them. Is she going to cry? She can’t tell.

“Rin...Selena...”

“Aha!” Selena says, tapping her fist to her palm in epiphany. “I remember! I read a story where a hero’s mom got sick, so he had her drink the blood from the liver of a frog, and she got better!”

“Where are we gonna find a frog?” Rin says.

“A koi fish is close enough to a frog, right? There’s one in the school pond out back! Come on, if we go now before it gets dark, we can catch it!”

“But...but guys...the audition tape...”

Rin just grabs her elbow on one side, and Selena on the other, and they haul her outside, giggling and laughing the whole way.

“Selena, corner it!!”

“I’m trying! Ah, Ruri, it’s going your way!”

The water is so cold on her ankles, but it feels somehow nice, too. The setting sun paints her skin orange as she throws her arms into the water, and suddenly the heavy, flopping weight of a koi as big as her chest is in her arms, smacking and wriggling.

“Ruri, you did it!”

“Nice one!”

Rin and Selena hold the fish down on either side, and Ruri hovers over it, the baseball bat that Selena handed her hanging loose.

“Go ahead, Ruri, let’s finish it!” Selena says, punching the air.

Ruri hesitates. She stares at the black eye of the fish. She thinks of her papa. Then she nods, and she raises the baseball bat over her head.

“What are you kids doing??”

The teacher eyes them with distaste as they all refuse to look at him, standing silently in the teacher’s office.

“Well, if none of you are going to tell me what happened, I’ll have to call your parents.”

“It was me!” Rin says suddenly, before Ruri can speak. “I wanted to drink koi fish blood so that I would live to be one hundred!”

“Nuh-uh, it was me, I was gonna do that!” Selena says. “If you have to call someone, call my family!”
“No! Call mine!”

“Girls, girls,” the teacher says, looking suddenly overwhelmed.

“A-ah...um, actually, it’s because my papa,” Ruri starts.

“No!” Rin and Selena say at once.

She jumps. Slowly, she turns to look at them.

Both of them stare at her with shining, determined eyes, their hands balled into fists. This time, she thinks, she will cry.

~ * ~ * ~

END FLASHBACK ~ * ~ * ~

“What a touching story of friendship, don’t you think?” Yuuri said.

Ruri couldn’t reply. She looked down to see the hippo standing beside her again. It stared up at her, unblinking. She didn’t know what it was thinking.

“Shall we read the final story? I think that’s the real one you’ve been looking for.”

“You don’t have to,” she said. “I know how it ends.”

“Oh?”

Yuuri smiled at her. This time, she thought, it reminded her of a snake.

Ruri closed her eyes.

“The girl gets sick,” she said out loud, her voice ringing through the room, echoing off of the endless darkness. “She has to leave school. When she looks back at the school, she sees her friends pressed up against the windows. It’s the last time she sees them.”

“Ah, not quite the last time,” Yuuri said, waggling a finger. “Several years later, she picks up a magazine.”

The magazine seemed to just appear in his hand. A brightly colored cover, with two older girls, one with short green hair and the other long blue. Double B’s Grand Debut.

“What a cruel chance of fate,” Yuuri said, shaking his head with a smile. “You could have been up there, singing with them. Been alongside their railway icons, their merchandise. How sad.”

Ruri closes her eyes and breathes in.

“Was the story you were looking so hard for? One of...self-pity, perhaps?”

“Mm,” she said, shaking her head. “No, I don’t resent them. I’m happy.”

It’s true. It’s not the lie she expected to come from her lips, and she feels a weight come off her shoulders.

“They were my true friends. And I’m happy to know they succeeded.”

“Ah,” Yuuri said. “You’re a sweet girl, indeed. A truly kind young woman. I wonder why something so terrible would have happened to something like you.”

“I don’t know. Perhaps that’s what I came down here to find out. But that’s all right. I don’t need to know.”

“I told you, didn’t I? The reason you came here was because there was a book you had a deep longing for. That means the story isn’t over.”

She opened her eyes. Yuuri’s arm wedged into the space where he had pulled the last book. He withdrew his arm, and with it came a fancy hippo shaped hat.

“What is that?” Ruri asked.

“It’s that which is given to the fated bride,” Yuuri said, ever smiling.

He placed it on her head before she could say anything else. She heard the swish of the fabric
flipping down from her waist, a new, shining costume appearing where her ordinary dress had once appeared.

“Whose bride am I supposed to be?”

He’s holding her, now, leaning in close, his hand on her waist to hold her in a frozen dip.

“You already know the answer to that. It’s hidden in the home of your destiny.”

“And where is that?”

“I will tell you, once I become needed, and you meet me in the other world.”

He’s leaning very close. His breath tickles against her lips.

She raises one hand and puts a finger to his lips, holding him away from her.

“No.”

The library goes black, and the floor goes out from under her. Her hand slips out of his, but his grip lingers before she falls.

“How unfortunate.”

She drops into the blackness. The yellow hippo spins away from her, tucks into a ball, and tucks neatly into the box alongside two other small colored lumps. The box closes, and shoots away.

Ruri falls.

Images.

Faceless, invisible children, huddled together on a cold and unfeeling floor. The hum of a machine, the shatter of glass. The heavy dread of abandonment.

The sign reads Child Broiler.

In the dark, an apple falls past her. She catches it.

“Let’s share it together— the fruit of fate.”

“Thank you for choosing me...”

There was someone. Someone important. She wanted to remember him. Who was he? Her soulmate, the one who chose her.

Below, a light grew, and she twisted to face forward towards it. She saw a cold, dark hospital room, a body covered in a white sheet, a pair of boys crumpled against the wall together.

Ruri slid with a sigh back into her own body, her eyes opening again for the first time.

“SURVIVAL STRATEGY!”

Chapter End Notes

fuck i forgot to update on timeeeeeeeeeeeeeee
His head hurt ...ugh...it was too bright. Who had left the blinds in his room open?

Soft voices skittered at the edge of Yuya’s consciousness as his eyes cracked open.

“Stupid ass...it’s true that idiots don’t die.”

A soft laugh.

“It’s too late to act grumpy now, Shun-nii. You were so pale when you got the call.”

Oh...it was morning? Already? He needed to get up and...and make breakfast...

His whole body ached and protested when he tried to sit up, and he gasped, flopping back onto the mattress. His eyes came fully open then, and he found himself staring at an unfamiliar ceiling. Where was he? What was going on?

“Yuya-nii! You’re awake!”

Yuya blinked a few times. It was a bit painful, but he managed to turn his head over. As he turned, Ruri scurried into his vision, her hand resting on his forehead for a moment. Yuya’s eyes fluttered. He swallowed.

“What...am I...” he coughed. He glanced around a bit, and noticed the scratchy covers, the curtain drawn along the side of the bed that wasn’t his. “Are we in a hospital?”

“Looks like you lost a couple of brain cells,” Shun said, appearing next to Ruri and leaning over him. “Or maybe you didn’t have them to begin with.”

“He was really worried about you,” Ruri said in a loud whisper. “He didn’t leave your side once all night. Kept pinching himself awake.”

Shun flushed a bright red and pinched Ruri on the arm, but it only served to make Ruri laugh more. Yuya found himself smiling faintly. He was still a little confused as to why he was here, but his siblings were acting as normal, so that meant everything was okay.

“Do you really not remember, though?” Ruri asked, sobering up. “You were hit by a car...”

Yuya squinted for a moment. He had an impression of darkness, of wet, of cold, of lights flashing over his vision—

Oh. Oh, he did remember. He remembered Yuzu stumbling out into the road, the man leaning on his horn, he remembered bolting out into the rain and punching her out of the way, and then...nothing.

He winced when he moved, but it was nothing more than an ache, nothing felt broken.

“You’re a lucky bastard,” Shun grumbled. “Nothing more than a couple of bruises. You’re lucky you’re alive.”
“Guess we had to catch some luck at some point, right?” Yuya tried to joke, but he just ended up coughing. At least he wasn’t wearing his binder right now, so he could breathe freely.

Ruri rubbed his stomach soothingly.

“You’re going to be okay,” she said. “Oh! I’ll let Yuzu-chan know you’re awake.”

Yuya blinked, lips parting.

“Is...is she here?” he said.

“Of course she is, and you ought to thank you,” Ruri said, waggling her finger. “Yuzu-chan is the one who called the ambulance for you!”

She’s okay, was his first thought. She was okay enough to call an ambulance, and she’s not in the hospital. She’s all right.

The relief was surprising, but he took it. He let his head fall back on the pillow and he half closed his eyes while Ruri trotted off to retrieve Yuzu.

Shun leaned back against the wall near the window, folding his arms. He wasn’t quite looking at Yuya, but Yuya knew that look when he saw it. Shun wanted to talk, but he was waiting to make sure they had enough space from Ruri to do so. Yuya’s eyes wandered past his brother to the ground near the wall. Pinku was sprawled out on the floor beside him, arm laced up in a miniature cast. Kii appeared to be pushing bananas into its mouth one at a time with its usual blank expression. Where were they getting the bananas? Yuya was too tired to consider that.

“So?” Shun said. “What happened last night?”

“I got hit by a car,” Yuya said.

“You know what I’m talking about. Did something happen with her?” His eyes flashed and he half rose from the wall. “Did she hit you?”

“No!” Yuya said, shooting straight up despite the bruising pain. He winced and dialed it back. “No, she didn’t. We...we had a fight. I said some things I shouldn’t have. But it wasn’t her fault that I got hit. She didn’t have anything to do with that.”

Shun looked unconvinced, but he leaned back against the wall. He looked like he wanted to say more, lips pressing together, not quite looking at him.

“I’m glad you’re all right,” was what he said. He hesitated there for a moment longer.

“Here she is!” Ruri said brightly, reappearing around the curtain.

Yuzu trailed behind her. Her shoulders were hunched up around her ears, and she gave Yuya only nervous flickers of glances without lingering. Her fingers tightened and untightened around her duffel bag straps.

Ruri hopped over to Shun and grabbed his hand, giving Yuya a very pointed smile.

“We’ll give you guys some space,” she said cheerily.

Don’t you matchmake me, Ruri, Yuya glowered at her mentally, but Ruri only giggled as though she had heard.

Shun hesitated only long enough to ruffled Yuya’s hair, and give him a brief look that let Yuya know that this conversation wasn’t over yet, there was more to discuss. Yuya nodded and blushed, and then Shun let Ruri tug him out of the room.

Yuzu stood there without speaking, tugging on her duffel bag straps back and forth. She still wouldn’t look at him, eyes flickering anywhere but at him. She looked so pale and sick, and her pigtails were a bit tangled and messy, as though she hadn’t slept or washed up since the rain last night.

“Ruri says you called the ambulance for me,” Yuya said. “Thank you.”

Yuzu’s teeth dug into her lip. Her hands started to shake. Yuya felt his stomach twisting.
“Um...Yuzu,” he said. “About what I did last night...and the things I said...”

“You didn’t say anything you shouldn’t have,” Yuzu cut over him. Her eyes welled up with tears and she still wouldn’t look at him. Abruptly, she bowed. “I’m sorry. This was my fault. You shouldn’t be thanking me. If I hadn’t...”

She was trembling so badly. But now that she was bowing, her bag was touching the floor, and he could see her knees. They were badly scuffed and scraped, and it looked like they had only recently scabbed over, still covered in band aids in places.

“Did you hurt yourself?” he asked.

Yuzu jumped. She hesitantly stood back up, eyes flicking towards the window.

“Nothing serious,” she said. “Just my knees.”

Yuya felt another burst of relief, and he smiled.

“I’m glad,” he said.

Yuzu’s face went red across the cheeks, and she didn’t look at him.

A breeze ruffled through the open windows, tickling Yuya’s face and rustling the curtains. Pinku had moved onto the bed, where it laid on its back and stared at the ceiling. Kii crawled up after it and stuck a thermometer in its mouth, which it promptly ate like a ticket machine.

“I’m sorry I threw the diary,” Yuya said. “If I hadn’t, you wouldn’t have...and I knew how important it was to you...”

“No. Don’t apologize, Yuya. Don’t apologize for anything.”

Her voice cracked and her hands shook more.

“I should go. I’m glad you’re doing all right.”

She turned with a snap— but not fast enough for him not to see the diary sticking out of the bag. Half of the diary, that was.

“What happened?” he said, his voice cracking with shock.

Yuzu’s shoulders tensed and she yanked her bag up against her chest. It was too late, Yuya had already seen the ripped up edges, where the diary had been split in half down the spine. Yuzu started to tremble all through her whole body.

“....someone took it,” she whispered.

“Someone took it? How??”

“I...when you threw it, I went down to pick it up. But when I...when I picked it up...”

She swallowed, shoulders hunching over herself.

“A motorcyclist. They zoomed past me, somehow they grabbed one end of the back cover, and they were moving so fast that it just...split.”

Yuya’s head was spinning now. Who had taken the diary? And why? Who else would know or care about it?

“But then...” he started.

The door opened then, however, and he heard the rattle of a cart coming in.

“Sakaki-san, it’s lunch time,” came a clipped, professional sort of voice.

Yuzu and Yuya both jumped at the same time. Yuzu just looked relieved at changing the subject, and she turned around towards the curtain, pulling it back. A nurse in prim white scrubs was rattling the cart as he pulled out tray with small bowls of food on it. Joy, hospital food, Yuya thought. Better than nothing, he supposed.

Light glinted off of the nurse’s glasses as he reached for the kettle, and then frowned.
“Ah,” he said. “How careless of me. I seem to have forgotten more water.”

“Oh! I’ll get it!” Yuzu said, slinging her bag over her shoulders and hurrying forward. Yuya couldn’t tell if it was an eagerness to help, or an excuse to put space between them on the diary conversation. Maybe both.

“That’s very kind of you. Do you know where the kitchen is? It’s a bit of a walk.”

“I remember, I’ll be right back,” Yuzu said.

Before she ran off, though, she did take a look over her shoulder, actually meeting Yuya’s eyes. She looked so tired, he thought. But she smiled faintly, and then hurried away.

The nurse glanced at her back, and then returned to preparing the tray, swooping it up and passing it over to Yuya.

Pinku seemed to recover instantly from the sickness it had been experiencing from eating the thermometer, as the second the food was in Yuya’s lap he felt Pinku’s giant nose flopping over his shoulder and whuffling with curiosity. Geez, this hippo never stopped eating.

“You’re very lucky, Sakaki-kun, to have such a sweet girl looking after you.”

Yuya blushed, not sure how to respond.

“She’s...just a very good friend,” he said. He quickly picked up the pudding cup, which looked the most appetizing of the other wilted hospital food, and shoved some into his mouth to hopefully get the hint across that he didn’t want to talk.

“I’m almost envious,” the nurse said, light across his glasses obscuring his eyes. “You have some very devoted guests here.”

He must be talking about Shun and Ruri, too, Yuya thought, focusing on chewing his pudding and swallowing. Pinku had already attacked the small bowl of rice and was starting on the cold soup.

The world swayed a bit in front of his eyes. He blinked. Was he getting tired again?

His fingers were trembling against his spoon, suddenly too weak to grip it. What was happening? Why was he getting so dizzy? The spoon slipped from his fingers and the pudding crashed into his lap, turning over. Pinku was already face down and unconscious on the tray. Oh god. This was all too familiar, he had just seen Zarc go down like this last night when Yuzu had— had drugged him. Yuya had just been drugged.

Panic overtook him, but his body was so heavy and limp that all he could do was slump back against the bed, his arms flopping on either side of him as the tray slipped from his lap and crashed onto the floor.

The nurse fixed his glasses with one hand, ruffling his straight gray bangs.

“Please don’t take this personally,” he said. “I have no quarrel with you, after all.”

Yuya couldn’t even get enough strength in his throat to shout. There were people right there out in the hospital hall, but he couldn’t do anything. He felt faint tears growing in his eyes as the “nurse” lifted his limp, unresisting body out of the bed and pulled him across the room.

“Yuzu, hurry...” he begged silently while the man folded him up into the bottom of the cart and locked it shut, leaving him cramped up in the dark and too weak and heavy to bang against the sides to let someone know he was there. Shun, Ruri, someone ...

~ * * ~

“Hey, Shun-nii. What do you think about presents?”

Shun blinked, looking up from his coffee. The soft click-click-click of both Ruri’s and Kii’s knitting projects surrounded him, even among the soft chatter of the people filling up the hospital cafeteria.

“Presents?” he said.

“Mmmh. Presents. Like...have you ever gotten something from a girl?”
Shun nearly spat out his coffee, and he flushed when Ruri laughed.

“Of course not,” she teased. “Nii’s not good with the ladies at all.”

“You shush,” Shun grumbled, flushing deeper.

“What about from boys, Shun-nii?” she teased. “Have you ever gotten a gift you really liked from a boy?”

“What is bringing this on?” Shun said.

“I just want to know about it! Come on, you can tell your little sister. What about something you hated?”

“Something I hated?”

Shun couldn’t really think of anything. He didn’t normally get presents from people outside of Ruri and Yuya, and that was usually just some informal ‘hey, here’s something you already know I bought for you’ thing.

“Yeah, something that would be a bother to receive,” Ruri said.

“Are you trying to come up with ideas for what to give someone?” Shun said. “Do you have a boyfriend?”

“Don’t be silly,” Ruri giggled. “I just like teasing you, is all.”

Shun rolled his eyes, and Ruri’s fingers kept flashing expertly through the knitting. She really was good. She didn’t even have to look at it. It was mesmerizing, actually, watching each thread loop around each other and hold, weaving together just by forming loops that he couldn’t quite comprehend. It was almost magic. He rested his chin on his hand and just watched each loop weave in and out, needles flashing and glinting.

“I think as long as it’s for someone you love, any gift is enough,” he said after a long beat. “I think your feelings will reach them no matter what it is.”

Ruri’s lips quirked slightly, but she didn’t look up from her knitting to acknowledge him.

“I think that’s sweet,” she said. “Shun-nii’s getting all sappy.”

Shun growled and turned his head away, still resting on his fist. That only made Ruri laugh, and he had to crack a smile himself.

“Is there anyone you’d want to give a gift with feelings to, Shun-nii?”

“Yes,” Shun said immediately. “And Yuya, too, of course.”

Ruri laughed.

“You’re sweet,” she said.

There was something...sad about the way she said it, though. He glanced across at her from the corner of her eye. Was she...was she crying? She was smiling, but no, there was a definite tear in her eye. He started to sit up.

Quickly, Ruri set her knitting back into its bag and hopped up from her seat. She rounded the table, and he jumped a bit when she put her hand against his head, her cheek resting against the top of his head for a brief breath.

“I’ve reached a good stopping point,” she said. “I’m going to go home and pick up some fresh clothes for Yuya. You stay here and look after him, all right?”

“All...all right,” he said.

She smiled, though he didn’t see it as much as he felt it. Then she was flouncing away, Kii in her wake.

*Are you okay?* he wanted to call after her. Ao punched him in the knee and he swore. He reached under the table and grabbed his hippo by the scruff of its neck, tucking it under his arm. It flailed and kicked, but it couldn’t reach him or anything with its stubby legs like that.

He sighed, standing up and moving to throw his coffee cup away.
He was just turning back towards the table to gather up his few things and head back to Yuya’s room when he saw movement at the cafeteria doors. He looked up past the crowds of people at the tables. That...that was Yuzu, right? What was she doing, looking so pale and panicked?

Her eyes roved the crowd and finally fell on him, and her eyes bulged. She bolted through the crowd, nearly knocking a tray out of a few peoples’ hands as she ran. She nearly banged into him when she reached him, and he dropped Ao to catch her by the shoulders.

“Hey,” he said. “Hey, what’s wrong?”

She was gasping for air, as though she’d been running a marathon. Her hands gripped at his jacket as she tried to get her air back to speak.

“Yuya,” she gasped. “Yuya’s gone .”
He rolls the cart into the dark room, where he hears a faint *scritch, scritch, scritch*.

“The package is retrieved, Devaraja,” he calls softly.

In the middle of the dark room, as he angles the cart to the side, he sees the little black hippo. It almost blends into the shadows, and it has its back to him, leaning over something and making the soft *scritch* sound. He glances over the hippo’s shoulder. It appears to be sharpening a knife against a whetstone.

“Is that truly necessary?” he says dryly.

The little black hippo looks back at him with narrow eyes, and then continues to sharpen its knife. He shakes his head.

“Do as you wish.”

He discards the hat and scrubs he stole from the staff room, returning instead to the much more comfortable red scarf that nestles neatly around his shoulders. There. Much better.

He pops the cart open, and the pink hippo rolls free, still knocked out from the drugs. Sakaki Yuya is still awake, but only barely. He can see the boy eying him out of the corner of his eyes, the only way he can see him with his limp body folded up inside the cart.

“I do apologize,” Reiji says, as he pulls Yuya out of the cart. “But Shun is a notoriously difficult person to get the attention of.”

~ * ~ * ~

Yuzu kept wringing her hands and shifting back and forth and it was starting to get on Shun’s nerves. He felt a huge lump in his chest clogging up his throat. How the hell had this happened—why had it happened?

Yuya’s bed was empty. The sheets were thrown back and only slightly rumpled, so it didn’t look like there had been a struggle. But his tray had crashed onto the floor and overturned, and there was food scattering everything. His hippo was gone, too.

Ao started punching the bed over and over, and Shun was feeling a bit punchy right now too. Yuya had been kidnapped—there was no other explanation. But by who? And why?

His phone buzzed in his pocket. Yuzu jumped as though the sound had burned her, and she
stared at him with wide eyes. Shun wriggled the phone free and flipped it open. This was...this was Yuya’s number. Was he okay?? He opened the message.

*I have Sakaki Yuya. Bring the diary to the roof.*

Yuzu had already peered over his shoulder to read. She paled as she read.

Shun’s phone buzzed again— a second message. He opened that one next. His blood turned icy.

It was a photo, no message attached. The picture was somewhat dark, but he could see it clearly enough. Yuya was strapped down by his wrists to a hospital bed, his eyes wide and his mouth gagged with a medical gag. There was the glint of a knife held in view of the camera, which was what Yuya was clearly looking at.

The message was clear: give up the diary, or Yuya dies.

*Why does everyone want this stupid thing?* Shun thought as he gripped his phone so hard it nearly broke.

“Take it!” Yuzu said, startling Shun with the force that she shoved the diary into his chest. “Just— take it!”

Shun automatically grabbed the diary, more out of instinct than anything. He blinked, lips parting as he turned it over.

“What happened to it?” he said. The thing was...ripped in half? Where was the other half?

Yuzu gripped her hands together, looking like she was on the verge of tears.

“There was an accident,” she mumbled. “But— but still, that should be enough, right? They’ll let him go if they get that, right?”

She looked like she was about to fall apart. She was trembling so badly that her knees nearly buckled.

“This is important to you, isn’t it?” he said.

“It doesn’t matter! Yuya is...Yuya is...”

Yuya had been trying to get this from her for weeks. Shun had been trying to convince him to steal it. And then, so easily, she just handed it over for this. Maybe Yuya’s approach had been the right one after all.

Shun pressed the diary back into her hands, and Yuzu’s eyes widened.

“We’ll still need that for Ruri,” he said. “Don’t worry. I’ll handle this.”

“But...”

Shun smiled, and gripped her on the shoulder.

“This is my family,” he said. “And it’s my job to protect it.”

~ * ~ * ~

A breeze caught through Shun’s hair as he stepped out onto the roof. Immediately, he hesitated. No wonder their opponent wanted them on the roof: this was a nightmare place to navigate.

It seemed to be the hospital’s laundry day, because there were lines upon lines upon lines of white sheets hanging out to dry. They ruffled in the light breeze and the bright white was almost glaring in the sun. He couldn’t see past the lines on either side of him. The breeze would hide anyone’s movement up here. He was very, very conspicuous, and he couldn’t see anything himself.

“I’ve brought the diary!” he shouted, holding up a paper bag.

It wasn’t the diary, of course. It was some magazine he’d found in the trash, but maybe the decoy would be enough to draw out his opponent. Enough to find out where Yuya was being held— it couldn’t be far. Yuzu hadn’t been gone for long enough for them to take Yuya anywhere, and Shun had a gut feeling he was still in the hospital.

Something whizzed past his face. He jerked to the side automatically, but it still grazed his cheek and left a red mark behind. The thing splattered onto the ground, and when he flipped back to
see, it was one of those little red balls he had seen used on Dennis and Sora before, crumpling and turning white on the ground.

Another whizzing sound, and Shun flinched backwards.

It was obvious that whoever was shooting wasn’t trying to hit him, because there was no way he was this good at dodging something so small and fast. One of the balls struck the edge of the paper bag and tore it open, and as the magazine tumbled out, another ball hit it along the corner and the whole thing went up in flames.

_Dammit_.

The flurry of shots ended and Shun whipped around towards the direction they had come. Where was the sniper?

He heard footsteps. The white sheets fluttered and he caught a movement in between them, someone’s feet, someone running towards the other end of the building.

“Get back here!” Shun roared, tearing after them.

He tried to duck under the sheets into the next aisle where he had seen the feet, but when he got into the next aisle, there was no one there. They had had the same idea.

Trying to punch through all the laundry was a bad idea. He could still hear them running towards the other end of the roof— he’d run and cut them off at the end!

Shun was pretty athletic, and he had confidence in his speed and endurance. But when he made it to the other end of the roof, bursting out of the laundry, he didn’t see anyone. Not even a flicker of movement. Had they stopped running somewhere in the laundry, use it as cover? He could run up and down the aisles and see if he could catch a glimpse—

A soft jingling sound caught his ears, and he whipped forward. What was that on the ground?

The jingling formed tones and music as he drew closer and started to wrap his head around what he was seeing. It was a small box, something he could have held easily in one hand. The lid was flipped open, and inside was a glass screen that looked into a series of gears. Was it a bomb? No, it was making some kind of music...it was just a music box.

Something about the song it was playing felt familiar. Something about it made Shun start to feel sick and sweaty as he got closer. What was this doing here? Why was he feeling like someone was walking over his grave?

A streak of red shot past his face and struck the music box directly in the center, causing it to explode in a burst of gears and splinters. Shun flinched backwards, throwing his hands in front of his face to protect from the spray, and then suddenly his feet were out from under him and the back of his head cracked against the ground and everything went black.

~ * ~ * ~

Yuzu perched on the very end of the bed, clutching her phone tight enough to make it worry about cracking. The diary was burning a hole in her bag.

_This is my destiny_, she thought dully. _Why does everyone else want it?_

Her mind replayed the image of the kidnapped Yuya and she squeezed her eyes shut against the tears. If she hadn’t stumbled out into the street, if he hadn’t gotten hit by that car, if he hadn’t been in the hospital, then he wouldn’t be involved in this! This was her fault! She shouldn’t have accepted when he said he would help her. This was _her_ mission. She shouldn’t be involving other people.

Her phone hummed against her hands and her eyes flew open. She snapped it open— was it Shun? Was he contacting her?

The message was from Yuya’s phone. Yuzu felt her heart freeze up in her chest.

_The instructions sent to Sakaki Shun were a decoy. Hiragi Yuzu, you will follow the next instructions for Sakaki Yuya’s sake._

~ * ~ * ~

Shun’s eyes crack open. For a moment, he can’t see anything except for a blur of white and blue;
his vision isn’t cooperating.

Then a horrible, deep noise like the bass on a stereo turned too high pummels into him, and he screams, clapping his hands over his ears. He can only lay there, curled up in a pathetic ball while the sound reverberates and shudders him down to his organs.

It’s not stopping. It’s never going to stop.

He feels a hard punch under his knee and winces. He cracks open his eyes, blurred with tears from the pain of the sound, and sees a familiar shape at his side. Ao punches him in the shin again and he flinches.

“Fuck you,” he hisses.

Ao punches him once more, and Shun remembers what he was doing up here. Yuya.

Groaning, hands still clamped over his ears as the sound refuses to stop, he pushes himself up to his knees. He peers blearily around. Is he...still on the hospital roof? He sees the lines of sheets, but nothing else is familiar.

The ground is wavy and blurry, painted with blue and white zigzags that also paint up the sides of the outcropping across from him, where the door to the stairs is. Even the sky has the same pattern, and he can’t see any other buildings around him, as though the city has vanished and the hospital is the only thing left.

Movement. He catches the glimmer of it and looks. Through the tears and the sound that seems to make the very air shake like a mirage, he can’t make out much. A tall figure, with something long and red spiraling down from either side of them, and something else small and black near their feet.

Both the tall figure and the small black one bolt back towards the sheets. Shun growls, forcing himself to his feet.

The sound is never ending, and eventually, it just seems to become a part of him. He has to let his hands from his ears to run properly, and grits his teeth against the rattling reverberation that blocks out everything else. The sound is...it’s not just the feedback of the stereo, it’s the same song as the musicbox, just played far too loud and with too much bass. It hurt, rumbling inside of him like he’s going to start bleeding from the inside.

He makes his way to the door on the other side of the roof, the one he came through to get here. It’s open. This is where they went.

He wonders if the heat in his ears is his ears bleeding, or if its his imagination. He stumbles through the door.

This is not the same hospital that he left. He can’t make heads or tails of anything. The walls, floor, and ceiling are all painted with bright red and white zigzags. There aren’t any shadows, making everything seem unreal and flat, like he’s walking through a two dimensional world. Doors line only the right hand side of the building, and there’s a large number three inscribed above every door.

One of the doors bursts open, and a cart shoots out in front of him, forcing him to stumble to a stop lest he runs into it.

“DO YOU REMEMBER?”

The voice echoes through the music and makes him wince, more tears bubbling out of his eyes. On top of the cart, there is a photo album. It’s mostly burned, so he can only pick out faint outlines of people, but they look like happy photos. He sees smiles and laughs.

He doesn’t understand. Growling, he uses the cart to steady himself, and pulls himself around it, continuing towards the stairs. The pain of the sound is so intense he can hardly stand straight, but he has to keep walking. He has to find Yuya.

He finds a set of stairs. The zigzags are turning yellow, now, and there are little stamped pictures of black and white hippo faces patterning the stairs. Ao lays down on its side and rolls down, seemingly just as affected by the noise as Shun.

By the time he reaches the next floor with the large number two inscribed over every door, he can hardly see for the pain.
Another door explodes open right in his path and a cart comes with it.

“DO YOU REMEMBER?”

This one has a box on top of it, a wooden crate with a hippo face stamped on the front. It’s overflowing with apples, so much so that when the cart stops, some of them tumble out and roll across the floor.

Ao, crawling along on its stomach, flinches when one of the apples comes towards him, and wobbles to its stubby feet getting ready to punch. When it sees the apple, however, something makes it hesitate. It stares at it instead, and then carefully picks it up between its two flat front feet. It carries it along as Shun pulls himself around the cart, avoiding the apples scattered over the floor, and moving on.

His brain is so rattled that he can hardly see. He’s moving forward by sheer instinct alone. He barely even notices the zigzags turning green when he comes down the next set of stairs, or the stamped hippo faces along the wall getting more and more prevalent until they almost overtake the zigzags.

Another door flings open and a cart emerges.

“DO YOU REMEMBER?”

This one has a red scarf on top of it. There is a long red thread coming off of the end of it, as though it has unraveled; it’s barely the size of a bandana. Shun puts his hand on it, and it feels soft. It feels familiar.

He doesn’t really know why, but he puts it on, tying it around his neck like a bandana. Ao continues to hold the apple as it follows after the long red thread that leads its way down the hall. Shun stumbled after it.

The thread leads down the stairs, and the world is getting somehow darker, even though the white, shadowless environment stays the same. The numbers read B1 above each door, now, and at the end of this hallway, there is suddenly something different: a set of large gray doors, actually shaded and colored, so that they look real against the rest of hallucinatory world.

The scarf feels warm against his neck, and the thread continues on through the doors ahead. Yuya is there. Somehow he can feel it.

“DO YOU REMEMBER?”

The voice and the song crest over his head again, but somehow, they feel fainter, now. It’s like this strange dimension he’s found himself in is beginning to break apart the closer he gets to the door.

He puts a hand against the scarf for a moment.

“Yes,” he says softly, as the sounds finally break away and everything comes clear. “I remember.”

Shun threw the doors at the end of the hall open. Ao dropped the apple and barreled straight in, but Shun needed to take a second to squint through the darkness.

A muffled voice caught his attention and his eyes snapped towards it. Yuya! He was there, still strapped to the hospital bed he’d been on in the photo.

Shun bolted towards his brother, as Yuya strained and struggled against his bonds, clearly trying to say something around his gag. His eyes were wide and he was shaking his head frantically, trying to nod forwards. Shun caught his message too late, skidding to a stop beside Yuya and flipping himself in the direction he was indicating.

The doors slammed shut, throwing the room into a full blackness. Shun swore. He pressed himself back against the hospital bed he’d been on in the photo.

Shun bolted towards his brother, as Yuya strained and struggled against his bonds, clearly trying to say something around his gag. His eyes were wide and he was shaking his head frantically, trying to nod forwards. Shun caught his message too late, skidding to a stop beside Yuya and flipping himself in the direction he was indicating.

The doors slammed shut, throwing the room into a full blackness. Shun swore. He pressed himself back against the hospital bed, trying to angle his body in between Yuya and the direction Yuya had been indicating, thinking that must be where the kidnapper was.

“Show yourself!” he shouted. “Enough of these stupid games!”

He couldn’t see a thing, and he didn’t hear any movement, either. He kept his fists up. There was no light to adjust to, even, and he was completely helpless.

A faint voice reached him, then, and he couldn’t tell where it was coming from.
“Very well; I suppose you have earned some prize for following Ariadne’s thread through the labyrinth. Let’s see how much you really remember.”

And then for one, quick, boggling moment, Shun felt lips press hard on top of his.

It was over as soon as it begun, so fast that he thought he could have imagined it, and then the lights were back on. He raised up both fists—but there was no one there.

He and Yuya were completely alone.

~ * ~ * ~

Yuzu pressed the phone to her ear, shaking as she approached the balcony. She looked down, her stomach twisting. They were really high up. The cars in the parking lot looked like toys from here.

“Drop the diary there,” the garbled, disguised voice said.

Yuzu swallowed and leaned back. One hand still holding the phone, she reached back with the other to dig the diary out of her bag. She held it for a moment, just staring at it. This had been her life for almost ten years. This was everything. This was the key to surviving. This was all she had left of Hiragi Ray.

Yuzu licked her dry lips, memorizing the cover of the diary. The image Yuya flickered over her mind again, and she squeezed back her tears.

She held the diary out over the railing.

She let go.

It almost seemed to float as it fell down towards the sidewalk. She almost couldn’t watch, but she couldn’t look away, either. It struck the concrete. For a few moments, it just sat there.

Then she saw a figure appear from under the balcony, saw them scoop it up. They bolted. Tears spilled over Yuzu’s eyelashes, and she leaned hard over the railing, trying to get a glimpse.

“Why?” she shouted. “WHY?”

There was no answer.

The diary was gone.
Shun looked up at the camera pointed right at him and his lips curled.

“Hey,” he said. “I know you’re in there. I want to talk.”

The camera seemed to focus in on him with a faint zooming sound. Then he heard the doors click, and the glass slid open into the lobby.

The building was a sleek construction of glass and steel, looming high over the city. He couldn’t see the shiny letters reading LDS at the top, but he knew they were there. There were few people in the world who didn’t.

He stepped through the now open doors, and into the empty lobby, Ao waddling behind him.

It was almost eerie, Shun thought, looking nervously around. A corporation of this size and magnitude, with so much power in the world, shouldn’t look abandoned at ten in the morning. But the lights were off, only the sunlight trickling over the chrome floors, and there wasn’t a soul in sight. Empty chairs leered at him, and he felt like the empty desk was staring into his soul.

The door behind the desk slid open by itself, and he knew that he was expected. He made his way over.

That door led down a hallway to an elevator that opened when he approached, and when he stepped inside, the buttons lit up for him to the very top floor. He snorted. Dramatic, much? But he shoved his hands into his pockets and he waited patiently while the elevator ascended. He had to hold Ao back with his leg so that the little hippo wouldn’t start punching the buttons.

It dinged softly when they reached the top floor, and slid open. He wasn’t sure what he expected.

The elevator opened directly into a large, empty office. Huge windows took up one end of the wall, letting the sunlight pour in and glitter across every surface. There was only one piece of furniture in the whole room: a desk in the center. And at the desk was a shadow, hidden behind what appeared to be a canvas propped up on top of it.

Shun stepped out of the elevator and it closed behind him. A small black hippo was perched on the end of the desk, tiny black eyes glittering with too much intelligence. Ao whuffled irritably, but surprisingly, did not immediately go on the offensive. For his part, Shun didn’t approach, waiting by the elevator. He’d make this at least somewhat on his own terms.

“Did you enjoy our game last night?”

The voice came from behind the canvas, and Shun scowled.

“A game? Is that what you call it?”

“Of course. What else would you call a situation in which one is pursued, and the other pursues, with the intention of one being the victor?”

Shun grit his teeth. He had been worried about this: the mind games. The talking in circles.
“Where I come from that’s called hunting.”

“Ah. Yes. That is indeed what I call it, as well.”

Shun heard the faint sound of scratching against the canvas. He was sort of curious, but he would not be lured in. That was the point. This was what he did.

“I’m drawing you, by the way,” he said, and Shun scowled. “Do you know why?”

“No, but you’ll tell me.”

“Humans lie. All of them do. I do, and now so do you. But art does not lie. The you in the image is the true you.”

“I didn’t know we were waxing poetic today. First hunting, now art.”

“The two are intertwined. Art is the hunt for the truth.”

“And what are you hunting for?”

No response for a few moments.

“Love is nothing but a chemically induced state in our brains, in order to further human existence. And yet, it is one of the most powerfully damning forces in the world. I suppose you would say, Shun, that what I am hunting is something akin to that.”

Shun’s hand curled up in his pocket, around the crumpled, used up ball with the hippo face stamped on it. He couldn’t take it anymore. He stomped across the vast space between him and his conversation partner, moving around the desk and putting his hand down on top of it.

Akaba Reiji barely even looked up from his sketch. He was, indeed, drawing a picture of Shun, which actually surprised him. He hadn’t thought Reiji was telling the truth.

“What is it you want? Don’t talk in fucking riddles with me.”

Reiji’s eyes flickered towards him from behind his glasses. He set down his pencil and pressed a button on the desk. Immediately, the windows went dark, and Shun heard the hum of new walls sliding up over the top of them, walls with screens on them that took up every wall, surrounding them with an eerie artificial light.

“Do you remember what you said to me before?” Reiji said.

Somehow, he had begun preparing tea without Shun noticing, or perhaps the tea set had been there the whole time. One way or another, Reiji was delicately tipping dark brown liquid into a shallow tea cup.

“We were children. That was a long time ago.”

Reiji extended the cup to Shun wordlessly. Shun’s jaw tightened. He didn’t want to be here. Instead of taking the cup, he took his hand from his pocket, reached over the cup, and dropped the spent ball into it.

“Did you buy that from where I think you bought that?” he said softly.

Reiji’s eyes flicked down to it. Instead of acknowledging it, he simply took the cup back and brought it to his lips, taking a sip from it.

“You were the one who used them against Kaito and the others, aren’t you?”

“I made them forget you. They were poor hunters.”

“Why? Why are you doing this?”

“It was to protect you. To protect your secret.”

Shun slammed his fist onto the desk so hard that the canvas fell over, toppling to the ground. The little black hippo nearly fell off, too.

“I don’t have any secrets! Don’t fuck with me!”

Reiji calmly continued to sip his tea, looking straight ahead at nothing as the screens began to play
images over and over like the stick figures on warning signs. Shun trembled slightly, feeling the anger pulse through him.

Then he let it go, breathing, trying to stay calm. He was like this—he got under your skin like nothing and no one else. Shun wasn’t doing himself any favors.

“Give back the diary,” he said. “Hiragi’s diary. Give it back.”

“I see no reason to.”

“I get your vendetta against me, but don’t turn this into more of a problem than it has to be! You don’t need it—”

He heard the faint squeak, squeak, squeak of sneakers, and blinked, looking up. Was there someone else in the room...?

His breath caught in his throat and nearly choked him. A little child stood a few feet away from the desk, illuminated from behind by the screens. Their tangled purple hair cascaded down their back, rumpled striped shirt hanging loosely from their shoulders.

On top of their head was a hippo hat. Almost exactly the same hippo hat as Ruri’s.

“I cannot give up the diary so easily,” Reiji said, while Shun couldn’t tear his eyes away, trembling slightly. “I will save Reira’s life. Even if I must make you my enemy to do so.”

~ * ~ * ~

The train clicked and clattered beneath them, filling up the space and the silence.

“So....you’re all right, then?” she asked tentatively.

She glanced through her bangs at Yuya, who sat on the opposite end of the bench. He looked a bit pale and tired, if she was honest.

He smiled at her anyway, making a show of flexing both of his arms.

“I’m right as rain,” he said. “Like I said, I didn’t get much more than bruises from the car accident.”

“I know, but I mean....”

She couldn’t stop thinking about it: that image of Yuya tied down with the knife over his head, looking so terrified. She felt cold and she had to hug herself tightly to rid herself of it.

Yuya put his arms down into his lap, looking down onto the floor.

“I’m fine,” he said. “Really. Whoever it was, they didn’t hurt me.”

He rubbed underneath his nose with one finger. She had to look away, then, tracing over the scratches on the floor with her eyes as the train continued on.

“I’m sorry you had to give up the diary,” Yuya said softly. “I know it was...important.”

That cold sense of emptiness where the diary once burned became harshly visible to her once again, and she hugged herself tighter.

“But I mean— hey,” Yuya said then. “Now that you don’t have it, you don’t have to put yourself through any of those dumb missions anymore, right?”

Yuzu’s fingers dug into her arms, leaving marks from her nails.

“Dumb?” she said, her voice cracking.

“I— I didn’t mean it like that,” Yuya said quickly, but Yuzu already felt a horrible tenseness in her chest.

“That was all I had left of Ray,” she said. “That was my last connection to her.”

“Ray...you mean...your sister? It was your sister’s diary?”

“It wasn’t dumb,” Yuzu said again, her voice shaking. “It was all I had left.”
Yuzu sat straight up, still hugging herself. A fresh determination washed over her as she fixed her
eyes on the screen across from here, where the chibi Rin and Selena of Double B were bowing
and smiling.

“I memorized some of the next diary entries. I can still do it. I can still complete Project R.”

Her voice sounded cold and robotic even to her. Good. She needed to be cold. She needed to get
back to her mission, without being distracted by other things. She’d been weak, when she’d given
up the diary. That was the real dumb move.
The train was coming to a stop— her stop. She stood up sharply and grabbed her bag.

Yuya’s voice was very quiet when he spoke.

“I won’t help you,” he said. “I won’t help you do this to yourself anymore, Yuzu.”

Yuzu turned away from him and went toward the doors.

“Good,” she said, feeling rebellious tears growing in her eyes. “I don’t want your help.”

~ * ~ * ~

Love potions were such an awfully crass way of doing things. Her first attempt at making one
with Yuya hadn’t even worked. She really hoped this one did, though, because this one had
required her to put the fat, slimy frog right on top of her face for fifteen minutes, and she was still
shuddering and wiping away at her face to get rid of the ghost sensations.

Still, she had the ingredients, and the coffee in her bag was laced. This was her last big chance.

“Thanks for meeting me on such short notice, Zarc-san,” Yuzu said.

The Ferris wheel car jiggled a bit when she tried to step on, and she nearly fell. Zarc grabbed her
arm and helped her up, smiling. She tried to feel something more than embarrassment. Ray would
have been happy about that little touch, right? She should feel happy about it.

“No problem,” he said. “What was it that you wanted to talk to me about?”

Yuzu settled herself on the other side of the car, and the door closed behind them as Zarc sat down
on the opposite bench. The coffee in her bag felt hotter than it should, but it wasn’t as fiery as the
diary.

“Oh, I hope I didn’t take you away from Grace for too long,” Yuzu said. “Where is she tonight?”

“Rehearsal,” Zarc said. “She’ll be out late.”

Perfect.

Yuzu nodded and smiled as she pulled the thermos out of her bag, unscrewing the top and pouring
some coffee into the lid.

“What is she working on right now? This her last one, right?”

She casually handed the coffee towards Zarc, and he automatically took it with a brief thank you
smile. The Ferris Wheel was getting up towards the top, now. If this went according to plan, then
by the time they reached the bottom...

“Yes, it’s her last one. I’m actually a little disappointed, you know? I told her to keep acting.
She’s really good at it.”

“She really is.”

Zarc tipped the coffee into his mouth. Yuzu’s breath caught in her throat. Was this even going to
work? Did she even believe in occult stuff like this? She reached up to touch the back of her
phone in her breast pocket, where the little hippo charm, the memory of what she was fighting for,
swung softly.

Zarc swallowed. He squinted briefly.

“This tastes a little different,” he said. “Did you do something different...”
His face drained of color. Oh—oh no, had she done something wrong?

“Zarc-san?” she said, leaning forward, suddenly scared.

Zarc dropped the cup and the remaining coffee splashed over their feet. He keeled forward, making a horrible choking sound as his hands began to claw at his throat, eyes bulging.

“Zarc-san! Zarc-!!”

He was choking! Oh, god, she’d killed him! Yuzu grabbed his shoulders and tried to support him as he collapsed off of the bench, convulsing and hacking.

“Zarc! Zarc-!!”

As suddenly as it had started, it stopped, and Zarc slumped forward on his knees, going so still in her grip that she thought, for a single, horrifying moment, that he was dead.

“Za—”

His hand shot up and grabbed her wrist. She nearly screamed from the force of it.

But then Zarc was sitting upright and tugging Yuzu forward where she fell against his chest, and for a moment, all she could do was freeze, his arms sliding around her shoulders and holding her there, one hand sliding up into her hair.

“Yuzu,” he breathed, tickling her ear. It was low and heady sounding, and it made Yuzu’s breath catch. “Yuzu. I love you.”

For a second, silence. And then it was like a chorus of birds had awoken in her brain, and Yuzu melted.

“Oh,” she whispered, leaning into his embrace. “Thank god.”

~ * ~ * ~

“Did you and Yuzu-chan have a fight?”

Yuya jumped so high that he nearly dropped the pancake in his hands, and it bounced off of his hands a few times before he managed to catch it. He flushed as he sent Ruri a sidelong glance.

Ruri had her hair up in two fluffy buns today, smiling at him with that uncanny intuition of hers. She smiled wider when Yuya’s reaction seemed to confirm her thoughts.

“It’s not like that,” Yuya grumbled.

“You only make pancake-wrapped sandwiches when you want to make up with someone,” Ruri said, sidling up beside him and leaning her elbows on the counter. She swiped one of the smaller pancakes off of the top of the stack and popped it into her mouth, chewing before she talked again. “Usually it’s only Shun-nii that you want to make up with, but I haven’t heard you two fighting recently so it must be Yuzu-chan.”

Yuya flushed with a deep heat, looking back down at his work as he deftly tucked the little fried meats inside his pancake pockets.

“She and I aren’t….you know,” he said, fumbling for words.

“I know,” Ruri said, though her knowing smile indicated she thought otherwise. “But she’s your little sister’s dear friend, so make sure you make up with her.”

Yuya grimaced. But Ruri’s smile was bright and open, and Yuya had to soften beneath it. She tried to snag another pancake and he tapped her hand lightly with a smile.

“Help me finish making these and then you can have more,” he said.

Ruri laughed, but she picked up another pancake and began to wrap the fried meat inside.

“I hope Yuzu-chan likes pancakes too,” she said.

Yuya smiled as he continued working. He hoped so too.
Zarc’s hand was warm where it gripped hers, and when someone tried to whistle at her on the dark street, he slid his arm around her waist and pulled her against him, and it was warm. So why did she feel cold?

He took her back home to the apartment, and the place felt so wide and dark in the evening, with nothing by the stars trickling through the huge windows. His arm didn’t leave her waist as he took her inside, and when the two of them sat down on the couch, he took both of her hands in his. His eyes glittered such a lovely gold in the faint light of the stars, and she tried to focus on that. The rest of her wasn’t really functioning, she thought. She couldn’t believe this was actually working.

“I’ve been working so hard for this,” she mumbled, before she realized what she was saying.

“And tonight it finally pays off,” Zarc said softly. He kissed her fingers, and Yuzu tried to feel something. She tried to feel anything at all.

Yes, it was finally paying off. She had been working for years to make this happen. For this moment, the time when she and Ray would finally become one. She closed her eyes and let Zarc slide his hands along her sides, pulling her flush against him. Yuzu was going to disappear, tonight, and Ray would wake up in her place. She’d finally have succeeded. The things she cared about would all come back and become eternal.

“Do you actually love me?” she whispered.

“Of course I do. I’ve loved you for years, Yuzu.”

It was just the potion. A potion that would only last one night. In the morning he wouldn’t even remember this. Still, it was a victory. A victory she’d strived towards for years. It felt sort of vindicating. But maybe she was just imagining she felt that.

She felt so limp when he scooped her up into his arms bridal style, but she carefully slid her arms around his neck anyway to steady herself. She felt nothing at all when his lips very gently brushed hers. She should feel...at least more proud of herself, for finally having achieved results.

Zarc pushed the door open to the bedroom softly with his shoulder, carrying her inside. She hung in his arms like a lead weight, and he didn’t seem to be bothered. Gently, he laid her down on the bed. Then she felt it shifting around her as he lifted himself up onto it as well, his hands coming down on the pillow on either side of her head. It was dark, and all she could see was the gold of his eyes. But she wasn’t even seeing that, she realized. She wasn’t seeing anything at all.

“What’s wrong?” Zarc said softly. “Why are you crying?”

Crying? Was she crying? She lifted one hand to her cheek and it came away wet.

“I don’t know,” she said softly. “I should be happy, right? I love you, don’t I?”

“Yes, I love you,” Zarc said, touching her face softly.

“This is what I wanted,” Yuzu said out loud. Who was she trying to convince. “I’ve been
waiting, wanting this moment, forever. For the time when I become Ray.”

“Then close your eyes,” Zarc said. “And let those feelings take over.”

Feelings? What even were those?

She felt his breath on her lips, coming down for another kiss. He was nearly on top of her. It would be so easy to let this happen. She wanted it, anyway. She’d made him the potion because she wanted this to happen.

Her hands moved by themselves, shoving him against the chest and pushing him back.

“No,” she gasped, more tears leaking from her eyes. “N-no.”

Zarc looked surprised, but he didn’t stop her as she pushed him back and quickly sat up to the edge of the bed. Her heart was hammering so hard in her chest and she had to press her hand against her collarbone to try and breathe. Now that he wasn’t on top of her, her fuzzy brain felt like oxygen was pouring into it again.

“I can’t do it,” she said, twisted and choked at first. She cleared her throat, and it came out clearer. “I can’t do it. I’m sorry, Zarc. I can’t do it.”

She pushed herself up to her bare feet. She felt fuzzy, heavy, dizzy. The darkness was so thick, even with the stars.

“I’m going home,” she said. “I’m sorry, Zarc. I’m going home.”

She needed to get out of here. She just needed to get out of the cloying, choking darkness.

“Ribbit.”

The sound was so out of place that she froze. Slowly, she looked back over her shoulder.

Zarc was still on the bed, crouched and hunched over strangely.

“Ribbit.”

Was that...coming from Zarc?

“Z-Zarc...?”

His head turned over his shoulder so slowly and strangely that all of a sudden Yuzu felt like she was in a horror movie. His body was starting to shake strangely, and he kept making that faint, choked ribbiting sound.

Oh. Shit.

Yuzu bit back a scream when he launched himself off the bed towards her, stumbling backwards. “Yuzuuuu, come back,” he cried, but she was already bolting for the bedroom door.

She slammed it behind her and leaned against it just in time, the whole door expanding behind her as he slammed into it. Her phone tumbled out of her pocket and onto the floor— she wouldn’t be able to reach it without letting go of the door, and Zarc kept pounding against it, over and over. The handle fumbled under her hand and she gripped it tighter. Oh god. Oh fuck. That potion was stronger stuff than she had imagined.

“Yuzuuuu,” he cried, his voice cracking with ribbits in between every syllable. “Yuzu, I love you, open the door, come back.”

How long did this potion last again? A night? Oh god. What had she done? Panic overtook her, choking her throat and making her black out briefly. Zarc threw himself against the door again and she nearly screamed, leaning back against it to hold it shut.

The front door swung open, and light poured over Yuzu’s face.

“Zarc, I’m home early,” came Grace’s singsong voice.

Oh. Wow. Amazing. Could this night get any better?

Grace hesitated in the door, hand still on the handle, when her eyes found Yuzu. Yuzu just stood there, staring. Another pounding rattle came from the door, jostling Yuzu forward with a squeak,
but she kept the door closed.

“Yuzu, open up, I love you, I love you more than all the stars, Yuzuuu.”

Grace tilted her head, blinking with a faint, almost bemused surprise. Yuzu felt an awful knot of embarrassment twisting in her chest—that and the panic were the only things she had felt tonight, and they almost seemed like drugs all of a sudden, filling her entire body with the feeling of them.

“G...Grace,” she gasped. “Break up with Zarc.”

Grace’s lips made a perfect little “o”, considering Yuzu silently. Yuzu’s cheeks flushed. Zarc was still pounding on the door, making embarrassing professions of love for her.

“Y-you see?” she said. “He’s in love with me now, so...so please break up with him, and give him to me!”

Grace looked at her for a moment. Then she smiled.

“All right,” she said, walking in past Yuzu, setting down her bag as though this were a normal thing to come home too.

Yuzu was so surprised that she nearly let Zarc throw the door open behind her, and she had to lean back against it to hold it shut.

“J-Just like that?” she mumbled.

Grace just smiled, unclasping her bracelet and taking off her hat as she crossed over to the couch. She set her things down on the coffee table and sat down daintily, folding her hands into her lap.

“Sure,” she said with another smile. “But will that really make you happy?”

Yuzu’s words died in her throat. She forced them out anyway.

“Of...of course it will,” she whispered. “That’s what I’ve always wanted. I...I love Zarc.”

“Mmm?” Grace said, tapping a finger to her lips. “Is that so?”

“Of course it is!”

“You know, I always thought it was Yuya-kun you loved.”

Yuzu’s thoughts ground to a stop. The sounds of Zarc faded into a distance for her, and all she could do was stare at nothing.

“I...love...Yuya?”

Grace almost seemed to glow in the dark, pushing her silver hair over her shoulders.

“Aw,” she said. “How cute. You didn’t even notice, did you?”

She saw, at the back of her head, Yuya. Yuya leaning over the counters helping her chop up apples for curry. Yuya offering to switch clothes with her. Yuya holding her while she panicked after the snake had fallen over her head. Yuya screaming at her: “What’s wrong with Yuzu?? I happen to like Yuzu!” Yuya not looking at her as he whispered “I won’t help you do this to yourself anymore, Yuzu.”

Tears bubbled up and blurred Yuzu’s vision.

“Oh,” she whispered. “Oh.”

~ * ~ * ~

The pancakes were still warm even through the tin, and Yuya balanced them nervously on his knees. Ruri sat beside him on the curb in front of the Hiragi Theater School, humming as she tapped her hands on the concrete. Pinku was trying to get into the pancake tin, and Kii was sitting in front of it, pushing Pinku back with its nose.

It was late, and the building looked dark and empty. Yuya checked his watch. Where was she? He thought he should call her, maybe. He didn’t want to think about what she might be up to. But if he did call her, what if he called her in the middle of...whatever her plan was today.

His stomach twisted, and he wondered how long he should wait.
“Ah! Yuzu-chan!”

Yuya’s head snapped up when Ruri leaped to her feet to wave. Yuya struggled upwards, too, gripping the tin in both hands.

Yuzu was making her way slowly down the sidewalk, her shoulders hunched over as though the weight of the world was on her back. She startled and looked up at Ruri’s greeting, and even in the dark, he could see how deep the bags under her eyes were.

Ruri ran forward first, all smiles, and Yuzu smiled faintly at her.

“What are you doing here?” Yuzu asked.

“Oh, well, it’s late,” Yuya said, trotting forwards. “And I guess I thought...well, maybe you’d be hungry?”

He held out the foil covered tin, and Yuzu looked down at it. She looked so tired and bleary, like she wasn’t sure where she was. Yuya was afraid to ask where she had been, and what she had done.

And then, suddenly, fat tears started rolling down Yuzu’s cheeks. Yuya jumped, fumbling, not sure what he could do with the pancake tin and not quite able to move it into just one hand.

“H-hey? Did I do something wrong? Yuzu?”

“I hate you,” Yuzu said, tears getting harder now. “I hate you, Sakaki Yuya. I hate you!”

She was crying so hard now that she had to drop her bag to knead her fists into her eyes.

“It’s Zarc I love! I love Zarc! I love him, I love him, I love him!”

“Y-Yuzu, I didn’t say— I wasn’t gonna—”

“Why? Why did you have to come into my life?”

Ruri patted Yuzu gently on the shoulder, and Yuzu curled up forwards over herself. Yuya quickly put the pancakes on the ground and reached for her shoulder, too. Yuzu sobbed louder, though, and pushed him back with both hands, shaking.

“Why did you have to say that I was me? Why did you have to make me feel like being Yuzu was okay? I would have been able to complete my destiny if not for you! Why, why, why?? You ruined—you ruined everything, Yuya!”

“Yuzu...Yuzu, I...” Yuya started. “Yuzu, I didn’t mean...I mean, I did mean...”

Ruri was wearing the hippo hat again. Yuya froze.

“SURVIVAL STRATEGY!”

Something about the transition this time felt more abrupt, and instead of a long, drawn out flurry of lights and sounds, Yuya simply blinked, and he and Yuzu were on the lower platform in cuffs like usual, with the strangely garbed Ruri looming over them.

Ruri extended an open palm towards Yuzu.

“Go on. Cry and blubber, if you must. I will allow it for today.”

He was never going to get used to the possessed Ruri’s crassness. Yuzu was really upset, why was she talking to her like that?

Yuzu just looked down at the ground, eyes still glazed with tears, shoulders slumped. She didn’t even react to Ruri’s needling. Ruri looked down her nose at Yuzu and let her hand fall back to her side.

“You know how my family has Curry Day?” Yuzu said softly, choked.

Yuya only nodded. He felt like it was difficult to breathe, and he didn’t want to, for fear that his exhaltes would make him miss something Yuzu said.

“On that day, my family eats curry together, the curry that my sister, Ray, loved so much,” Yuzu continued. “On that day, we eat curry on the anniversary of my sister’s death.”
Yuya blinked, and then they were suddenly somewhere else. It looked like a train car, like the ones he rode on every day. Only it was dark, every surface was black as though someone had turned the dark setting on in a website, and outside the windows it was black as night. Every surface glowed with a bright red circle, and the numbers 95 inside them.

He and Yuzu sat next to each other, uncuffed now. Yuzu pressed her hands into her lap, eyes still fixed on the ground. Across from them, Ruri sat straight and prim with her dress billowing across the seats and onto the floor like a pool of oil. Her face was unreadable.

“I was born the day my sister died, sixteen years ago,” Yuzu said. “I’m her reincarnation. That’s why I have to replace her.”

“Yuzu, that’s...that’s not how it works,” Yuya said.

“That has to be it. I was born when she died. After my parents lost her so horribly, I must have inherited her existence.”

_Sixteen years ago._

_Lost so horribly._

_The date of Curry Day._

The train car was starting to feel suffocatingly claustrophobic. Yuya couldn’t breathe. Oh no. Oh god. Oh god.

“You don’t mean...she didn’t die in...”

“That’s right. She died in that incident. Sixteen years ago, on the day I was born.”

Yuya felt dizzy. Ruri simply stared straight ahead, unblinking, and the train car felt like it was crushing in on him.

“You were right then,” he said. “It is my fault. I did ruin your destiny.”

“What?” Yuzu said, looking at him with surprise. “What are you talking about? Sixteen years ago, you weren’t even...”

“I was born. I was born on the same day. And it’s my fault your sister is dead.”

Yuzu stared at him with a horrified disbelief.

Ruri stared forward, and did not make a sound.
“I hate the word fate.”

Footsteps echo silently in the long, dark hallway. Clop, clop, clop. Skitter skitter. there is no one there attached to the footsteps, and no one around to hear them.


The doctor’s face is illuminated eerily by the glowing screens before him, frowning as he looks over the images of the brain scans on the computer. He turns them around a few times, looks at them again. He is alone. The only one left in the hospital this late at night.

“If our lives are already set in stone by fate, then why are we even born?”

The rabbits—the boys—hurry to keep up with the young man, his cloak fluttering behind him. They carry suitcases just a bit too big for them, hugged against their chests with both arms. Their ears twitch back and forth, listening to something that isn’t there.

“There are those born to wealthy families, those born to beautiful mothers, and those born into the middle of war or poverty.”

The doctor doesn’t move when the young man appears behind him, holding an apple in one hand. He considers it like a crystal ball, thoughtful and pensive. As though there are answers to be found inside of it. But the doctor doesn’t hear him, or see him. As though he isn’t there at all. The rabbits’ noses twitch in their basket on the table at the other side of the room.

“If that’s all caused by fate, then God is incredibly unfair and cruel.”

The young man places a framed photograph on the table in front of the doctor. But the doctor does not hear it, nor see it. He does not see the image of the people in the khaki colored uniforms, holding out a banner and throwing peace signs at the camera. He does not see the man and woman in the center of the frame, holding hand and smiling, their heads framing the hippo in the lake behind them.

“Because, ever since that day, none of us had a future.”

The young man is sitting on the bench behind the doctor now. Still holding the apple. The rabbits— the boys— sit on either side of him, holding the suitcases on their lap. The doctor is gone.

The young man picks up a telephone and dials.

“And the only certain thing was that we wouldn't amount to anything.”

~ * ~ * ~ F L A S H B A C K ~ * ~ *

Zarc

Towards the subway station

He is LATE. He is so so so so late!!
Zarc huffs and puffs as he scurries down the sidewalk, bolting around adult’s legs, his tiny size making it easier for him to navigate the streets. His backpack flaps against his back, which indicates that it is mostly empty. He’s forgotten all his books and homework, but he’s already making Ray wait for him, he needs to hurry up!

She probably went on ahead of him already. It’s her turn to take care of the animals today, so she probably didn’t wait for him.

“I’m going to get tickle tortured again,” he whines to himself, and runs faster.

He slows as he comes up on the entrance to his station. What’s with the crowd in front of the entrance? There’s a faceless man standing on a box above the milling faceless crowd, with a megaphone, his voice monotone and expressionless.

“This subway station is closed. There’s been an accident. This station is closed until further notice.”

Someone shouts an expletive, and someone else demands details. Zarc reaches the edge of the crowd, but he can’t see past it, all of the adults are so much taller than him. An accident? What kind of accident? Is Ray okay?

“Oh my god!”

The scream catches his ears, and he looks up to where the faceless woman is pointing.

Smoke.

There is smoke rising up in a huge, thick pillar into the sky, several buildings away. No, that’s not the only one. There’s another one. Two more. There are four pillars of smoke bubbling into the air.

Someone else screams. Someone shouts. The crowd is starting to press forward.

Ray.

Zarc whips back towards the crowd and pushes against it, trying to pull at legs and backs and force his way through.

“Let me through!” he screams. “Let me through! My friend is in there! Ray is in there!”

No one hears him over the screams and shouts and yells and he tries harder. He can’t see. The panic is overwhelming and the stench of sweat and screams presses down on him.

“You have to let me through!” he shrieks until his voice grows hoarse. “Ray is on that train!!”

~ * ~ * ~ END FLASHBACK ~ * ~ * ~

Shun yawned, pushing open the door.

“Ruri? Yuya? I’m home.”

It had taken him so much longer to get back from LDS than he had thought. That trip had been a total bust, too. Reiiji was as unhelpful and difficult to talk to as ever. He made sure to smooth out the irritability in his smile as he made his way in.

“Ruri? Yuya?”

The lights were off, except for one small one in the kitchen, and he left his shoes behind for Ao to start punching them and padded inside.

There was a small container wrapped in foil on the kitchen table, and Shun leaned down to have a look. A note was taped to the top.

_Yuya and I went to share some pancakes with Yuzu. These are for you!_

The note was accompanied by one of Ruri’s cute, round face doodles with a smile and a peace sign, and Shun smiled. He peeled the foil back and inhaled the scent. Oh, wow, not just pancakes, these were Yuya’s sandwiches. They smelled like curry, too. Shun’s stomach growled, and he started to pull out a chair.

The phone rang.
Shun paused, looking towards it. Who was calling at this hour? Ruri, or Yuya, maybe? He left the chair and crossed over to the phone, lifting it off the hook.

“Hello? Sakaki residence.”

The other end was silent. Had they hung up? No, he didn’t hear a dial tone.

“Hello?” he said.

Was he imagining it, or did he hear someone breathing very softly on the other end?

“Hey, if this is a prank call—” he started, getting irritated now.

“It’s electrifying, isn’t it?”

The voice was cold and poisonous and Shun felt like he was about to choke just from hearing it. His heart plummeted into his stomach and his breath caught for a moment.

“Who is this?” he demanded as soon as he got his breath back.

“I am from the destination of your fate,” the voice said.

“I am from the destination of your fate,” the girl who had appeared when Ruri was possessed by the hat had said once. Shun suddenly couldn’t breathe.

“Ruri will die again tonight.”

Shun almost dropped the phone.

“Who the hell are you?” he screamed. “What are you talking about?”

But the phone had already gone dead and all he could hear was the whine of the dial tone. He dropped the phone without hanging it up and bolted for the door, throwing himself into his shoes and grabbing up Ao under the arms.

Ruri. Ruri Ruri Ruri Ruri Ruri.

~ * ~ * ~ F L A S H B A C K ~ * ~ * ~

_Yusho_

_Factory_

“Ah! So she had the baby already?”

He smiles into the cell phone, feeling a cool relief flood through him. The thunk, thunk, thunk of the machine stamping the boxes outside his control box echoes in the distance, but his ears are trained on the voice on the other end of the phone.

“It’s a boy? Are they both doing all right? ...that’s great. That’s wonderful.”

He nods, a huge smile spreading over his face.

“I’m so glad to hear that. Yes, I’ll be at the hospital as soon as I’m off of work.”

He hangs up the phone and looks down at it for a moment. Still smiling.

“A little boy,” he says, his voice thick with wonder and awe. “We’re parents now.”

He smiles at the phone one last time. Then he puts it away, and picks up a different phone: a small black one, with an image of a hippo stamped onto the back. He opens it up and dials.

“We’re clear,” he says. “We can begin the operation now.”

He nods to the man on the other side of his glass window, and he nods back. He picks up one of the boxes and begins to walk away. Yusho closes his phone. He looks at the screen, briefly, the blinking dots on the map that tell him where the vans have parked. He puts the phone into his pocket, and turns to open the door from his box.

“Perhaps now,” he says quietly. “The world can finally know peace.”
"What are you talking about?" she said, almost laughing with a little bit of nervousness. "I mean — even if you were born that day, it still couldn’t be your fault. You were a baby."

"You don’t get it," Yuya said, his voice thick and tight. "R-Ray...your sister...she died in the subway, didn’t she? In—in the incident."

He heard Yuzu swallowing, and he looked up across to the other side of the train car. Ruri was staring right back at him with those cold blue eyes, expressionless. Waiting for him to speak. Waiting for him to say it.

"It was my parents," Yuya gasped finally, so quietly that he was sure Yuzu couldn’t hear him. "It — was my parents. They were the ones who caused that attack. They were the leaders of the organization that killed your sister."

He heard Yuzu choke softly. He finally looked at her, finally looked straight into her pale face, lit eerily by the mysterious train car they were in. She looked like she was about to keel over, her mouth hanging open and her eyes so wide that they were more white than blue. Yuya’s eyes filled with tears.

"It’s my family’s fault," he said. "It’s my family’s fault that your sister is dead."

Yuzu’s mouth closed and she chewed on her lip. She opened it again and closed it again. No sounds came out of her.

His blood was running so loudly through his head, and the warning red lights of the 95 loomed over him like a hot brand. She must understand now, right? She must understand what he was trying to tell her, about how it was his fault, about how she should hate him because she was right, he did ruin her life, he ruined her family and caused her suffering.

"Do you both understand now?" Ruri said in her cold voice. "Do you understand the circle of fate that binds you two together?"

Yuya couldn’t look at Yuzu, and he was sure that she was looking away from him too. The train beneath them hummed and clicked. Taking them somewhere, but he wasn’t sure where.

"Ugh!" Ruri said suddenly, drawing both of their gazes. She flopped over onto her side across the train seats, her arms flopped over her head. "This is taking too long. Humans are so slow."

She sat up again, and stood with a snap, her shoulders thrown back in her usual dominating posture. She pointed towards the two of them with one finger, her other hand on her hips.

"Listen well!" she said, like a princess giving out a proclamation. "You have lost the Hippodrum! The world has once more called out to the Dark Rabbits, and they will come among us again."

She was practically shaking with the conviction of her words, even though they didn’t make sense. Yuya could only stare at her, at the girl who was and was not his sister, her eyes harsh and determined. Her gaze flickered to him in particular.

"If you want to change the rails," she said. "If you want to change your cursed fate, you must act quickly. You must regain the Hippodrum."

And then, as abruptly as she had begun...

She collapsed.

Yuya and Yuzu leaped from their seats as one as the train car flashed away down the rails without them, leaving them alone in the cold, dark world of the hippo hat girl. Yuya caught Ruri against the shoulders before she could keel forward.

"Ruri!! Ruri!!"

"Ruri-chan!" Yuzu gasped, trying to hold her up too.

Ruri’s eyes fluttered. Her eyes were still the full, cold blue as she struggled to lift her head up towards them. This — this was wrong. The hippo hat girl was not supposed to be this weak, this limp in his arms. She was supposed to be a force of nature, a princess that they couldn’t disobey...
— not laying loosely in his arms as though she couldn’t even breathe. Her breaths were ragged as she lifted her head up, trying to look more imposing than she did. Her fingers curled weakly into Yuya’s sleeve.

“Please find the Hippodrum,” she said, her voice hoarse. “If you want to escape your fate, you have to...stop...him.”

“Stop him? Who’s him? Who do we have to stop?”

The hat slipped off of Ruri’s head, and landed on the sidewalk. They were back in the real world, and Ruri’s eyes were half open and her lips were parted, and she suddenly felt icy cold to the touch.

She wasn’t breathing.

“Ruri!” Yuya screamed, shaking her shoulders.

“H-hello, yes? We need an ambulance, a girl’s unconscious, the address is—” Yuzu was already on her phone with the dispatcher as Yuya could only cling to Ruri.

“Ruri!” he screamed, tears blurring his vision. “Wake up! RURI!”
“Hehe, it is pointless to resist—you will be assimilated!”

There’s the sound of slopping as an egg is plopped into the batter, and Ruri attacks it happily with a spoon. Shun glances up from the baseball game he’s only half watching. In the kitchen, Ruri rocks back and forth with the force of her mixing. Behind her, Kii is trying to sit on Ao, and Ao is wiggling its little arms around pitifully.

“That’s right, you’ll all become one with the collective,” Ruri says in a dramatic voiceover as she throws in another egg.

She slops some batter into the pan and sets it to fry and bubble, while she reaches for one of the already finished pancakes, wrapping up the fried meats inside deftly.

“Pancake sandwiches for dinner again?” Shun says, standing and wandering over to her.

She grins at him as he leans over her shoulder, her hair flipping back over her back.

“Yup!” she says.

He looks at the mess she’s made, at the three plates already stacked with pancakes.

“Are you trying to feed an army in here?” he laughs. “I don’t think even I’m hungry enough for all of this.”

Ruri smiles at him again, flipping a pancake up and down back onto the frying pan.

“Do me a favor, Shun-nii,” she says, returning to her mixing. “Make up with Yuya-nii before dinner.”

Shun freezes in the middle of reaching for an unused pancake. He flushes lightly.

“We’re...not fighting...” he grumbles.

“Mm. Well, pancake sandwiches are our family’s special make-up recipe; so make sure that they do their job.”

Shun makes a grumbling sound at her, and she only laughs. The sunlight glitters through the window and through the obsidian purple of her hair, and he hears the hippos fumbling at each other playfully again. Her smile is infectious, shining, and he smiles too. He reaches for the bowl and plucks it from her hands, taking care of the rest of the mixing.
“Ah! You’re the collective now!” she says. “We’ll have to up the heat of the rebellion.”

She turns the notch up on the oven and he laughs.

“Are we still playing that?”

“You’re the galactic emperor, and I’m going to be the rebel mobilizing the pancake brigade.”

“Sounds good to me, I guess.”

~ * ~ * ~ E N D  F L A S H B A C K ~ * ~ * ~

He chuckled.

One of the little boys perched on the table kicked his legs back and forth, looking up at him with curious gray eyes. For a moment, his black hair seemed to twitch, as though there were long rabbit ears tucked within the spikes, but then the image was gone.

“What’s funny?” he asked.

The doctor leaned against the desk and didn’t look up from the book he had balanced in one hand. He smiled, tongue sticking out between his teeth.

“Nothing,” he said. “Only, I’ve just found the most amusing fairy tale.”

“I want to hear it,” the other boy said from where he sat on the floor. For just the barest breath, there was the flicker of movement from the ribbon in his blue hair, like ears turning towards a sound, but then there was nothing.

“Once, Mary had a beautiful apple tree that gave light to the entire world, and three lovely little lambs with wool like the wings of angels,” the doctor said. He flicked his magenta purple hair from his cheeks. “They were her pride and joy.”

Out in the hall, there was a faint crashing sound, like doors being flung open.

“But one morning, Mary awoke to find her tree had wilted. The apples had all rotted, and the world was overtaken with darkness.”

The door to the dark room hung open, letting only a thin stream of light. Outside, a gurney rumbled past, feet smacking the ground as nurses and doctors hurried after it.

“It seemed that the world would never be bright again. But then a light came from the sky, and someone called out to Mary: ‘the world isn’t done for yet.’”

A second pair of feet stumbled past the door, a streak of red and green. A name called after him, Yuya, wait, wait!

“When Mary opened her eyes, she found two large black rabbits seated on a rock before her.”

The two boys sat up a little straighter, their noses twitching.

“There’s one way to save your tree,” the doctor said. “You only need take the ashes from the flame of the Goddess’ temple, and spread them over the roots.”

“The Goddess won’t like that,” the black haired boy said.

“The Goddess wouldn’t like that at all,” the blue haired boy said.

“Mary said she could not, for the flame of the Goddess could not by touched by humans, it was law,” the doctor said. He flipped the page. “But the rabbits insisted. If they saved the tree, the world would be filled with light, and the Goddess would be pleased at that, wouldn’t she? Mary would only be borrowing some ashes, after all.”

Heels struck the ground in an echo, this time a streak of pink blurring past the crack in the door. The doctor flipped to the next page.

“That night, Mary stole the ashes, and spread them over the roots of the tree.”

There was the sound of slamming doors, and out in the hall, a light flickered on over the glass doors. Emergency services, no one save medical personnel allowed inside.
“The next day, the apple tree was whole again, and the world was once again filled with light. Mary sang and danced around the tree, so pleased was she at what happened...but she did not notice her three little lambs.”

The doctor closed the book. He tucked it into his purple jacket, and stood up, fixing his lapels. Somewhere through a set of doors, a heart rate monitor beeped irregularly.

“And when the Goddess found out...that Mary had touched her sacred flame...she demanded punishment.”

The doctor opened the door all the way into the hallway. He stopped, and waited, smiling at the young man who bolted past him, a hippo tucked under his arm, his hazel yellow eyes wide and not even seeing the doctor at all as he bolted through.

“Eeny, meeny, miney...you,” the doctor said softly. “And she pointed at the smallest, and youngest of the lambs.”

The boys behind him hopped to their feet, grabbing up the silver briefcases left on the table and hopping to fall into step behind him. The doctor stepped into the hallway.

“Why,” he said. “The older lambs begged and pleaded. Why her? Why the darling, sweet, precious baby sister who had done no wrong? Why not them, instead?”

The heart rate monitor flattened to a long, unchanging whine.

“Because,” the doctor said, “Punishment has to be the most cruel, doesn’t it?”

~ * ~  * ~

Shun grabbed Yuya by the shoulders, whipping him around to face him.

“Yuya!” he said. “What happened? What happened??”

Yuya just flopped in Shun’s grip, staring at nothing. His eyes were hollow, dead, his mouth hanging open. The hat dangled uselessly from the edges of his fingertips. Behind him, Yuzu was rocking back and forth, her hands clenched against her chest, staring through the windows into the emergency room, mumbling nothing to herself.

“Yuya!!”

Yuya just hung there. He looked paler than bone, like he himself was dead, too. Anger pulsed through Shun, and he dropped Ao to grab both of Yuya’s shoulders, shaking him.

“Wake the fuck up!” he shouted into his face. “Wake up!! She’s not going to die!”

Silent tears grew in the corners of Yuya’s eyes, and his face or his posture didn’t change. Shun swore. He snatched the hat out of Yuya’s limp fingers and slammed his shoulder into the doors of the emergency room.

One of the nurses tried to stop him, but a doctor stopped her. He bolted to Ruri’s side and dropped to his knees, grabbing her hand. The heart monitor whined with a flat tone, but he ignored it.

“Ruri,” he breathed. “Ruri, open your eyes. Ruri, don’t— you can’t—”

He blinked and he wasn’t in the hospital anymore. The swirling pink and sparkling world of the spirit in the hat rolled past him. He was on the platform where he usually stood when she appeared, but he wasn’t cuffed.

The giant bear robot platform where she had stood before was empty. It sagged and sparked, the lights in the eyes going out. Suddenly, the background went black and gray, like it had the day the spirit had pulled the hat off her own head and died in front of them. The world was freezing up, dead and lifeless. Where was she? Where was Ruri?
His eyes dropped to the floor. Oh god.

Ruri—or the spirit in the hat, he wasn’t sure which—lay sprawled on the floor, face down.

“Ruri!!”

Shun grabbed for her, dragging her up into his arms. Her dress was so heavy and unwieldy like this, and he had to struggle to get a hold of her.

“Wake up! Open your eyes! You told me you would keep her alive!”

Ruri’s eyes fluttered. The deep blue irises that weren’t her own seemed to glow in the darkness for a moment.

“I gave you my life to save her! You can’t die now!!”

She coughed, her body curling up in his arms.

“The compensation I took from you has run out,” she croaked. Her throat bobbed when she swallowed. “Which means I can no longer stay here. I’m going back.”

“Going back? Going back where??”

“To the destination of fate. Where I came from.”

Shun swore, his eyes blurring with angry tears. He was shaking so badly, he didn’t know how he was holding onto her.

“I won’t let you!! What was the point of—if you—”

A cry struggled free of his twisted throat, and Ruri only grew heavier in his arms.

“T-take more of it,” Shun gasped. “Take all of it. All of my life, take it. Take it to save her.”

Ruri coughed with a sound that might have been a laugh. She put one weak hand onto Shun’s hand that held her.

“It doesn’t work like that,” she whispered. “It’s like love...like a first kiss. It only works once.”

He grabbed her hand and pressed it against his chest stubbornly.

“You won’t know if you don’t try, will you??” he said. “Take it! Please— I can’t...I can’t lose her.”

Ruri gasped for breath. Her eyes, eerie and blue, stared up at him. They weren’t Ruri’s eyes, but he wasn’t sure who’s they were. He felt a heat blossom against his chest, then, where her hand rested. Her eyes flickered to the spot. A faint, tired smile flickered to her face.

“The red burning of scorpion’s fire,” she murmured. “Humans are so stubborn.”

She struggled to sit up. He tried to support her, but she pushed his hands away, until she was wobbling up to her heels and standing in front of him, looking down at him from down her nose. Her dress and gloves wilted away into pieces, leaving her only in her boots and corset and bloomers, and of course, the hat.

“Very well,” she said. “Let’s initiate the survival strategy.”

The corset burst apart, and her hand pushed forward. Shun gasped as her hand shoved inside of his chest, through his skin. His hand felt cold and fuzzy like bubbles and he couldn’t comprehend how it was actually in his chest, so he tried not to think about it too hard.

It hurt. He gasped, grabbing hold of her back. Her fingers were icy, and he felt them curl around his heart as though it were a living flame, gripping it between her fist. He dug his hands into her back harder, trying to support himself. It was hard to breathe. His vision was blurring in and out, so he closed his eyes. She’d rip it out of him, and he’d die. He could sense that as clearly as though it were written in front of him. He’d die, but she would live. That...that was all...that mattered...

Ruri released his heart, and pulled her hand out of his chest.

His eyes snapped open. He grabbed her wrist. He tried to force her hand back into his chest again, back to his heart.
“No,” he gasped. “Don’t.”

Her face was so close to his that he could feel her breath against his lips, her not-Ruri’s eyes inches from his own.

Her eyes softened.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “This is goodbye.”

He was in the hospital again, holding Ruri’s hand between his, and the heart monitor still whined without a single blip. She wasn’t breathing.

Shun opened his mouth, but nothing came out. His throat croaked. His body folded up over the bed, pressing his forehead into the mattress beside Ruri’s head.

“Why?” he gasped into the mattress. “W-why?”

He lifted his head, but he couldn’t see for the tears.

“Why wasn’t I good enough?” he said. “Why wasn’t I enough??”

A cry uncurled from his throat and then he was screaming. His scream was echoing off of the dark walls of the tiny emergency room, as screens blinked unfeeling at him.

“I’m not good enough,” he gasped and choked. “I’m not—I was never good enough.”

The doors opened. Light flooded into the room, silhouetting the trio of figures there.

The young man in the middle smiled at him, his magenta-purple hair slicked back from his face.

“You’re right,” he said. “You weren’t.”

He smiled, and leaned forward.

“But I can help you fix that.”
“They’re late,” Yuya says, frowning. He’s tapping his fingers nervously against the table, and it’s making the chopsticks rattle. Shun bites back the urge to grab his hand and press it into the table. Ruri rocks back and forth on her knees on top of her chair; she hasn’t sat properly in years.

Yuya looks up at the clock. Shun groans.

“I’m just gonna eat without them,” he says, reaching for the karage.

Yuya smacks his hand.

“No! It’s a family rule that we eat as a family!”

Shun glowers at him, and Yuya glares right back.

“That’s a stupid rule,” Shun grumbles, dropping his round face onto his hands.

Yuya opens his mouth to retort— but then he notices that Ruri is already balancing her soup bowl in her tiny hands, and tipping it up to her mouth. Yuya lets his head droop. He loses, Ruri wins.

Ruri beams when she puts her soup bowl down.

“Mom’s miso is the best!” she says.

Yuya blushes, since he was the one who made the soup, and Shun grins.

Buzzzzzzzz. Buzzzzzzzz.

All three of them look up. Is that the door? Yuya and Shun exchange a glance. It’s late, and their parents wouldn’t ring the doorbell. So who is that?

Buzzzzzzzz. Buzzzzzzzz.

“Okay, okay, I’m coming!” Yuya shouts. He hurries up from his seat and trots down the hall out of the kitchen, and around to the door. The doorbell continues to buzz insistently.

“I’m here, I’m here,” he says, pulling the door open. “Who is...”
He loses his words at the sight of the scary, looming man in the tuxedo standing in his doorway. His fingers tighten around the door, ready to slam it. The woman in the suit beside him, however, pushes on the door and it opens despite Yuya’s best try.

“You must be Sakaki Yuya,” the woman says in a fake sweet voice. “Are your parents home, kiddo?”

Yuya shivers, half stepping back.

“You, who is it?” Shun calls, peeking around the corner.

“Ah, and there’s Shun there, right?” the woman says with a fake smile.

“W-what do you want?” Yuya asks.

“Hey, you can’t go barging into people’s houses like that!” Shun shouts when the man steps through the door, making Yuya shy back with nerves.

The phone rings. Yuya flinches—the sound is too abrupt and he’s too nervous. He hears Ruri pick it up.

“S- Shun,” she mumbles, peeking around the corner with the phone.

“Stay in the kitchen!” Shun shouts, and Ruri flinches. She swallows, holding out the phone.

“It... it’s Aunt Asuka,” she says. “She says it’s important.”

Shun tenses. His eyes flicker to the men in the doorway. Yuya swallows tightly and hopes they won’t try to walk farther inside. He—he decides he absolutely won’t move out of the way. He won’t let them in any further.

Shun finally takes the phone and goes around the corner with it to put slack in the cord.

“Aunt Asuka, there are weird people at our door,” Shun’s voice echoes around the corner. “What? But what would the police be doing here? No, I don’t understand. No! Explain...fine. Fine, okay.”

The phone clicks, and Yuya tries to stare up at the big man with as much force as he can muster. He has to be tough, like Shun.

Shun reappears, looking pale and angry.

“Fine,” he says. “We’ll go with you, but just because Aunt Asuka said to.”

“What?” Yuya says, heart leaping. “We’re going with them?”

“Ruri, Yuya, go pack a few changes of clothes,” Shun says, ignoring Yuya. “Aunt Asuka will meet up with us there.”

Yuya glances at the two scary people in his door again. The woman has her fingers on the doorway, and her nails are long and pointed, and the color of blood. He shudders. He hurries off with Ruri to their rooms to do what they’ve been told.

~ * ~ * ~ E N D F L A S H B A C K ~ * ~ * ~

“This is a punishment for us,” Yuya whispered.

Yuzu startled, looking up. Yuya had curled himself up with his head buried in his knees, leaning against the glass looking into Ruri’s room. Yuzu still stood, back pressed against the glass, hands shaking so badly that she had to put them behind her and lean on them.

“What do you mean?” she whispered.

“This is our punishment,” Yuya whispered. “For all of the people our parents killed. Fate has decided to take Ruri.”

“Y-Yuya,” Yuzu said, her voice choked.

“I knew it would always come back to hurt us,” he whispered. “Ever since that day, in the hotel
room, with the police, when we turned the television on, when we saw our own house on the news.”

He choked on a sob, burying his face harder into his folded arms atop his knees. Yuzu wanted to reach for him. Wanted to hold him. Do something.

But there was a wall there, now, she felt. Something between them that she couldn’t breach. She didn’t know how. She didn’t even know how she felt right now.

“This is my fault,” Yuya said, his voice cracking.

“Y-you’re not responsible for something your parents did,” Yuzu managed to choke out.

“No,” Yuya said, snuffling. “I didn’t mean for that.”

Yuzu wanted to ask him what he did mean, then, but she couldn’t find the words.

She could only look back into the room behind her, where Shun bent over the top of Ruri, crying silently. Where the hippo hat was left strewn on the floor, crumpled and powerless.

Her eyes filled with tears. Then she, too, slid down against the glass, and pressed her face into her hands.

It wasn’t fair.

Why did it have to be Ruri?

~ * ~ * ~

The whine of the flattened heart rate monitor is all that fills Shun’s ears, and he stares up at the strange new addition to the room.

The young man with the slicked back hair smiles— it’s a bland, distant sort of smile, as though the person smiling isn’t actually at the controls at the moment. Behind him are two small boys who don’t look like they belong in a hospital setting.

“It’s electrifying, isn’t it?” he says, and Shun tenses, tightening his hand around Ruri’s cold one.

“Who the fuck are you?” he asks.

The man smiles. Before he answers, however, one of the small boys behind him hops forward, turns around, and pins a nametag to his lapel. The man then points to the nametag.

“I am Yuuri. I was transferred to this hospital just a day ago. I’ll be taking care of your sister.”

Shun bites down hard, clenching his teeth. His eyes suddenly swim with tears.

“Now?” he demands viciously. “You show up— now?”

The man doesn’t stop smiling.

“Don’t make that face like you’ve given up,” he says, laughing. “The world hasn’t ended yet.”

Shun held back a very strong urge to punch this guy in the face. The only thing stopping him was that he didn’t want to let go of Ruri’s hand.

Yuuri smiled again, even wider, and then he snapped his fingers. The two boys behind him lifted up their suitcases, laying them flat in their arms. The combination locks on the top twisted and spun on their own, and then the cases popped open.

Inside were....apples? Six apples each, neatly tucked into a little section for them. Yuuri reached back and selected one, holding it out in front of Shun. Shun opened his mouth to ask. Yuuri’s hand moved downwards, and when it came back up, instead of an apple, he was holding a glass vial with a strange, glowing pink liquid.

“What is that?” Shun said in a choked voice.

“Medicine,” Yuuri said. “It’s a souvenir for you, from very far away.”

He pressed his thumb to the top of the glass vial and began to press down. He tilted his head with
another smile.

“So,” he said. “Shall we begin the survival strategy?”

Shun flinched so hard that he almost dropped Ruri’s hand. Survival Strategy. That was...wasn’t that...?

“What are you talking about?” Shun said. “What do you mean?”

“I suppose,” Yuuri said. “That you could say that, since it awakens the sleeping princess...it could be called a prince’s kiss.”

He snapped off the top of the vial. With a flourish of his other sleeve, he withdrew a small syringe from his coat. He dipped the needle inside the vial and began to withdraw the liquid.

“You seem a very pitiful child. Powerless. Not even able to save your dear sister, but only to cry and bemoan your ‘fate.’”

Shun’s lips curled back with anger, but Yuuri didn’t seem to notice. He finished filling the syringe and discarded the vial into his pocket. He lifted the syringe then, smiling.

“So?” he said. “What is your answer?”

Shun felt sick. He couldn’t explain the twisting in his stomach, or the hot-cold pulsing in his chest where Ruri’s doppelganger’s hands had touched him. But it what he was saying was true...if this medicine could save Ruri....

He opened his mouth, but before he could speak, Yuuri raised up a hand.

“But please remember,” he said. “That this medicine is quite expensive. Many people desire it. It’s a very new drug.”

Shun tensed.

“So it’s money you want for it?”

“If that’s what you deem sufficient recompense for your sister’s life.”

Shun felt a cold shudder pass through him, but he refused to drop Yuuri’s eyes. He stood up, still clinging to Ruri with one hand.

“If it’s money you want, I can pay anything.”

“It’s not the kind of price a parentless high schooler can pay.”

“Shut up! I’m good for it! I promise!”

He knew how to make money. He knew how to make it fast. He knew how to do it without Ruri or Yuya ever finding out how he was getting it. No one ever needed to know. If only he could just save Ruri...

Yuuri smiled. His boots clicked when he walked forward, and slowly, almost sensually, he pressed one finger to Shun’s chest.

“And will you place this down as collateral?” he said softly.

Shun swallowed.

“What are you talking about?”

“Is she worth so much to you? That you would let yourself be burned one hundred times for her sake? What would you gain? What would be left of you like that? Nothing but a blackened scorpion’s heart, or a pile of white ash?”

Shun snarled, grabbing Yuuri’s wrist and flinging his touch off of him.

“Ruri is my precious younger sister,” he hissed. “I will do anything to save her.”

“Anything?”

“Anything.”
He was gasping for air, glaring as hard as he could at Yuuri—the doctor was shorter than him and yet, he felt taller. Yuuri’s smiling face didn’t change even an inch. He simply turned back towards the two small boys.

“Well then,” he said.

“The contract is approved!” the one on the left with the spiky black and purple hair said.

“Congratulations, Yuuri!” the other said, the one with the spiky blue and yellow hair.

“Isn’t it?” Yuuri agreed with a smile.

He turned towards the limp and pale form of Ruri, then. He lowered the syringe down towards her arm.

“Very well,” he said. “I believe it’s time for you to open your eyes, princess.”

Shun felt his grip on Ruri’s hand slide free. His breath was caught in his lungs, and he couldn’t release it. Couldn’t take his eyes away from Ruri, who wasn’t breathing. Was this a mistake? Was she already....

*Beep.*

His eyes darted to the heart rate monitor. There was a blip?


Ruri inhaled.

Ruri collapsed to his knees again, grabbing her hand.

“Ruri, Ruri, Ruri, Ruri,” he gasped over and over again.

Her eyelashes fluttered, air moved through her lips. And then her eyes were open. Magenta irises flickered around, before settling on Shun.

“Oh...?” she breathed.

The door slammed open. Yuya’s choked cry echoed through the room, and Yuzu shouted Ruri’s name. Shun could only grip Ruri’s hand against his forehead, tears rolling down his cheeks as he said her name, over and over again, just her name. Ruri tried to smile, weakly, while Yuya and Yuzu crowded around them, sobbing and crying and laughing.

Shun did not notice Yuuri melt back into the hallway with his attendants. He didn’t notice the way the small boys’ hair twitched as though they were large ears tucked in the spiky locks for a moment.

He did not see nor hear when Yuuri took a book out of his inside pocket, and popped it open in one hand.

“And then like that, the Goddess decided not to punish the young lamb,” Yuuri said softly. “But it was not out of a fondness for the lambs, nor mercy for Mary.”

Yuuri looked up and smiled at nothing.

“No,” he said. “It was, because, she said, ‘Punishment wouldn’t be fun if this was all there was, now would it?’”
just as a heads up, there will be no update next Thursday. I'll be camping and I won't have internet. Thanks for following this project so far, I appreciate all of y'all!

Art once again provided by dark-angel-of-muses!

“What do you think of the word ‘fate’?”

A giggle echoed between the rows of books. Overhead, the sky glowed through the hole in the roof, sending tendrils of light streaming down against the spines of red tomes.

“Do you think fate as a concept exists?”

Tiny feet clicked and ran across the floor, like a child skittering away. The giggling grew louder, and then fainter. He lifted his eyes from the floor, looking towards the sound. His back leaned against a row of bright yellow books.

He rose, then, and began to walk after the giggling, hands in the pockets of his dark purple coat.

“Put simply, do you think human life is already set in stone at birth, and simply cannot be resisted? Do you think that’s a rule?”

The giggler did not wait for him. Her feet tapped out a rhythm as she ran, arms swinging back and forth in a joyous arc, leaving him far behind. He did not increase his speed, but simply continued after her through the dappled light across the floor from the sky overhead.

“Wouldn’t you hear me out, for just a little?”

He stood at the top floor, looking down at the endless abyss of books and stairs from over the railing. The light played against his magenta and purple hair, as a breeze from the faraway sky rustled his coat. His hair did not move, as though it were frozen in time.

“Long ago,” he said softly, voice echoing through the abyss. “...yes. A long time ago. It’s a story from about sixteen years ago.”

Far below him, he saw her dart through the spots of light. Her laughter trickled up like a backwards waterfall.

“That girl appeared before me. Out of the blue.”

He tapped his lips thoughtfully, eyes elsewhere. The light below him was empty.
“To my surprise, she was the same type of human as me.”

His boots sent ripples of sound across the metal as he walked down the stairs, one at a time. Below him, he could hear feet like raindrops pattering down the stairs, just out of sight of his eyes.

“She had the same eyes. In that moment, I knew I wasn’t alone in the world.”

He paused, looking at the row of books beside him, their endless spines and gradating colors, from all red to violet down the way.

“I was happy.”

He began down the stairs again when her giggles reached him once more. He could see her now, running down the aisle of books. Her pigtailed danced in the motion of her joyful gallop.

“That’s right. Until I met her, I was all alone in the world. No one else could see the sights I saw. No one else could see the things I could hear.”

She was only a few feet ahead of him, but he did not pick up his pace, and she did not slow hers. Her dress rippled around her tiny legs as she ran.

“I could hear voices from all across the world. Voices crying out, ‘help me.’”

She darted around an aisle, into the shadows and out of sight. He stopped, eyes flickering over the line of books, and into the darkness just above them, through the shelf to what was on the other side of it.

“It’s true,” he said, musing. “That’s why I could see the path the world must take. It’s not a lie.”

The giggling girl did not respond, and for a moment, she seemed to have fallen silent. He let his chin droop, sighing. But he did not stop smiling.

“But that’s why I was sad.”

He came around the corner. Her shoes were there. But she was not.

“I mean, the moment I saw her, I knew our paths would never cross.”

Down the stairs, another giggle echoed. She ran in stockings, now, her feet muffled against the metal floor.

“Yes,” he said softly. “She did not become my ally.

“She rejected me.”

He reached the bottom of the stairs. A spotlight flooded down from the hole in the sky above them, illuminating the edges of an pair of empty train tracks.

“The one person who could see the same sights as me rejected me.”

She ran across them, her stockinged feet bouncing off of the railroad ties and off into the shadows on the other side again.

“What’s that? A question for me? Go on.”

He stepped over the first rail and onto the wooden plank.


Yuuri stepped over the next rail and made his way across the second track.

“Why indeed. That’s still a secret.”

He was on the top floor of the library, looking down at the tracks below him again. He chuckled.

“What’s this? Don’t be mad at me.”

The hippo hat on the stack of books beside him did not respond. The light rolled off of its shiny blue eyes.
“Well, let me answer it like this, then. Does the concept of fate exist in the human world?”

He produced an apple from within his jacket and tossed it into the air, catching it deftly in one bare hand.

“I wish to confirm this. And I want you to confirm it as well. With me.”

The girl giggled as she ran back behind the bookshelves once more, and then vanished into the shadows. He turned towards the books, but his true gaze was on the hat beside him.

“The two of us will search for the Hippodrum. See whether it truly exists. Well? That’s not too bad of a deal, is it?”

Light gleamed along the edges of the dark blue eyes inset into the hat. It seemed to stare straight at him, though it had no life in it. He chuckled.

“Then continue to be by that girl’s side.”

The floor was starting to slat itself away, rolling down towards them, disappearing into blackness. Her stockinged feet rested on the ground for only a moment before the ground disappeared beneath them.

“You will see the same sights as me,” he said. “Let us confirm, together, the fate of the brothers and their sister.”

The hat’s tassels tangled forwards, and she dropped out from beneath it, vanishing into the darkness. The hat, as it fell, was the only thing that remained.

Yuuri smiled, and turned away.

“The only one in the whole world who can see the same sights as me...let us meet again in the world beyond.”

He sighed out once through his lips in a faint, satisfied hiss.

“See you soon...my love.”

~ * ~ * ~

“And in today’s ceremonies, we are celebrating the tenth anniversary of the building and inauguration of the Maiami Sky Metro.”

On the screen a pair of girls clapped with bright, polite smiles, looking purposeful in their matching uniforms and the stars that twinkled in their hair, one short green and the other long blue. The reporter in the corner image smiled at the image of the two girls turning to present the plaque in front of the train station that they were participating in memorializing.

“But even as we celebrate, we must remember the history behind everything. There is nothing that can be regained once it is lost, not in the same way. We must do everything in our power to prevent another tragedy.”

The screen changed to another bright, peppy reporter.

“We’re now taking calls from the audience for comments.”

He picked up his phone from the armchair beside him and hit the numbers on the screen.

“Hello, yes! You’re our first caller.”

“Light cannot exist without the dark places,” he said. “For if light were to shine too brightly, the shadows would surely rise up with all the greater intensity to drown it out.”

“I...I’m sorry?”

“How unfortunate. I’ll have to crush it soon.”

He hung up and put the phone back down. On the screen, the reporter was looking a bit flustered.

“He? I’m sorry?”

The screen turned off. In the seat beside him, Deveraja put the remote down, huffing through its little nostrils. Reiji let out the tiniest huff of a laugh at the sight of the tiny hippo sitting upright in
the seat like a person.

His phone rang.

He let it go for a few moments, not even bothering to take a look at the screen. He wasn’t in the mood to answer calls right now. As the beeping continued insistently, however, he finally retrieved it, hitting the receive button and bringing it to his ear. He listened for a moment.

“Ah. It’s you.”

Devaraja huffed again, and reached for an apple on the coffee table.

“Yes. Reira is fine. I suppose I should thank you for that much.”

The voice on the other end of the phone chuckled.

“You needn’t thank me. You’ve done more than enough to warrant such help.”

Reiji’s lips tightened, but he did not respond to the statement. Devaraja began to use its stubby legs to peel off the skin of the apple, a bit at a time with a paring knife.

“I assume this isn’t simply a cordial call,” Reiji says.

“You would be correct,” the young man’s voice replied. Somewhere on the other end, Reiji could hear a faint snuffling, as though there were a rabbit in the man’s lap that he were stroking. “I’m calling to tell you that I know who has the other half of the diary.”

Reiji sat straight up in his seat. Devaraja dropped the half peeled apple.

“Who?” he said. “Who has it?”

~ * ~ * ~

“Did...did you know about the Sakakis all along, then?”

She stared down at her hands in her lap, and didn’t look up at him. Still, Yuzu could feel Zarc looking across at her, from where he sat beside her on the bench. It was an eerily familiar setting. She remembered sitting beside him, years ago, when she was only a child and he just graduating from high school. The first time she’d ever heard someone speak plainly to her about Ray.

“I did,” he said finally. “What a coincidence, right? When they became my students, I was shocked. I was a friend of one of the victims, and they were the children of the perpetrators. It was as though fate had brought us together.”

Yuzu’s hands tightened against her skirt.

“Fate,” she whispered, voice trembling.

Zarc leaned back against the bench, propping his elbows on the back of it.

“So he told you, then,” he said.

Yuzu nodded. Zarc sighed.

“If they ever found his parents...if they found Yuya and Shun’s parents...what would you do?” Yuzu asked.

Would you demand revenge? Would you hurt them? What would you do?

Zarc sighed, letting his head fall back.

“I don’t really know. It all feels so far away, you know? Like it wasn’t real.”

He lifted one hand up towards the pink sky, light playing across the faint white scars lining the base of his fingers.

“It’s not like they were common thugs who did something right in front of me,” he said. “It all kind of happened in a blur. As though it happened to someone else.”

He let his hand fall back to his lap, and Yuzu looked back at her own hands. Tears were shining against the backs of her hands, but she didn’t remember crying.
“The day before, when I said goodbye to your sister that day, that was the last time I saw her. I didn’t see her die. So it doesn’t feel real.”

Yuzu swallowed. Her shoulders tightened up around her ears.

“I wanted to become her,” she whispered. “I thought that...if I could...if I was Ray...then I could have soothed your pain. Mama and papa’s pain, too.”

She didn’t look up, her eyes were too blurry with tears for that. Her shoulders shook and she shook with them.

Zarc put a hand on top of hers. He didn’t grip it, but he just laid it there, and she let it stay where it was. It seemed so unreal, she thought, to think that just a few days ago, she would have been over the moon at this faint contact. But now, it just felt like any other comforting hand.

“I wish I’d never found out,” she whispered. “I wish I never knew about his parents.”

Zarc shook his head, the sound making a faint swooshing as his bangs bounced back and forth.

“No, I think there’s a reason for that, too. Everything happens for a reason. Not a single thing goes to waste.”

He touched the bottom of her chin lightly with the side of his fingers, and tilted her face up to look at him. His golden-hazel eyes were soft, and he smiled in a faint, sad sort of way.

“At the very least, I’m glad that I met you, Yuzu. Can you say the same?”

Yuzu thought about Yuya. She saw his bright smile and exasperated groans. She saw Shun’s awkward grimace and his scowling face, the hidden smile he thought no one saw. Ruri’s cheerful, boisterous laugh, the way her hair bounced around her. Zarc’s kind face, smiling at her right now.

His image blurred as her eyes glazed over, and she quickly looked away, pulling free of his faint grip to rub at her eyes.

“Yes,” she said. “Y-yeah. I’m glad. I’m...I’m really...I’m glad.”

I love the word “fate”.

Yuzu waves to Zarc through the train window as it pulls from the station. As he disappears from sight, she turns, and takes a seat facing away from the window.

Because, you know how they talk about “fated encounters”? A single encounter can completely change your life.

She pulls out her phone. The little hippo charm bounces against her fingers, and she flips it open, dialing in a number to write an email.

Such special encounters are not just coincidences. They’re definitely... fate.

‘Dear mom,’ she writes. ‘Sorry I didn’t call you last night. Can I come over to your new house to visit you next time? I want to meet Ayu-chan.’

Of course, life is not all happy encounters. There are many painful, sad, moments.

A faint blur of tears comes over her eyes for a moment, and she wipes it hurriedly away. Over her head, the cute mascots of Double B smile down at her, popping in and out of the screen for the advertisement they’re playing on the tv screen.

It’s hard to accept that misfortunes beyond your control are fate.

She wipes her tears away, and finishes her message. ‘By the way, congratulations on your remarriage. I really hope that you find happiness in it.’

But this is what I think: sad and painful things definitely happen for a reason.

She clicks the phone shut and shoves it back into her pocket. She looks up towards the window, at her reflection barely visible against the orange sky and setting sun. She inhales. She exhales.

For the first time in a long time, she is breathing.
Nothing in this world is pointless.

~ * * ~ F L A S H B A C K ~ * * ~

Shun, Yuya, Ruri

Hotel

"Shun, they told us not to use the T.V. or the phone," Yuya says, clenching and unclenching his hands in worry.

"We’re in a hotel. What else are we supposed to do?" Shun says, rolling his eyes. "Sit here and worry until we here from Aunt Asuka or our parents?"

Yuya still looks nervous, sending a glance to the door where the man and the woman in the suits disappeared. Shun heard them, of course, telling them not to use the appliances, but he knows a warning when he hears one. And he knows when it means an adult is hiding something from him.

"There’s something on the television that they aren’t suppose to see, and he wants to know what it is.

Ruri is already tucked beneath the covers, fast asleep and clinging to her bird plushie. Shun thinks it can’t hurt. He needs to know what he can to protect her, and Yuya, and his family.

He turns the television on.

"We’re here live at the scene, where the culprits of the ‘95 attacks are said to have been residing."

Shun feels his blood turn to ice. His grip on the remote slips.

"S-Shun?" Yuya says, voice thin and nervous. "Isn’t that our house?"

It is their house. He recognizes the bright white front, the big glass window where the living room is, the slanted roof. That’s their house, and there’s bright yellow police tape pulled all around it, dozens of police cars with flashing lights jammed in every available space all around it. People in uniforms pounding in and out of their doors, into their house, their rooms, their spaces.

"The suspects, Sakaki Yusho, and Sakaki Yoko, have not yet been found, but the house is under surveillance and the investigation thinks they are close to cracking the case."

"Shun, what are they talking about?" Yuya says, his voice cracking. "S-Shun, what are they saying?"

Shun drops the remote. Images of faces he knows are plastered to the screen, now. Tough green eyes beneath coiffed blond bangs look out at him from one image, and softer, dark eyes, a only half shaved face, looks at him from another.

"No way," he whispers. "No. It’s not true. Our parents— they can’t be—"

He screams, then, throwing himself at the television, as though he can break through it to the faces staring at him on the other side.

"You can’t be criminals! How are we supposed to explain that to Ruri? There’s no way— there’s no way our parents are criminals!!"
The tower glowed like a scar against the night, cutting open the starry sky outside the wide windows. The silhouette of the woman at the window could not hide the garish glow, and Grace turned her head against the pillow, shifting beneath the silken sheets to turn her eyes away.

“I feel bad for your poor husband,” Melissa giggled from the window. It was so quiet that Grace could hear her swirling her wine around in her glass. “But there’s really no substitute for being with a woman, is there?”

Grace snorted, but the sound was swallowed into the pillow. She was so goddamn full of herself. She twisted her head back up towards the window, and saw her costar turning back towards her with a vapid smile, the glowing light of the city tower casting her in an eerie light. Grace’s stomach twisted. The words tumbled out before she could think about them, but she did not regret them.

“You’re so predictable,” she said. “Do you honestly think that technique of yours can satisfy a woman more than once?”

Melissa stared at her for a minute, as though she couldn’t believe Grace had just said that out loud. Fuck. Grace had let this go on for too long. Now she was irritated.

She pulled herself off of the bed on the opposite side of Melissa, turning away from the tower, and went to find her clothes.

“Grace! Grace, wait. You’re not leaving already?”

“Don’t take it personally, darling. I get bored of everyone.”

Melissa scrambled for her shirt and pants as Grace made her way to the door while buttoning up her coat.

“Grace! Wait, darling! I thought we were forever! On the stage and in bed, I thought we were going to last?”

What a pain. She always found the clingy ones. Grace quickened her step, but Melissa followed her all the way down through the hotel to where her car was parked, chasing her all the way to the door as Grace slid herself into the seat and slammed the door closed.

“I don’t go back to people I’ve already lost interest in,” Grace said through the open car window, looking straight forward.

Melissa grabbed the ledge of the window, leaning her face down towards Grace.

“Are you really sure about this, honey?” she said. “If you break up with me, the secret about you and your body might get out...”

Grace didn’t even blink.
“You really are an awful seductress,” she said.

She revved the car once, giving Melissa only a breath to scramble back from the vehicle before she pealed away.

There are only two kinds of people in the world. Those who are wanted, and those who aren’t.

The word blurred in streaks of black and glowing gold as Grace zoomed away down the highway. To her left, the tower still loomed, blinking at her like a star too close to the ground. But she kept her eyes forward, ignoring everything but the blurred road and the few cars on the street around her at this time of night.

I can see the line between the two. That’s why I’m special. That’s why I’m untouchable. That’s why— no one will ever, ever touch my heart.

The car in front of her was too slow. She shifted gears and switched lanes, roaring around it and back onto the road in front of it. The tower was ahead of her now, right in the view of her windshield.

I’ve thrown away the past. I’m...I’m...

The road was empty. She was the only person in the whole world— just her, and the tower that lit up the night.

Grace choked on the sob in her throat. Her foot mashed into the brake and she skidded to a stop in the middle of the road. Her car buzzed and rumbled from the abrupt stop.

Slowly, her forehead fell against the wheel, hands trembling where they gripped it. Tears littered her lap in seconds. She couldn’t see for the blur, and she didn’t want to. Her shoulders curled around her ears, and the sobs wracked out of her body one at a time, shaking the car around her.

“Lies,” she choked out. “Fucking lies. This world is made up of only lies.”

She choked, and had to put a hand over her mouth.

They’re all liars. No one has ever wanted me.

She moaned, sliding her forehead down further, to hide herself from the watching stars, from the shadows outside her car, from the emptiness and loneliness.

“You were the only one,” she gasped. “You were the only one to ever call me beautiful. I miss you, oh god, I miss you, why aren’t you here?”

She was full on sobbing, now, and she could hardly breathe. She found enough air to scream, though, scream into the unfeeling glow of the tower overhead.

“I want to see you!” she said, voice echoing through her car, but swallowed up by the world outside. “You promised me! Our connection would be forever!!”

She wanted to be anywhere other than here, or home, or anywhere, really. She wanted to be in a place that didn’t exist.

She wanted to be with a person who could never hear her voice again.

~ * ~ * ~

He pauses in the hallway, glancing into the room. The ever attentive rabbits stop behind him, their noses twitching as they follow his gaze.

The soft click, click, click of knitting needles brushing against each other plays like a soft tune through the hospital door, matching the girl’s humming. At her side, the little yellow hippo works on its own long purple scarf, long enough now that it trails along on the floor.

“Annnd...done!!”

Ruri finishes her loop, pulling it tight and taking the needles away. She unfurls the long blue scarf and holds it high over her head like it’s an item she’s received from a video game.

“Mission complete!” she says happily.

The hippo matches her, holding its own long scarf over its head with its stubby legs. He chuckles
softly, and the rabbits giggle too.

After another beat, Ruri lets her arms down, and folds up the scarf on her lap into a neat pile. She sets it on the bed beside a neatly folded green scarf.

“This one is for Selena-chan,” she says. “And that one’s for Rin-chan.”

She hums, and her hippo begins to fold up its own scarf.

“I hope they like them,” Ruri whispers.

Yuuri smiles to himself. He walks past the open door without making his presence known, down the hallway towards the x-ray viewing room.

Shun is already standing inside, arms folded as he leans against the desk.

“You’re late,” he complains, lip curling.

“Or you’re early,” Yuuri says, smiling.

Shun just scowls at him while Yuuri walks over to the desk and seats himself. Shun lifts himself from his lean and moves over to the table. He slaps a thick envelope on the desk.

“How electrifying,” Yuuri says, smiling as he lifts his eyes to Shun’s. “That was very quick. I’m impressed.”

“I told you I was good for it,” he says.

Yuuri traces one finger across the hippo shaped mark stamped on the front of the envelope. Very good. He’s progressing much faster than he anticipated. His rabbits giggle behind him, smelling the scent of Yuuri’s tightening trap. It won’t be long, now, before Shun is far too tangled to ever think of escape. He can almost see the yarn tangled around him now, pulling tight as Ruri pulled her creation shut.

“I suppose that means you’ve earned this,” Yuuri says, producing a small vial of glowing medicine from his pocket. He relishes in the way Shun’s tight expression seems to relax at the sight of it. So easy. “Well, that’s what I’d like to say.”

Shun’s expression immediately crashes.

“What are you talking about? This is what you said the cost was yesterday!”

“The market is a living thing, you know,” Yuuri says, rolling the little vial between his fingers. “It ebbs and flows. Even the hospital industry is affected.”

Shun is trembling slightly, now, lips pressed together so tightly that they’ve gone white. It’s too simple, really. Yuuri plucks at the underside of the desk with his free hand, tugging the threads of the yarn about him a little tighter.

“I can have more by the end of the day,” Shun says quietly.

“How reliable of you,” Yuuri says pleasantly. “I’m pleased to hear it.”

“How much longer before Ruri can be released from the hospital?”

Yuuri smiles.

“When the world’s secret is finally revealed.”

Confusion sparks over Shun’s hazel-gold eyes. His lips part with uncertainty. Yuuri decides to take the briefest bit of pity on him—at least to give him a little more to work for.

“Well, with a few more ampules, she should be well enough to return home,” he says. “But you know the cost of each one, yes?”

“I told you I’m good for it,” Shun said, the heat rising to his voice again in the wake of the confusion. “I’ll be back tonight.”

“Very good. I look forward to it.”

Shun sends him a glare as he stalks past him to the door, and the wall shakes when he slams it. The futile struggling of an insect in a web. It’s almost charming, the way he tries to glare and slam
things as a final act of defiance.

“But you can’t run away, Shun-chan,” Yuuri says. “Or your most precious thing will go up in
smoke.”

His rabbits applaud in response, and Yuuri sends them a faint smile.

He rises from his desk, then, and meanders to the door. It opens without his touch, and he ghosts
down the hall silently, his boots not making a hint of sound. He wanders back towards the still
open door to Ruri’s room and takes a glance inside to see how his patient is doing.

She is tucked into the bed now, her hair flowing over the side of it, back to the door with the
covers pulled up to her chin. Her hippo lays on its side beside her.

The scarves are stuffed into the wastebin beside the bed. Yuuri almost smiles. How adorable.

He pushes through the door and lets the sound of his boots hit the floor. Ruri stirs slightly, but she
does not look at him. She’s awake, though.

“How are you feeling today, Princess?” he says. When she doesn’t respond, he turns his eyes to
the wastebin. “Ah? What’s this? Hadn’t you just finished these?”

Ruri shifts slightly.

“I threw them away.”

“Oh? But you worked so hard on them.”

“How wasteful,” says the blue-haired rabbit.

“What a bad girl,” says the black-haired rabbit.

Yuuri smiles at the back of Ruri’s head.

“I thought these were gifts for someone important.”

Ruri’s shoulders tighten up over her shoulders.

“No one would get happy over something I gave them.”

Yuuri lightly traces his fingers over the bumps and ridges of the knit fabric. It’s soft, and well-
crafted. The fabric holds tightly together when he lifts the scarves from the basket and holds them
in his hands. He twists them back and forth for a moment, the green and blue catching the light.

“Well then, perhaps I’ll take them.”

Ruri jumps a little, and quickly sits up. Yuuri tosses the scarves over his shoulders and wraps
them around him once.

“I think they match quite well, don’t you think?”

The rabbits applaud.

“Of course they do!”

“Amazing!”

Ruri stares at him, wide-eyed, as though she’s about to tell him to put them back, to give them
back. She looks almost hurt. The loneliness in her eyes is raw and satisfying.

“What?” he says. “You were throwing them away, weren’t you?”

Ruri stares at the scarves for one more long breath. Then her faces closes off, and she turns away,
flopping back onto the bed again.

“I guess I was,” she says.

Yuuri smiles.

This whole family is far too easy.
Yuzu twisted the straps of her bag back and forth in her hand. She was going to be late for school at this rate, but she didn’t care. Her eyes flickered across the faceless people swarming around her, on their way to work or school or who knew where. She didn’t see Yuya, though. He came this way to get on the train for his school, right? She wasn’t too late? She checked her watch for the fourth time in the last ten minutes.

When her eyes looked up next, she caught a glimpse of a bouncing strand of green hair poking out above the crowd. Then someone moved aside, and there he was, walking along with his eyes on the ground. A cool relief crashed through her chest and turned her lips up into a huge smile.

“Yuya!”

Yuya startled, his eyes flickering up from the sidewalk. Yuzu ran towards him with a bounce in her step, hopping to a stop in front of him and swinging her bag around.

“Hey, you kept me waiting!” she said, trying to sound teasing. “You haven’t been answering your texts! How is Ruri doing?”

Yuya’s eyes slid off of her face and down onto the ground again.

“Sorry,” he said. “I’m busy.”

He stepped around her and walked past without a word. For a moment, Yuzu felt like she’d been punched in the stomach. She stood there, staring at the place where his face had been a second ago, as though not comprehending that he had moved.

She snapped back to herself.

“H-hey!” she said, whipping around and hurrying after him. “What’s wrong? Are you all right?”

What did I do wrong? she wanted to scream. Did I upset you? Why are you avoiding me?

Yuya stopped, but he didn’t turn around. She stumbled to a stop just behind him, shaking slightly.

“Do you want me to get on my knees and apologize?” he said.

Yuzu blinked. Her lips parted.

“A...apologize?” she said. For what?

“That wouldn’t be enough, would it? Nothing would ever be enough to make up for what my family did to you.”

Apologize? For...for Ray?

“But Yuya, I didn’t—”

“It’s okay. I understand. I wouldn’t forgive me either.”

“Yuya! Stop putting words in my—”

“It’s always the same. Everyone gets close just so they can watch, waiting for our family to fall apart in recompense for what we did. It’s the same.”

Yuzu reached out before he could walk away, snatching him by the hem of his school uniform. Her eyes were blurring with angry, frustrated tears.

“Yuya, listen to me!” she said. “I never thought that! I’d never abandon you or your family over — over that! I care about Ruri! And I care about...about...it wasn’t...it’s not your...”

Yuya’s hand tightened on the strap of his bag over his shoulder, but he still did not turn around.

“That’s enough!” he said, his voice snapping. Yuzu flinched, but she didn’t let go of his jacket. “What’s the point of saying superficial things that only hurt each other!”

Yuzu felt all of her words, all of her anger, slip away from her. Only the tear that rolled down her cheek remained.

“Oh,” she whispered. “I...I get it. It hurts you to talk to me.”

She swallowed around a big lump in her throat, and almost choked on it.
“I’m...I’m sorry. I’ve been selfish the whole time, haven’t I?”

Yuya didn’t even move. Didn’t even flicker a glance at her.

“That’s enough,” he said, his voice lower now. “You’d be better off not seeing us anymore.”

Her fingers slipped away from his jacket as he tugged himself free of her. She stared at the back of his head until it disappeared into the gray, faceless crowd.

She couldn’t see. The tears rolled down her face.

“Stupid,” she said. “Stupid, stupid, stupid!! Stupid Yuya!”

She dropped her bag and rubbed at her eyes with the heels of her palms, trying to stave off the tears that wouldn’t stop falling. If she was somewhere else, she thought she would have screamed out loud, let the sound of her shattering heart echo throughout the sky. But she was in public now, and she couldn’t do more than sob.

“I’m stupid,” she sobbed. “It’s me, I’m dumb, I’m so stupid —”

She turned around and stumbled off in the opposite direction of Yuya. She just needed to get away. She didn’t know where, but she wasn’t going to school today, either. She needed...she needed to disappear.

“Stupid,” she said, kicking a stone on the sidewalk as hard as she could. “Stupid!!”

The cry came out of her loudly this time, and a few people stopped on the screen to look at her. She didn’t look back, though, because she couldn’t even see through the tears.

She didn’t hear the car roll to a stop next to the sidewalk, she was too busy sniffling.

“Ah, Yuzu-chan, is that you?”

The voice was all too familiar, and Yuzu hiccuped as she turned around, mortified to be seen like this with her face stained with snot and tears.

Grace, however, just smiled at her with the same perfect, sweet smile as always.

“Oh, darling,” she said. “It looks like you’ve had a bad day. Why don’t you get in?”

She reached across to pop open the car door for Yuzu. Yuzu stared at it for a moment, and then looked up at Grace’s smiling face. The woman tilted her head and winked.

“Sometimes girl talk can help,” she said.

Yuzu sniffled. Just a few days ago, she would have died before she spent time with Grace, much less confided in her. But now, she was someone completely new and different, and even she didn’t know who she was. All she knew was that Grace was a familiar face, a kind one, and she needed someone right now or she’d drown in her own loneliness.

“Thank you,” she mumbled, and she stumbled over to the car and slipped herself into the passenger seat beside Grace.
Shun opened the envelope, eyes flicking over the stack of bills inside. It was enough.

He gave a perfunctory nod to the men that stood in a semi circle around him, as the train clicked along through the dark tunnels. Their faces shadowed behind the wide brim of their hats, they did not nod back.

“That should buy Ruri’s medicine,” he said. “So about the next job. I was—”

The door to the next car snapped open, cutting Shun off. He and the men each jerked up and faced the door.

“This is no good,” Akaba Reiji said in a clipped voice, his little black hippo at his feet armed with a gun-like crossbow that matched his own. “This will have to be crushed at once.”

One of the dark-coated men reached for their belt. Reiji, however, was faster.

With almost inhuman speed, scarf blurring behind him, Reiji loaded one of the red balls onto the sling, yanking it back and firing. The it struck the first man on the wrist, and then a second one hit him in the forehead and he went down. The other two went for their weapons, and Ao barrelled forward, wheeling its stubby arms.

Reiji bolted down the car, closing the distance, and fired off two more shots in the same motion. The other two men went spiraling off and smacked into the empty train seats, crumpling to the ground. Ao tried to get a punch off on the black hippo, but was immediately struck by what looked like a miniature apple-shaped ball fired from the black hippo’s sling and fell onto its back. It didn’t seem to be able to get its legs back under it, and instead just began to flail like a beetle on its back.

Reiji came to a stop with his foot on the seat between Shun’s legs, the crossbow sling yanked back and the red bullet line trained onto Shun’s forehead.

“That’s enough,” he said. “Cease this foolishness.”

“You’re one to talk,” Shun snapped back, refusing to lower his gaze.

Reiji’s lips tightened.

“If you need money to pay for her medicine,” he said, through grit teeth, as though it pained him to say it. “I will pay for it. That should be all right, shouldn’t it?”

Shun scowled.

“As if I’d touch the Akaba family’s money.”

Reiji’s lips twisted down ever so slightly, his face otherwise remaining blank.

“You’re a fool,” he said. “You are balanced on the edge of the cliff, and you don’t even see the crocodiles waiting beneath you.”
He pulled his cord back a little tighter.

“If that’s the case, then I will end this before you are torn to shreds.”

He released the projectile.

The window behind Shun’s head cracked from the impact, but Reiji’s shot had gone wild as Shun’s foot caught his, kicking out his support and sending him with a heavy thwump to the floor. For a moment, Reiji didn’t move, as though the impact had shaken him. Shun stood, shoving his hands in his pockets.

“Stay out of this,” he said.

Reiji reached up slowly and fixed his glasses, repositioning them on the bridge of his nose.

“You’re killing yourself,” he said. “And for what? For her?”

Shun’s lips tightened. His hands clenched inside his pockets.

“What are you trying to say?”

Reiji regained his feet, pushing himself up. Shun hated that he was just a little bit taller than him, hated the way that he looked so unperturbed as he straightened and smoothed the ends of his scarf.

“I’ll say it for you, since you won’t admit it out loud,” Reiji said. “You’re in love with her. You’re in love with that girl.”

Shun felt a tight clenching in his chest.

“What are you talking about? I just want to protect my family.”

Reiji’s lips turned down into a visible scowl for once.

“And we weren’t enough for you, were we?” he said softly.

Shun almost took his hand out of his pocket. He almost punched him in the face.

But the moment passed, and Reiji was out of reach, retrieving his fallen weapon.

“Come along, Devaraja,” he said. “It seems we’ll be on our own in saving Reira.”

He stepped out through the door to the next car, leaving Shun alone. All around him, the train moved on, and on, and on.

~ * ~ * ~

The car hummed, but it was so quiet that Yuzu barely heard it. Outside, the sun set slowly, painting her skin in shades of orange. She twisted her fingers together, tapping them against her knees.

“It hurts Yuya to see me,” she said, her voice choked. It took everything she had to say things out loud, without bursting into tears. “It hurts him to talk to me, or even know I exist. I was really selfish and I didn’t even think about it.”

At her side, Grace kept her hands on the steering wheel and her eyes on the road. Her silver spun hair cascaded down her back and over her shoulder, a bit mussed, yet somehow still perfect.

“T—that’s why....why I can never...see him ever again,” Yuzu gasped through the lump in her throat. “I guess that’s— that’s our fate—”

She couldn’t do it. The tears spilled over and the lump in her throat burst. She covered her face in her hands, trying to hide the tears and the muffled sobbing that escaped her throat.

After a few moments, as the road blurred past them, Grace let out a soft tutting sound.

“You poor dear,” she said. “You’re in love with him. First loves always hurt.”

She tapped her fingers against the wheel, as though to some song that only she could hear.

“But first loves are rarely the real thing, darling. I had a love like that too, once.”

Yuzu managed to swallow down her sobs enough to peek between her fingers, glancing at Grace.
Her peridot-gold eyes were still trained on the road. Her normally perfect, smiling face seemed a bit pensive, and her lips were slightly pursed.

“You...did?” Yuzu said.

“Mmhm,” Grace said. She took her eyes from the road just long enough to send Yuzu a small smile. “And just so you know, it wasn’t Zarc.”

She winked, and looked back at the road. Yuzu watched her for a moment, as though she could glean some knowledge from her face, something that would help her survive the awful, squeezing pain in her chest.

“So...what happened to that person?” Yuzu asked.

“Gone,” Grace said, letting out a sigh between her lips. “Disappeared before my eyes, without a trace.”

She tilted her head a bit, but didn’t catch Yuzu’s eyes.

“But you know what really helps? Going all out with your girlfriends to forget for a little while.”

She winked again, and Yuzu found a tentative smile growing over her lips. For so long she’d thought of Grace as her nemesis, her fate-chosen enemy. But that chapter of Yuzu’s life was over, now...and she was so glad that she had someone to talk to about this for once, someone besides Zarc, who her identity had been tangled up in for far too long to the point where sometimes it was hard to separate him from that part of her life.

“Go ahead and call your father and let him know you’re out with a friend tonight,” Grace said. “We’re going to help you forget all about your heartbreak.”

“Thank you, Grace-san,” Yuzu said, digging in her bag for her cell phone.

Grace pumped on the gas, and the car bolted off down the empty road.

It was dark by the time she pulled them into the parking lot of the fanciest looking hot springs that Yuzu had seen in a long time. She stared with awe at the beautiful wooden siding while Grace locked the car, and then hurried to follow her inside.

The receptionist seemed to recognize Grace, because she brightened when Grace came through the doors.

“Ah! Tyler-san! What a pleasure to see you here again! Here with your sister?”

“Thank you,” Grace said, sweeping over to the sign in sheet. “We’ll only be a night.”

Yuzu leaned in to the sheet, and smiled a bit to see that Grace had signed them in with the same last name. Grace caught her eye, and winked when she saw that Yuzu had noticed.

“You’ll be my little sister tonight,” she laughed, as they made their way down the hall towards the room she’d booked. “Is that all right?”

“That’s fine,” Yuzu said. She blushed. “Actually...I’m a little happy. I’ve never had siblings before.”

Grace would make a good big sister, she thought, as Grace shot her a dazzling smile, opening the door for her to go into the room first. Yuzu’s desperate journey for her destiny beforehand had caused her to miss just how kind Grace could be. She’d appeared just when Yuzu had really needed someone, and she couldn’t believe that just a few weeks ago, she would have died to be stuck in Grace’s presence.

Yuzu changed out of her clothes and found a towel, wrapping it around herself before finding her way to the door out to the hot springs.

Oh, she gasped, taking in the view. This was a nice hot spring! She could see the whole of the ocean over the fence from their vantage point, the moon beginning to glimmer in the water even now.

Grace was already out there, her hair perfectly coiffed into an updo that hung neatly to the back of her head. She sat on the rocks with her legs in the hot, steamy water with her eyes looking out over the ocean. She looked, as always, like she was posing for some kind of magazine shoot, the towel hanging from her slight curves attractively. At the sound of Yuzu’s feet, she looked back,
and smiled.

Yuzu smiled back, walking to the spring and dipping one toe in. A cool ocean breeze tickled her ponytail, and she shivered. It was hot, but it was just what she needed, and she slid right in up to her collarbone, sighing with relief.

“Oh,” she gasped. “I needed this.”

“Right?” Grace said, smiling. “I always say, you need a good rest after a heartbreak. It’s as exhausting as running a marathon.”

Yuzu nodded in agreement, letting the hot water melt away her stress and feeling her muscles relax. For a little while, there was no sound except for the crackling of the torches that lit the small outdoor spring. She drank the silence in: a soothing salve to her aching brain. But soon, she found her eyes wandering over to Grace. Who was this woman, anyway? She’d been so upset that she existed at first that she’d never taken the time to get to know the woman that Zarc, her longtime family friend, had decided to marry.

“Grace-san?” Yuzu asked.

“Hm?”

“Um, how did you and Zarc meet? I mean, you’re a star and he’s a teacher, right? How do people in two totally different worlds even run into each other?”

Grace chuckled. She crossed one of her long legs over the other, resting her hands on the stone behind her.

“We’ve known each other for a very long time,” she said. “We were childhood friends, actually... we met in elementary school.”

Yuzu’s breath caught. No way... then...

Her hands tightened against her legs under the water.

“Then, um...” she said, staring at the clear water. “You... you knew my sister, Ray, didn’t you?”

For a long moment, Grace didn’t reply.

“Yes,” she said. “I did. Very well.”

Something like a trapped breath unfurled out of Yuzu. She wasn’t sure if it was the heat of the spring that was making her face start to flush.

“What was she like?”

The question rang in her head. The one she’d never asked, the one she’d never been allowed to ask, because she knew what a knife of a question it could be to the wrong people. And yet, her chest ached. She wanted to know. She wanted to know about the sister she’d tried to convince herself to become.

Grace didn’t respond right away once again. Yuzu chanced a glance at her. The woman sat silently on the edge of the water, staring at the ocean. Then she uncrossed her legs and dipped one deeper into the spring, her head tilting back so that the moon caught the crest of her throat. Her eyes closed.

“She was like seeing a field of flowers on the other side of a desert,” Grace whispered, her voice echoing against the stars. “Like seeing a candle alight in the middle of a cold, dark room.”

Yuzu shivered, lips parting. Grace’s eyes opened again, head still tilted towards the sky so that she stared at the stars.

“Ray changed my entire world.”

In her chest, Yuzu’s breath caught against her ribs again, and tangled between them. Her hands clasped together beneath the water. For a long time, the words echoed in the darkness.

“Zarc said something similar,” she said. “She must have been really amazing.”

She laughed, but the sound hollowed as it escaped her throat.
“I’m nothing like her at all.”

The water sloshed as Grace slid herself into it, beside Yuzu.

“I wouldn’t say so,” Grace said. “Sisters are strange, it seems...you and Ray have the same scent.”

Yuzu blinked.

“Really?”

Grace smiled, but didn’t look away from the stars. Yuzu’s jaw clenched. She could feel a trembling in her chest, words that wanted to come out, but she was afraid to release.

“I— I wanted to become her.”

Grace blinked.

“Oh? Why is that?”

“Because...Zarc liked her.”

Grace smiled as though at some private joke, eyes sliding over to her. She pinched Yuzu teasingly on the shoulder.

“Oh? And you’d say that to his wife?”

Yuzu blushed. She’d said much worse things to Grace about Zarc before than that!

“S-Sorry,” she mumbled.

“It’s okay, I’ll forgive you,” Grace teased. “But why that, Yuzu-chan?”

Yuzu bit her lip. She’d never told anyone this, anyone except...except Yuya, and he was gone. He was gone with all her secrets locked in his chest, and she’d never be able to get them back.

“Because I thought...I guess I thought that it would fix things,” she said, the words tasting ashen in her mouth. What a difference the perspective of just a few weeks could give her.

Grace’s eyes softened. She reached for Yuzu’s shoulder again, but instead of pinching her, she squeezed it instead.

“W-why did you marry Zarc?” Yuzu blurted, as though that could change the subject from her and her awful choices.

Grace laughed.

“Well, because I love him,” she said, matter of fact, as though that were the only true answer. And really, wasn’t it? Yuzu laughed a little.

“Oh, of course,” Yuzu said.

“Actually, that’s a lie,” Grace said, standing abruptly. “We’re a fake family, really.”

It was so abrupt, and her voice had the same smooth, light tone as before, that for a moment, it didn’t sink in. Then Yuzu blinked. Grace was already climbing out of the water and undoing her hair, letting it fall back down against her wet towel when Yuzu spun around in the water.

“Wait, really?” she said.

Grace laughed, sending Yuzu a smile over her shoulder.

“I’m kidding,” she said. “But, the truth is...Zarc and I are connected by the wheel of fate.”

The word ‘fate’ skittered over Yuzu’s skin like a cold breeze, and she shivered. By fate...what did Grace mean, exactly?

~ * ~ * ~

Grace mixed the drink with a deft hand, arranging another smile as she turned back towards Yuzu. Yuzu nibbled at one of the sushi from the plate on the table, her cute cheeks a bit puffed from the
food she’d already eaten. She still managed a smile around her full mouth when Grace set the drink in front of her, and sat down on the cushion on the other side of the table.

Yuzu bumped her chest to help her swallow, and then gasped, blushing. It was just like Ray had when she’d been embarrassed about eating too much.

“Um...” Yuzu said, blushing again. Her eyes were so trained on Grace, so focused. The shade was a little different from Ray’s, but the shape of her eyes were the same. “Is there...anything else?”

Grace caught the message after a beat.

“Oh, about how you resemble Ray?”

Yuzu nodded, eyes not leaving Grace’s. God. Their faces were so alike...it was like looking Ray in the face again.

“You both do the same thing where you fixate on something with your eyes when you’re interested in it,” Grace said, swirling her own drink.

Yuzu blushed.

“R-really?” she said, tugging on the strand of hair that framed her hand.

“Ah, that too! Ray would always play with her hair when she was embarrassed.”

Yuzu blinked with surprise, and stopped playing with her hair to stare at her own hand. It was almost as though she were surprised that she were doing the same things as her sister without ever having known her. It surprised Grace, too. They were so eerily alike.

It was frustrating.

“It’s...it’s nice to hear about her,” Yuzu said. She picked up the drink that Grace had given her, cupping it in her hands. She held it to her lips without taking a sip yet, breath frosting the glass. “No one at home ever talks about her. It’s like a taboo subject.”

“Is it?” Grace said, eyes trained on Yuzu’s hands.

Yuzu tipped the glass back and the liquid slipped between her lips. Grace couldn’t help but trace the line of her throat with her eyes as it bobbed up and down from drinking.

Yuzu drank almost the whole glass before setting it back down. She blinked once. A faint haze of confusion crossed her eyes.

“Hey, Yuzu-chan,” Grace said softly.

“H-hm?” Yuzu said, sounding dizzy.

Her hand slipped from the table, knocking the glass over. The remains of her drink spilled over onto the floor as her body slumped forward, face flushing.

Grace smiled and reached across the table, brushing Yuzu’s bangs from her face.

“Would you like to become Ray again, for me?” she said softly.
“Grace,” he says, the night sky making him a silhouette against the window, where the tower stands like he does. “Do you love beautiful things?”

Grace smiles at her papa. The studio is dark, but the light of the moon sends shadows over the mounds of marble that fill the room. Muscular men reach one hand up towards the sky as though giving a speech. Half clothed women stand with a curve in their backs, missing arms or noses. The marble is quiet, as quiet as the man-shaped tower that dominates the skyline, right behind her father’s shadow.

“Yes, papa,” she says.

He nods. The pipe lays unsmoked in his palm.

“And do you also love your father, who makes beautiful things?”

His statues stand silently, blank eyed, staring at her from all corners of the room.

“Yes, papa! I love you a lot!”

“Of course you do. Papa loves beautiful things as well. It is because I am an artist. I can only love what is beautiful.”

He walks towards her, but the shadow that covers his whole front does not fade, even when he is standing directly over her. She focuses on his pipe. She does not focus on the tower.

“Grace,” he says. “You are....so very ugly.”

It’s like a knife jammed into her chest. This wasn’t where she thought this was going to go. For a moment, Grace can’t breathe. She can only stare, trembling, at the shadowy mass that is her father.

“Papa,” she whispers, voice cracking.

“It is because you are your mother’s daughter,” he says, shaking his head. “She grew uglier and uglier after she had you. She never understood my work. That is why we can no longer live together.”

Grace is trying hard just to breathe. She feels tears in her eyes.
“I couldn’t love her because she was ugly,” he says. “And I cannot love you, either, because you are so ugly.”

“Papa, please,” Grace whimpers, begging. Mother is gone. She’s been gone for so long, and this is the first time father’s spoken to her in weeks. “Papa.”

“Ugly things cannot be loved. Ugly children are unwanted. Do you understand, Grace?”

He puts his hand on her shoulder, and she tries not to flinch. She doesn’t remember how to breathe. She doesn’t remember how to speak, either.

“Papa wants to love you, Grace,” he says, in a voice that might be reassuring. “Will you let your papa make you into something he can love?”

He has a chisel in his hand instead of a pipe, now. There’s something like fear that settles in her chest. But this is her papa. She loves her papa. She wants papa to love her.

She throws her arms around his waist.

“Yes, papa!! Yes, please, I’ll do anything!”

His hand is not soft when he pats her head. It feels more like sandpaper.

“Good girl, Grace.”

Her father’s tower stares down at her through the window, and the sound of a hammer and chisel echoes through the workshop. And echoes, and echoes, and echoes...

~ * ~ * ~ E N D  F L A S H B A C K ~ * ~ * ~

Yuzu felt hot. It was hard to think. She was just so hot. Which was odd, because she wasn’t wearing any of her clothes. They were strewn across the floor, last she remembered. She only sort of remembered the cool hands undoing her obi, pulling away the folds of her yukata and trailing nails lightly against her breasts. She couldn’t quite remember...what she was doing here.

The softest gasp rang over her, sounding simultaneously far away and too loud.

“It’s impossible you could be this alike,” someone whispers, and blessedly cool hands wrap into her fingers, turning her hand over and touching her nails lightly. “Right down to your cuticles, even...you’re just like her.”

Yuzu thought, perhaps, she should say something. She could sort of remember who she’d come here with. It was...Grace, right? It was hard to think. She was so hot. She wanted Grace’s cool hands on her face so that she could cool off, get rid of the hot sweat that seemed to stick to every inch of her bare body.

A light went off, and the little bit that Yuzu could see faded. It was so hard to think. Maybe she should just stop.

But something niggled at her. She felt like she was forgetting something. She groaned, and managed to roll one arm over. Her hand hit something square and plastic, and she put her hand against it vaguely. A light glowed in the corner of her eyes. Oh. It was her phone, she thought, fingers brushing against the hippo charm hanging from the top. She fumbled her fingers against it for a moment blindly, not really sure what she planned to do with it. It was so hard to think. So hard. She wanted to go to sleep. And cool off.

Her hand was pulled gently away from her phone and she let the cool hands move her. She was turned over onto her stomach, and something soft wrapped around her wrists.

“Sh, sh, sh,” Grace said again, distantly. “Don’t worry, darling...I’ll take care of you. You just be Ray for me, won’t you?”

The soft bonds tightened around her wrists, and then Grace wrapped it around her waist and up over her shoulders, pulling lightly.

Somewhere, she heard a sort of buzzing sound. She wondered what it was. A cool hand touched her face, ran a thumb over her lips. It was nice to feel something cool against her hot skin, but...

“Grace,” Yuzu mumbled. “I...I don’t...”
“Sh,” Grace said. “Sh. Everything’s going to be all right.”

“I don’t....” Yuzu tried to say again. “I...don’t...what...?”

“It’s all right,” Grace said soothingly. “It’s all just like Ray wrote in her diary.”

The diary. Yuzu felt a spike in her chest, twisting. Her eyes managed to flop over to the side, and she saw Grace in a blur. She saw her yukata hanging loosely around her waist, and the splotch of pink that Grace set reverently aside. The other half...the other half of the diary.

The motorcyclist, Yuzu thought. Grace was the motorcyclist, the one who ripped the diary in half. That was important...somehow that was important. She felt dizzy. It was hard to think.

“Grace,” she mumbled again. But Grace didn’t listen, as she pulled her yukata from her shoulders, let her hair down from its bun to spiral in metallic waves over her bare torso.

Something felt wrong. This was...she didn’t...want this. Want what? She didn’t know but it hurt so much to think and she didn’t want to...she didn’t...want...

~ * ~ * ~ F L A S H B A C K ~ * ~ * ~

Grace

School

“All right, class, let’s pair off now,” the teacher calls. “Pick a partner to draw! Settle down, Tanaka, honestly!”

Easels clatter and shuffle, chairs squeak across the wooden floor, as children skitter about the room, grabbing their friends and dragging them to the corner, or over to the window where the light was better.

Grace sits in her chair, arm bound up in a sling. It hurts. That’s okay, though.

She looks up through her hair to see who’s left. No one has come over to where she sits with her own blank easel. It makes sense, though. It’s like papa said. No one wants anything to do with an ugly child like her. But he said he would make her something worthy of loving, and so soon, she’ll be beautiful...

“Grace-chan! Can I draw you?”

Grace doesn’t see her at first, as she’s still lugging her easel over, and her head is covered. But then it pops out from behind the easel, and a bright face grins at her. Soft lavender eyes, a swoop of pretty maroon bangs, wavy pigtails that bounce on either side of her round face when she moves.

Grace stares at her for a moment, trying to remember who she is. She knows most of her classmates in passing, but she can’t recall...

Oh, that’s right. Her name is Hiragi Ray.

“Me?” she finally says. “But...why me?”

“Well, because you’re pretty, of course!”

She says it so easily. Grace’s eyes widen. Her mouth opens. To tell her she’s wrong. That she must not understand. Grace is not beautiful. She’s ugly. Papa says so, and he’s an artist. He knows.

But she doesn’t say anything. Ray takes that as a yes, and sets her easel across from Grace, situated so that she can see her drawing partner. Grace silently picks up her pencil with her uninjured arm, and begins to draw.

“Wow!! That’s the first time I’ve ever gotten a gold star!” Ray says.

They’re looking up at their drawings from class. Grace stares at the gold star affixed to each of their drawings, where they hang from the blackboard.

“It’s because I had such a great model!” Ray giggles, clapping her hands behind her back, and
sending her a sidelong smile.

Grace doesn’t smile back. She’s not sure she knows how to.

“Hiragi-san...”

“Call me Ray! Oh! Let’s walk home together!”

She’s already decided it, and Grace doesn’t know how to say no, either. She lets Ray take her hand, and lead her out of the classroom.

~ * ~ * ~ E N D  F L A S H B A C K ~ * ~ * ~

Yuya’s phone buzzed.

Slowly, he reached for it, as Sawatari tried to figure out where the best place to balance his little hippo token on the wiggling tower. He was considering the game with such force that his whole face was getting red.

Yuya looked down at the phone, feeling hollow. He felt worse when he saw Yuzu’s name flash over the screen. The sick feeling that had choked him during their last meeting rose up in his throat again.

She can never forgive us. It’s not possible, even if she thinks she can. She’ll never be able to forget what our family did to hers.

He hit deny call. He put the phone back into the pocket of his yukata. Pinku immediately began to gum the hem of his yukata, laying on its stomach and staring at nothing with its tiny black eyes.

“There!” Sawatari announced, placing the plastic hippo on one of the layers of the wobbly tower. It didn’t collapse, and he breathed out a sigh of relief. “Your turn.”

Yuya picked up a random hippo and stuck it on the tower without really thinking about it. It wobbled, but it didn’t collapse. Sawatari swore. Then he glowered at Yuya.

“Hey, you,” he said. “I, the great Neo New Sawatari, didn’t share my luck of winning a trip to a hot springs with you so that you could mope, you know!”

“Sorry,” Yuya mumbled.

Sawatari rolled his eyes, and picked up another hippo.

“So you got dumped— big deal! Just relax, why don’t you!”

Why did Yuya take Sawatari up on this, again? He really should be home, with Ruri, and Shun. But he couldn’t get Yuzu out of his head. Couldn’t stop thinking about her broken voice.

“Oh...I’m hurting you, aren’t I?” His chest tightened. It wasn’t him that she was hurting. It was only herself, if she insisted on staying close to him and his family.

Maybe I was too harsh, he thought, as Sawatari finished his turn, and Yuya stuck another hippo on without thinking about where.

“Hey, I know what will get your mind off of a break up,” Sawatari said, brightening. “I saw this really hot woman in here earlier! Like, she must have been some kind of celebrity or something. I’ll bet she’s here for some sexy rendezvous.”

“That’s nice,” Yuya said, not really hearing him. Sawatari was like white noise, sometimes. “Um, pause on my turn. I think my sister called me and I need to check.”

Sawatari rolled his eyes, but he didn’t argue as Yuya stood up and walked out to the balcony outside their room, pulling out his phone and pulling up the call from Yuzu. He could at least listen to the message, he guessed.

The phone brought up the message, and he waited. And...waited. Was there no message? He listened harder. No, he could...hear breathing. Was it a misdial?

“I...I don’t...”

“Sh. Sh. Everything’s going to be all right.”
“I-I don’t...”

Yuya felt his stomach drop out. That...wasn’t that Yuzu’s voice? Her voice sounded slurred, as though it were hard for her to get the words out. He thought the other voice was familiar, too, but he couldn’t place it. Whatever was happening on the other side of the line, it was making his throat go dry and a panicked tremble run through his fingers. What was going on?

The message ended abruptly. Immediately, Yuya hit the call back button on Yuzu’s number. He pressed the phone to his ear, bouncing from foot to foot, trembling with nerves. Maybe it was a mistake. Maybe she’d...dialed by accident while watching a movie?

The phone rang and rang and rang. He thought it wasn’t going to pick up, and if Yuzu hated him as much as he hated himself after their meeting, he wouldn’t blame her for not picking up.

But then there was a click. He heard a breath echo over the phone.

“Yuzu?” he said. “Yuzu, are you there? Is that you?”

“Mm...Yuya...?”

She sounded sleepy and slurred, almost like she was drunk.

“Yuzu, are you okay? What’s happening?”

“I’m going someplace you’ll never see,” Yuzu said, sounding even more dizzy than before. “Grace said she’ll show me...I think maybe I want to see...?”

“Grace? Grace is there? Yuzu, what’s going on?”

He heard a soft sound that might have been a laugh, might have been a sob.

“I don’t know,” she mumbled. “I don’t know. I’m gonna be Ray now. I’ll finally be Ray now. It might stop hurting then.”

“Yuzu! Yuzu, don’t rush into anything, please! No matter how bad it feels right now, don’t do anything rash!”

Oh god, oh god, oh god, what could Yuya do? He could run to her house, as fast as he could, find out where she was and what she was doing—

Oh, fuck, no he couldn’t!! He was at a hot springs a four hour drive away from the city!

“Sounds like the room next door is getting it on,” Sawatari said. He had an actual cup that he was pressing to the wall so that he could listen through it. Yuya ignored him. This was really, really bad! Should he call the police?

“Yuzu, please, keep talking to me, where are you?”

“I’ve gotta be Ray,” Yuzu slurred. “It’s the only way to be okay. It’s the only way to make things better.”

Another voice, one that must be Grace, came through distantly, and Yuya heard a faint shifting noise.

“That’s enough now, sh,” Grace said from a distant place. “Lay still, darling.”

“Ooh, sounds like she’s the dominant one,” Sawatari said with an annoying laugh. Yuya tried to plug his other ear so that he could pay attention to Yuzu.

“Yuzu! Grace, you can hear me, can’t you?! Stop, please!”

“It’ll feel really good...I’m really good at this.”

“‘It’ll feel really good’? Damn,” Sawatari said with a whistle.

“Would you shut up,” Yuya hissed at him. He needed to figure out what to do! Yuzu was...Yuzu was...

“I’m going to take you to the Shangri-la of love, darling.”

“‘The Shangri-la of love?’” Sawatari said, his voice cracking with the excitement of his inappropriate listening in to—
Wait.
Yuya’s phone slipped from his fingers and struck the floor. He stared at Sawatari, at the cup he had pressed to the wall.
Oh fucking hell.
Yuzu was in the room next door.

~ * ~ * ~ F L A S H B A C K ~ * ~ * ~

Grace

Lake On the Way Home

Her father’s tower watches her as she walks after Ray, who skips when she walks. She skips to a slow stop, though, as her eyes turn to the lake beside them. The sunset tangles among the waves, glimmering like gems sent aloft by a breeze. It is beautiful, Grace thinks.

The water ripples, and the reflection of her father’s tower appears among the water. Even there, it watches her. Reminds her that as beautiful as it is, she is not.

“Ducks!”

Ray’s voice startles her out of her thoughts. Ray scurries to the edge of the water, where a pair of ducks have come near the shore. Neither seem troubled by her when she approaches, swinging off her bag and plopping it onto the ground. She pulls out her lunchbox, and pops it open to find two uneaten pieces of lettuce.

The ducks clamor a bit at her while she tears the lettuce up and tosses it to them.

“I always feed them on the way home,” she says, looking up at Grace. “Do you want to?”

“No.”

Ray doesn’t acknowledge the bluntness of the answer, and finishes tearing lettuce and tossing it onto the water.

“I don’t like ducks,” Grace says, the words leaving before she can think about them.

Ray’s eyes are only curious when she looks up at her.

“Why not?”

Grace tightens her good hand into a fist, her arm in a sling stabbing with more pain.

“Do you know the story of the ugly duckling?” she says.

“Uh-huh.”

“I hate that story,” Grace says, words tearing out of her lips bitterly. “The duckling just goes to sleep, and wakes up again a beautiful swan? It’s a lie. Ugly things have to endure and feel pain to become beautiful.”

Ray looks up at her, the sunset painting her body crouched at the shore in shades of orange and yellow. Her hands rest on her knees, and then she looks down towards the water, rocking back and forth on her heels.

“I guess so,” she says, but it doesn’t sound like she agrees. “But you know? I never thought that baby swans were ugly.”

Grace blinks, lips parting. Ray smiles at the water. Then her eyes lift up to the sky above, and Grace looks where she does. Looking this direction, she cannot see her father’s tower. The sky looks free and open, unimpeded. As though she could fly forever through it and never stop.

“I went to a zoo once, and I saw some baby swans, and I thought they were cute,” Ray said. “I think everything in the world is beautiful, don’t you? The sky, the birds, the bugs. Everything is alive. The force that made this world made it on purpose, so don’t you think that everything is beautiful?”
Grace’s voice lodges in her throat. As she stares at the sky, she thinks, for a moment, that maybe Ray is right. She can see forever, see a world without endings. Maybe such a world could be beautiful.

The water ripples, and in the bottom of her vision, she sees the tower.

“I have to go,” Grace says.

“Tyler-san?” Ray calls after her, as Grace runs.

“Call me Grace!” Grace shouts before she can think better of it.

The studio is dark when she makes her way inside again, breathing heavily. Her father is in the window, with the tower. He has his pipe again, unlit.

“You’re late today,” he says. “Did you stop on the way home?”

Grace shifts uncomfortably. Will papa be mad? She’s late to the important task of becoming beautiful, so that papa will love her.

“...yes,” she says in a small voice.

“Did you make a new friend?”

Grace jolts, looking up at him. The moonlight casts a shadow over his front when he turns to face her, as though his face isn’t really there. A friend? Is Ray a...a friend?

“Because you’re so pretty, of course!”

Grace looks down at the floor, smiling as a warmth fills her chest.

“Yes,” she says.

“How nice,” her father says. “Is she a nice girl?”

“I think the whole world is beautiful, don’t you?”

“She really is,” Grace says, looking up to papa, excited to tell him about her.

“Then you can’t trust her.”

Her words shrivel in her throat. Somewhere, a chisel shifts, clinking against a marble statue. Between them, more statues fill the room, staring. Wide-eyed. Blank. Missing limbs.

“Papa?” she asks.

“Nice girls are nice to everyone, in order to keep up their appearance of being nice,” he says. There is a chisel in his hand, instead of a pipe. “They are liars. They will betray you, take advantage of you, to further their own image. The only people you can trust are your blood relatives.”

He approaches her, puts his hand on her shoulder, and this time, she flinches.

“You are all I have, Grace,” he says. “And I am all you have. We are the only ones we can count on, isn’t that right?”

“Papa!” Grace cries, her shoulders shaking. Is it true? Ray is a liar? But she...she was...

But if papa says so, papa is always right. She...she has to become something that papa can love. Even if that means saying goodbye to Ray.

“I understand, papa,” Grace says, her lip trembling.

“Good girl,” he says, patting her with his sandpaper hands. “Now, are you prepared? We have much to do tonight.”

Grace nods. She unbuttons her shirt one button at a time, and lets the dress fall to the floor around her feet.

“Yes, papa.”
The sliding door slammed open.

“Yuzu!!”

Grace looked up. Her hair shifted over her shoulders at the sound of the feet that scrambled into the room, and then Yuya had thrown himself into view. He was flushed and wild eyed, hair mussed and yukata rumpled. His eyes widened and his mouth dropped open when he caught sight of Grace. Well, she thought. She supposed it was something of a startling sight. Both her and Yuzu, naked; Yuzu looking dazed and half asleep underneath Grace, who straddled her bound body. She felt like she should be more annoyed about the interruption.

Instead, she felt something cool in her chest. Something that might have been relief.

“Ah,” she said, smiling. “The prince is here to save his princess, it seems?”

“Get off of her!” Yuya said, his voice cracking with panic.

He tried to fling himself into the room—his foot stepped on the glass that Yuzu had left strewn on the floor.

Immediately, his body went out from underneath him, and his eyes widened. In a blur, he was down, his head hitting the side of the table with a thwap. He didn’t get back up.

Grace stared at him, feeling distant, like she wasn’t in her own body. Once she saw his chest rising and falling, however, she felt everything clear back up. He had knocked himself out. She almost laughed, but instead, it shriveled in her chest.

Her eyes fell down to Yuzu beneath her. She was half asleep by now, the drugs taking over her body. They’d flush out through her system in a few hours, and she probably wouldn’t even remember any of this had happened. Grace cupped her face. It was so like Ray’s, she thought. But...now that Yuya had broken the illusion, she could see the differences. Yuzu wasn’t Ray.

Grace had been foolish to believe Ray was still alive somehow.

She sighed, letting her head fall down so that her hair fell over her in curtains. This had been...a stupid decision. And a selfish one.

She rose off of Yuzu, reaching for the scissors. She cut the rope away from Yuzu’s heavy, sleeping body, and retrieved the discarded robe, laying it over her to cover her up. Then she picked up her own yukata, and slung it back over her shoulders, tying it off at the obi. She walked past the unconscious Yuya, and found her cigarettes on the table.

She left the two sleeping children in the room behind her, and went out onto the balcony to look at the ocean. No tower marred this skyline, only the spiral of her own cigarette smoke.

“Ray,” she said quietly. “I wonder if you’d forgive me for what I just tried to do.”

~ * ~ * ~ F L A S H B A C K ~ * ~ * ~

Grace

School

“Grace-chan!”

Grace stiffens, dragging herself to a stop.

“Hey, Grace-chan!” Ray says, bouncing in front of her, swinging her pigtails. “I haven’t seen you all day!! Are you walking home? I’ll come with you...”

Her eyes fall down to the wrapping around Grace’s leg, and she automatically shifts it behind her other leg.

“You hurt yourself again?”
Something about the way she says it makes Grace stiffen. As though she knows that she didn’t fall
down a set of stairs, like she told the teachers that morning.

“Go away,” Grace says. “I have to go home.”

“Grace-chan, are you avoiding me?” Ray asks.

“I don’t trust you,” Grace says, glaring at her. “You’re just nice to me because it makes you
look better.”

Ray’s expression slackens with surprise. Grace hmpfs, and turns on her heel. She begins to limp
towards home. Papa said that she would be finished today. One more session, and she’ll...she’ll
finally be beautiful, beautiful enough for her father to love, beautiful enough to never be unwanted
again.

A hand grabs hold of hers, stopping her.

“Wait,” Ray says, and her voice sounds so small. She sounds...scared? “Come with me.”

“I don’t want to.”

“If I tell you my secret, will you trust me?”

Grace hesitates. She looks slowly over her shoulder. Ray’s lavender eyes grab hold of hers, and
she can’t get them to let go. Secret? What secret does she have?

She can’t overcome her curiosity. She lets Ray take her hand, and take her around to the back of
the school, where the setting sun is beginning to shift the spectrum of the world.

Ray lets go of her hand once they reach the little school rabbit hutch in the back, and takes a few
steps forward. For a moment, she doesn’t turn around, and Grace can only see her back.

Grace grows tired of waiting.

“Is your secret that you’re only nice to me because I’m ugly, and you pity me?” she snaps.

Ray spins around in a tornado of maroon hair.

“No!” she says. And there’s such conviction in her voice that Grace hesitates.

Ray hesitates, too, for a moment longer. Then she reaches into the large front pocket of her dress,
and pulls out a bright pink diary. She holds it up to Grace.

“This is my secret,” she says.

“A diary?” Grace scoffs.

Ray shakes her head.

“The diary is part of it,” she says. “Here’s my secret, Grace-chan: I have the power to transfer
fates.”

~ * ~ * ~ END FLASHBACK ~ * ~ * ~
Scenery

~ * ~ * ~ F L A S H B A C K ~ * ~ * ~

Grace and Ray

School

Grace stares at her. Ray stares back, her hands still on the little pink diary. Grace looks down, shifting her weight to her uninjured leg.

“What are you talking about?” she says, finally. “Are you making fun of me?”

Ray shakes her head furiously. She holds the diary out to show it to Grace, but Grace doesn’t look at it, or her.

“With the spells in this diary, I can change fates,” Ray says. “It’s like...changing trains. If you go to the station, and you’re on the wrong train, you can hop off and get on another one. That’s what I can do.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Grace says.

Ray hugs the diary to her chest. Then she turns around, pigtails spinning, and crouches in front of the rabbit hutch behind them.

“You know this rabbit?” Ray says. She reaches one finger through the bars so that it can sniff her finger, and then pokes it lightly on the head. “This rabbit was supposed to die. But I used the spell in my diary to change its fate.”

Grace frowns, tilting her head.

“That rabbit has always been healthy,” she says.

“When you change fates, the scenery changes,” Ray says. She turns over her shoulder towards Grace again. She smiles, then and holds up one finger. There’s a bandaid wrapped around the tip. “But see? There’s a price. This was for the rabbit.”

“It looks more like a papercut from your stupid book,” Grace sniffs.

Ray stands up, using one hand to dust off her skirt. Her eyes raise up to Grace’s, and catch. Grace finds herself holding her breath. She doesn’t want to look away from Ray all of a sudden.

“Want to try it?” Ray whispers.

Grace blinks.

“What?”

“Changing fates. Do you want me to transfer your fate? Do you want to be free?”
Her mind, for a moment, is in a dark studio, surrounded by blank faced statues, listening to the sound of a chisel striking marble. She feels hands gripping her bare skin, pinning her to a table. She feels a horrible heat spread through her and tears bubble to her eyes as suddenly her limbs start to tremble.

Freedom? It’s never even occurred to her. But suddenly, while she stares at Ray, she thinks about it.

And yes. She wants it. She wants to taste this nebulous, distant freedom that Ray says does in fact exist. She wants to believe in it.

Her gaze flickers as a cloud lazily moves over the sun. She catches, out of the corner of her eye, the sight of her father’s tower, looming above all the other buildings. Even here, it can see her.

“It’s not possible,” the words come out of her before she thinks of them. “Haven’t you seen my father’s tower? It’s always there! As long as it’s there, my papa—he’ll never...”

Ray’s lips part. She turns to look up at the head of the giant man-shaped statue that looms above the rest of the city.

“So if I got rid of that tower, you’d be free?” she says, tilting her head.

“It’s impossible!” Grace snaps. “And—and I can’t believe you’d make fun of me like this!!”

She stumbles back, away from Ray when her eyes widen and she hops forward.

“Grace-chan—”

“Papa said tonight is the night he’ll be finished,” Grace says, a lump in her throat choking her and making it hard to breathe until she gets dizzy. “So after that, I’ll be beautiful! And then no one will hate me!”

She turns, and runs, as fast as her injured leg will let her.

“Grace-chan!” Ray screams. “Grace-chan! Don’t go! You’ll die!”

~ * ~ * ~ E N D F L A S H B A C K ~ * ~ * ~

“There,” Shun said. “That’s the last of the money.”

He threw the envelope on top of the other one. It was a staggering amount of money when he thought about it, so he didn’t. He couldn’t put a price on Ruri’s life.

Yuuri smiled at the envelopes. He tapped them both with one finger.

“How electrifying,” he said. “You’re quite quick, Shun-kun.”

Shun’s lips curled at the familiar nickname, but he didn’t say anything. He had Ruri’s life in his hands, after all. He didn’t have room to complain.

“Just hurry up and treat Ruri,” he said.

“Of course, of course,” Yuuri said with a laugh. “Not to worry.”

The door swung open in a rush, and Shun jumped in spite of himself at the flood of light that poured into the dark room.

“Doctor!” Ruri’s voice squeaked. “The scarves!”

Shun turned quickly, but Ruri was faster. She ran past him to skid to a stop in front of Yuuri. Her eyes were wide and sparkling with awe, her hands almost flapping up and down with the excitement.

“Ruri, what’s wrong?” Shun asked.

“The scarves I made!” Ruri said. “I just— on TV! I saw Selena-chan and Rin-chan wearing them!”

It took him a few seconds to remember why those names were familiar — oh, right, those were Ruri’s friends from elementary school, the ones who had become the famous idol duo, right?

“You must have given them to them!” Ruri said, still looking at Yuuri with wide eyes. “After I
threw them away, and you took them!"

“Oh, my, did you find me out so quickly?” Yuuri said, smiling.

“How great!” the blue-haired boy said behind Yuuri.

“Amazing, doctor!” said the black-haired boy.

“Settle down,” Yuuri said with a faint laugh.

Shun flicked his eyes between Ruri and Yuuri for a moment, feeling a bit confused himself. Scarves? Was that what Ruri had been working on all this time? He didn’t quite get the timeline of what had happened here but...Ruri was sparkling, she was so happy. He couldn’t help but smile.

“Thank you, doctor!” she said, grabbing and shaking his hand.

“It was nothing at all,” Yuuri said, briefly squeezing her hand before extracting it from her grip, standing up. “Now make sure you’re still resting, my dear. I can’t have my patients running all around the hospital.”

“Oh,” Ruri said, still bouncing. She turned and hugged Shun quickly. “Come visit me soon, niisan!”

“You’ll be discharged soon, don’t worry,” he said, squeezing her back.

She gave him the most dazzling smile when she popped back. She waved to him from the door, bobbing a bow towards Yuuri, and then skipped back down the hall towards her room. Shun couldn’t help but smile after her, his hand still raised in his own wave. It was good to see her so happy and energetic, after having almost lost her for a second time...

When he turned back towards Yuuri, he found the young man considering him with a very curious expression, fingers laced together beneath his nose. Shun’s smile faded immediately. It seemed this man had done a good thing for Ruri, and he’d been taking care of her with that medicine, but...something about him still rubbed Shun the wrong way. He kept upping the price of the medicine, for one thing.

“What?” he said.

“I was only wondering if you thought I did something wrong in ferrying her gift to her friends, without her permission.”

The question startled Shun, and he couldn’t respond for a moment. He turned to face him fully, shoving his hands into his pockets.

“No,” he said. “I think that was...a very good thing you did for her.”

And I wish I knew why you did.

He shifted uncomfortably as another thought occurred to him.

“I’m only wondering how you knew who the scarves were for in the first place.”

Yuuri smiled brightly.

“It’s a doctor’s job to know about his patients,” he said.

It was not a satisfactory answer, but Yuuri made no visible attempt to clarify. He swept the envelopes of money off the desk and into a drawer, and then withdrew a small vial of the precious glowing liquid.

“I’ll walk you out,” he said. “Ruri-chan’s not due for a dose for another hour.”

Shun didn’t really like walking shoulder to shoulder with this man down the hallway. Nice guy or not, he felt weird, and Shun felt awkward in his presence. He wasn’t sure whether to recoil from him or not, and it was a very discomforting feeling. He liked being able to read people from a glance — but Doctor Yuuri was unreadable. Did he care about Ruri at all? Or was she just another patient to make money off of for him? Shun didn’t know. But as long as he kept Ruri alive...that was all that mattered. Just as long as she kept smiling...even if her smile was for this strange doctor for once.
"Are you that anxious to know that your sister loves you?"

The question caught Shun off guard, and he stopped walking. Yuuri didn’t, however, his white coat fluttering behind him. Shun stared at his back for a moment. Then he hurried along.

"What are you talking about?" he said. "What kind of question is that?"

It was almost as though he had been listening in on Shun’s thoughts, and Shun’s skin crawled. But Yuuri only gave him that same inscrutable smile as always, looking at him from the corner of his eye as he kept his face forward down the hallway.

"I was thinking to myself the other day," Yuuri said, almost as though he were thinking aloud. "Family is a sort of illusion. Sort of like a curse, isn’t it?"

Shun felt a sickness creep into his heart.

"What are you talking about?" he said through grit teeth.

"Think of how many children suffer under the yoke of the illusion called ‘family’," Yuuri mused. "Children are the property of their parents, and parents beat their children in the name of ‘love.’ And children must love their parents, their siblings, simply because they are ‘family.’"

He didn’t stop walking, and Shun had to hurry to keep up, though he really wanted to just stop and process what exactly this man was trying to say. Yuuri finally looked at him then, his head tilted back to catch Shun in his eyes.

"What about you?" he said. "Have you ever thought that it might be easier, not having them as a family?"

A fiery anger clutched at Shun’s heart, as though it might consume him from the inside out. It took him several long, deep breaths to fight past the urge to punch him in the face for daring to ask such a question.

"I have never thought that," he said, the flames licking out from his chest and up his throat. "I have never thought that, for even a second."

Yuuri’s eyes half lidded, like a snake’s watching him. Then he smiled again.

"Ah," he said. "How sweet, then."

He stopped walking abruptly, and Shun had been trying so hard to keep up with him that he almost didn’t stop before he smacked into the glass doors of the exit lobby. Yuuri continued to smile at him.

"Have a safe trip home."

---

Grace ran her fingers over the spine of the ripped diary, tucked into the folds of her yukata. She took another long draw on her cigarette, and watched the smoke twist up from her lips and into the moonlit sky. The small private hot springs for this room caught the moonlight among its waves and sent it sparkling over the water. The world was beautiful tonight. Or it would have been, if the most important part of it wasn’t missing.

She tightened her fingers on the diary.

"Just as I thought," she murmured. "I’m nothing without you, Ray."

A tiny red dot appeared on the front of her yukata. Had she been just about anyone else, Grace may have paused to look at it, curious about where it came from.

Grace, however, was not anyone else.

In a single fluid motion, she drew the ping pong paddle from the rec room, still inside her obi, and struck. Her paddle impacted with something small and hard, and the red ball she’d struck hit the floor and splatted, fading to white.

_It seems I have company._
Another red dot appeared, and she bolted back behind one of the rocks in the hot springs. Another red ball missed her by inches, hitting the ground and exploding into a tattered mess of paper.

“If you have any courage,” Grace called into the night. “You’ll face me head on.”

For a moment, there was no response.

“I never could bring myself to be fond of celebrities,” came a voice that was surprisingly close. Grace shot to her feet, just in time to bat back another projectile with her paddle.

“Oh?” she said, turning towards the source to see a young man appear from the shadows beside the fence. “And why is that?”

He held a very strange weapon in his hands, a cross between a crossbow and a paintball gun, and his glasses glinted in the light. She almost laughed at his odd ensemble of a full body wetsuit and a large red scarf still draped over his shoulders. Did he intend to swim like that?

He fixed his glasses, pushing them up to brush against the edges of his neatly trimmed silver hair.

“They’re always too needy,” he said, looking at her with an entirely expressionless face. “Celebrities are always the kind who were never told they were loved as a child. And so they spend the rest of their lives grasping for something to replace that missing piece.”

Grace kept her smile plastered to her lips.

“You seem to know me quite well,” she said cheerfully.

“Of course. I did my research. I would be remiss not to, when we both know what’s at stake.”

Grace felt the diary warm against her body, as though it were on fire.

“Oh~” she said. “So you’re the one with the other half of the diary.”

“It won’t be half for long.”

He held up his weapon and fired. She slapped the projectile back once again, leaping out of the way and dropping into the hot spring itself.

“Devaraja, now,” the man called, grabbing at a strange headset on his forehead and pulling it over his glasses.

All of the lights in the hot spring went out. In the pitch black, Grace couldn’t see anything, and the hot springs felt like lava to her legs. Her ears twirled. Something fired, and she swung.

Her paddle struck true, striking the ball away even in the pitch black. This boy was going to have to try harder to get the better of her.

Another shot, and another deflection. Grace hit them back as hard as she could, hoping that perhaps one might strike him back. She could play this game for as long as necessary, as long as he needed to harass her before he gave up.

A spotlight flashed out through the darkness and right into her eyes. She shrieked. She threw her hands up over her eyes to block the sudden blinding light, and from inside her sagging yukata, she felt the diary fall.

She heard the splash, heard the bolt of the young man diving through the spring, and by the time her vision readjusted from the flash, he was gone.

So was the diary, she thought, patting her yukata.

A tiny smile quirked at the edges of her lips. She pulled herself out of the hot springs, and walked inside, dripping water everywhere. She went to the safe, and keyed in a code.

She smiled again as she pulled the real diary out of the safe.

“One should always keep valuables in a locked place,” she said. “Have fun with the forgery, dear.”

~ * ~ * ~ F L A S H B A C K ~ * ~ * ~
Grace Studio

Grace’s eyes slowly open. Her lips feel dry, and it’s almost too dark to see, save for the moonlight that pours through the window. She turns her head against her hair pooled about her. This is...papa’s studio. The statues, for once, are not staring at her. All of them seem to have turned away, leaving her in peace.

In...peace. She twitches her fingers experimentally. Her toes. There’s no pain. She parts her lips, and slowly, sits up. She runs her fingers over her bare skin, poking and prodding for signs of papa’s work. But there is...nothing. No pain. No marks. No...papa.

For a moment, she panics. Where is papa? Where is his new chisel from Italy? Is she all alone? The word “alone” strikes her as a suddenly very reassuring word, though she’s not sure why.

She slides onto the cold floor, toes curling up at the bare marble. The moon pours through the window and onto her toes, and her eyes lift up to the window.

She chokes.

The tower. Her papa’s tower.

It’s gone.

Grace bolts to the window, grabbing for the sill. She can’t stop staring, can’t close her hanging mouth. The tower shaped like a man, the one her papa made, is gone. In it’s place is a beautiful and much less imposing construction of beautiful steel poles, like the Eiffel Tower in France.

"The scenery of the world changes when someone’s fate is transferred."

"It...it really changed,” Grace whispered.

"This was the cost for the spell."

Grace’s momentary, knee collapsing relief vanishes. If Ray used the spell to save her, then — What was the cost?

Grace runs as fast as she can from papa’s workshop, her replaced dress smacking around her knees. The school! She left Ray at the school!

"Ray!” she screams, beneath the light of the new tower. “RAY!”

Red and blue lights spin in circles, lighting the air as Grace gets closer. There’s a crowd gathered around the back of the school, where the rabbit hutch is. Grace’s lungs burn and her throat craves clear air as she stumbles to the end of the crowd. She shoves her way between legs and hips, trying to get through.

“What happened?”

“There was some kind of accident...”

“A little girl caught on fire!”

“Do they know what caused it?”

Grace bursts through the crowd, just in time to see the stretcher being pushed inside the ambulance. Just in time to see the familiar shiny shoes, and the diary on her chest before she disappears inside.

“Ray!” she screams.

It is two days before they let her visit. When she stumbles through the doors, Ray is sitting up in bed. There are bandages wrapped around her head and across one cheek, and her arm is in a cast. But her eyes light up like the stars when she sees Grace.

“Grace-chan!” she says. “Are you all right?”

Grace can only stand there, hands trembling. She thinks she might be crying, but she can’t feel the
fat tears that roll out of her eyes.

“Papa hasn’t come home,” is what she says first.

Ray blinks. And then her smile turns sad.

“He won’t ever again,” she says.

Grace swallows the lump in her throat, but a new one comes. She stumbles to the bed, one step at a time, until she’s within reach. And then she simply collapses. She drops against the bed, her head on the mattress beside Ray’s legs as her knees drop to the floor.

“Why!” she cries. “Why did you do that for me? You...the spell hurt you!”

Ray’s small, warm hand alighted on Grace’s head, stroking softly.

“Because I love you, Grace-chan,” she says. “And I think that you were always beautiful, just the way you were.”

Grace can only cry. And Ray just strokes her hair, gentle and soft, in a way that Grace has never, ever been touched before.

That is the day she decides that she will stay with Ray forever. No matter what it takes.
Sorry for the delayed update ;w; been having a bit of mental kerfuffle but i’m getting better <3

~ * ~ * ~ F L A S H B A C K ~ * ~ * ~

Reiji

Akaba Household

Dear Reiji,

I am so sorry that I cannot come home sooner. But as long as he lives in that house, I can’t return. I am counting down the days until the four of us can live as a family again, away from him. Until then, take care of Reira.

Reiji’s fingers dig into the paper, leaving marks and creases in the margins. He reads his mother’s words twice more, before carefully folding it with his slender fingers, and tucking it inside the inside pocket of his jacket. He fixes his glasses, and looks up, out from the poles of the gazebo where he’s taken shelter from the rain. There is only one light still on inside the house, and he watches it, looking for some sign of the shadow he knows is inside.

“I’ll have to crush him at once,” he says.

~ * ~ * ~ E N D F L A S H B A C K ~ * ~ * ~

Reiji sipped on his coffee, staring out the windows of his small home office. The grounds of the estate were looking a little overgrown, he thought. He would have to see the gardener about that.

The soft sounds of snoring behind him were the only thing that told him that Reira was still in the room, curled up on the couch. Beside him, on the table, sat the two halves of the diary. With this, he would be able to trade for Reira’s life. Project R would be a success.

Or so he’d like to say.

He put his hand on top of the half that he’d taken from the actress, and immediately, a tune began to play. The dulcet tones of a woman sang from somewhere inside the false half.

“Did you enjoy my lovely singing voice?” Grace Tyler said over the top of her own musical number from her play. “Don’t underestimate an actress, darling.”

Reiji’s lip curled, and he lifted his hand away from the diary. The annoying song continued to
play, but he could not be bothered to stop it now. He’d dispose of the trash later. For now...he’d have to plan his next move.

A soft knock drew his attention to the door, and he set his finished coffee cup down.

“Yes?” he said.

“Reiji-sama, the car is ready,” came Nakajima’s voice. “Remember, you have —”

“The Board meeting. I remember,” Reiji said. “I’m coming.”

He shut off the diary and tucked it under his arm to dispose of on the way out. The other half he replaced in its hiding place, hidden inside a panel on the wall. Then he walked towards the door, hesitating beside Reira. The child was curled up beneath a blanket on the couch. Their hair was a tangled mess. Reiji hadn’t wanted to wake them after what a rough night they’d had, so he hadn’t had a chance to brush it. Gently, he tugged some of the strands away from Reira’s face, and pulled the covers up higher on their shoulders. Reira stirred but did not awaken.

Nakajima was waiting in the hallway when Reiji closed the door softly beside him.

“Reira is still asleep in my office. See to it that they eat breakfast when they wake up.”

Nakajima nodded, and Reiji swept off towards the car, flinging his scarf behind his shoulders. The company never waited for him to finish his own personal schemes. But then, he thought. That was the price he paid for release.

Even if that release had never truly come.
His pounding heart clenches up, and he digs his fingers into his shirt as he huddles up over his knees.

Just another dream. His father is still alive.

~ * ~ * ~ E N D  F L A S H B A C K ~ * ~ * ~

“Reiji-sama, it’s not that we don’t trust your judgement, it’s only...”

“It’s only that you don’t,” Reiji said tersely. “You needn’t sugar coat the details, Taki-san. I know you think my grasp of economics is passable at best.”

He sent a cutting glance across the room, and almost all of them looked away. Taki just kept smiling at him, as he was prone to do. Irritation sparking, Reiji fixed his glasses and tried not to look at the clock, or at his phone to see if there were any messages from Nakajima.

“I have given you the numbers, and I believe I’ve shown you my worth in full in the past few years of running this company, as our stocks have only been climbing,” Reiji said. “Unless someone else has a more relevant opposition to bring up to this proposed merger, I move that we adjourn.”

“It just seems a bit cautious, don’t you think?” Taki said, tapping his papers on the table. “Your father would have been more ambitious.”

Reiji pressed his lips together in a thin line, hoping to swallow back the venom that was rising in the back of his throat. He forced the blandest smile he could manage.

“Well, Taki-san,” he said. “My father isn’t here.”

~ * ~ * ~ F L A S H B A C K ~ * ~ * ~

Reiji

Akaba Household

“Useless, useless, all useless!”

Reiji holds Reira against his chest, trying to prevent them from looking, but Reira’s eyes are locked on the sight. Father has the box in front of him, the firelight licking at his hollow cheekbones as he throws each stuffed animal into the fireplace, one after the other. Reira flinches at every impact of the fur against the coals.

“What’s this?”

Reiji’s breath congeals in his throat as father pulls out the crumpled envelope.

“Don’t touch that!”

He lets go of Reira, lunging forward for the letter. His father grabs him by the head, knocking off his glasses and forcibly holding him away from getting close. He slits the envelope open with his free hand while Reiji flails and struggles to get closer. The paper crinkles when father flaps it open.

“Dear Reiji, I am so sorry that I cannot come home sooner. But as long as he lives in that house, I can’t return. I am counting down the days until the four of us can live as a family again, away from him,” his father reads out loud.

His lip curls further and further the more he read, and finally he lets out an almost animal snarl. Reiji yelps when he forcibly flings him back, causing him to land hard on the floor. Reira immediately drops down next to him, clinging.

“This woman was weak!” father snarls, shoving the paper in Reiji’s face. Reiji makes another grab for it, but father takes it back before he can even tear away a piece. “I threw her out because she was weak! I will not have weak children like her in this house!”

He flings the paper into the flames along with the rest, and Reiji can’t help but let out a pained cry as the paper begins to blacken and curl.
“Listen to me, Reiji — you must be a strong man. Akaba men will not be crushed!”

“Go to hell,” Reiji gasped, his voice thin and broken.

Reira just cries, burying their face into Reiji’s neck. But then father snaps.

Reira screams when father grabs them by the hair, hauling them away from Reiji. Reiji screams too, staggering up and launching himself at his father’s hand, trying to pry him off of Reira.

“Are you listening, Reira?! You must be a strong Akaba man as well! Stop crying! Stop crying!”

Reira only cries more, and Reiji claws at his father’s hand, screaming things he doesn’t even hear. Father shakes Reira by their hair a few times, and then flings them at Reiji. The pair crumple to the floor. Reiji curls his body over the top of Reira before father can make another attack. But his feet only shift.

“That stupid hair of yours comes off tomorrow,” he snarls.

Then his boots clomp from the room, and the door slams. There is only the heat of the fireplace, and the burning bits of their childhood left there.

Reiji should reassure Reira. He should say something comforting, or ask if they’re all right.

“I’m going to kill him,” is all he can mumble, tears blurring his eyes. “I’m going to kill him, I’m going to kill him, I’m going to crush him.”

~ * ~ * ~ END FLASHBACK ~ * ~ * ~

“Eat the rest of your vegetables,” Reiji said.

“Kay.”

Reira pushed the beans around a bit more before finally popping them into their mouth. They made a face that couldn’t help but bring a smile to Reiji’s face.

“Good job,” he said. “Now you can have the cupcake.”

“Yay!”

Reira scurried off to the counter where the treat had been left. Reiji smiled into his coffee, taking a long sip as he flicked his eyes over the news. His phone buzzed, and he put the paper down to check it. It was from Nakajima, an update on his surveillance of the Sakaki family. It seemed that nothing was of note, though it was odd that Sakaki Yuya had just happened to be at the same hot springs as Grace Tyler. Reiji would have to investigate that more and see if the two knew each other or knew of the diary from each other.

“Niisan, can you help me pour the milk?”

Reiji put down his phone. His eyes wandered up to Reira, who was struggling to hold the jug in their weak hands. He tightened his grip on the mug. His eyes refused to flicker over the two empty chairs at the table, the ones with the place settings, but no people.

He’d lost enough. He wouldn’t lose Reira too.

~ * ~ * ~ FLASHBACK ~ * ~ * ~

Reiji
Akaba House

Reiji waits behind father’s expensive potted houseplant, a gift from a business partner. He hears father’s boots clomping down the stairs. He clutches the dart tightly in one fist, but not enough to prick his hand.

As soon as father’s leg comes into sight, Reiji stabs the dart into him.

The poison works quickly. His father doesn’t even have a chance to yell before he’s collapsed in
limp pile of limbs on the floor. Reiji chokes on his heartbeat — he’s finally done it, he’s finally killed him.

He opens his eyes and stares at the ceiling. Father is shouting at no one in the study again.

“I will not be crushed!”

Reiji bites his tongue when his father comes home with two women too young for him, smelling of alcohol and yelling incoherently. He goes to the kitchen, and obediently brings out a fruit platter when father yells for something to eat. He leaves a big black spider underneath the mango slices.

He hears father yell in pain from the other room, hears the two women scream. He looks through the door to see his father face planted in the fruit, dead. He’s dead. He’s dead. He’s —

Reiji opens his eyes, and stares at the blurry ceiling once more.

“I will not be crushed!” father is screaming in the study as an expensive globe is flung at the opposite window

“I can’t stop dreaming about killing him,” Reiji chokes out. “I’m going to snap and do it one of these days.”

He swallows.

“But then...if I did, mother would finally be able to come home, wouldn’t she?”

He glances up sidelong, through the darkness in the little gazebo at night. Shun doesn’t look back at him, not yet. He’s looking at his knees, kicking his feet back and forth, tiny hands perched on the bench beside him.

“But if I actually killed him, I’d be cursed forever,” Reiji mumbles. He feels sick. “The whole family would be.”

Shun puts his hand on top of Reiji’s. He looks up, hazel eyes glinting in the darkness.

“In that case,” he says. “If you’re cursed, then I’ll be cursed too.”

His fingers squeeze Reiji’s hand.

“That’ll be the bond that ties us together.”

“Don’t go back,” Reiji says. “I can’t protect Reira all by myself.”

Shun shakes his head, looking pained.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “But I can’t stay any longer.”

Reiji wakes up to a ceiling that’s blurry for all the wrong reasons. He pushes the tears back with his thumbs, as though he can shove them back into their ducts, uncried. Outside, he hears doors slamming, and his father’s voice echoing.

“Reiji-sama, your father is requesting your presence,” Nakajima says through the door.

“I’m coming.”

Reiji straights his sweater vest as he drags his feet, taking each stair as slowly as possible before he makes it outside to the backyard. The gardens shimmer, but they look poisonously colored to Reiji. He avoids the flowers.

He flinches at the sound of a knife hitting another, and approaches the table set up cautiously.

“About time you showed,” father snarls at him, and Reiji doesn’t respond. His eyes are on the table. Those are...

“Blowfish I caught this morning,” father says, slicing his knife through the fleshy fish. Reiji’s skin crawls.

“Father...we should have the chef...”

“Nonsense! We are Akaba men! I will prepare the fish I caught myself!”
Father has already finished gutting and fileting slices of the first blowfish. He grabs one of the slices, and before Reiji can do anything, shoves it into his mouth.

“You see, Reiji?” he says, turning towards him. “It’s the Akaba way! You — ”

His lips twitch and spasm. The knife slips out of his hand. Reiji takes a step back as his father’s frame begins to sag. Every bit of him locks up as, in slow motion, his father crumples face first into the ground.

Reiji stares. One second. Two seconds. Three.

He isn’t breathing.

This is the part where Reiji opens his eyes now, right? This is the part where he wakes up and stares at the ceiling, isn’t it? But he’s still staring. His mouth is still hanging open in a silent scream. He doesn’t know what the pit in the base of his stomach is, as he hears one of the maids in the grass, dropping her tray of tea and screaming.

I didn’t kill him, Reiji thinks, with a curious sense of emptiness. I didn’t kill him, and he’s dead.

~ * ~ * ~ END FLASHBACK ~ * ~ * ~

Reiji awoke to a dry mouth and a horribly nostalgic feeling. That empty pit in his stomach roiled for a moment, threatening to consume him from the inside out. And then it settled once again to the place beneath his heart.

Why was he thinking about old things like that again? He ran a hand over his face, mussing his bangs. The moon glimmered through the crack in the shades. It was full night. He didn’t like to be awake during times like this, because then he would think. He would think too much about the things he didn’t want to remember: the days of his father’s terrifying control. The strange pit of emptiness upon seeing him die and not being the cause of it. The fact that even though he was gone, mother had never come home.

And neither had Shun.

A crash echoed down the hall, and for one terrifying moment, Reiji was eight years old again, waking up to the sounds of his drunken father screaming and throwing things in his study. That was where the sound was coming from — father’s old study, which he’d boarded up and burned the contents of years ago.

Reiji shoved away his childhood panic like tangled spiderwebs, though they continued to trail after him as he ran down the hall after the sound.

The door to his father’s study was open. He swallowed down a panicked cry before it could release. He was nearly an adult now. His father was dead. There was nothing to be afraid of. He was the one in control of things now.

“I’ll have to crush this,” he mumbled almost automatically. Devaraja bumped at his legs, as though it, too, were too nervous to head inside.

Reiji inhaled, and pushed the door open.

A cold feeling overtook him. The desk he remembered destroying was here again, and Reira was sitting in its chair where father had always sat. They were staring at the screens and readouts that Reiji had disconnected, as though nothing had changed at all.

“Reira?” he said, quietly. Was this the hat again? But Reira wasn’t wearing it right now. They were just staring.

Their eyes slid over to Reiji after a moment, however. Their mouth opened.

“Did you really think that death would free you from me?”

That wasn’t Reira’s voice. That was his father’s. Reiji choked. Devaraja let out a very unhippolike hiss.

“Reira, what’s going on?” he said, having trouble choking out the words.
Reira stood up from the chair. They opened up the drawer of the desk, and pulled out two small plates. Reiji’s stomach twisted. He knew the sight of blowfish meat anywhere. It had been seared into his brain.

“You’re a weak man, Reiji,” Reira said in his father’s voice. “And I won’t accept that you’ve taken my company. So we’ll have a contest. One of these blowfish was prepared by a trained chef, and one was prepared by me. We’ll both eat one. The survivor will run LDS.”

Reiji couldn’t breathe. It was like the whole room was pressing in on him. The more he heard his father’s voice, the more he wanted to bolt, find a corner to hide in and never leave. But Reira — he couldn’t leave Reira like this.

“Leave Reira out of this,” he said.

Reira snorted.

“You’re a coward,” they said. “We’ll have Reira eat first then.”

Reira’s hands reached for one of the plates. Reiji’s mind briefly whitened out.

Then he bolted forward, snatching both plates from Reira’s grasp. With little time for ceremony, he simply grabbed the meat from one plate in one hand, and stuffed it into his mouth. He grabbed the other one, too, nearly choking before he swallowed it all down. But now, his father’s ghost couldn’t force Reira to eat either.

He wasn’t sure what blowfish poison felt like. He didn’t know what to expect.

He knew the second it hit, though, because his whole body seized up. He choked. There was a burning electricity running through his whole body shutting him completely down. His legs went out and he collapsed to the floor, and then to his side in a heap of unresponsive limps.

Is this enough? he thought to no one. Is this enough to rid this family of the Akaba curse?

His eyes fluttered. He felt so heavy. The world was getting darker and darker.

When he opened his eyes again, he was nowhere. He blinked. The darkness, however, did not change. Was he dead?

“Mother?” he tried, his voice echoing. “Mother...I protected Reira to the end.”

He blinked again, and he was elsewhere. He gasped, as the red circles emblazoned on the walls of the train car, zooming through darkness, glowed and seared against his eyes. He stumbled, and smacked against the back of a wall that jostled with the movement of the train. No, not a wall — that was a door. The door to another train car. He pushed off of it, trying to figure out where exactly he was. All he could see was the darkness outside the car, and the red, spinning circles that burned against the black walls of the train.

The door to the next car opened with a snap, and Reiji swore, spinning around. His heart rose in his throat. Wasn’t that...?

“Mother?” he called. “Mother!”

He could only see the back of her head, but he was positive that was her! She didn’t look back when he called, as though she couldn’t hear him. He started forward — but then someone else stepped into view. A man, no, two men, in dark black coats and pulled low hats that shadowed their faces. They had black hippo insignia emblazoned on their coat collars. It was an insignia that Reiji knew — the organization he had purchased his crossbow from. His blood chilled as the two men, now three and four of them, both walked in front of his view of his mother, consuming her from sight as they all walked deeper into the train.

And then, another face walked into view of the open door, pausing for a moment. Shun.

“Shun!” Reiji shouted. “Don’t follow them!”

Shun didn’t seem to hear him. Reiji leaped forward, but the door snapped shut, and he was trapped on the other side of the glass. He slammed his fists against it, but none of them on the other side heard.

“Shun! You can’t go with them! They’ll simply use you up and throw you away, just like they did mother! Shun!”
“They’ve been chosen.”

Reiji flinched and spun, slamming into the door again. He was somehow not surprised to see Yuuri standing behind him, smiling his usual smile.

“What are you talking about?” Reiji said. “Where are we? What is this?”

“This? This is the train of fate.”

Yuuri was sitting on one of the seats, now, flicking through a magazine. Reiji inhaled sharply when he noticed Reira was sitting next to him, wearing the outfit of the being inside the hippo hat.

“They’ve been chosen for a grand mission of changing the world,” Yuuri said, flicking another page while Reira looked over his arm.

“What do you mean by that?” Reiji said, cautious. That pit of emptiness in his stomach was beginning to fill with a roiling, uneasy water. “What are they going to change?”

Yuuri looked up from his magazine. He smiled.

“They’re going to reclaim the world from those that ruined it,” he said. He tilted his head. “Won’t you join us?”

Reiji’s eyes widened. The circles on the wall spun, red and searing, faster and faster. He was going to be sick.

And then his eyes opened. He gasped, struggling for air, his limbs tangled in the covers.

“Reiji-sama! Reiji-sama, breathe.”

“N-Nakajima?”

Reiji blinked a few times. He couldn’t see the face without his glasses, it was like one big smudge — but he was pretty sure that was Nakajima and Reira beside his bed. When Reira started to cry and grabbed his hand, he was sure. He fell back against the pillows, trying to breathe.

“What happened?” he said.

“We found you in your office,” Nakajima said. “You were lucky. We found you in time for the paramedics to induce vomiting. But you’ve been out cold for three days.”

Reiji felt a chill pass over him, and it wasn’t from the fact that he’d been out of commission for three whole days. He reached for his glasses.

Nakajima tried to stop him, but Reiji ignored him, pulling himself out of bed and stumbling to the window. Actually, he felt perfectly fine now that he was up. It was almost like a miracle.

He pulled back the curtain.

Yuuri stood on the lawn, smiling at him. When Reiji blinked, he was gone.

Reiji’s lips tightened.

“I will never get on that train.”
He lightly runs the brush over the dark black fur of the rabbits in his lap. The light from the computers glows over his face, making him look like a ghost. The rabbits snuffle and sniffle, constantly sniffing the air.

“Humans are curious, aren’t they?” he murmurs to no one. “In the human world, truth doesn’t matter. Only what you desire to be true becomes true.”

He brushes the second rabbit, and its ears twitch.

“Humans will do anything for the sake of their truth. They’ll even kill.”

The rabbits sniff, sniff, sniff, the echoes of their wiggling noses bouncing off the empty walls. He inhales through his own nose, and out again, sharp enough to slice the air. He smiles.

“The war will start soon enough,” he says. “We only need to wait.”

~ * ~ * ~

The train hummed underneath them. Yuya let his head rest against the window, trying to let the cold of the glass keep him grounded in the now. He could hear Pinku rustling in their grocery bags between his and Shun’s legs, but he didn’t move to stop it for once. He was too tired.

Shun, however, wrestled with Ao, swearing softly at the little hippo where it was attempting to wage war against one of the poles near the door, its tiny legs wheeling in circles. It was always trying to fight something, wasn’t it?

“So what do you think we should do?” Yuya asked.

Shun swore again as it sounded like Ao managed to land a hit on him. Yuya faced away from his brother, but he could hear the thump of Ao hitting the floor when Shun dropped it.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean...about the diary. The half that Grace has.”

Shun didn’t answer for a moment. Yuya tried not to think about a different train ride, from a day before, but it was too late. His mind was already wandering out into the darkness of the subway tunnel outside, and the previous night was returning to him.

~ * ~ * ~ F L A S H B A C K ~ * ~ * ~

Yuya, Yuzu, Grace
Words They Said to Him

Yuya gasps awake, sitting bolt upright. W-where is he? What’s happening? There’s a panic in his throat and he’s not sure why, whether it’s from some awful dream, or something that he remembered before he fell asleep —

Yuzu! That’s right! Yuzu had been in trouble! He spins in his seat wildly, looking around for —

Yuzu lays on the futon next to him, sound asleep and neatly tucked underneath the covers. The folds of her yukata bunch under her elbows as she pulls on the comforter in her sleep, mumbling something incoherent. Yuya’s heart slowly begins to slow down. Was...was that all a dream? His head hurts, and he’s starting to barely remember what it was that scared him in the first place.

He hears the clink of a glass in the next room, and the panic resurfaces.

Grace Tyler appears, smoothing her hair back into an effortless bun. Her yukata hants a little bit low, almost so that he can see her breasts, and he blushes, looking away quickly.

“Ah, you’ve awoken,” Grace says with a smile. “Feeling all right?”

“What happened?”

“Oh, don’t you remember? You heard Yuzu and I chatting in here and came in, and then you tripped and hit your head. What a coincidence that you happened to be in the same hotel, hm?”

Yuya bites his lip. His eyes flicker to Yuzu. She...looks all right. Still, Grace’s words don’t sit right with him. They taste like a lie.

When he chances another glance at Grace, she’s smiling at him like she knows what he’s thinking.

“Did you hurt her?” is all he can say.

Grace doesn’t stop smiling.

“No,” she says. “Yuzu-chan is fine. So let’s say what I told you is our story, and leave it at that.”

There’s something else in the back of her words, but it’s not a lie. It’s something of an omission, something she’s hiding. Like...like she’s angry, and she’s trying to pretend the venom isn’t rising in her throat. But she continues to smile, and walks quietly to the back of the room.

He notices the pink cover sticking out of her obi.

“That’s — ” he gasps, eyes widening. “Why do you have that?”

Her eyes flicker down to the diary, Yuzu’s diary. Her perfectly manicured nails rest against it for now.

“I need it,” she says simply. “It’s going to help me transfer fates.”

“W-we need it too,” Yuya gasps, trying to sit up and feeling dizzy. “It’s — my sister! The hippo hat girl needs it, and she’ll save my sister, and — ”

He’s too dizzy. He has to lean his head forward between his knees to stave off the bile in his throat.

Grace doesn’t respond for a long moment.

“I’m sorry,” she says, and she really does sound sorry. “But I will not give it up so easily.”

Tears prickle at Yuya’s eyes. Why does this all have to be so hard?

“Get some rest, darling,” Grace says. “You and Yuzu can take the train home tomorrow.”

He doesn’t remember falling asleep again, and barely remembers the morning, when Yuzu’s eyes bulged at seeing him and she tried to ask but never had the chance, while Yuya hurried to avoid her questions and tried to explain to Sawatari what had happened to him last night. But the next thing he knows, he and Yuzu are seated next to each other, staring at the other side of the train, and Pinku is trying to chew on his shoe laces.

For once, Yuzu is seated on the seat just one away from him. It makes him think of other rides, ones where they hefted piles of boxes back and forth to stow beneath Zarc’s house, and the way
that she sat as far away as possible from him during those trips. But this time, she is close. Close enough to touch. Her fingers drum against her school bag on her knees. He can tell she wants to speak, and he does too, but he’s not sure what he should say.

“How do you hate me?” she finally whispers into the empty train car, and the words rattle against his ribs. They make it hard to breathe for a moment. He stares at Pinku on the floor.

“It’s not about that,” he says, finally. “It...we can’t change it. We can’t change what my parents did. What my family did to yours. And we can’t...ignore it.”

Treacherous tears prick at his eyes, but he doesn’t wipe them away, because that would acknowledge them.

“Nothing can change,” he says. “It’s better...if we stay apart. That’s the destiny of our families.”

He hears Yuzu’s fingernails dig into her bag. For a long moment, she doesn’t respond.

“Well then,” she says. “I guess you’re going to have to learn to deal with me, then.”

Yuya blinks. Yuzu’s voice is strained, but there’s a tone of humor in it.

“Because...because I’m your stalker now, Yuya. A-and...and I’m going to change this destiny.”

His hands tighten around his knees and he pretends the tears aren’t there when they fall.

~ * ~ * ~ E N D  F L A S H B A C K ~ * ~ * ~

Yuya dragged his mind back to the train he was on right now. Shun still hadn’t answered him. He turned around, resting his other cheek on the window so that he was facing Shun again. Shun looked at the floor on the other side of the car, his arms folded, his face sour as usual.

“Grace said that the diary could transfer fates,” Yuya said. “So maybe that means...if we got it, it does have some kind of power. Something we could use to save Ruri.”

Shun shook his head.

“We have the medicine for Ruri now,” he said. “We don’t need the Hippodrum anymore.”

“But isn’t that...expensive?” Yuya asked, twinging with nerves.

Shun’s eyes finally flicked to his. He seemed to catch the nerves in Yuya’s face, because his eyes softened. He reached over the single seat between them and put a hand on his shoulder.

“Don’t worry about it,” he said, squeezing Yuya’s shoulder. “Don’t worry about the costs. I’ll take care of this family.”

Yuya tried to search Shun’s eyes, but he didn’t know what he was looking for. Hope? Something to trust? He already trusted Shun — he was his brother. But he felt like something was wrong. Like something...some piece of Shun was missing somehow.

In that moment, though, he was just Yuya’s older brother. The older brother that was always pushing himself too hard.

“If there’s anything I can do to help,” he started, but Shun shook his head.

“I’ll take care of it,” he said. “You just...keep smiling, like always. That’s all you need to do.”

It wasn’t enough, Yuya thought. It wasn’t enough for him to just stay on the sidelines and like Shun take care of anything. But something in Shun looked so tired all of a sudden. So Yuya didn’t press. He just forced out a smile.

“All right.”

~ * ~ * ~

“Aaaand...ta-da.”

Ruri oohed and ahhed, clapping her hands together like an excited preschooler. She was laying it on really thick, and Shun had to roll his eyes. He smiled anyway, twisting one of the takoyaki balls over on the grill with the chopsticks. The warm scent of fried octopus wafted over them, and
his stomach rumbled.

Yuya’s stomach made a similar noise, and he groaned.

“Why am I over here?” he whined, looking over his shoulder.

“Eyes on the hallway,” Shun said, pointing at him with the chopsticks. “If the nurses find out we’re doing this, we’ll get banned for sure.”

“I know, I know,” Yuya grumbled, turning back to look out through the crack in the door of Ruri’s hospital room. “Why did I have to pick the short straw.”

Shun let out a chuckle in spite of himself, and looking back to his work. The mini takoyaki grill sizzled with the thick, delicious spheres of seafood. Shun plucked a few off and onto a plate, handing it to Ruri. She grabbed hold of it eagerly, and immediately burned her fingers trying to pick one up with her bare hands.

“Oy, they’re still hot,” he said, rapping her lightly on the forehead. “Be careful.”

“Oh, but they’re so good,” Ruri moaned. She’d already gotten two in her mouth, and although she was gasping through the heat, her eyes rolled up with delight at the taste. Shun smiled.

“Hospital food was wearing thin, huh?” he said.

“You have no idea,” Ruri said. She grabbed another one straight from the grill and popped it into her mouth.

Shun picked one up with his chopsticks and gave it a taste. It seared his tongue, but it was delicious, and he closed his eyes to savor it for a moment, mixing the taste with the sound of Ruri’s giggles between her own bites.

“Save some for meeee,” Yuya said, and Shun opened his eyes again, laughing.

“Keep lookout,” he ordered, and Yuya stuck his tongue out over his shoulder at him.

Ruri piled a few more on top of a plate, and then scootched over to the door where Yuya sat.

“Here,” she said, holding one between her fingers. “I got the ones that looked the crispiest, you like those right?”

“Ruri, you’re an angel,” Yuya said dramatically.

“You’re so lucky, Yuya. And here I was just going to give you the bits I scraped off the grill,” Shun said with a grin.

“Ruriidii, Shun’s abusing me again.”

Ruri giggled, almost dropping her plate. Shun tried to swallow his own laugh down, but it was hard once Ruri got them started. Yuya started laughing too, and he almost tumbled to his back, catching himself by the door, and hurriedly sliding it shut.

“Ahh!” Ruri said then, thrusting both hands into the air with the empty plate in one. “It’s a good day!!”

She set the plate down and then flopped face first onto the bed, kicking her legs back and forth for a moment.

“You’re certainly a lot peppier,” Shun said. “Are you feeling better lately?”

“Mmhm!! I’m feeling great!”

Ruri rolled over onto her back with her legs still dangling off the side of the bed. Pinku was starting to wriggle towards the grill, so Shun tossed a takoyaki behind it so that it would go for that instead of eating the entire batch. Ao saw it when Pinku went after it, and kicked it. Kii caught it like a soccer goalie, and then Pinku fell on top of it trying to get the takoyaki. All three hippos fell into a tangle of stubby limbs and muffled grunts.

“Dr. Yuuri said that I would probably be able to leave soon,” Ruri said.

“That’s great!” Yuya said. “We’ll make sukiyaki when you’re discharged as a celebration!!”

Ruri bolted upright then.
“Oh, that’s right!! I wanted to show you!”

She rolled over and flopped down to reach over to the other side of the bed, rummaging around in the bag on the floor. She popped back up with a length of brown knitted fabric, hanging off her knitting needles. She presented with her eyes shining proudly.

“Oh, wow, what are you working on?” Yuya asked, finishing off his takoyaki.

“A sweater!”

“Something big this time, huh? Doesn’t seem like a color you’d usually wear,” Shun said. He turned off the grill and slid the last of the takoyaki onto a plate.

“Oh, it’s not for me,” Ruri said, grinning. “It’s for someone else! It’s a thank you present.”

“A thank you present, huh? For who?” Yuya said.

Ruri stuck her tongue out between her teeth, grinning.

“It’s a se~cret,” she said.

Yuya blinked, still chewing on a takoyaki. Shun tried to scrape his mind for who Ruri might be making a sweater for. Dr. Yuuri, maybe? She did seem to have become friends with him, as uncomfortable as that made him. Yuya spluttered suddenly then, almost spewing crumbs onto his plate.

“R-Ruri, you don’t have a...a b-b-bo...I mean, right?”

He flustered and fumbled, accidentally spilling one or two takoyaki to the floor. Shun’s eyes widened as he hit on what Yuya was saying. Boyfriend? Ruri wouldn’t have a boyfriend, right?? She didn’t even really know anyone, or go to school, or...why was he getting so worked up about it??

He coughed into a takoyaki and hurriedly shoved it into his mouth, hoping the heat would clear his brain.

“W-well, it’s not really the color I’d go for, but I’m sure whoever it is will like it,” he said around his food.

Ruri giggled.

“Chew with your mouths closed, you two!” she said, tucking her work back away into her back. She picked up her plate again and slipped over to Shun, stealing a few from his plate and scurrying back to her perch on the bed. Yuya closed the door now that the grill wasn’t cooking anymore, and took a seat across from him.

“She really does seem better, huh?” he said in a low voice to Shun.

“Yeah. That medicine seems to be working,” Shun said.

Yuya looked so relieved, and it was the most relaxed Shun had seen his brother look in a very long time. He let out a breath of relief himself. Things weren’t right when Yuya was worrying.

“Maybe we can go back to normal after this,” Yuya said. “When she’s finally out. No more hippos, or chasing diaries, or hats telling us what to do...”

“Unfortunately, that’s not the case.”

The voice cracked over their happy bubble, nearly popping it. It still took Shun half a second to realize that Ruri had left the bed and was standing in between them — and that she was wearing the hat.

The blue-eyed version of Ruri swallowed down her puffed cheeks full of takoyaki. She still had crumbs around her lips when she cleared her throat.

“SURVIVAL STRATEGY!”

The colors and lights swirled around them, sweeping them out of the hospital room and into their platforms. Shun couldn’t even react this time, he was just so tired and used to this bullshit by
“Listen up, you low lives who will never amount to anything,” the hippo princess said from her high up platform, looking down at them.

Yuya flushed a bright red.

“Hey!” he said, holding up his cuffed hands in fists. “That’s rude! We were having a nice time with Ruri; why did you have to interrupt us?? We don’t need your help anymore!”

“Foolish,” the princess snapped. “Have you forgotten your mission? You must find the Hippodrum.”

The happy little bubble that had grown around them in that hospital room seemed to pop. Shun felt a weight expand in his chest, like an anvil that was going to drag him down into the ocean. Hadn’t it been enough? Hadn’t he done enough?? What could she possibly want now? Ruri was alive! The medicine was saving her life!

“So the diary is the Hippodrum?” he said. “That’s the Hippodrum? For sure?”

“It...” the princess started. And then she stopped. Shun’s heart quickened, and he heard Yuya shift with surprise.

Neither of them had ever seen that expression on the princess’s face before. It was something like...uncertainty? Nervousness? Even fear, maybe?

“It’s a secret,” she finally said.

Yuya let out a blubbering sound.

“That’s what you have to say??” he said. “We don’t see you for days, and that’s what you have to tell us?!!”

The princess’s heels snapped against the first step, and she flung her arms back, letting the puffs of her gloves disappear.

“Very well. As a bonus, let me tell you something else, then.”

She reached halfway down the stairs and paused, as her skirt too, blew away like a puff of mist.

“If you leave the Hippodrum be and abandon your mission, one of you will experience a great punishment. You’ll lose the thing you hold dear the most.”

Her scarf puffed out and vanished in another stroke of light as she reached nearly the end of the stairs.

“Punishment?” Yuya said, voice cracking.

“Is that some kind of threat?” Shun said, anger bubbling in his throat.

There was no malice in her eyes as she reached the bottom of the stairs, stepping up onto the heads of Pinku and Kii so that she remained taller than them, hands on her hips.

“No. It is only a fact. A warning. The Hippodrum is of the greatest importance. You must not abandon your mission.”

Shun’s heart screamed in his ears. Punishment? Lose what he considered most dear? His eyes lingered on the face that was and was not Sakaki Ruri, staring back at him with unspoken words that he didn’t dare translate.

“I’m so sick of this!” Yuya said. “You show up, possess our sister, throw cryptic nonsense at us, and you expect us to just — what, to just hop to it? When will you leave us alone!”

The pain in Yuya’s voice broke Shun’s heart, but he couldn’t look at him. He could only stare into those unnaturally blue eyes that held his, even as Pinku smacked a button behind Yuya and opened up the trapdoor, sending him yelling back down into the darkness.

And leaving him alone with her.

“Shall we begin the Survival Strategy?” the princess said, not losing Shun’s gaze.

As it had before, her corset and bloomers exploded away, leaving her bare and naked save for her
As it had before, her corset and bloomers exploded away, leaving her bare and naked save for her hair and her boots. Shun didn’t look away from her eyes, the eyes that were not Ruri’s. His knees shook. He knew, but he didn’t know what it was he knew. And that knowing was ruining him from the inside, rending him apart.

He dropped to his knees in front of her, head dropping with the weight.

“I can’t save her?” he gasped. “Is that what you’re telling me? That I can’t save her?”

“No. You can,” the princess said. “I know you can.”

It was the gentlest he’d ever heard her speak, and he inhaled sharply when he felt her arms wrap around his head, pressing him against her.

“You can,” she said again, running a hand through his hair. “Because I think you already know. That the Hippodrum is...”

“No,” Shun whispered, as they both fell backwards, down to the floor, her weight on top of him. “I can’t...I can’t.”

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The moonlight dripped through the open windows, pooling in streams across the open, dark floor. It cascaded over her shape, her hair glimmering in the moonlight.

Grace didn’t flinch when Zarc grabbed hold of the couch behind her, leaning over her.

“You promised me that you would leave her out of this,” he said.

Grace swirled the wine in her glass without looking at him. She stared, instead, at the tower, where it glowed against the night. Her eyes were always there. His hand twitched slightly with old ghost pains, and he gripped his wrist, trying to still the tremor.

“Well? Are you going to say anything?”

“Don’t act as though you’re any better,” she said, swirling her wine again before taking a sip. She finally looked at him then, through the veil of her bangs, with the moon glinting in her peridot eyes. “Honestly. Pretending to let her drug you.”

Zarc’s hands tightened into the couch and he bit back the urge to snarl. But she held his gaze, and after a long time, he let go of the couch and slumped.

“Did you go through with it?”

“No. Sakaki Yuya arrived, and...I thought better of it.”

“Good.”

Grace took another sip of her wine. She nodded towards two more glasses on the coffee table in front of her, glancing at him as though in question. After a long beat, he walked around the couch, and took one of the glasses. He hated wine. He took a sip anyway.

“Sakaki Yuya asked me to give him the diary,” she said suddenly.

Zarc’s eyes flickered to the half left on the table in front of her, beside the untouched glass of wine.

“I said no, of course. He doesn’t even know what it’s power is.”

“We’re the only people in the world who would know that,” he said.

He put the wine back down, and rubbed at his wrist again, massaging feeling back into his fingers. Grace stared at her own glass, twisting it so that the light played through it like a prism.

“I’ve realized that I can’t forgive them,” she said. Her fingers tightened on the stem of the glass, threatening to shatter it. “I can’t forgive the Sakaki family.”

Zarc stared up at the moon, still holding his hand in the other.

“They were children when it happened.”
“So noble,” Grace said, with just the slightest hint of a scoff. “Pretending as though you can let go.”

“The sins of their parents aren’t their sins.”

He reached for the wine and took another long sip this time, swallowing down the acrid, unwelcome taste.

“Did you know that Yuzu is in love with Sakaki Yuya?”

“Is that so?”

Grace’s eyes looked at him without turning her head.

“And you’re all right with that?”

Zarc spun the wine around.

“Yuzu isn’t Ray.”

“I know that! I’m not stupid!”

Her mask was starting to crumble, and she drowned it in another sip of wine. She stood up then, walking towards the window and pressing her hands against them. Her breath fogged the glass, hiding her reflection. Her fingers danced just over the glowing tower.

“It’s not like I’ve forgotten her,” Zarc said. “I couldn’t ever forget her.”

“The Sakaki family killed so many people,” Grace said. There was a tightness in her throat, but he couldn’t see her face to confirm if she was crying. “Ray tried to stop them, and she was punished for it.”

“Ray wouldn’t want her life to be avenged, no matter how she died,” Zarc said.

He considered his wine for a moment, and then looked to the untouched third glass. Grace made a choking sound. Her shoulders hunched over her ears.

“Ray isn’t dead,” she said.

The words felt hollow to him. Everything felt hollow nowadays. He took another deep sip of the wine, and waited to see if that would fill the space.

It didn’t. Grace folded her arms up.

“It’s cold in here,” she whispered. “We need curtains.”

Zarc let his head fall back against the back of the couch, away from the lights of the city and to the darkness of the ceiling instead.

It was cold everywhere, he thought, his hand twitching once again. It was always cold.
“Ruri! We brought more snacks!”

Yuya flung the door open, swinging the bag triumphantly. The effect was somewhat lost since Pinku was currently clamped to the bottom of it, and swung pitifully with the plastic.

Yuya hesitated, then, as he realized that one: Ruri’s bed was empty. And two: the two weird little boys that always seemed to be with Dr. Yuuri were standing beside it instead, staring down gloomily at the empty covers.

“What’s wrong?” Shun asked behind him, when Yuya stopped in the door.

Yuya quickly scurried forward to let Shun in after him, and Shun’s eyes narrowed when he saw the bed.

“Where’s Ruri?” he asked the boys. “Is she having some kind of test.”

“No,” said the blue haired boy.

“She’s disappeared,” said the black haired boy.

Their twin ribbons and their spiky bangs twitched like rabbit ears. Yuya’s skin crawled a little bit. They had always creeped him out. What even were they? They weren’t nurses or doctors, they were too young. Why were they always skulking about, and why did no one seem to question their presence?

“What a naughty girl,” the blue haired boy said.

“She needs to take her medicine,” the black haired boy said.

Yuya’s heart leaped. He exchanged a glance with Shun. Shun looked pale, and his hands shook slightly. His eyes flicked to something that Yuya couldn’t place, and then back to the boys.

“When does she need to take her next dose by?” he asked.

Both boys hummed, and held their chins at the same time, as though they were robots in synch with each other. Yuya shivered.

“She needs to be back soon,” said the black haired boy.

“At least by the time the sun sets,” said the blue haired boy.

Yuya’s eyes darted to the window, where the sun was already starting to hang heavy in the sky. They had maybe two or three hours before the sun set. Shun’s hands curled into fists, and a panic overcame Yuya for a moment, making him dizzy. What would happen if Ruri didn’t get her medicine in time? Would she just die? They had been so close, so close to going back to their normal lives, just the three of them living happily together again. But now...
The words of the hippo princess rang in his head.

“If you do not retrieve the Hippodrum, one of you will suffer a great punishment.”

“Shun,” he started.

“Let’s go,” Shun said. “I think I know where she must have gone.”

He stormed past Yuya, and Yuya jumped. He dropped his bag of snacks and hurried after him, heart clenching.

They had been so close. Was their happy life going to be forever just out of reach?

~ * ~ * ~

Ruri hummed, pushing aside a few rolls of clearance yarn to see what was underneath. Yuzu drummed her fingers against the strap of her bag. Her eyes flicked over the aisles upon aisles of colored yarn — she hadn’t even know that there was so much yarn in the entire world.

“Are you sure you’re okay to be out, Ruri-chan?” she asked. “I mean...tell me if you get tired or anything. I’ll take you right back to the hospital.”

“I’m feeling great, don’t worry, Yuzu-chan!” Ruri said, giggling as she squeezed some yarn. “And don’t worry. Dr. Yuuri gave me permission to go out today.”

“Well...if your doctor said so.”

She still kept throwing Ruri glances every now and then, alert for some sign of her tiring, or her illness surfacing again. Ruri had convinced her to come along when she’d come by for a visit, and she hadn’t been able to say no — she liked Ruri, and besides, it was better if she had someone along with her, right? She would have gone anyway. At least this way, Yuzu could keep an eye on her. Yuya would never forgive her if she let anything happen to Ruri.

“So what are you looking for?” Yuzu asked, following Ruri into the next aisle.

“I was making sweaters for my brothers,” Ruri said, looking at another skein and frowning at the price. “I showed them part of what I was making to gauge their reactions, and Shun-nii said he didn’t like the color, so I’m starting over.”

She held up a skein of dark purple-blue yarn.

“What do you think? For Shun-nii?”

“Is that a color he likes?”

“I think so,” Ruri said, frowning down at the yarn. “That’s the trouble. My brothers never talk about themselves with me. They’re always worrying more about me than themselves.”

She put the yarn back and continued down the aisle.

“It’s always been like that,” she said. “They spend all their time taking care of me. So that’s why I want to make these...as a thank you.”

Yuzu couldn’t help but smile. Ruri was so sweet. She probably didn’t even realize that she was taking care of her brothers as much as they were taking care of her. If...if Yuzu was honest, she was a little jealous that they had each other.

But she breathed out the jealousy, and breathed in calm instead. Her family was fine the way it was. She was looking forward to learning to live with the new configuration of her family, with her mother’s marriage and her new stepfather and stepsister. The Sakaki family was a happy one, and the Hiragi family would be one too, she was sure of it.

“What about this one for Yuya?” she said, grinning so that Ruri knew she was joking. The color was an ugly, puke brown, and Ruri giggled behind her hand. Yuzu put the yarn back, and followed Ruri into the next aisle. Ruri picked up two skeins of the same color, but different weights, and weighed them in her hands experimentally.

Yuzu was about to say something about another color above Ruri when her phone buzzed. Frowning, she reached into her skirt pocket and flipped it open. Grace? Why was Grace calling?

Yuzu clicked to accept the call, and brought the phone to her ears.
“Hello? Grace-san?”

“Ah! Yuzu-chan,” Grace’s voice floated through the receiver. “How are you?”

“I’m doing all right. What’s going on?”

“I was just calling to thank you for coming out with me the other night. It was fun, wasn’t it? We should go again sometime.”

Yuzu bit her lip. To be honest, she couldn’t remember a whole lot of that trip. Somehow, the last half of the night was one big blur. She couldn’t remember how Yuya had ended up there in the morning, or really...anything after having that conversation with Grace in the hot springs. Still, Grace’s voice was light and cheery, and there was something nice about it. She’d always been nice to Yuzu, even when she was trying to steal her husband.

Yuzu smiled into the phone.

“That would be nice,” she said. “Thank you for taking me out. I think I needed it.”

“Oh, don’t thank me, darling,” Grace said with a laugh. “Actually, I know it’s sudden, but I was wondering if we could meet for dinner perhaps.”

Yuzu glanced over at Ruri, who was reaching for the color that Yuzu had been looking at before now.

“Actually, I’m out with a friend right now,” she said.

“Oh? How nice!”

“Yeah, it’s Sakaki Ruri-chan. I told you about her before, right? She’s Yuya’s little sister.”

There was a brief pause on the other end. Yuzu thought she heard Grace’s breath catch. But then her voice was all light and cheer again.

“Oh, how lovely,” Grace said. “Why don’t you both join me? I’ll text you the restaurant in a few moments.”

“Oh, I should probably ask her if it’s okay, first,” Yuzu said quickly, but Grace was already hanging up. Yuzu rolled her eyes. Grace was sweet, but she was still definitely a celebrity, always just assuming that her plans would be met.

“Who was that?” Ruri asked.

“Wife of a family friend,” Yuzu said, stowing her phone away. “Her name is Grace Tyler...actually, she wanted to know if we could meet her for dinner. But you probably need to get back to the hospital, right?”

But Ruri’s eyes had widened and began to sparkle, her whole body shivering with delight.

“Grace Tyler?” she said, voice squeaking. “The actress?? Oh my gosh, I have the music recording of that play, the Tragedy of R! I love her voice!! You know her??”

Ruri’s enthusiasm briefly bowled Yuzu over, and she was reminded once again that Grace was a celebrity. Sometimes, in all of the ordinary craziness of her life, she forgot things like that.

“W-well, yeah, she’s married to a family friend,” Yuzu said.

“I could really meet her?” Ruri said. “Oh my goodness. Do you think she’d give me her autograph?”

Yuzu had never seen Ruri so flustered and excited before, it was kind of cute. Yuzu smiled, and sighed.

“Well, as long as you don’t need to go back soon,” she said. “When she texts me, I’ll let her know we can come.”

“Yay!” Ruri threw both her hands into the air. “Oh, I think I picked colors, by the way. So we can check out!”

She placed the purple and green skeins into her basket, and Yuzu poked them as they walked to test the softness.
There was a small coffee shop on the other side of the street from the yarn store, and since Grace hadn’t texted her yet, Yuzu suggested they wait there. Ruri argued with her for a brief moment when Yuzu insisted on paying for her coffee, but Yuzu won in the end. They took a small booth near the door and sipped at their cappuccinos.

“I can’t believe I can really meet her,” Ruri said. “I used to listen to that recording all the time! I was so sad when she retired. I never had a chance to see her show.”

“I know she’s got a recording of it. I’ll bet we can ask if she’ll lend it to you.”

“Oh my gosh, really?” Ruri said, eyes widening. “W-what’s she like?”

Yuzu had to hesitate for a moment. It wasn’t the time, for sure, to dump all of the events of the past few months on Ruri, about how Yuzu had hated her for so long for stealing Zarc, or how she’d tried to literally compete with her for Zarc’s affection. She wasn’t even sure how to explain what she felt Grace was like.

“She’s a really sweet person,” said another voice out of nowhere, and Yuzu jumped, almost spilling her coffee on her shirt.

“Z-Zarc-san?” she said, looking up with surprise.

Zarc smiled down at the two of them. Where had he even come from?

“Sorry, I saw the two of you in here, and thought I’d say hello,” he said. “You’re going to meet Grace, right? I was on my way to see her too. Why don’t we go together?”

“She hasn’t told me where we’re meeting yet,” Yuzu said.

“She probably forgot,” Zarc said, shaking his head with a smile. “Don’t worry, I know where she’ll be.”

“Oh, right,” Yuzu said, looking at Ruri’s confused face. “Ruri-chan, this is Tatsuzaki Zarc. He’s a family friend, and he’s Grace’s husband.”

“Oh! It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Ruri said, bobbing her head.

“Zarc-san, this is Sakaki Ruri, a friend of mine,” Yuzu said. “She’s Yuya and Shun’s little sister, from your class.”

“Oh!! You’re my brothers’ homeroom teacher!” Ruri said. “I thought I remembered your voice!”

Zarc’s smile looked suddenly plastered on when he shook Ruri’s hand, and a skitter of strange nerves played over Yuzu’s skin.

“Charmed,” said Zarc. “Well...should we go?”

Grace put her hand into her purse, running her fingers over the cool metal of the object inside. She stared at the other side of the parking garage, into the shadows, where everything was hidden. A parking garage felt like an inherently hostile place, even sitting inside the safety of her car. Just about anything could be waiting in those shadows. Waiting for her to step out, to snap her up.

But she didn’t feel afraid of it. There was nothing in those shadows that could match her own darkness, after all.

“Yeah, it’s Sakaki Ruri-chan. I told you about her before, right? She’s Yuya’s little sister.”

The name Sakaki grated on the raw edges of Grace’s mind, and her fingers tightened around the handle in her purse. She inhaled sharply, and out. Sakaki Ruri. The youngest Sakaki. Her hands shook. She’d had Sakaki Yua right in front of her, unconscious. She could have taken her revenge right then and there, for all of the lives that had been ruined by his family. For Ray. But she hadn’t. She’d been weak.

Her finger curled around the trigger inside her purse. Her hands shook further, and her throat began to close up. So easy. It would be so easy. She could see it, vividly. Could practically taste it. She could kill Sakaki Ruri.

Her hands shook. She released the handle in her purse and brought her hands up, to stare at them.
Her fingers were slender and soft, her nails perfectly painted. But for a moment, she thought about a different pair of hands. Smaller ones. Ones that had been held by hands the same size, held together between them so that she could feel her own pulse, and Ray’s, through their hands.

She put her face into her hands.

“You’d be so disappointed with me, wouldn’t you?” she whispered into her palms.

Footsteps echoed through the parking garage. That wouldn’t have been odd in and of itself, it was a public garage, but something about it made her pause. She lifted her eyes over her fingers, searching for the source of the echo.

The dim light glinting off of his glasses, he appeared at the end of the aisle, just within her line of sight. She found herself smiling. Something to distract her.

She slipped out of the car, reaching into her purse and pulling out the weapon to bring with her. The mini crossbow bolts, neatly loaded, glowed faintly in the dim garage light.

The young man was already waiting for her, impassive eyes behind his glasses, the massive machine-gun looking apparatus held easily in one hand.

“So you found me,” Grace said, smiling.

“I should thank you for the song,” Akaba Reiji said, fixing his glasses. “Though it did seem a little off pitch.”

Grace fingered the ends of the crossbow bolts, still smiling.

“You must have misheard,” she said. “I’m never off pitch.”

“Perhaps you’re simply losing your edge,” he said, flipping the gun up and letting its kickstand pop out, balancing it against the ground. “It happens as actresses age.”

“That sounds like something a virgin would say.”

His lips twitched downward.

“One chance: give up the half of the diary.”

“I will not give up on Ray,” Grace said, aiming her crossbow.

He hit the heel of his hand against the back of the gun and it roared to life.

“And I will not give up on Reira,” he said. “And so we’ve reached an impasse.”

“At least entertain me for a while, darling,” Grace laughed, and she fired.

~ * * ~

The rabbits stared at the bed. They had not moved since the brothers had left. Their noses twitched at once. Through the window, the orangey light of the setting sun melted through the glass and pooled in the creases of the covers.

“She’s not back yet,” said the blue haired rabbit.

“What a naughty girl,” said the black haired rabbit.

“Naughty girls are punished,” they said in unison.

~ * * ~

“Is...is Grace really waiting for us up here?”

This building looked more like an abandoned construction site than someplace where a famous actress would get a restaurant reservation at. But Zarc only smiled, and Yuzu shrugged. Ruri was just too excited about meeting Grace, she bounced on her heels. The girls followed Zarc into the elevator, and Zarc pressed a button. The elevator creaked and clattered ominously, but it went upwards without a hitch.

Yuzu kept her eyes on the setting sun. Was it okay for Ruri to be out this late? Maybe she should called Yuya and Shun, in case they needed to know where their sister was. She stood and drummed her fingers against the strap of her back, while Ruri fidgeted beside her, bouncing from
Zarc stood on the opposite side of the elevator, and she stole a glance at him. He looked the same as ever. Something about the setting sun seemed to cut the edges of his face eerily, though. Why did she feel so nervous? This was Zarc. Dorky, useless, forgetful Zarc.

“Yuzu,” Zarc said suddenly, and Yuzu jumped. She looked forward before he noticed she’d been staring at him, but he hadn’t even glanced at her.

“Yes?” Yuzu said.

“Do you remember what I told you before?”

Yuzu blinked. She wasn’t sure what he was referring to, and didn’t know how to ask. It was like the words had suddenly left her.

“How about everything happens for a reason. That nothing goes to waste.”

She did remember that conversation. A smile pulled at her lips. It was just Zarc being Zarc. Saying something deep before he said something dorky again.

“Yes, I do remember,” she said.

“Good.”

Zarc didn’t speak for a long moment. The elevator climbed up and up. Through the grate in the front, Yuzu could see the building they were going through. Once again, nerves claimed her stomach, flipping and flopping inside her. This really didn’t look like a proper building. The floors they passed looked unfinished, the sun streaming through their open walls and empty floors. Where exactly were they going?

“Zarc,” she said. “Where is it that we’re going?”

She couldn’t keep the tremble out of her voice. She looked desperately up at him, for some sign that things were okay. She’d always trusted Zarc before. He’d been there for her, talked to her about Ray when no one else would.

Why did she feel so scared all of sudden?

Zarc didn’t look at her. He stared out through the grate, the sun alternately shining over his face and plunging him into shadow as they passed floors that blocked the sun’s rays.

“I guess I’m going to have to do it after all,” he said, as though to no one in particular. “Today, I’ll bring punishment to the Sakaki family.”
The elevator creaked and clattered, and Yuzu couldn’t breathe.

“Zarc?” she said.

Zarc wasn’t looking at her. He was staring at his hand, at the scar that ran over the ends of his fingers. She’d never noticed it before. The light of the setting sun made it look ragged, as though it were bleeding, and she felt like she was about to throw up.

Ruri tensed beside her, and even though Yuzu wasn’t looking at her, she could sense the tremble. She moved herself in front of Ruri, putting one arm up to block her from Zarc. Zarc wouldn’t do anything — bad, would he? He wouldn’t hurt Ruri, would he?? He had said that he didn’t hate the Sakakis!

Zarc twisted his hand to face back towards his eyes, looking at the scar from behind.

“I used to play piano,” he said. “Did you know that?”

Yuzu couldn’t breathe. The elevator kept going up, and she knew that they weren’t headed towards any restaurant to meet Grace. She didn’t know where they were going, and it terrified her.

“My mother married a professional pianist,” Zarc said, in a voice that seemed just as though he were discussing the weather. “But then his popularity started to flag, and she left him. She only loved talented people. She told me that every day. ‘Mother loves talent, Zarc. Don’t be like your father, Zarc. Here’s a pet bird to be your friend, Zarc. Human friends will only distract you.’”

He smiled, and it looked so dead, like he was a mannequin instead of a human.

“She married again, this time to a composer. I had a little brother. As soon as he was old enough to sit up, he was poking keys on that little toy keyboard. I noticed right away — he was going to be better than I was.”

Yuzu pressed backwards, pushing Ruri behind her to the other corner of the elevator. She had no idea what was going on, but Zarc wasn’t right. This wasn’t the Zarc she remembered, the one that she would walk home with, the one that she’d ask questions about Ray or the one that she had convinced herself that she was in love with. Gone was his dorky grin, his forgetful nature. This was something new, and this was something horrifying. P-police. Maybe she should call the police.

“So I thought I’d try to freeze time.”

He looked at his hand again, considered the scar there.

“Maybe if I was unable to play, if some accident caused me to have to stop...maybe mother wouldn’t abandon me in favor of my brother. Maybe she would always believe that I could have
been talented, if not for cruel fate. Maybe she wouldn’t leave me.”

He stretched his hand out, and Yuzu’s skin crawled. Where...had the scar come from?

“I was nine,” he said, almost wistfully. “I just left my hand on the keys while I slammed the keylid back down on top of it.”

Yuzu flinched, her hands twitching with sympathy pains. Ruri choked on a gasp.

Zarc’s eyes finally moved to Yuzu’s — and they were dead. There was no spark there, not a glimmer of the man she had thought she’d known. He was still smiling, but it looked deranged, now, a hollow shell pretending it knew what a human looked like.

“Needless to say,” he said. “I don’t play piano anymore.”

The elevator shuddered to a stop. The grate slid open.

Zarc was much faster than Yuzu and much stronger. She screamed, but he grabbed hold of her arm and slammed her into the back of the elevator. For a moment, she couldn’t see, lights flaring over her vision and her brain rattling in her skull. She heard Ruri scream, but by the time she’d gotten her bearings back, the grate of the elevator was sliding shut like a set of bars again. She yelled, flinging herself forward. Her foot nearly slid on the discarded yarn bag that Ruri had dropped, and then Yuzu smacked into the grate. She managed to grab hold of it to stay standing.

Her whole body trembled with panic and pain, and she could only barely make out the shape of Zarc dragging a struggling Ruri through a broken down construction site.

“Don’t watch, Yuzu,” Zarc called back. “You have a different destiny than the rest of us.”

Oh, god, they were so high up, Yuzu realized, her breath catching in her throat. She could see the city from up here, and Zarc was taking Ruri — he was taking her right to a massive hole in the floor, oh god.

“Zarc!” she screamed, banging her hand against the grate. “Don’t hurt her! Zarc, please, don’t hurt her!”

Ruri tried her best, but she was just too small to do much damage. She couldn’t fight Zarc off as he lifted her up by her wrists, dumping her into what appeared to be a small metal tub. He kicked the tub from the side of the hole, and Yuzu screamed again.

But the tub only swung across the space, hanging precariously from a series of metal ropes over the abyss. Even from here, through the grate, Yuzu could see Ruri’s wide, terrified eyes as she pressed her hands to the sides of the tub while it swung back and forth. Yuzu banged her hands against the grate again.

“Zarc!” she screamed again. “Were you lying to me?? You told me you didn’t hate them! You told me that it wasn’t their fault what their parents did!!”

Zarc wouldn’t even turn around to look at her. He had one hand in his pocket, and he was dialing a phone with the other.

“Don’t watch, Yuzu,” he said again, and this time, he actually sounded like a human being, his voice laced with sadness. “You were never supposed to be involved in any of this.”

Yuzu’s knees trembled, and she could only stand by clinging to the grate, her fingers digging through the metal slots.

“I hate you,” she mumbled. “I hate you, Zarc, I hate you!”

Her voice rose to a scream at the end, and for a moment, she saw his shoulders flinch. But he just brought the phone to his ear, and waited for it to dial.

“Good,” he said softly. “You probably should have hated me a long time ago.”

~ * ~ * ~ * ~ * ~ * ~

Zarc

Child Broiler
Zarc opens his eyes. For a long moment, he’s not sure where he is.

He hears...a fan. A big one, the heavy whup-whup-whup of the blades spinning slowly around. There’s a faint cough, the shuffle of feet across the floor, the shifting of fabric over legs, the faint, metallic hum of some unknown machine.

When his vision clears, he realizes that he is not alone.

All around him are children, around his age of nine, or younger. They’re faceless, or at least...he can’t seem to focus on their faces. It’s like they aren’t really there, like they’re ghosts, or cardboard cutouts.

A chirp catches his attention. He looks down, and notices his pet bird at his feet, still sitting in its little wrought iron carn. It stares at him with one blue eye, and then turns its head to look at him with the other green eye.

“Where are we?” he whispers, more to the bird than to anyone else.

One of the faceless gray children answers, however.

“You’re in the Child Broiler,” they say.

“T-the Child Broiler?”

He can hear the faint hum of a conveyor belt, and the hiss of some whirring machine. It’s cold and hard on this floor.

“It’s where unwanted children are sent,” says another gray child. “So that we can be made invisible.”

“Unwanted...?”

He looks down at his hand. It’s wrapped and bandaged, from his “accident.” Something in him breaks, and his head slumps down to his knees.

“So mama didn’t want me after all,” he mumbles.

The child said that they would become invisible, right? Maybe...maybe that’s a good thing. Being invisible sounds like a great idea right about now.

SLAM!

Zarc is the only one who flinches, and shoots to his feet at the sound. The other gray children are more like lumps growing from the floor, as though they’ve already become a part of this place.

Over head, light streams through an opening in the wall. For a moment, he can’t see anything past the blinding light. But then, a small shadow emerges. A small shape leaps down from the now open window, landing lightly on the ledge below it with her arms outstretched.

“No,” she calls. “I won’t let you disappear.”

Zarc squints. Something about her is familiar. And as the light adjusts, and it glows around her edges, he remembers: Hiragi Ray, from his class.

“What...what are you doing here?” he calls.

She turns, and her eyes look straight at him. She smiles, and it’s brighter than all the light in the world.

“I’m here for you,” she says. “To take you back to the one who needs you.”

Zarc’s heart clenches.

“No one needs me,” he said. “Don’t you understand? My mama doesn’t want me. That’s why I’m here. You don’t even know me! Why do you care?”

Ray clasps her hands behind her back, and looks up. Her pigtails swing back behind her.

“I do know you,” she says. “I used to listen to you. You’d play piano in the music room every day, right? I loved that music.”

The bird in the cage ruffles its feathers. Zarc’s good hand rolls into a fist, and tears bubble up in
“Well then, you won’t want me anymore either! Because that music — I can’t play it anymore!!”

He thrusts his bandaged hand up for her to see. He’ll see the light die out in her eyes, now, for sure. She’ll turn around and go back the way she came.

But the light doesn’t dim. She only smiles.

“That’s not what I loved about your music,” she said. “That music...it was the sound of your heart.”

Something in Zarc’s chest releases. He feels a tear roll down his cheek.

But then the floor beneath him lurches. He screams as he falls to his side, the birdcage bouncing up and down and the bird inside squawking, trying to fly away but only ramming into the bars.

Overhead, a gray shape that might be a person moves past on a cart, holding a megaphone.

“You will now be processed,” a monotone voice echoes through the room. “The Child Broiler is now online. Do not be afraid. It does not hurt. You will only be ground to dust.”

Zarc can only lie there, letting the conveyor belt take him along with it. Ahead of him, he can hear the blades whirring. Several gray children have already fallen inside of it, and the shards of glass shatter on the other side.

Well, he thinks. No one wants him anyway. He might as well be invisible. He reaches for his birdcage, and hugs it to his chest. Then he closes his eyes, and waits for the blades to take him.

“No!”

Ray’s scream echoes over the whole warehouse, and he feels something curl around his wrist. All at once, his whole body is yanked to a stop as his legs try to go over the edge of the conveyor belt, but his body remains hanging in the air. The birdcage dangles from his good hand, the wrist that Ray’s taken hold of. His eyes fly open.

Ray clings to him, her other hand grabbing hold of a pole on the end of the conveyor belt. He must be too heavy for her, but she’s not letting go. Her whole face is screwed up in determination.

“Let go!” Zarc shouts. “Let go! You can’t hold me up!”

“No!” Ray shouts. “I won’t let you go! I won’t let you disappear!”

“It’s pointless! There’s no point in saving someone like me!”

The monotone voice of the megaphone person echoes over the room.

“We will now sever your lifelines. Please stand by.”

A blowtorch lights from somewhere in the air, and strikes against Ray’s wrist. The scream that rips out of her is almost enough to shatter Zarc into pieces right then.

“Let go of me!!” he screams, panic overtaking him. “Let go!! You’ll get hurt!”

“I don’t — care!” Ray shouts, even as her face goes white with pain, and her skin begins to blacken with the burn. “I absolutely will not let you go!”

“You’re wasting your time!! I have nothing left to live for! You need to just let me go and save yourself.”

Ray’s lavender-blue eyes flash, and her scream comes out with pain and frustration.

“If you have nothing left to live for, then live for me!!”

The birdcage snaps open. Feathers fly as the bird escapes, tearing off into the blue sky. Zarc feels the confining tug of the bandages on his other hand release, swirling away and into the blades below.

In one swift motion, Ray hauls him upwards. He tumbles forward into her, and the two collapse to the ground — to the soft, grassy ground. The Child Broiler is gone.

Zarc lays against her for a long moment, catching his breath. Ray’s arms tighten around him, but
he can see, out of the corner of his eye, her blackened skin where she took the punishment for saving him.

“Your hand,” he blubbers.

Ray only smiles, and hugs him tighter.

“We match,” she whispers.

~ * * ~ E N D F L A S H B A C K ~ * * ~

Shun’s phone rang. He swore, fumbling for it in his pocket. If it was Yuya, maybe he’d found Ruri!

The sun was already setting. They had to get her back to the hospital by nightfall, or — or he didn’t want to even know! They had to find her immediately!

“Yuya! Did you find Ruri?” he gasped as he opened the call without looking at the caller ID.

“Hello, Shun.”

That — that wasn’t Yuya’s voice. Shun’s voice froze in his throat.

“Who is this? Wait...”

The voice was familiar. He knew that voice. It was...it belonged to...

“Tatsuzaki?? Zarc?” he said.

“You’re sounding well,” Zarc said, in a mild tone that put Shun’s skin on edge. “Incidentally, Shun-kun. I’ve kidnapped your sister.”

Shun’s entire body locked up. For a moment, he couldn’t see; he’d blacked out.

“What kind of fucking prank are you trying to pull?” he screamed into the phone.

“Not so loud, Shun-kun. This doesn’t have to end badly. I’ll even send you a map to where she is. Just bring your parents with you when you show up, hm? We’ll talk then.”

The call ended, and he was stuck listening to an incessant beeping sound. His phone buzzed, and when he ripped it from his ear, there was a new set of directions added to his map app. That was where Ruri was.

But...

“My parents?” he gasped. “I don’t — I don’t know where they are.”
Punishment

Ruri swung precariously over the abyss. She pressed her hands into the side of the thin metal tub, trying to steady it. Only a few meager looking wire ropes suspended her from certain death. She tried not to think about the panic. Tried not to think about the roaring sense of utter terror that pulsed through her.

*I could die*, she thought, as the tub continued to swing slowly. *I didn’t used to be so scared of dying.*

She still remembered the feeling of near-death from her last two experiences. The first time had felt so very gentle. It was like falling asleep, with the happiness of her day with her brothers to lull her off to rest. The second time had felt a little more panicked, like having just woken up from a nightmare, and starting to fall asleep right back into a twisted dream.

But now, there was only fear. This was not a gentle send off in a hospital that she was looking at. This was a terrible, painful death she could be facing.

Kii sat in the corner of the tub, knitting up the one yarn ball it had retained as quickly as its little stubby legs could go. It was almost silly, Ruri thought with a panicked sort of smile. Was it trying to knit a rope for them to escape?

*Bang, bang, bang!*

The sound of feet slamming up metal stairs echoed over the empty lot. Zarc, who had been sitting on the edge of the drop with his legs dangling off the side, looked back over his shoulder. Ruri was just deep enough in the hole that she couldn’t see over the lip of the floor, but she could hear the gasping wheezes and the stumbling half run of someone who had been running for a long time.

“Ah, Shun-kun,” Zarc said. “You’re finally here. Where are your parents?”

Ruri could hear Shun wheezing for breath, his stumbled steps forward, and her heart leaped with panic.

“Where’s Ruri?” he gasped through a thin throat.

“Shun, she’s there! She’s down there!” Yuzu shouted from up above.

Shun finally stumbled into view. He came from the opposite direction as Zarc, his face peering over the edge. His red, flushed face immediately went white, and even from here, Ruri could see his entire body trembling. She tightened her hands around the lip of the tub. She needed to say something. To reassure him.

“Ruri, I’m coming,” he gasped. “I’m —”

“I told you to bring your parents, Shun-kun,” Zarc said. “I’ll trade them for Ruri-chan.”

Shun’s eyes widened with panic as he shot a look at Zarc.
“I don’t know,” he said, voice cracking. “I swear I don’t know where they are.”

Zarc stared at him blankly, like a statue. Then he raised up one hand, holding a small remote. He pressed a button.

An explosion rocked the construction site. Ruri’s stomach went out from under her as the tub lurched down a few feet from one of the metal ropes snapping over head, the heat of the explosion washing over her. She swung wildly, the tub nearly tipping over from the lost support.

“RURU!”

Shun’s voice sounded like glass when he screamed, but the shaking slowly began to subside, and Ruri’s tub resettled. Panicked tears rolled unbidden from her eyes as the tub sagged slightly forward, and she had to press herself into the end. Kii was still laying against the far side, tangled up in yarn and still knitting.

“Lying is not your best course of action here, Shun,” Zarc said.

“I swear! I don’t know! I haven’t seen them in years! Please, I’m begging you don’t hurt her!”

“Z-Zarc,” Yuzu cried, out of Ruri’s view. “Zarc, please! I’m — I’m going to call the police!”

Ruri could still see Zarc, sitting on the edge of the hole with his finger still on the button. He wasn’t looking at Ruri, or really anyone. After a beat, he stood up, brushing off the edge of his jacket.

“Fine with me,” he said. “But I think he might not be all right with that.”

Ruri’s eyes darted to Shun. She was horrified to see him flinch, see the panic flood into his eyes.

“Don’t call the police,” he said. “Yuzu, don’t call them.”

“W-what?” Yuzu said.

“See?” said Zarc. “I’m not the one who’s afraid of the police.”

He put one hand into his pocket, twisting the remote back and forth between his fingers.

“Why don’t you tell Ruri-chan the truth?” he said. “About where you’re getting all that money for her treatment?”

Shun’s hands curled up into fists, and Ruri felt something cold flood her chest. She couldn’t take her eyes off Shun. He looked so pale, so small, so fragile, even as he glared at Zarc with all his might. He looked...broken. Her fingers twisted into the metal. She had never asked Shun how he was affording her medical bills. It had seemed like something he would never answer. A taboo to even ask. But...she knew it was expensive. Nothing that he could pay for with his coffee shop job, or even with the gambling money that she wasn’t supposed to know he did.

Zarc pulled his hand out of his pocket, and with it came what appeared to be a fistful of photographs. Ruri couldn’t see them from here, but Shun’s face went even paler at the sight of them.

“You’ve been in contact with the Kiga Group,” Zarc said. “The very same group your parents used to lead. The one that caused the terrorist attack that took away my reason for living.”

He threw the photos on the ground and they scattered at Shun’s feet. He didn’t look at them, but it seemed to tense as they came towards his toes, as though they were a heavy tide coming up the beach.

“You’ve been in contact with the Kiga Group,” Zarc said. “The very same group your parents used to lead. The one that caused the terrorist attack that took away my reason for living.”

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“You’ve been dealing with criminals and murderers,” Zarc said. “All to keep your baby sister alive.”

He twisted the remote in his hand.

“That group was the one your parents commanded. So I’m sure you know where they must be. I’m giving you another chance to bring them.”

“I don’t know,” Shun gasped. “I’m telling the truth, I swear, I have no idea where they are!”
Zarc sighed. He pushed another button.

This time, Ruri screamed when the next rope exploded. She lurched another ten feet down and gasped with the abrupt catch that bruised the metal against her back. Kii lost hold of one of its knitting needles, and it went tumbling down into the dark abyss, almost black as night in the fading light of the sun. It was like a gaping maw, ready to swallow her. She blinked the tears out of her eyelashes.

_Hang on_ , she told herself. _You just have to hang on._

- * * * -

Yuzu dialed behind her back, hoping that she would hit the right buttons, and that Zarc wouldn’t see. The phone warmed in her hand, and she chanced a peek at it — Zarc and Shun were too busy looking at each other than her anyway. Yuya’s name glowed on the screen.

_Yuya_ , she thought, tears blurring her eyes. _Pick up!! You have to get here!!_

She turned her blurred vision back to the scene in front of her. She had hit the buttons to open the elevator a million times, but it wouldn’t budge. She was nothing more than a rat in a cage, trapped and forced to watch helplessly. The phone kept ringing, and Yuya wasn’t picking up.

“Zarc,” she begged again, her voice cracking. “Please! This isn’t worth it! Vengeance isn’t worth it! They don’t deserve this!”

Zarc didn’t even look back at her. He just looked up at the darkening sky, his hand hanging limply at his side with the finger still on the bomb button.

“I must look so horribly monstrous to you right now, Yuzu,” he said, sounding almost mournful. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize to me! Let them all go!” Yuzu screamed.

He ran his free hand through his tousled hair, still not even turning around.

“Ray was the only reason I lived,” he said. “She was my...no. She was the world’s savior.”

He looked towards Shun, and Shun flinched.

“And your parents took her away from all of us.”

“Please,” Shun begged, his voice thin and weak.

“So many of the world’s atrocities could have been avoided if Ray had only been here,” Zarc said. “But she’s gone. She left me behind. And without her, I’ve rotted away.”

He stared at his free hand for a moment, looking over the rippled scar there.

“One more chance, Shun. Call your parents. One or both of them, I don’t care. Bring them here. They’ll answer for Ray’s death.”

“They’re gone!” Shun shouted. “I can’t bring them here because they’re gone!”

Zarc pushed another button. Yuzu screamed, and she heard Ruri’s faraway shriek as yet another metal rope exploded. Only one remained — could Ruri still even be inside the tub?? There was only one rope left, the tub must have turned sideways by now and tossed her out!

“Ruri!” Shun screamed. “Ruri!”

Zarc seemed to consider them both for a moment. Then he put his hand on the last metal rope, hanging from a thick spool on the side of the hole.

“If you’d like to save her,” he said. “Then I’ll have you take the punishment instead. Does that sound like a deal?”

Yuzu’s phone buzzed and she choked. She looked down to see Yuya’s number flashed across the screen. She hit answer.

“Yuzu? _Sorry, the train took me out of signal for a minute, and I didn’t—_”

“Yuya, come quick!” she begged, her voice breaking. “Please! Ruri and Shun are here, and — you have to come!”
Shun could barely breathe. Ruri was still alive, but for how much longer? The tub hung precariously on its side, and only sheer will kept Ruri hanging on by tucking herself inside it like a hanging chair. She looked up at him with wide, frightened eyes. He couldn’t lose her — god, no, he couldn’t lose her, not when he’d come this far, not when he’d worked so hard!

“T’ll take whatever you want me to take,” Shun said. “Just — don’t hurt her, please!”

Zarc looked at him with such hollow, empty eyes, that it seemed odd that he was a human and not some living doll. He patted his hand on the metal rope.

“When this one blows, you’ll have to hang on,” he said. “Prove yourself, and hold her up, the way Ray saved me.”

The rope was made of metal threads, threads that would certainly tear his hand to pieces if he had to try and hold it up on his own. He probably wouldn’t even be strong enough to hold Ruri up.

He grabbed hold of the rope immediately, and braced his legs. Zarc looked briefly, distantly impressed.

Then he pressed the button.

The explosion nearly sent Shun off his feet and tumbling into the abyss. He heard Ruri scream, felt the rope snap, and for one moment, he thought he was about to lose her.

Ao let out a heavy snuffling sound, and gave him a flying headbutt in the chest. It was enough to swing his balance the other direction, and he grabbed the other end of the rope with his other hand, becoming the link between the two halves of the metal.

Pain ripped through him as a thousand metal threads ripped into his palms. A scream tore from his throat. But he could see over the side, and Ruri was still alive. Against all odds, he was holding her up. The tub swung, and with every motion it strained his muscles, made every bit of him scream out in utter pain. The metal dug into his skin and ripped new tears. Blood leaked out around his palms, making it slippery to grip, but he held tight. The blood trickled down his wrist and fingers and dribbled onto the wire.

After the first few seconds, the roar and scream of the initial pain faded, and he could suddenly hear — hear his heart racing, his muscles straining, his lungs gasping for air. His body stretched beyond its capabilities, and he thought for sure that the weight below him would tear his body in half. He dug his feet in. He pushed away the pain. He had to...he had to hold on. Had to pull Ruri up somehow.

“Niisan,” Ruri gasped from far below, so quietly at first that Shun could barely hear it over the roar of his pain. “Niisan!”

“Just — hold on,” he gasped. “Hold on, Ruri, I’m — I’m not going to let go!”

The blood leaked between his fingers. His grip slipped, and he gripped tighter, but that only dug the wires in deeper. His hands might not even be usable after this.

“Ray destroyed her hand to save me,” Zarc said, somewhere so distant that Shun could barely hear. “If you want to save Ruri, you’ll have to be willing to do the same.”

“Shut up! I’m doing it!” Shun gasped.

“It’s not as easy as it looks, is it?”

“Shut up!”

“Niisan,” Ruri cried. “Niisan, please — let go. Let me go.”

Shun’s entire body was on fire. He tried to haul himself back with his grip on the other end of the rope, but he couldn’t. He could only hold this position.

“No!” he screamed. “I’m never letting go!”

He heard a sharp intake of breath from behind him.

“Ray?” Zarc whispered, as though he’d just seen a ghost.
Shun ignored him. Ao was trying to pull him and Ruri back, but it was only a tiny hippo, and it couldn’t do anything but tug on his leg. Shun tightened his grip again, gasping at the pain. Through the blur of pain and the scream of his straining muscles, he could still see Ruri. She clung to the inside of her tub, staring up at him with such wide eyes. Tears briefly flooded her eyes. She rubbed them away.

And then, carefully, she stood up, wrapping one hand around the rope above her, balancing on the inside of the tub. Shun’s breath caught.

“Ruri, don’t move,” he gasped, as he tried to cling on to the now slightly swinging tub. “I’m going to pull you back up, I — ”


There was something so terrible, so terrifying in the tone of Ruri’s voice. She smiled at him.

“Thank you,” she said. “You’ve done so much for me, Shun. But it’s all right. You can let go now.”

“No,” Shun swore. “I won’t!”

“My condition has no cure,” Ruri said. “I know I’ll never be better.”

“You will! I’ll make sure of it!”

“You and Yuya gave me so much extra time,” Ruri said, her voice choked with tears. “And I was so happy to spend it with you both. But it’s okay now. You can stop fighting.”

She inhaled, and slowly, leaned her body outwards, still hanging onto the rope.

“Zarc-san!” she called up. “I’ll take the punishment for my family. I hope that’s enough for you. Please let Shun and Yuya continue to live happily.”

Zarc did not respond, and Shun could not see him through his blurred eyes.

“Ruri!” he said. “Ruri! Don’t!!

His grip slipped. Ruri sent him one last smile.

“Thank you, Shun,” she said. “I love you.”

She closed her eyes, and she jumped.

~ * * ~

Yuya couldn’t breathe, but he did anyway. He pumped his arms through the white hot pain of exertion, pounding down the street after the address that Yuzu had sent him. He could still hear her panicked voice, and the faint sound of an explosion on the other end along with a scream. His heart shrieked in his ears as he rounded the corner.

Ruri. Shun. Yuzu. God, please, be okay, be okay, be okay —

There! That was the building! He forced himself to run harder.

The chain link fence was closed around the building on this side, and he slammed into it. He gripped the links for a moment, leaning his forehead against it as he tried to breathe through the white hot fire in his chest. Then he climbed. There was barbed wire on top of the fence and it tore at his clothes and arms, but he ignored it, vaulting it and landing hard on the other side.

He stumbled, kicked the feeling back into his ankles, and continued running. His body was starting to break apart inside of him, and he wouldn’t be surprised if he suddenly started throwing up blood. But he didn’t dare stop. He found the stairs and bolted up them.

He was up the third flight when he saw the huge blurred shape whip past the stairs, and heard the massive crash that followed it. He stumbled, and hit the railing, peering down through the open middle of the building. It was too dark for him to see properly, but the smoke and dust of debris from something huge hitting the ground wafted up. Some ominous panic shot through him, and he went back to running.

He reached the top of the building so tired that his vision was blacking out at the edges. He tried to call out his sibling’s names, but there was no oxygen left in him. He stumbled, half blacked out
vision scouring the floor for any sign of them.

“Y-Yuya!” he heard Yuzu gasp, and through the dark, he could see someone on the other side of a grated elevator door. Yuzu. She pointed through the grate. “T-there.”

Yuya swang his head towards where she indicated, and something in him froze up. Shun lay crumpled against a pillar, his head lolled down at his arms at his sides. Yuya couldn’t run anymore. He had to drag himself one step at a time to Shun.

“Shun.”

The word was more a wheeze than anything, and Shun didn’t even stir. His hands were...oh god. Yuya almost threw up. His hands were torn apart, his sleeves ripped to shreds, blood staining his palms. Yuya wanted to curl up and cry. But where was...

He saw Shun’s chest shudder, and a tear leaked down his cheek.

“Yuya,” he gasped. “Ruri...I...I couldn’t...”

Panic clenched Yuya in a vise. He tried to stand, but his body wouldn’t respond.

“Ruri?” he called. “Ruri??”

A shuffled foot kicked at a stone. Yuya’s eyes shot up.

Zarc stood only a few feet away from them. A scream coiled up in Yuya’s throat at what he held in his arms — Ruri.

He tried to stand, but once again he couldn’t. Zarc approached, carrying Ruri bridal style in his arms. He said nothing as he laid her gently against Shun, and Yuya reached out to support her. Her chest rose and fell slowly, though her eyes were closed. She was...she was alive.

Zarc withdrew. Yuya grabbed both his siblings in his arms, leaning them against him and pushing his face into their hair.

“Why?” he gasped. “Why them?”

Zarc didn’t respond. Yuya buried his face into their hair for a moment, trying to get his air back. Then he lifted up again, glaring at Zarc through his tears.

“Why them!!” he shrieked. “This wasn’t their punishment to take! It should have been me! Why didn’t you come after me??”

Zarc just stared at him for a moment. Then, without a word, he walked past Yuya, and walked silently back towards the elevator.

Yuya didn’t move to follow him. He gathered his siblings in his arms and cried.

~ * ~ * ~

The elevator grate opened. Yuzu flinched, trying to stumble back from Zarc, a fierce panic racing through her. He grabbed her wrist before she could get away, though. But before she could scream, he merely pulled her past him, sending her stumbling free of the elevator. He entered, and the door slammed shut behind him.

Yuzu could only stare for a moment. She had thought she had known him. But now all that was in front of her, through the bars, was a stranger. Zarc’s golden eyes stared at her in the dark, like unnatural stars.

“Don’t become like me, Yuzu,” he said.

He pressed a button, and the elevator sank away. Yuzu could only stand there, trembling. For a moment, she thought she might collapse.

But no. There were more important things.

She turned, and she stumbled to the others.

Yuya still cradled his siblings in his arms, crying softly. She could hear him mumbling over and over: *It should have been me. It should have been me. It should have been me.*

She collapsed to her knees behind him, and fell forward, letting her head fall against his back. He
stiffened briefly, but relaxed as he realized who she was.

“I will never abandon you,” she mumbled into his back. “I promise. I will never, ever grow to
hate any of you. I’ll always be there for all of you. I...I promise...”

Yuya’s shoulders began to shake again, and then there were only tears. There wasn’t any room
for anything else.

~ * ~ * ~

“Ah. It’s you.”

Grace glared at him. She looked like a mess. Her beautiful dress was torn at the edges, the scarf
ragged around her shoulders. Her hair was, for once, tousled and matted, and not in a purposeful
sort of way. There were some dirt stains on her cheeks, and a faint bruise grew on her bare
shoulder.

“Find the diary?” Zarc said, stepping off the end of the stairs.

“We’re still at a draw,” Grace said. “You used me, didn’t you, darling?”

He shoved his hands into his pockets, looking up at the night sky. It was pretty tonight. At least,
he was pretty sure that was what pretty looked like. It was hard to tell without Ray, sometimes.

“Oh? And what plans did you have for them, when you called the two of them to meet you?” he
said.

Grace snorted. Her fingers tightened around the half of the diary she still clutched in one hand in
a death-grip. She clung to her desires, to a hope. He had forgotten how to do that with nothing
left to cling to.

“We couldn’t do it after all, could we?” Zarc said. “Any of it. We were a fake family from the
beginning.”

He deserved the slap when her hand struck across his cheek. It felt sort of refreshing, to feel pain.
He didn’t take his hands from his pockets as he turned back to face her, her hand still raised in the
air. Tears made her eyes look like gemstones, but she did not release them even as she trembled.

“We both used each other til the end,” Zarc said. “That was all this ever was.”

“And so you’re giving up?” said Grace.

He managed one last smile. The gentlest that he could manage for her, but judging by her
expression, it didn’t help.

“We started this relationship on lies,” he said. “I think we both knew it wouldn’t last.”

He closed his eyes, and walked around her.

“Goodbye, Grace.”

To her credit, she did not cry. She did not shout, and she did not demand. But he could still hear
her, breathing, not turning around to watch him go as he faded away into the night.
The door jingles as he pushes through. The ramen shop is warm, as usual, insulated with the steam of broth and the smell of noodles. He draws up a chair at the booth, and puts down a few bills. The bowl arrives quickly after, steam billowing over his face. He pokes at it with his chopsticks.

A hand rests on his shoulder.

“We’re really proud of you, Shun.”

Shun looks up through his bangs, at the woman who’s put her hand on his shoulder. Sakaki Yoko smiles big at him, and squeezes. Sakaki Yushou, on the other side of his wife, leans on the counter with his elbows and smiles at him, too. He finds himself smiling back.

Yoko rubs her thumb against his shoulder.

“You did good, protecting Ruri,” she says. “How are your hands?”

“I’m only doing what I should. I promised I’d take care of this family.”

He twisted his bandaged hands towards him — he could still move his fingers, but they were wrapped up like a mummy.

“They’re fine. The doctor said I won’t have any permanent damage.”

“You’re a good big brother, Shun,” Yushou says with another smile. “They’re lucky to have you.”

Shun feels an unbidden blush arise to his cheeks, and quickly bows his face towards his noodles, to pretend it’s just the heat.

Yoko’s hand slides from his shoulder, and she turns back towards the counter, clasping her hands on top of it.

“We can’t come home until our mission is over,” she says. “I’m sorry to do this to you Shun, but you’ll have to watch over them a little longer. Take care of Yuya and Ruri for us.”

“That’s what I said I would do,” Shun says.

His parents smile at him again. Then his father raises his hand and snaps his fingers. At the end of the counter, a man all in black with his hat brim pulled low over his head puts his hand on the table.

“The usual for my son, please,” Yushou says.
The man produces a thick envelope stamped with a black hippo head from his jacket. He slides it down the counter, and Shun stops it with one hand. He flips the envelope open briefly to take stock of the bills inside. It will be enough. He tucks it inside his jacket.

“Hang in there just a little longer, Shun,” Yoko says. “We’ll be a family again soon, I promise.”

He nods. The bowl of ramen is gone.

It’s suddenly very cold in here.

~ * ~ * ~

It was dark. She hadn’t let all the curtains down yet, but even with the stars and the moon and the glowing city skyline, the apartment was so dark that it felt like a coffin.

Grace saw the note right away. She couldn’t bring herself to look at it yet. So instead, she slowly went about unpacking her purse, methodically putting away each tube of lipstick and discarding every receipt one at a time. When her purse was empty and hanging up beside the door, she knew she couldn’t wait any longer. She walked to the couch, and sank down into it. The note sat on the coffee table. She watched it, waiting to see if it might come alive on its own.

Finally, she reached for it. It was short, and abrupt, and Zarc’s key to the apartment was taped to the bottom.

I’m sorry. We couldn’t be a family after all. Goodbye.

“So cruel, darling,” Grace whispered. “You might as well have broken up with me over a text.”

She let the note fall to her lap. She was surprised at how cold she felt, and she clutched her hand into her dress above her heart. She’d been left before. She’d left plenty of people before. This one hurt more somehow.

“I’m saying that I think we should be together.”

He’d looked so surprised, head jolting up from the mont blanc he’d been picking at. It was a quiet day, in a quiet coffee shop, and yet her mind had been so alight with sound and noise and static.

He’d swallowed harshly, smacking his chest with his fist a few times.

“What do you mean?”

“You and I are the only ones who remember Ray,” she’d said. “I think if we got married...perhaps between the two of us, we can help her live forever.”

His eyes had casted down to the table. She was the only one who ever saw this face of his — the dark, pensive look that he hid from the rest of the world with a dorky smile. It felt somehow special to her, knowing that she was the only one who knew his real face, and that he was the only one who knew hers.

“Can we really manage that? It feels like a lie.”

“It will be a lie at first. But the more we pretend, it will become real eventually.”

She let her head fall back against the couch, her hair sliding down over the back.

“I guess we couldn’t do it after all,” she whispered. “It was a silly attempt, wasn’t it, darling?”

She moved her hand to the deep inner pocket where she kept the diary. Only half the charm to transfer destinies was there. But she’d soon have the other half.

“I’ll just bring Ray back by myself then. It’s what I should have done from the beginning.”

Her voice sounded echoey and lonely in the huge, empty apartment. She stared up at the dark ceiling, listening to the silence.

“It’s still cold in here,” she whispered.

~ * ~ * ~

“Welcome home, Ruri!”
They all raised their glasses of juice and clinked them together over the table. Ruri giggled when Yuya’s sloshed over the top of his glass and scattered over his wrist, making him yelp. Yuzu rolled her eyes and grabbed a napkin to dab it off of his arm.

“All right,” Shun said, pounding his fist into his palm. “Let’s get this started.”

He whisked off to the counter, and came back with an armful of plates covered in thin slices of meat, balanced precariously with his bandaged hands. Ruri felt her mouth watering already.

“That looks really good!” she said.

Yuya leaned over to the middle of the table and began wiping grease onto the little hot plate in the middle of the table. Shun put the plates down and picked up a few slices with a pair of chopsticks, laying it onto the griddle where it immediately began to sizzle. Beneath the table, the hippos appeared to be making their own grill.

“For the first time, I’ve bought the highest quality meat,” Shun said. “So you’d all better enjoy it.”

“What?? How much was it?” Yuya said, looking suddenly worried.

“Don’t worry about it. I got paid at the coffee shop today so we need to splurge a little.”

“Besides, it’s a party,” Yuzu said, grinning. “Ruri’s finally out of the hospital!”

“I still have to go back for checkups,” said Ruri. She held her plate up so that Shun could dole out a few freshly fried slices of sukiyaki onto her plate. It smelled heavenly. Hospital food had been a nightmare.

“But you’re getting better, and that’s what’s important!” Yuya said. “And you’re finally home with us!”

He threw his arm around her shoulder and squeezed her. She laughed — oh, but it was great to be home again, no longer sitting lonely in a hospital bed watching television that she tried to be interested in.

Yuzu nudged her with her elbow then, grinning.

“By the way! Ruri has something to tell you guys, doesn’t she?”

Ruri blushed. She’d almost decided not to do it, she was so embarrassed — but Yuzu wasn’t going to let her get out of it. She reached down beneath her chair and pulled up her knitting back, taking the wrapped packages out. She handed them to Yuya and Shun, who both looked slightly surprised.

“These are for you,” she said, blushing. “It’s a thank you, for everything you’ve been doing all this time.”

Her brothers exchanged a glance, and then smiled. Yuya slit his open neatly, but Shun just ripped the paper off, making a bit of a mess.

“Oh wow!!” Yuya said. “This is so soft!”

“Make sure it fits!” Ruri said, feeling nervous. “I had to kind of guess!”

Yuya flapped out the warm green sweater, turning it back and forth for a moment to check which side was front. He pulled it over his head, and it briefly caught over his goggles. Yuzu had to help him pull it the rest of the way down. Shun unfolded the purple sweater more carefully, running his fingers over the knit.

“Did you make these?” he said.

Ruri blushed.

“I’ve been working on them for a while. It was a surprise.”

“Then, back when you showed us that sweater...” Shun said, looking up.

Ruri nodded, rubbing the back of her neck.

“It was for you guys. But you said you didn’t like the color, so I had to go get some more yarn.”

Shun blushed.
“Sorry, Ruri.”

“What are you sorry for?” Ruri said.

“I said I didn’t like the color because I thought you were making it for someone else.”

He immediately went even redder, and buried his face in the knit of the sweater.

“It is really soft,” he mumbled into it.

“This fits perfectly, Ruri, you’re a genius!” Yuya said, standing up from the table to show off his sweater. “It’s so warm!! This is going to be great for winter.”

Shun tried his on then, and the color looked perfect. Ruri clasped her hands together and smiled — they looked good! She was so happy.

“I’m so glad you like them,” she said.

“Ruri, you’re the best!” Yuya said, throwing his arms around her in a big hug. She laughed, and they both almost tumbled off the chair together. Shun had to reach over to boost them both back up.

“All right, all right, you huggy saps. The sukiyaki’s gonna burn.”

Still giggling, they all dug back into the plates upon plates of sukiyaki. Ruri groaned when all the plates were empty.

“I can’t believe we ate all of it.”

“High quality meat definitely is worth it,” Shun said, patting his stomach. Ruri giggled at the way he’d sprawled back in his chair.

“Niisan, you’re going to turn into a cow,” she said.

He mooed at her and she nearly fell off her chair laughing. Yuya scooped up the griddle and bustled over to the counter, starting the water in the sink to wash dishes. Ruri heard the clink of plates, and came out of her teary laughs to see Yuzu clearing away the plates.

“Oh, I can get that,” Ruri said.

“No, no, you’re fine! This is your party, and you should rest anyway,” Yuzu said, smiling. “I’ll handle it — I’m pretty good at dishes!”

She pumped her fist once like it was some kind of weight-lifting position, and Ruri let out a small giggle. Yuzu scooped the rest of the plates up and brought them over to Yuya.

“Need any help?” she asked.

“Oh, sure, thanks. Do you mind rinsing?”

“No problem.”

“There’s an apron over there, you can use that one.”

Ruri couldn’t help but feel the tiniest squeeze of her heart as she saw Yuzu pick up Ruri’s own pink apron, the one she wore when she helped Yuya in the kitchen. Yuzu slung it over her neck and tied it behind her back, and then joined Yuya at the counter.

Ruri wasn’t sure, all of a sudden, how she was supposed to feel, looking at the pair of them standing next to each other. Shun flicked on the television, and she heard a familiar song playing in a commercial. It was one of Rin-chan and Selena-chan’s songs, from Double B.

Ruri looked away from her apron and back at the table.

She felt suddenly very cold.

~ * ~ * ~

Yuya wiped off his hands on the dish towel, slipping into one of tables. Well, the kitchen was totally clean! It had been a long time coming, and it had needed the deep clean. It helped him settle his thoughts a bit, too.
Although, now that it was done, and he was sitting alone at an empty table in a sparkling clean kitchen with the dark evening pressing in through the windows, his thoughts were returning.

Yuya heard the swish of Shun coming down the fireman’s pole, landing lightly on the ground.

“Is Ruri asleep?” Yuya asked.

“Yeah. She seemed tired.”

“She’s been in the hospital for a while.”

“Mm. Hiragi left?”

“Yeah, a while ago. She wanted to make sure she got on an early enough train to meet her dad before he went to bed.”

Shun nodded. After another moment of quiet, he pulled out the chair opposite Yuya, and sat down. He rested his hands on the table. Yuya studied Shun’s hands for a moment. His brother’s hands had always been surprisingly soft looking. He always seemed like the kind of guy who might have calluses, or bruises from picking fights. But now, that was over. Both hands were wrapped in thick bandages. Yuya could still remember the raw meat look of his torn up hands, the blood that had coated the front of Yuya’s shirt as he’d supported Shun all the way to the hospital.

“You okay?” Shun asked quietly. “Have you taken a binder break recently?”

His binder was feeling a little tight, but that wasn’t the issue right now. Yuya twined his fingers together on the table, twiddling his thumbs.

“We spent the whole day pretending yesterday didn’t happen,” Yuya said.

He could tell Shun didn’t want to talk about this. He moved his hands under the table.

“Yuya, it’s okay. We got through it.”

“You both could have died.”

“But we didn’t. And we’re okay.”

Yuya couldn’t stop thinking about Shun’s hands. It was seared into his mind. He couldn’t stop thinking about the crash he’d heard as he’d run up the stairs. How that crash had been so close, too close, to having Ruri inside it. He could have lost both of them in a single night. He hadn’t been there. He’d been late. He was always late. He was never there when they needed him.

He couldn’t stop thinking about Shun’s torn up hands.

“It took the punishment, Yuya,” Shun said quietly. “It’s over. It’s going to be okay. I’ll protect this family.”

“It’s not over,” Yuya said, his words coming out harshly. “It’s not just Zarc. Thousands of people still hate us for what happened! Who’s to say it won’t happen again? That one day we might come home and find someone dead?”

“Yuya.”

“It’s their fault.”

Shun sucked in a breath, but Yuya couldn’t see him. His eyes were blurred with tears, and he could hardly breathe around the lump in his throat.

“It’s mom and dad’s fault. It’s all their fault! If they hadn’t done this, then you and I and Ruri wouldn’t have to bear this.”

Shun tried to reach over the table and put his hand on top of Yuya’s, but Yuya jerked his hands away. If he saw the bandages, he’d see the torn up hands in his mind again.

It should have been me, he thought, over and over. It should have been me with the bandages. It should have been me in that tub. Why them? Why are they the ones being punished, while I’m left untouched?

“I won’t forgive them,” he said, his shoulders hunching over his ears, his body curling up over the
table as the tears began to fall. “I’ll never forgive them. Never.”

Shun didn’t say anything. He just sat quietly, and listened to Yuya cry.

It was cold in this room. It was just so damn cold.
“Ah, Ruri-chan. Come in.”

The rabbits nibbled at their carrots in their basket as Ruri quietly slipped through the door.

“Good morning,” Yuuri said, smiling. “Was your first day home a good one?”

“It was, thank you, doctor,” Ruri said.

She sat down in the chair across from him, half her face illuminated by the x-ray overlays of a brain scan. She sat quietly for a moment, her hands in her lap.

“You’re a little early for your checkup,” he said, pretending to look at the clipboard beside him. “How are you feeling?”

Her magenta eyes were somewhat hollow when she looked up at him.

“I’m dying, aren’t I?”

He smiled at her. What a clever child.

“What makes you think that?”

“You’ve upped my medicine dosage, but you released me from the hospital. You did that because there’s no hope of my getting better, right? So that I could spend the last of my time with my family.”

“Hmm. I wonder.”

He leaned his elbow on the table and his head on his hand, tapping his cheek with his fingers. Ruri’s hands tightened in her lap.

“Doctor, don’t sugarcoat things for me.”

“Is that what you want to hear? You want to hear that you’re going to die?”

She flinched. Her face went pale, and she looked down at her knees. The rabbits nibbled away. What an amusing child she was. The whole family, in fact. Yuuri tapped his knee with his other hand, still smiling.

“Perhaps there’s something else going on at home you’d like to talk about?”

Ruri tensed a bit. Ah, yes. Trouble in paradise indeed. He wasn’t supposed to be a counselor, of course. But people tended to open up to him soon enough.

“...I feel as though I’ve lost my place at home,” she whispered. “Like...I don’t belong there anymore.”

“And what is that place of yours supposed to be? What life are you reaching for?”

Her shoulders hunched up around her ears, and she began to tap her fingers nervously against
“Me, Yuya, and Shun, all together, as always. Living happily,” she said. “Normal. Smiling.”

“It sounds to me as though you’re looking for something that no longer exists.”

Her head jolted up, and she looked pale as she stared at him.

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know,” Yuuri said. “I don’t know your past, your feelings, or your desires. Only you can decide that.”

He smiled at her. She did not smile back. He leaned into his hand again, considering her almost sideways.

“I think you’re suppressing something, my dear,” he said, pointing at her with a light hand. “I think that there is something else you want more than the old life you once had. I think you should think on that.”

She twisted her hands into her skirt.

“That’s all I have,” he said, sitting up and smiling. “Don’t keep your brothers waiting, now.”

She did not ask him about how abrupt that check up had been, or how he hadn’t even taken any of her vitals. Like a good girl, or at least, one wrapped up in thought, she stood, and she turned back to the door. Not even a goodbye. He couldn’t help but chuckle, turning back towards his desk. Now. Who was his next appointment?

The door opened a few moments later, and Reiji appeared. He stopped in the doorway for a moment. His lip curled.

“Ah,” Yuuri said with a smile. “I didn’t know you’d come.”

“I only came to ask you one final question.”

Reiji crossed the room, but he did not sit. He held up the half of the diary.

“What is the meaning of the charm written in here? The woman who’s looking for this half seems insistent that there is something in here.”

“It’s exactly what it is. A charm. A magic spell that will save your dear Reira, if only you complete it.”

Reiji’s brow furrowed. He gripped the back of the chair with his other hand.

“But what does it mean? It’s not truly magic.”

“The words aren’t important. It’s like... ‘open sesame.’” Yuuri flourished his hands as though conducting an invisible orchestra. “Obtain the full charm, and you’ll have the spell to change fates.”

“That’s ridiculous. The charm must be some form of code, something that alludes to a new drug combination that will cure Reira’s illness —”

“You are being stubborn, my dear,” Yuuri said.

Reiji went somewhat red, and he took a moment to breathe, fixing his glasses. He had to compose himself.

“You’re telling me it’s magic.”

“Indeed. It’s magic, and I’m a magician.”

“You’re a liar.”

Yuuri smiled.

“Are you willing to bet on that?”

Reiji flinched. His hand on the diary shook for a moment. He was nearing his breaking point.

Good.
“What are you planning for Shun?”

“That’s a second question, dear. You said you only had one.”

Reiji’s jaw clenched, and Yuuri smiled. So easy. Humans always were.

“The parents couldn’t realize the dream. I’ll have the children bring it to fruition.”

“And what is that dream?”

“To fix this rotten world, and put it back on the right track.”

Reiji looked frozen, like marble. He stared at Yuuri with a combination of wariness and disgust.

“You’ll force him to board the train of fate.”

“He’ll board of his own volition. Won’t you join us?”

Reiji actually let out a small snarl.

“I will not,” he said. “And I won’t let Shun get on it either.”

He turned, and he stormed off through the door. The room shook when he slammed it, and Yuuri turned back to his glowing screen.

“He was mad,” said the blue rabbit.

“He was really mad,” said the black rabbit.

They stood behind him, sipping on carrot juice boxes now with their human hands. Yuuri chuckled.

“Perhaps now he’ll be angry enough to burn the diary,” he said. “And finally get rid of the wretched thing.”

He studied the backs of his nails.

“I can’t touch it myself,” he said, shaking his head. “And I won’t be able to win this game with it in play. So I need Reiji to get rid of it for me.”

“How smart of you!” said the black rabbit.

“Amazing, doctor!” said the blue rabbit.

Yuuri chuckled.

“Electrifying, isn’t it?”

~ * ~ * ~

Reiji held the diary out over the fireplace.

The heat crackled over the back of his hand, warming him up to his face. He glared at the awful book. This terrible, stupid thing. He’d wasted time and resources retrieving it, defending it, and trying to get the other half. All to be told that it was some unscientific magic spell that would magically save Reira?

And Shun. Shun was destroying himself, and all because of this diary. No. Because of her. Because of that girl.

He held it farther out, willing himself to let go of the book. Put an end to it. Without it, Ruri couldn’t be saved.

His eye twitched. He caught sight of Reira, then, curled up on the couch with a blanket pulled over their shoulders, their hair tangled up in a curtain around their face. They slept soundly.

Reiji pulled the diary back, and held it to his chest. It still felt warm.

Not yet. He wouldn’t get rid of it yet. It might still be useful.

His hand tightened into the spine. But that girl — she was the real reason that Shun had never come home.
Maybe it was time to pay the Sakaki family a visit.

* * *

The doorbell rang. Ruri stirred, swallowing through her dry mouth. Had she fallen asleep? She sat up, rubbing at her eyes. Her face had been pressed into the photo album she’d had open on her pillow. Happy faces grinned and laughed up at her, her own, Shun’s, and Yuya’s. The day at the aquarium seemed so far away now, and she touched the picture her parents had taken of the three of them in front of a tank of jellyfish.

* * *

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We look so happy, she thought. She still felt hollow somehow. The words she’d not meant to share but had anyway with Dr. Yuuri ran through her head over and over. I don’t feel like I belong here. Like I’ve been pasted in.

The doorbell rang again, and she remembered why she had woken up.

“Coming!” she shouted, scrambling from her bed and nearly knocking Kii onto the floor. She ran to the fireman’s pole and slid down. Who was here, anyway? Shun and Yuya wouldn’t be back from school for a bit, and they wouldn’t ring the doorbell. Was there a package? Had they ordered something?

Ruri unlatched the door, and opened it up, peeking out. She immediately felt very small before the person on the doorstep. He was taller than her, about Shun’s height, with neat gray hair and red glasses. His cold purple eyes searched hers for a moment, and she felt as though she were being appraised.

“Is Shun here?” he said.

Ruri shrank back behind the door.

“Um, no,” she said. “He’ll be back in a bit, though, so...”

“I’ll wait inside, then,” the young man said. Ruri hopped back as he let himself in, too surprised by his presumption to tell him no. He took off his shoes and stepped up onto the landing. Silently, he handed her a box, and she blinked, accepting it. It appeared to be a box of...very expensive chocolates. Was this supposed to be a house gift for coming by? Blushing, Ruri set it down, and reluctantly led him into the living room.

He sat stiffly on the edge of the couch, his nose wrinkling a bit as though noting how badly it sagged. He might be rude, but Ruri wasn’t about to be a bad host — not to mention, she wanted an excuse to stay out of his cold line of sight — so she went into the kitchen and made some tea.

He was still sitting in the exact same position when she came back, setting a cup down in front of him.

“Here’s some tea, if you’d like,” she said. She sat down in the other armchair, pressing her hands into her lap and fidgeting. She noted, with some surprise, that there was another little hippo in the room. Kii was showing the black hippo a ball of yarn, and the black hippo was simply staring back at it.

The silence dragged out. It was so quiet that Ruri could hear the clock in the other room ticking. She tried to think. What was this about? Was this someone Shun knew from school? They seemed to be the same age. But then why wouldn’t he be in school right now? Was it someone from the coffee shop? Wouldn’t they just call him?

She squirmed a bit. It wasn’t...something to do with the gambling, was it? Ruri wasn’t supposed to know that Shun did it, but she’d seen his books left open in his room before. Had he borrowed money from this person? Judging by the brand of chocolates he’d brought, he seemed well off.

“If...if this is about money, um...if Shun borrowed anything from you, he’s really good about paying people back so...please be patient with him.”

The young man blinked, finally looking at her.

“What are you talking about?” he said.

Ruri wasn’t sure if she was relieved or more stressed than ever to find out that the gambling wasn’t the problem.

“I mean, Shun is a good person, so...I hope whatever’s wrong, you won’t hold it against him!”
He blinked at her again, as though considering her. He fixed his glasses.

“What makes you think that something is wrong?”

“You seem, um...angry about something.” Ruri said. “I know Shun can be a little abrasive sometimes, so...”

He studied her for an uncomfortably long moment. Then he looked away.

“I’m only here so that he can return something to me,” he said.

“Oh, is that it?” Ruri said, feeling relieved. “If it’s something he borrowed, maybe it’s around here somewhere. I can go look for it?”

“I doubt you would find it.”

Ruri deflated a bit. She really wanted this man to leave. She felt so uncomfortable, and she didn’t know how long it would be before her brothers got home. She tried to think. Who was this person, anyway, and what could he have lent to Shun? She suddenly blushed. This wasn’t a...boyfriend, was it? Shun had never seemed interested in girls or boys, though. Although, not that he’d ever spoken to her about something like that. Was that really the sort of thing that you talked to your little sister about?

“Did you...give my brother a present or something?” she said, trying to figure this out so she could get him out of the house as soon as she could.

“I’ve given him several, but he refuses all of them.”

This didn’t sound like a boyfriend after all. Maybe a...an admirer? Her head hurt trying to figure it out. Then an awful thought occurred to her. The fancy meat from last night — Shun didn’t make enough at the coffee shop to afford that, so...

“I’m so sorry,” Ruri said, flushing. “I think we might have eaten whatever you gave to Shun.”

He looked at her with surprise, then, staring at her. Then he snorted.

“You couldn’t have eaten what I gave him,” he said.

That was a relief. But Ruri was starting to get annoyed with all the cryptic stuff.

“Well, what did you give to him then?” she said, folding her arms.

He fixed his glasses again. He didn’t look at her, staring instead straight ahead.

“Love.”

Her face went hot. Oh my. She could hardly believe someone could say something like that with a straight face! Now she was really uncomfortable. Did her brother have a stalker? Had she just let a stalker in the house? She wrung her hands in her lap.

“Um...I don’t think I can help with that,” she said, trying to make it sound like a joke, laughing nervously. “There’s only so much a little sister can do!”

He looked sharply at her.

“Little sister? That’s what you think, is it?”

Ruri felt her blush get deeper.

“I mean, yes, I’m Shun’s little sister,” she said. “I-if you mistook me for a girlfriend or something...”

The man’s eyes narrowed, and she felt suddenly nervous, like she’d been cornered. Her heart started racing in her chest. What was with that look? Why was he looking at her like — — like he hated her?

He scoffed softly, shaking his head.

“How unacceptable,” he said. “That you would keep up this farce, even when there is no one to fool.”
“What are you talking about?”

Now she was panicking. Her hands clenched into the arms of her chair, her heart banging against her ribs.

“This is the reason he won’t come home,” he said. “Because of you. He’s abandoned the rest of us for you.”

Ruri didn’t know what was going on. There was a faint noise in the back of her head, like someone screaming at the end of a tunnel. She wondered if that was herself that was screaming.

“I can’t accept this — watching you all play house,” he said, and there was venom in his voice now, venom that made Ruri want to run and scream. “This pretend family that you’ve made — this family that isn’t even yours.”

Ruri couldn’t breathe. Her fingers curled into the arms of the chair.

“...leave,” she whispered. “I want you to leave.”

He looked sharply at her again, staring right at her. Then his face slackened a bit.

“You don’t remember, do you?”

“I want you to leave,” Ruri said again, louder this time. “I don’t know what you want but — I want you to go. Leave us alone.”

He stood, but he didn’t leave. He just looked down at her, with more curiosity than anger now. He reached into his pocket, and pulled out a small blue ball with a hippo face stamped onto it.

“This is a bullet of remembrance,” he said. “It will bring your memories back.”

What memories? She hadn’t forgotten anything!! She opened her mouth to tell him to leave again, but her words stuck in her throat as he withdrew a crossbow-looking weapon from his side, loading the blue ball into it. She choked, freezing up.

“This family is fake,” he said. “And I won’t have you steal from me any longer.”

The red dot shone out from the inside of the crossbow, and rested on her forehead. Ruri couldn’t move. She couldn’t breathe. She didn’t want —

“Ugh, geez! It wasn’t supposed to rain today. Ruri, did you bring the laundry in?”

Yuya’s voice clattered down the hallway, and both Ruri and the young man flinched.

“Ruri? You awake?” came Shun’s voice. Ruri couldn’t breathe enough to call out to them. She could only stare at the red sightline between her eyes.

From the corner of her vision, she saw Shun shuffling out of the hall, rubbing his hair off with a towel. He looked up, unconcerned — and why would he think there was something to be concerned about? Yuya came out beside him, smacking rain off his book bag. Both of them saw Ruri and the man at the same time.

“You!” Shun shouted.

“What are you doing??” Yuya yelled.

The young man grit his teeth. He whipped his eyes back to Ruri, and pulled the trigger. Ruri threw herself to the side of the chair. The bullet hit the back of the chair instead, and she flung herself the rest of the way onto the floor. She heard Shun swearing and scrambling over the floor, Yuya was yelling, another bullet hit the floor beside her hand and she scrambled to her feet.

She bolted for the back door, flinging it open and running into the rain. It was pouring outside, and she was immediately drenched. Her bangs plastered over her eyes and she ran. She heard another bullet whistle past her, and heard Shun shouting. When she looked over her shoulder, the young man with the weapon was in hot pursuit of her. She turned back forward, and ran.

Her bare feet slapped against the wet sidewalk, running as hard as she could. Two more bullets whizzed around her. What was going on?? Why was he doing this??

She whipped around a corner, and immediately realized her mistake. This was a dead end! But she couldn’t turn around, so she kept running. She ran until she came up against the wall,
pressing her hands against it and gasping for breath. The warehouse would have been unscaleable even without the rain, and the sides were too slippery for purchase. The two giant fans set into the side of the warehouse spun slowly — too far away for her to reach the grate.

She heard the slap of wet socks against the ground, and whipped around, pressing herself into the wall. The man advanced on her, weapon upraised.

“I will restore your memories,” he said.

She couldn’t hear anything anymore. Nothing but the rain and the soft whup, whup, whup of the fans over her head. Her heart screamed. She couldn’t breathe.

The man’s finger pressed down on the trigger.

At the same time, Shun appeared, and kicked him in the ankles. Ruri screamed and threw herself to the side, collapsing as she dodged. The bullet hit wild, missing her, and both she and the young man went collapsing to the rainy ground. Ruri could hear Shun shouting, but her ears trained in on the sound of the fan for some reason. It was familiar. Had she been struck by the bullet of remembrance after all?

Her eyes closed slowly. The fan seemed to be lulling her to sleep. To somewhere else. Somewhere dark, and cold...she remembered the cold. Remembered how it still felt warm where she’d wrapped the scarf around her neck.

Ah. The scarf. She remembered the scarf.

She remembered other things. The gray, shapeless lumps of children all around her. The big fans, spinning slowly and coldly. She remembered the sign posted on the wall.

The sign read Child Broiler.

Ruri opens her eyes. This is a memory, she thinks. A dream memory. There are children all around her, faceless, gray lumps that seem to be growing out of the cold metal floor.

“Where am I?” she whispers.

“Don’t you know?”

“You’re in the Child Broiler.”

“It’s where the unwanted children are sent.”

She hears the sound of blades humming, like a giant paper shredder in the distance. Ah, she thinks. She remembers now. She was unwanted. She was left behind.

“We’ll be ground into dust.”

“We’ll become invisible.”

“Because we’re unneeded.”

Her small hands reach up to the scarf tucked tightly around her. It still feels warm. She smiles.

“Well,” she says, to herself. “I guess I can take this with me, at least.”

She’s on a conveyor belt. There are shapeless children falling into the blades below her, shattering into glass. She clasps her hands together in her lap and closes her eyes. Becoming invisible doesn’t seem so bad. She had some happiness. The scarf is proof of that. It’s better for her to disappear now.

“Wait!!”

Her eyes fly open. She stands up, turning around to find the voice.

“Hello?” she calls.

“Wait! Ruri! Don’t go!”

“Who is it? You should leave me. I’m unwanted.”

A shape, about her size and age, appears beside her. They’re in shadow, and she can’t quite see them.
“No, you’re not! Come home!” the shadow calls.

“Come...home? Where is that?”

“Come home with me! Become a part of my family!”

She shakes her head, pressing her mouth inside her scarf.

“But that’s impossible.”

The shadow shakes their head too.

“No it’s not. Because we have magic!”

They pull something from behind their back. It’s an apple. They hold it out to her.

“Share the fruit of fate with me,” they say. “Then, we’ll be a family. We’ll go home together.”

Ruri blinks back tears. She rubs away at them, brushing them away. All a sudden, she can’t stop smiling, or crying. Someone wants her. Someone in this world wants her. She reaches out, and cups his hand and the apple with both of her hands.

“Thank you for choosing me,” she whispers.

The light changes. The shadow starts to come into view.

Ah, Ruri thinks. *I remember now. The one who saved me...my soulmate is...*

The light illuminates his round, cheerful face, lighting up his warm red eyes, and his bouncy head of red and green hair.

*It was Yuya.*

*Yuya is my soulmate.*
Loved

~ * * ~ F L A S H B A C K ~ * * ~

Apartment Complex

One Day Before the Subway Attack

“This world is wrong.”

Her voice is strong, vibrating against the walls. The faceless people who watch and wait listen intently.

“Winners and losers. Superior and inferior. The world is made of boxes, and those who shove people inside them.”

The voice seems to echo, even outside into the cold gray apartment complex outside. Even though the doors are closed, and the people are huddled together inside a single dark apartment.

“Who makes those decisions? Who decides who is chosen and who is not? Who decides who gains and who loses? Only those who think only of how to acquire more and more, and think nothing of how to give to others!”

Fifty pairs of shoes are stacked in piles in the entryway. The dust of the crumbling apartment curls down among them in pillars of light.

“That’s how petty and vicious this world is. It’s run by those who will amount to nothing. This world is already stagnant. It is already a world that has turned to ice.”

The faceless gray lumps of people stand shoulder to shoulder, pressed together in the same tiny apartment, listening to the burning words.

“But we’re fortunate — we already hold the burning torches of ambition. It is a sacred flame — and with it, we will cleanse this world. We will reclaim a world where people are not divided by the chosen and the unchosen!”

The woman turns to face her rapt crowd, green eyes cutting through the dark apartment, blond hair held back severely. Sakaki Yoko folds her arms against her chest, standing before the wall of plans.

“Tomorrow, we will burn down the world that chains us,” she says. “This is our survival strategy.”

~ * * ~ E N D  F L A S H B A C K  ~ * * ~
The rain poured down over his face, plastering his hair into his eyes. Behind him, Shun cradled Ruri, whispering her name over and over again. Yuya didn’t take his eyes off of the man, though, with the cold violet eyes and the raindrops covering his glasses.


The man only stared at him. Rain slicked his hair down over his eyes. His lips tightened.

“You’re pretend family was always destined to fall apart,” he said.

Yuya bristled. Was he crying, or was that the rain? He took a step forward, towards the young man.

“We’re not pretend!” he screamed into the rain. “We’re a real family!”

The young man stared at him. The rain continued to flood the street beneath them, filling Yuya’s shoes with water. Then the man looked down, picked up his fallen weapon. He made no attempt to aim it. He didn’t even look at Yuya anymore, staring off into the distance.

“I think you’re the only who believes that anymore,” he said.

Yuya felt the rain soaking down into his chest, and turning him into nothing more than a hunk of ice.

But by the time he had anything else to say, the young man was gone.

“Yu...ya...”

Ruri’s voice stirred Yuya out of the ice, and it shattered off of him as he spun and ran to her, collapsing into the puddles next to Shun and Ruri.

“Ruri!” he cried. “Ruri! You’re awake!”

Ruri’s eyes were clouded, but she looked right at him.

“Yuya,” she whispered. “Yu...ya...”

Yuya grabbed her hand and held it, while Shun propped her up. He was sure it was tears that blurred his vision, now, and not the rain.


“Yuya,” Shun whispered. “It’s okay. She’s all right. I’ll always protect this family.”

Yuya shook his head, pressing Ruri’s hand to his forehead and crying.

“I’m sorry, Ruri,” he cried. “This is all my fault.”

~ * ~ *

There was one thing that the Sakaki family had become unfortunately quite good at, Ruri thought: pretending that yesterday never happened.

So Ruri woke up early. She tiptoed past her brothers, sleeping in chairs beside her bed as they hadn’t wanted her to be alone after the day before. She walked down the hall and slid down the fireman’s pole. She put on her apron, and she began making breakfast.

Kii joined her. The little hippo passed her eggs and she cracked them into the pan.

Yuya slid down the pole a few moments later, while she was rolling the omelettes. She could hear him standing behind her, just outside the kitchen, watching her. She wondered how much he understood about yesterday. He wondered if he’d guessed how much she’d remembered.

She wondered if they would talk about it.

“Good morning, Yuya-nii,” she said, turning over her shoulder and smiling. “Do you want anything in your omelettes?”

Yuya’s face looked pale for just a moment. For just a moment, the topic of yesterday hovered in the air. Who would be the first to acknowledge it? The first to say aloud that what had happened had really happened?
But then he smiled. He walked to the counter and got his own apron, tying it on.

“Nothing special,” he said. “I’ll make the miso.”

The Sakaki family was very, very good at pretending yesterday had never happened.

Shun joined them a half hour later, yawning. He threw pickles into a baggie and rolled them around in the marinade. They set the table silently, trying not to trip over the hippos, and then they were at the table again, poking at the eggs.

“How are the omelettes?” she asked.

“They’re delicious,” Shun said, grinning. “You’ve gotten better than Yuya.”

“I practiced mental visualization while I was in the hospital,” Ruri giggled.

“That can improve your cooking skills?” said Yuya.

“You’re just jealous cause Ruri’s gotten better than you,” said Shun.

“I am not jealous!”

Ruri giggled. It was another morning. The same kind of morning as always. There was something comforting about it.

But there was also something wrong about it, as well.

Someone say something, part of her thought. Someone remind us that yesterday happened.

But she didn’t want to break the spell. She picked up the soup, and took a sip. It was warm, and it spread through her all at once, making her sigh with delight.

“Everything okay?” Yuya asked.

Ruri held the steaming bowl to her lips, smiling as she let the heat pour over her face.

“It’s so good,” she said. “It tastes just like mom’s.”

The table’s temperature dropped a degree. When she looked up over the lip of her bowl, Yuya was staring blankly at the plate in front of him, his usual happy face blank and stony.

“Yuya?” Ruri whispered, her throat tight.

“Don’t talk about them,” Yuya said. “We’re the only members of the Sakaki family.”

His voice was so sharp, so cold. So not like how Yuya should be. Ruri felt ice in her heart, a cold that the heat of the soup could not banish. She put the bowl down and stared at the food.

Yesterday was ignored. But it was never far away.

~ * ~ * ~

“Electrifying, isn’t it?”

Ruri did not look up from the floor. Her face was still and unaffected. Adorable. She was trying so hard to look like nothing mattered.

Yuuri leaned his elbow on the table beside him, and his head on his hand. He considered her for a few beats.

“Now then. Shall we talk about love?”

Ruri blinked. She looked up at him, curious. He wondered how much of Ruri was looking at him, and how much of her was in that gaze. He closed his eyes, smiling as he spoke.

“When you are chased, you flee. Upon fleeing, you’re chased.”

“What does that have to do with love?” Ruri asked.

“Things go well for a while until you realize, ‘ah, no. They’ve gotten away from me.’”

He threw his arms in the air in a melodramatic pose, before leaning forward with both elbows on
his knees, head in his hands.

“So what would you do, Ruri-chan?”

Ruri stared at him. He was supposed to be her doctor, not her therapist. But people always opened up to him eventually. Ruri twisted her fingers together on her lap. Her hippo was busy reading books at her feet.

“I wouldn’t chase someone who ran,” Ruri said.

“Oh? Why not?”

“I’d get tired.”

How cute. Yuuri mmmed to himself.

“Oh, I suppose people like that exist too,” he said. “So then, you’d only ever be the one that flees?”

Ruri’s hands twisted in her lap. She bit her lip.

“Why do I have to choose one or the other?” she said. “What if I choose to stand still?”

Yuuri smiled. Adorable.

“You’re unseen, then. The chasers only chase that which moves. And those that flee will always run away from you.”

Ruri stared at him, such confusion in her magenta eyes. Yuuri held that gaze. Wondering if he’d catch even the barest glimpse of the other.

“Such love would come to nothing,” he said.

“But if one chases, and one flees, they never catch each other,” Ruri said. “Wouldn’t that love amount to nothing, too?”

“Perhaps. Does that trouble you?”

Ruri looked away, her hair sliding over her shoulder. She licked her chapped lips.

“No,” she said. “It doesn’t. I won’t fall in love.”

“Oh~?”

“If one chases, and the other flees, then that means you’d never reach each other. It’s a foolish, endless race.”

“You’ve very clever, Ruri-chan. The fleer would never bestow fruit on the pursuer. The game would end too easily then.”

Ruri stared at her knees. Her hands tightened.

“That’s too cruel,” she said.

He smiled, leaning back in his chair and folding his hands. The glow of the screens lit them from the side, sending the room into an eerie half darkness. His rabbits snuffled from their basket.

“You want the whole fruit, and not just the kiss, don’t you?” he said.

Ruri didn’t look at him. She tossed her hair back over her shoulder.

“Kisses aren’t forever. They disappear.”

He stood. He closed the space between them. She looked up at him, but she did not betray her surprise as he put his hands on the arms of her chair, leaning down over her. She just kept talking.

“If there isn’t any fruit and all I get are kisses, I’d become empty,” she said.

“Is there something wrong with being empty?”

His face lowered inches from hers. She didn’t pull away. He wondered which of them he was speaking to after all. This Ruri stared at him without any confusion at his behavior.
“Empty things are thrown away,” Ruri said.

“Is there no amount of kisses that would make up for being thrown out?”

“That would be no good. My heart would turn to ice, and I’d be unable to breathe.”

It was impossible to tell in this lighting what color her eyes were truly, even this close up. But the hat was nowhere to be seen.

“Then why not be kissed repeatedly, right up until the moment you become ice?”

Ruri didn’t drop his gaze.

“That would be cruel.”

Yuuri held her gaze for a very long time. Waiting to see if something would crack. It did not.

He stepped back, and sat back down in his chair.

“Oh,” he said. “But isn’t it more fun to kiss and be turned to ice, rather than to do nothing and become ice anyway?”

Ruri looked down, and her bangs shaded her eyes, throwing her face into darkness. Her hands tightened in her lap.

“What should I do, then?” she said, her voice thick and cracking.

He stroked his rabbits ears as they sat in his lap.

“Leave it up to your emotions, I suppose,” he said. “Perhaps kisses bear their own fruit.”

~ * ~ * ~

The train clicked down the tracks. Yuzu pressed her knees into her legs. She peeked at Yuya.

Yuya’s bangs covered his eyes. She wasn’t sure if he was staring at the ground, at his knees, or looking at nothing at all. She looked away, trying to focus on something else other than the silence. She looked up at the monitors as an advertisement ended, and the mascots of the train, Rin and Selena of Double H, appeared in their chibi-fied forms. Today’s slogan: One man’s trash is another man’s treasure, the screen read.

She looked at Yuya again, wishing, hoping, praying that he would say something.

“I should have taken the punishment.”

Yuzu startled up to look at Yuya. He still wasn’t looking at her, eyes on the ground. His hands tightened in his lap.

“What are you talking about?” she said.

“If the Sakaki family had to be punished, I should have taken it alone,” Yuya said. “It’s my crime to bear. Not Shun’s or Ruri’s.”

“Yuya, no,” Yuzu said, reaching for his hand. “This isn’t your fault.”

His hand moved away from hers, as he reached up to pull his goggles over his eyes.

“I won’t forgive my parents,” he said. “They took so many lives. They killed your sister.”

“But that wasn’t your crime,” Yuzu said. “You didn’t do anything!”

“It is my crime!” Yuya cried. His shoulders shook. He was clearly crying, but the tears were in his goggles. “It’s my crime, and not theirs. It’s not fair. Why won’t they punish me, if someone needs to be punished?”

Yuzu’s hand trembled in the air, over Yuya’s shoulder. Unsure if she should touch him. Her heart trembled in her chest, and she could feel tears bubbling in her eyes. This was too much. This was too cruel.

“Yuya,” she whispered, her voice thick and choked.

“It’s my fault,” Yuya said. “I’m the one...who made Ruri a Sakaki.”
Yuzu's fingers twitched with surprise.

“What do you mean?” she said.

Yuya hugged himself, folding over his knees.

“Ruri was adopted,” he mumbled. “And I was the one who chose her to become a part of this family.”

He pressed his head into his knees and cried.

“It’s my fault,” he said. “Ruri is being punished because of me. Because...because I’m the one that chose her.”

Yuzu's hand stayed in the air, over a shoulder that was no longer there to touch. The train moved on, without pausing, as Yuya continued to cry.
Chosen

Chapter Notes

Art provided by dark-angel-of-muses!! please check out her work and her commissions!

~ * ~ * ~ F L A S H B A C K ~ * ~ * ~

Shun

Kiga Group Complex

The words trickle past Shun’s ears without sticking. He catches a word here or there from the woman’s powerful voice. The room is full of adults, all in orange jackets with a hippo’s face on them.

“That day, we were only able to purify part of the world with our holy flame. We have changed our name, to throw off those who would try to stop us. Our next mission —”

Shun picks at the sleeve of his too big orange jacket. Beside him, Reiji stands at the wall, straight backed and attentive. Reira clings to him, and Reiji has his hands lightly on top of their shoulders, but his eyes are fixated on the woman speaking. They’re the only children here, but Reiji listens closely as though he’s already an adult.

Shun can’t help but let his eyes wander to the window. Outside, the apartment complex is gray and cold, the sky far away and clouded. He blinks. Outside the window, there’s another child.

He is small, probably about his and Reiji’s age, but a little smaller than they are. A big striped scarf is pulled around his face. He’s playing with an apple. He drags it across the railing overlooking the rest of the complex, making it bounce up and down like a galloping horse. He turns and spins with it a few times, his eyes bright and cheerful. His red and green hair flops with his movements, and he’s in the same too-big orange jacket as theirs.

“Niisan?”
Shun looks back to Reiji, who’s watching him with curious eyes.

“Niisan, what are you looking at?” he asks.

Shun’s eyes flick back to the window, and Reiji’s eyes follow. He frowned.

“What he is doing out there?” Reiji asks. “He should be listening to the speech. The next one is even more important; it’s about our mother.”

Shun spins an apple between his hands, watching the boy. The boy finally moves out of sight, out of the window’s view. The apple is very cold in Shun’s hands.

“Dunno,” he says. “I guess he just didn’t feel like listening.”

~ * ~ * ~

Yuya

Kiga Group Complex

Yuya hums a tune he makes up as he goes along. He slides the apple along on the railing beside him, following it around the outside of the space beneath, that looks down all the way to the bottom of the complex.

Today, the apple is a carriage, he decides. It’s carrying a very important princess to the next kingdom.

He hums the princess’s entourage song as he continues down the railing. Mama said he could come out and play during the meeting, but not to go too far. That means to stay on the same floor as their apartment. He can do that. The next kingdom isn’t very far for the princess, anyway.

Something flickers. He looks down.

Two floors down, he sees someone move. He leans over the railing, staring. Did he imagine it?

A moment later, he sees the flicker again. It’s a girl, he thinks. A girl with long, obsidian violet hair, running back into the stairwell. Yuya leans against the railing, sliding along it as he tries to get a better view. Who could that be? He thought he knew all the children in the Kiga Group, and there weren’t very many.

He clutches his apple as he turns and runs down the railing, making his way to the stairwell entrance on his floor. It’s very dark in here. Almost all of the lights are out, and only one or two bulbs are still flickering, clinging to life.

He carefully takes each step one at a time, one hand on the railing as he peers down. He climbs down two flights before he sees her.

She sits in a crouch, hugging her knees. She stares blankly through the bars of the railing. Her head lolls to the side. Her hair is so long, almost as long as she is, and it drags on the ground, matted and dirty.

Yuya approaches quietly. She doesn’t lift her head.

“Hey,” he calls gently.

Her eyes flicker towards him. She looks so gray, like she’s going to melt into the grayness of the floor and walls. Yuya holds his apple in both hands.

“Do you want to play with me?” he asks.

The girl stares at him for a while. She doesn’t blink. Yuya doesn’t either. Somehow, he feels like if he blinks, she’ll disappear, like a ghost.

Her head slumps back onto her knees, going back to staring through the railings.

“I can’t,” she says. “I’m waiting.”

Yuya steps off of the last stair, onto the same landing as her.

“Waiting for what?”
“For mama to come back.”

The silence drags out between them. Yuya’s scarf presses into his mouth.

Slowly, as though she might flee if he makes a sudden move, he sits down next to her. He unwraps part of his scarf, and carefully lays it across her shoulders, so that it can cover them both. She glances at him with surprise, and he smiles. He holds out the apple.

“I’ll wait with you, then,” he says. “We can share this, if you want.”

She stares at him for a long moment.

“Mama says not to take things from strangers.”

Yuya considers this. His mother and father say things like that too.

“Well, I’m Yuya,” he says. “Sakaki Yuya. What’s your name? Then we won’t be strangers.”

The girl only stares at him. He waits, and then sets the apple on the floor between them. He puts his hands into his lap and looks down into the empty stairwell, down the endless spiral of stairs.

“Hey,” he says. “Do you know the story of the first man and woman on earth?”

She hugs her knees a little tighter.

“I don’t.”

“They ate the fruit of fate together,” he says. “And...”

“I need to go,” the girl says.

She stands up, and the scarf falls from her shoulders and onto the floor. She is gone before Yuya can look up from the apple, and he hears her feet pattering away. The apple sits alone in the dim, flickering light, untouched.

It’s cold, he thinks. It’s too cold for someone to be outside all alone.

~ * ~ * ~

Yuya
Stairwell

“Hello?”

She’s not at the stairwell today. Yuya hesitates. The two tiny pints of milk are cool against his chest, and it’s too chilly to hold them for long. He looks around, peeking for some sign of the girl. But she’s not there. Maybe yesterday was a fluke. Maybe she doesn’t usually wait here.

Does he have to search the whole apartment?

He hops down the stairs, humming a song to himself as he goes. There’s a bunch of new signs posted up on all the walls today. Jobs Wanted, Reminder no Pets are Allowed in the Apartments, Cleaning Services Available.

He reaches the bottom of the stairs. He’s never been this far down before, and the parking garage is very dark.

“Hello?” he calls again. “Are you still here?”

The tiniest sound makes his ears twitch. Was that a cry? No, it was too quiet. It sounded like...

Meow.

It’s coming from behind the dumpsters. Milk still in his arms, Yuya hurries around them. He’s somehow not surprised to see the familiar dark purple hair and tiny body crouched over a small box.

She doesn’t jump when he approaches, leaning over to see inside. Inside the box is the tiniest kitten he’s ever seen — small and covered in brown and black spots, with the prettiest blue eyes.

“She’s so pretty!” Yuya gasps. “Is she yours?”
The girl shakes her head. The kitten makes another soft, pitiful meow. It brings tears to Yuya’s eyes.

“Someone abandoned it,” the girl says, her voice somehow sounding far away. “It wasn’t chosen. It will probably die.”

Yuya’s heart leaps into his chest.

“That’s not true!” he says. “Oh — look, I have milk! We can—”

“Don’t.”

Her voice is so tight, so harsh, that he flinches. But she’s not even looking at him. She’s staring at the kitten. Something in her eyes looks so, so far away, like there’s not even anyone in her body.

“You can’t take care of it, can you?” she says.

Yuya bites his lip. There’s no pets allowed in the apartment. He reluctantly shakes his head. The girl stares down at it.

“It wasn’t chosen,” she says again. “To not be chosen is to die.”

Yuya can’t take his eyes away from her. She looks so hollow. He feels that she’s not talking about the cat. He squares his shoulders and hugs the milk against his chest. Then he puts both pints into the box and starts to pick it up.

The girl’s eyes widened.

“What are you doing?” she says.

“Taking care of the kitten.” Yuya says with determination. The kitten meows and shifts as he picks up the box. “We can take care of it in the bottom of the stairwell. Just until we can find someone who can take it. No one will find it there.”

The girl stares at him with wide eyes. For the first time, he sees life in those eyes, as though she’s suddenly returned to her own body.

“You don’t have to help,” he says.

But she stands up and dusts off her knees. And without a word, she follows him back to the stairwell.

They set the cat up in a box underneath the last stairwell. Yuya finds some old blankets in a trash can and knocks them out as best he can, filling up the bottom of the box and tucking it in the corners so that the kitten has a soft place to sleep. Then he opens up the milk and finds an old container to pour it in.

The girl watches the kitten lap up the milk with wide, curious eyes. She still looks alive, as though color’s flooded back into her. She can’t stop watching the kitten, as it stretches and yawns, and curls back up in its box. Yuya pets it. It’s the softest thing he’s ever felt.

“You want to pet her?” Yuya asks.

The girl’s hand reaches slowly into the box. It hovers over the sleeping cat for a long, drawn out moment. And then, tentatively, she lays her hand onto the cat. She inhales with surprise.

“She’s really soft, huh?” he says.

She looks so alive now. She smiles — it’s a small one, but it’s a smile nonetheless.

“She is,” she says softly. “She’s very soft.”

~ * ~ * ~

They take turns watching the cat. Well, Yuya says they take turns, but he’s pretty sure the girl has nowhere else to go. She’s always there every time that Yuya comes with some more milk, or his sandwich from lunch to share.

He can tell she loves the cat. She snuggles up with it, pets it, hums lullabies for it. She found a blue ribbon left behind and tied it around the cat’s neck like a pretty collar. She’s the one who tries to teach it how to only do its business on the newspaper they laid in the corner, and she
always watches with such huge, wondering eyes every time she watches it eat.

They lay together on a blanket Yuya brought from home. His scarf is lying across the both of them. The cat is on her chest, and she strokes it gently, humming another song. He turns his head over on the blanket to look at her. She looks more colorful now, he thinks. More real, and more alive. It’s been a few days since they found the cat.

“We should give her a name,” he says.

The girl strokes the cat.

“She’s warm,” she whispers. “And pretty. Like a gemstone in the sun.”

Yuya watches her. He feels suddenly like he needs to memorize this moment, to remember the details of her soft, gentle smile and her pretty gem-like eyes.

“What’s your name?” he asks.

She strokes the cat, still smiling down at it on her chest.

“Ruri,” she says. “Like ‘lapis lazuli.’”

“Ah!” Yuya says with a smile. “What a pretty name!”

He leans his head back thinking. Then he sits upright, the scarf sliding down to his waist.

“What if we give her a pretty name like yours?” he says. Then he blushes. “I mean...maybe.”

“Sapphire.”

He glances down at her. Ruri continues to stroke the cat, and she looks so, so soft and gentle.

“Sapphire,” Yuya repeats. “Like her eyes, right?”

Ruri nods. He smiles. She has such a sweet smile, and it makes him happy to see.

“Sapphire!” he says. “What a great name!”

He leans over to stroke Sapphire’s head.

“Do you hear that? Your name is Sapphire!”

The cat yawns. Then it curls up under Yuya’s hand, and snuggles into Ruri’s chest, and falls asleep.

~ * ~ * ~

The box is gone.

He and Ruri stand beside each other and stare down at the space where it had been. Hanging on the wall beside them is a sign with red letters reading No Pets Allowed in the Complex!!

“Where did they take her?” Yuya asks, his voice trembling.

Ruri stares down at the space. She looks gray and empty again. All of the color she’d regained, all of the life, it was all gone.

Behind them, in the parking garage, Yuya hears an awful sound. The rumble of a garbage truck echoes in the garage. His heart leaps into his throat. Without thinking, he turns and runs. He bolts out into the garage, staggering around the dumpsters. He’s not sure if Ruri’s followed him or not, but he just has to go. He has to run, as fast as he can — Sapphire. Sapphire!!

The dumpsters are empty. All of the piled garbage bags around them are gone, too. He runs into the garage just in time to see the garbage truck pulling out into the snowy morning. The light cascades into the back of the truck.

“Wait!” he screams. “Wait!”

No one can hear him. He runs out into the cold and snow. The freezing air stabs into his lungs, the ground slips under his feet, but he still runs. He runs and runs and runs, he keeps running
even after the garbage truck is long gone from sight and he knows he’ll never catch it.


He can’t breathe anymore. It’s too cold. He stumbles to a stop as the snow begins to fall. The tears are frozen to his face and he tries to wipe them away, but it hurts to touch.

The walk back takes too long. He can barely stumble along, and he’s in no hurry to return. He can only feel a biting, sick emptiness eating away at him from the inside. He can barely even see where he’s going for the tears. It’s a miracle he makes his way back, the snow covering up his footprints.

Ruri is standing in the dark just inside the garage when Yuya comes back. She stares at him without any expression. He’s sure she can see the truth on his face, but he...he can’t say it.

“Ruri,” he gasps. He rubs at his eyes, afraid he’ll start crying again. “Ruri, I...”

“It’s all right.”

Ruri’s voice is far away again. When he looks at her, he sees the emptiness in her eyes. She’s left her body once again, leaving behind only a colorless, gray shell.

“It wasn’t chosen,” she says. “To not be chosen is the same as death.”

“But...but we chose it,” Yuya says, gasping around his tears.

Ruri’s smile is so cold, and so empty. It’s like a dagger in his heart. She doesn’t respond.

~ * ~ * ~

Yuya only remembers that he forgot his scarf long after he’s gone home and cried himself to sleep. It takes massive effort to make it down the stairs, his legs feeling wooden and heavy.

When he returns to the place where they last saw Sapphire, Ruri is nowhere to be seen. Neither is his scarf.

There is, however, a note.

Yuya’s hands tremble as he picks up the paper, and slowly unfolds it. Awkward letters written in crayon stare back at him.

*Goodbye, Yuya*, it reads. *I’m going to the child broiler.*

Yuya runs up the stairs two at a time. The air is harsh and cold in his lungs by the time he makes it to his door again, stumbling through and tripping over his father’s shoes.

“Mama?” he tries to yell, but his voice is too thin. He tries again, louder. “Mama! Dad!!”

His mother responds first. She appears from the kitchen, her eyes wide with surprise. She quickly walks over to him, cupping his cheeks in her hands and tutting at how red and cold they are.

“Yuya, Yuya, what’s wrong?” she says. “You’re so cold. Did you forget your scarf?”

Yuya’s fist crumples the note in his hands, panic rushing through him.

“Mama,” he gasps. “What’s the child broiler?”

His mother’s eyes widen. For a moment, her hands slip from his face. Then she grabs hold of him, squeezing him in a warm, furious hug, crushing his face against her.

“Oh, Yuya,” she says. “Where did you hear about that?”

“Please,” Yuya gasps. “Mama! What is it? Where is it?”

His mother strokes his hair, but he struggles, trying to wriggle free of her grip. She needs to answer him! He needs to know where Ruri’s gone, and why!

His mother finally releases him, holding him by the shoulders. She searches his eyes with that unyielding gaze of hers. He doesn’t drop it. He needs her to tell him. She needs to tell him the truth.

“The child broiler is...a terrible place,” his mother says slowly. “It’s a place where unwanted
children are sent.”

Yuya’s heart screams in his chest.

“And what happens to them?” he gasps.

His mother’s eyes are so terribly, awfully sad. It makes him want to scream.

“They’re made invisible,” she says.

“But what does that mean?” Yuya says, grabbing his mother’s shirt, begging her to answer. She looks so hesitant. She chews on her lip, choosing her words carefully.

“They become nothing,” she says.

Yuya feels his eyes widening, tears blurring his view of his mother.

“You mean...they die?”

His mother’s silence is enough to confirm his worst fears. A scream coils in his chest, but it does not release.

“It’s the failing of our society, Yuya. That there are so many children who are made invisible, because no one will choose them.”

“Then why don’t we choose them?” Yuya cries, his voice rising to a shriek.

His mother squeezes his shoulders, looking so sad. But sad won’t save Ruri! Sad won’t stop Ruri from becoming invisible!

“There’s just too many, Yuya,” she says quietly. “This is a world of ice. There’s nothing we can do until we break it back down. All we can do is keep working, to change this world. So that someday, the child broiler will no longer exist.”

“That’s not enough!” Yuya shrieks. “By then, Ruri will already be — !”

He throws his mother’s arms from his shoulders. The note still crumpled in his hands, he bolts back out the door. His mother shouts after him, but Yuya doesn’t listen. He runs. He just runs.

Dear Yuya. Goodbye. I’m going to the child broiler. Thank you for everything.

He runs like he’s never run before, not even while he was chasing Sapphire. He runs down the stairs, two at a time, almost falling off the bottom. The note is still crumpled in his hand.

You know, the first time you called out to me, I was so happy. Since then, you were the one I always waited for.

He stumbles down to the bottom of the stairs. His lungs are screaming, but he doesn’t dare stop.

He runs through the dark parking garage, tripping over left behind trash.

Mama never came home. But you always showed up, Yuya. So I was never lonely.

He isn’t even sure where he’s running. He doesn’t even know where the child broiler is. But he runs out into the dark, snowy evening, into the flurrying snow, the icy wind that cuts through his too thin sweatshirt, and he runs.

For the first time, waiting for someone didn’t hurt. It was nice. You, me, and Sapphire...we were like a family. It was fun, Yuya.

The houses blur past him. Street lamps flicker on over him as he plows through the dusting of snow, trying not to slip. His lungs burn like fire from the icy cold of the air he gasps for.

That’s why I’m taking this scarf. So that no matter what happens, I won’t forget. Meeting you was so precious to me.

Something in his chest seems to be tugging on him. He doesn’t know if he’s going the right way, but he presses on anyway. The note, he thinks. The last thing she left for him will lead him to her. He’ll run into the city, the downtown that his mother and father speak of with such distaste, that has to be the place where such an awful thing as the child broiler is!

So I’m not afraid anymore. Thank you, Yuya. Thank you for everything.
The trip is a blur. He doesn’t know how he arrives, or how he makes it there, or if any of this is real. Icy cold tries to stop in his tracks, to urge him to simply stop and curl up, but he can’t. He can’t and he won’t.

And then he’s standing in front of a huge, broken down panel in a wall, and he can hear the sound of massive fans spinning in place, and deep inside the hole in the wall, he sees the faceless gray lumps of children on the floor.

“Ruri!” he screams.

Even if I’m made invisible, no one can take away that treasure.

He doesn’t see her. Where is she? His lungs scream, and getting his legs to start moving again is pain. But he stumbles inside anyway, running along the dais overlooking the room. A faceless man drives a cart hanging from the ceiling over the space, speaking into a megaphone. Yuya doesn’t listen. He just searches the crowd of children for some sign of Ruri, for some place he can climb down to look for her.

He hears the terrifying whine of a thousand blades, like a gigantic paper shredder, humming at the bottom of a long line of conveyor belts. Children sit on the belts, letting them drag them along towards the blades, to shatter them into glass.

“Ruri!” he screams again. “Ruri, where are you? Answer me!”

I actually did know that story about the first man and woman on earth. They were punished for sharing the fruit. Life is kind of a punishment, isn’t it?

He manages to look up over his arms crossed over his face. Ahead of him, sprawled half on the conveyor belt — Ruri!

“Ruri!”

She’s unconscious. He struggles to reach her, grabbing her in his arms, dragging her against him. She’s still wearing his scarf, he thinks through the tears.

But even if it was a sin, I wanted to be together with you, Yuya. That’s why...that’s why I wanted to be chosen.

Yuya tilts Ruri up towards him. She looks peaceful, asleep. He brushes her bangs from her face, his tears sprinkling her cheeks.

“Ruri,” he gasps. “Ruri...wake up. I’m here.”

Her eyes squeeze. Her eyelashes flutter. Slowly, her eyes crack open. A smile bursts over Yuya’s face, his eyes blurring with tears. For a moment, she only blinks at him.

Then her lips begin to tremble. Her face screws up as tears bubble to her eyes.

“Yuya,” she gasps. “You...”

He smiles through his tears, still holding her up. He takes her hand in his.

“Let’s eat the fruit of fate together,” he whispers.

Ruri begins to cry, big fat tears rolling down her cheeks. She grabs hold of his hand as though she’ll never let go.

“Thank you,” she gasps. “Thank you, for choosing me.”
The train trundled along, voices chattering against the walls of the car. Yuzu flicked through her phone, but she wasn’t actually seeing anything on the screen. Instead, her mind felt like it was on another train track entirely: one where she was still listening to Yuya’s broken voice, as he crumpled over himself and sobbed about how it was his fault that Ruri was suffering.

Her fingers tightened on her phone. She hadn’t even been able to say anything. It wasn’t his fault, and yet...he was destroying himself over it. Their whole family was. And all she could think, over and over, were the awful words she now remembered all so clearly that she herself had once said.

“You’re faking, too, I can tell—you, and Shun, and Ruri, all pretending to be a happy little family and you’re just fake, I can tell, you’re trying to hold together something that’s not even real—”

Yuzu pressed the phone to her forehead, fighting back tears.

“I didn’t mean it,” she whispered. “You aren’t pretend. You aren’t a fake family.”

She sensed the man step in front of her before she caught the flicker of his cheap suit out of the corner of her eye. She blinked, looking up. Immediately, she was on guard. He had an unpleasant sort of face, and the only thing fancy about him was a too-fancy watch that was probably a knock off. His sallow face was a little hollow cheeked, or maybe his cheeks were just extra sharp, and his blond hair was slicked back from his hairline in a manner that made her think he was trying to look more important than he was.

“Can I help you?” she said, quickly flicking her eyes around to see if there was anyone she could appeal to for help if he started to harass her.

“Hiragi Yuzu, aren’t you?”

He knew her name?? And he had an unpleasant voice to match his unpleasant face.

“What do you want?” she said.

He smiled, and handed her a business card. Cautiously, she looked at it without taking it. Jean-Michel Roger, the Weekly Truth.

“You’re from a tabloid?” she said suspiciously, glancing up at him.

He smiled placatingly, putting the business card back in his pocket when it seemed clear she wasn’t going to take it from him.

“We’re gathering interviews from family members of the victims of the accident in ninety-five,” he said. “I hoped you might be interested in providing one?”

Yuzu scowled at him.

“You should have called me instead of confronting me on the train,” she said. “I still would have said no.”
“Fair enough, fair enough,” the man said, holding up his hands. “But I do hope you’ll reconsider. It’s going to be a breaking story.”

“I don’t care.”

He smiled, as though he thought what he said next would somehow entice her.

“Did you know that there are still children living in the house the leaders of the attack lived in?”

Yuzu’s hands tightened on her bag. She wanted this man to go away.

“None of them are related save for one, though. They’re all just there playing family.”

Yuzu was on her feet, in his face before she even realized she was moving.

“You have no idea what you’re talking about!” she shouted.

The chatter of the other people in the train immediately went silent as everyone looked at her, confused by the commotion. Yuzu glared, pressing her advantage. The man didn’t seem fazed, however. He only smiled, and stepped back.

“Very well,” he said. “I’ll leave you alone.”

He began to walk away, and Yuzu wheeled on him, shouting at his back.

“And you’d better leave them alone too!” she shouted. “Do you hear me?”

He gave no indication that he had heard, slipping through the doors to the next carriage. Yuzu was left standing there, her heart trembling and her mouth dry. Her brain rattled around in her head, and she knew that people were still staring at her.

She pressed a hand to her chest.

If he’s coming to see me, he might harass Ruri and the others too, she thought. I need to warn them.

~ * ~ * ~

“A tabloid reporter?”

“Yeah! He had a really terrible face, and a knock-off watch, so I’m sure you’ll recognize him. Remember that you don’t have to talk to him! Just slam the door in his face.”

Ruri’s hands tightened on her mug of tea, and Yuzu shot her a sidelong look.

Ruri had been happy to see her when she’d stopped by unexpectedly, but all of that was gone now. She looked nervous now, her eyes staring into her tea without really seeing it. They were seated at the edge of the porch, looking out at the park across the street. It was a gloomy sort of day, so no one was out save for them, but it wasn’t cold yet. Still, the tea’s steam wafted up into the air and over their faces like a ghost.

“Ruri-chan? Are you okay?”

Ruri seemed to shake herself out of a reverie. She smiled, looking tired but quick to reassure Yuzu.

“I’m fine,” she said. “It’s been a long couple of weeks.”

Yuzu remembered, then, everything that Yuya had told her. Did Ruri remember where she had come from? Was it something that the family, rightfully enough, never talked about? Was it even really something she should be allowed to know about?

“I...you know I don’t think the reporter is right, right?” she said quickly. “You guys...you aren’t a pretend family. You’re the farthest thing from it.”

Ruri smiled again, but something about it seemed far away.

“You know, don’t you?” she said softly.

Yuzu flushed.
“I mean — Yuya mentioned it — but I don’t have all the details, of course!”

Ruri shook her head, leaning her face down towards her mug to let the steam waft over her face.

“No, it’s all right. I don’t want to lie to you, Yuzu-chan. It’s true. I’m not truly Shun and Yuya’s sister.”

That made Yuzu bristle. She put her mug down beside her, and reached for both of Ruri’s hands, clasping them between hers and feeling the heat of the mug between them. Ruri looked at her with surprise as Yuzu caught her gaze and held it.

“You listen to me, Sakaki Ruri,” she said. “I don’t care where you came from — and I’m sure your brothers don’t either. But you are their sister. Blood doesn’t determine that. Love does.”

Ruri’s lips parted. Then she smiled again, looking a little more present. She looked back at the house behind them, in all of its splashed colors all over the front.

“Yuzu-chan,” she said. “Do you remember the Lyrilusc Dolls?”

Yuzu tilted her head, releasing Ruri’s hands from the surprising change in subject.

“You mean that specialty doll line? Yeah, I remember. It had a catchy jingle or something, right?”

Ruri hummed a few bars, and Yuzu joined in immediately, the jingle coming back to her in a second. When they reached the end, both of them starting giggling. Then Ruri smiled, leaning back towards her mug again and pulling her feet up onto the porch.

“When our parents disappeared, I couldn’t stop crying,” she whispered. “They’d just vanished...without a trace, without a note, without anything. I started to think...what if Shun and Yuya would disappear next, and I’d be all alone?”

Yuzu put her hand on Ruri’s shoulder and rubbed it softly. Ruri trembled, but only slightly, and she quickly wiped away the tears before they fell.

“Before they disappeared, I had begged my parents for a Lyrilusc Doll. One that came with the house, you know?”

“I remember. I wanted that too when I was a kid,” Yuzu said with a smile.

Ruri leaned her head back, staring up at the gloomy sky. Her hair cascaded onto the porch behind her.

“While I was crying, Yuya and Shun went out and bought so much paint,” she said. “Then they spent the entire afternoon painting the front of the house, to look like the colors of the Lyrilusc house.”

Yuzu’s lips parted, and she looked back at the house. How had a pair of young kids even made it high enough to paint all that? It explained the cacophony of colors and the somewhat sloppy job, though.

“Then they found some curtains and some fancy lamps in a resale shop, and they made my bed with the canopy and all the decorations,” Ruri continued, smiling fondly. “They made me a fairy-tale bed. Just for me. And...and it was the first time I smiled.”

She was starting to cry just a little now, but it wasn’t very strong. Yuzu continued to rub her shoulder.

“Although, while they were working, they stepped on my teddy bear,” Ruri laughed through the tears. “And all the stuffing popped right out. Yuya had to sew it back up.”

Yuzu laughed.

“That sounds like them,” she said. “Doing all that just to make a flub at the end.”

“Doesn’t it?” Ruri said, wiping away another tear with one finger. “But...but it was all right. That bear’s stomach is all sewn up now, and it’s a fond memory. It’s proof that my brothers did so much for me. That they were in my life.”

Yuzu squeezed Ruri’s shoulder, and slowly slid over to slide her arm over both her shoulders, tucking the smaller girl against her.
Ruri started to cry. It was soft, and Yuzu didn’t draw attention to it. But she held Ruri, and she stared at the sky, and she just listened.

*God, if you exist,* she thought. *Please. Let this family live.*

---

Ruri could not sleep. She tossed and turned. Every time she flopped over, Kii would be on the pillow beside her, staring at her with its unblinking black eyes. She felt like it was considering her, somehow.

*A reporter with a knock-off watch.*

She appreciated Yuzu coming to warn her. She really did. It was unfortunate that the warning had come too late, though.

She laid in bed, staring at the top of her canopy, and tried not to think about him.

He’d been unpleasant, like Yuzu had described, and he’d put his foot in the door so that she couldn’t close it, but not coming in so she couldn’t claim that he was trespassing.

*“Don’t you know how much it costs to treat you?”*

Ruri turned over again, trying to get comfortable. The room suddenly felt so big and empty.

*“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”*

She was thirsty. She needed the bathroom. Or maybe she didn’t. She needed an excuse not to go to sleep.

*“I’m saying that it’s not the kind of money that a pair of high school students could put together. Don’t you wonder where that money comes from?”*

She sat up with a huff, her hair all tangled. She tried to run her fingers through it. Sleepless nights meant that she would have a horrible mess on her hands in the morning.

*“I want you to leave. Please.”*

She slid out of bed, still trying to smooth her hair with her fingers over her shoulder, and walked towards the bathroom. She opened the door.

*“Have a look at these photographs. Your older brother has been getting the money for your treatment from the Kiga Group — the group your parents used to lead.”*

She hesitated in the door. Why was there a light on downstairs? She leaned over the railing, lips parting.

*“How do you feel about that? About knowing their money is what’s keeping you alive?”*

She heard the soft sound of someone tapping their foot into a boot. She saw Ao waddle around the kitchen table, and someone moving in the hallway. The door opened, and closed softly. Ruri turned towards the other two bedrooms. She peeked in the first — Yuya was fast asleep, his body half on the floor with only his legs on the bed. She looked into the second.

Shun’s bed was empty.

She took the pole down, and ran to get her shoes, not worrying about getting dressed or brushing her hair. She peeked through the door, hoping Shun had just gone out to sit on the porch. But she didn’t see him anywhere. Where had he gone at this time of night?

There! He walked under a faraway street lamp, and it had to be him, because there was a tiny hippo waddling beside him. Ruri slipped through the doors, Kii running after her.

The dark and the cold seeped through her thin nightgown, and the streets were eerily empty. She tailed him down the streets, ducking behind signs or bushes every so often, but he never checked to see if he was being followed. Part of her wondered — did he already know that she was following him? But he would certainly not want her to; he was always telling her to stay inside and rest. If he saw her out here in just her nightgown when it was so cold, he’d order her back home.
They took a few more turns, and she nearly lost him. As she careened around a corner however, she caught sight of the back of his head as he disappeared into...a ramen shop?

She stopped at a distance, staring at it. What was in there? Was he just really hungry? At this time of night? Why not just get something from the fridge?

I should follow him in, she thought, but something stopped her. Instead, she drew back, crouched behind a bush, and waited.

~ * ~ * ~

Even the warmth of the ramen shop can’t drive away the chill from the outside world. Shun takes a seat the empty row of booth seats. There are dishes in the sink, but no chef. He taps the table once, and a glass of water is placed in front of him. He doesn’t drink it. He just stares at the back of his hands against the table, considering their bandages. It still hurts, when he moves his fingers too much.

A hand rests on his shoulder.

“Shun. You’re doing all right.”

Shun bites back tears, and lowers his head against the table.

“Ruri’s not getting better,” he whispers. “Do I...even now? Do I still need even more money?”

Yoko’s fingers tighten against his shoulder, and he chances to look at her now. She isn’t looking at him, however. Her eyes are focused forward. They always have been.

“This world is cruel,” she says. “And the rules in place are meant to stop those at the bottom from ever reaching the top.”

“What am I supposed to do, then?” Shun whispers.

“We can only do what we have done,” Yusho says, from beside his wife. “The world must be remade.”

Yoko rubs his shoulder with her thumb, and this time, she does look at him. Her eyes soften, and she reaches for his face, cupping it gently in both hands. Her hands are warm.

“I’m so proud of you,” she says. “You’ve taken such good care of our family.”

“I...I only wanted them to smile,” he whispers. He feels so tired. So drained.

She smiles, and runs a thumb over his cheek.

“I have never once regretted the day we accepted you into our family,” she says. “You make me proud, Shun. You make both of us proud.”

An envelope slides across the table, and Shun reaches out to catch it. It’s thick and full of bills. A man in a dark jacket and a wide-brimmed hat sits at the far end of the counter.

Yoko leans forward and kisses Shun’s forehead, and then releases him, but not before fixing his bangs.

“It will all be over soon,” she says. “And then we’ll be a family again, Shun. I promise.”

~ * ~ * ~

Ruri had nearly fallen asleep by the time Kii poked her on the knee. She nearly shot straight up to a stand from the surprise, but when she saw what Kii was pointing at with its stubby leg, she was glad she hadn’t. She peeked through the branches of the bushes. Shun had exited the ramen shop. Behind him was a man in a dark coat and a wide-brimmed hat, so that she couldn’t see his face or any distinguishing characteristics. She did, however, see the shiny lapel on his breast pocket — and even from a distance she recognized it. It was the black hippo symbol of the Kiga Group.

It’s true, she thought, heart in her throat. What Zarc and the reporter said...it’s true. Shun really is working with them.

She waited until both of them disappeared around the corner. Should she follow them, or check inside the ramen shop? He had really been in there a long time...
Kii decided for her, waddling straight towards the ramen shop. She hopped to her feet and hurried to catch up.

Kii bumped its face into the door, but Ruri had to push it open. She immediately had to cover her mouth, choking on the dust. She waved her hand in front of her face. Her eyes watered. As she managed to adjust to the heavy cloud of dust, she squinted into the dark.

“Hello?” she called. “...hello?”

It was dark inside, but as her eyes adjusted, she started to make out details. An old, torn poster on one of the walls. Cobwebs hanging from every corner. A thick layer of dust on the counter and on the seats, except for two, where Shun and the other man must have sat. Bits of plaster covered the floor from the rotting, moldy walls, and she wrinkled her nose. It looked like no one had been in here for years.

“Hello?” she called. Who had Shun been meeting here? Was it just the man she’d seen him leave with? She turned in a slow circle, looking for some new clue that the room might give her.

Her eyes fell on something in the corner. Something piled up, left behind.

Her eyes widened. The color drained out of her face. She clapped her hands to her mouth before she could scream.

Oh god.

It couldn’t be.

~ * ~ * ~

The door jangles, and the doctor lets himself into the examination room. Yuuri waits in the far seat. The rabbits sit in his lap, ears twitching slightly.

The doctor sees Yuuri, and looks at him for a moment. It seems that for a breath, he might be about to ask what Yuuri is doing here. Then his eyes seem to slide off of him, and he walks to the other chair, sitting down across from Yuuri.

“Thank you for agreeing to meet with me, doctor,” Yuuri says.

“Yes, indeed.”

“Tell me, doctor. You used to be Sakaki Ruri’s doctor. Do you believe in miracles?”

“Her recovery was certainly something to make one believe in such things. But I am a man of science, first and foremost.”

“What about ghosts, doctor? Do you believe in ghosts.”

The doctor scoffs softly, shaking his head. Yuuri smiles and rests his head on his fist.

“It seems you do not, then.”

“It’s a preposterous notion. Ghosts are not real — simply visual and auditory hallucinations, brought on by a deep desire to see someone again.”

The doctor looks around then, suddenly seeming as though he is lost. He frowns

“This is familiar,” he says. “Isn’t this my examination room?”

“It is. Thank you for letting me use it while you were away in Germany.”

“I don’t recall saying any such thing.”

Yuuri strokes his rabbits, and their tiny noses twitch. The doctor seems confused, then, and starts to look around as though he doesn’t know where he is. His eyes fall on a photograph left on the counter. He reaches for it, frowning, turning the frame up towards him so that the light doesn’t glint over the glass. It depicts a group of people on what appears to be a safari, dressed in khakis. Behind them, there are hippos half submerged in the lake behind them. A sign is leaned against their legs, reading Twenty-Fifth Environmental Safari Expedition. One of the people in the group is the doctor. A second is a tall woman with thick blond hair in a ponytail, throwing up a peace
sign, with a man with frizzy black hair beside her.

Far off to the side, apart from the group, as though he wasn’t supposed to be there, is a young man in a long purple coat, his purple and magenta hair slicked back save for a few cowlicks that stick up like antenna. Yuuri smiles as he notices the doctor’s eyes fall on that figure, tap his finger against it.

“Do you see someone you recognize?” he asks.

“Yes, indeed. It’s an old story.”

“Tell it to me.”

The doctor considers the man in the photograph.

“He was once my assistant. A brilliant young man. But volatile. He left my employ many years ago, and became the leader of a terrorist group. I heard he died during an attempted attack over a decade ago.”

Yuuri smiles, still leaning his face against his fist. The rabbits’ noses continue to twitch, faster and faster as he strokes his hand through their silky fur.

“It would have worked,” he says softly. “If not for Ray.”

The doctor seems to realize something. He looks up and squints at Yuuri with surprise.

“Who are you, anyway?”

“I’m a ghost,” Yuuri says. “Or if that offends your scientific sensibilities...you can call me a curse.”

He sighs, looking up towards the ceiling.

“I’m going to try for it again, doctor,” he says. “I’ll have the children inherit my will. And my curse.”

~ * ~ * ~

Yuya shuffled down the street, his eyes on the ground. He nearly bumped into a few people as he made his way down the sidewalk. His school uniform felt somehow heavy, or maybe that was just his body. He couldn’t even remember what had happened at school today. Shun hadn’t gone. He hadn’t been to school in weeks. What was he doing?

“Sakaki Yuya, isn’t it?”

His name in a stranger’s voice made him flinch, and he turned quickly. There was a car parked at the side of the road. He didn’t quite see the man’s face inside the car, but he did see his arm hanging off the windowsill, and the fancy watch he wore on his wrist.

“What do you want?” Yuya asked. “Who are you?”

“I’m from the Weekly Truth,” he said, and Yuya bristled. He knew that tabloid.

“I don’t want to talk to you,” he said, starting to walk on. But the man called after him.

“Aren’t you interested to know how your older brother is making the money for your sister’s treatment?”

Yuya flinched. He stopped in his tracks.

“My brother...is a hard worker,” he said.

“Be honest, Sakaki-san. A high school student working even a full time job couldn’t make enough to cover it.”

Yuya knew he should keep walking. He didn’t want to hear this. He didn’t need to hear this. He should trust Shun.

He hated the way his stomach twisted as he realized that he couldn’t trust Shun.

“I’m listening,” he said quietly.
Remains

~ * * ~ F L A S H B A C K ~ * * ~

Shun

The Funeral of Mrs. Akaba

Yoko puts a hand on his tiny shoulder, her hand almost swallowing his entire shoulder.

“I’m so sorry, Shun,” she says. “Your mother was a wonderful woman.”

Shun just stares at the casket, closed and covered in flowers. The image of his mother set on top of it doesn’t feel recognizable. As though he forgot what his mother looked like the moment she died.

“We’ll take care of you from now on, Shun,” Yusho says, putting his hand on his other shoulder. “You and Yuya have become such good friends already. I know that you’ll be like real brothers in no time.”

I have a brother already, Shun thinks distantly. I have siblings already.

Yuya clutches an apple to his chest behind Shun, crying quietly. How silly. Yuya barely even knew Shun’s mother. But he’s crying anyway. Shun doesn’t understand. He’s not crying, and it was his mother.

The hands move away from his shoulders, and he’s alone, staring out at the gardens, as far away from where they are burying the casket as possible. He stares. And he stares. But he doesn’t know what he sees.

He feels a tiny hand on his cheek. He blinks as he feels something weird stick to him, and frowns as he touches it. A bandaid?

The girl peeks around him from behind. Oh. This must be Ruri, Yuya’s little sister. Shun has barely met her. His hand stays on the bandaid she’s stuck to his cheek. What is this for?

She smiles at him, her hair falling around her back. She pats his cheek gently.

“Ouchie, ouchie, go away,” she sings. “Go away, ouchie, go away.”

“I’m...not hurt,” Shun says.

Ruri smiles.

“Not anymore,” she says. “See? The band-aid makes it go away. Papa taught me the ouchie song.”

And for the first time, Shun lets himself cry. He curls up over his knees, presses his face into his legs, and cries. And Ruri sits down next to him, pressing up against him, her head resting against
his shoulder. A few moments later, he feels the quiet footsteps of Yuya, and feels Yuya crouch down on his other side, the two of them sandwiching them.

That’s the moment that he decides.

He’ll protect this family. Even if he has to die for it.

~ * ~ * ~ E N D  F L A S H B A C K ~ * ~ * ~

“So. I see that you’ve remembered.”

Ruri did not look up from her lap, her bangs falling over her eyes. Reiji folded his arms, considering her across the table. Cups of tea sat in front of each of them, untouched and no longer steaming.

“Yes,” she finally whispered, her voice barely above a breath.

Reiji pursed his lips. He took up his cold tea and took a sip, wrinkling his nose at it.

“So that you understand, don’t you?” he said, putting it back on its saucer. “That Shun’s true siblings are Reira and I?”

She nodded, her hair slipping over her shoulders.

“That you and that boy stole him from me? From both Reira and I?”

“Yes,” she said, seeming to shrink further and further in on herself. Reiji didn’t have it in him to feel guilty about the effect his words had on her. He drank another sip of cold tea.

“You realize how far he’s willing to go do for you, don’t you?” he said quietly.

Ruri raised her eyes to Reiji’s. There was a fear deep in her gaze, a fear that was not for herself, or of he himself. It was a fear for Shun.

That gave him pause. And he took a moment to consider it. Ruri spoke before he could fully gather his thoughts.

“What does he plan to do?” she asked.

Her voice didn’t shake. Her shoulders set, and her eyes were firm, but desperate. Reiji pressed his lips together. It seemed, then, that she knew — at least part of the story.

“You know who he’s become involved with, don’t you?”

She nodded.

“They will use him up and throw him away. Do you understand that?”

“I don’t want to let that happen.”

“Hm. You do realize, you’re the reason he’s done this?”

Ruri’s whole body tensed, and her eyes shone with tears that she did not release. She did not drop Reiji’s gaze.

“That’s why I have to save him,” she said.

He considered her for a long moment. He swirled his finger around the rim of the cup, waiting for her to be the first to drop her gaze. But she did not. She held it, without flinching. He couldn’t help but be a bit impressed.

“That man will have Shun board the train of fate,” he said. “And bring about the disaster that the Sakaki family attempted to complete before. We must stop him before then.”

Ruri’s eyes widened and her lips parted. Then she smiled, and it made her entire face light up with relief. For just a moment, Reiji understood why Shun had chosen her — even if he would never forgive her for it.

“How do we do it?”
“You simply follow my instructions,” Reiji said. “And we will save him.”

After several hours’ talk, she rose. But she hesitated before she left, her eyes still trained on Reiji.

“You know that I love him as much as you do, don’t you?” she whispered.

He looked down at his empty cup of tea, and ran his finger around the rim.

“I don’t want to know,” he said. “Because if I did, it would be that much harder to hate you.”

~ * ~ * ~

“We need to talk.”

Shun didn’t stop walking. Yuya’s hand tightened on his bag, pulling it more tightly over his shoulder, and he hurried to catch up to Shun’s longer stride

“Are you listening to me? I want to talk to you.”

“I’m listening.”

Shun’s words came out with a snap that made Yuya feel like shriveling up. But he set his jaw and hurried to stand in front of Shun, blocking his path. Shun stopped, then, but his gaze was trained somewhere firmly over Yuya’s head. Yuya felt sick. Why wouldn’t Shun look at him? Did he already know what Yuya had to say?

For a moment, they both just stood there, taking up space on the sidewalk. The path to a shrine spread out from beside them, and the neighborhood was quiet.

“You haven’t been to school in days.”

Somewhere, a bird chirped, and far away, a single car pulled out of a driveway, but other than that, there was no one around. Shun still didn’t look down.

“I met a reporter the other day.”

The bird fluttered out of the tree and landed on the path to the shrine, pecking at something in the cracks of the bricks.

“He knew everything, Shun. He had pictures.”

A breeze ruffled the leaves, and both Shun and Yuya’s bangs. Shun’s gaze didn’t even flicker as his bangs fluttered over his eyes. Yuya’s hands curled into fists. React, dammit! Do something! Say something!! Say anything!! Even a lie would do!

“Shun, you’re working with them,” Yuya said, his voice cracking. “You’re working with the group our parents led.”

Shun finally stirred. His hand shifted on his bag’s straps, and he shifted from one foot to the other.

“And if I am?” he said.

Yuya’s hands started to shake, and his throat was dry. Look at me, he thought, begging. Why won’t you look at me? A horrible mixture of betrayal, anger, and heartbreak fought in his chest, choking him.

“They killed so many people,” he whispered. “What are you doing with them?”

“We need the money for Ruri’s medicine.”

“There has to be a better way!! You can’t do this, Shun!”

Shun’s eyes finally, finally met Yuya’s — but they were cold, and harsh, and Yuya almost took a step back.

“Do you have any other ideas?” he said, words hissing through his teeth. “Ruri will die. Is that what you want?”

Yuya flinched. He stepped back from Shun, still shaking. Where was he? Where was the brother that he remembered? This cold, angry person wasn’t him. What happened to his stupid, dorky
brother who would make dumb jokes and animal impressions to make Ruri smile? Who would tell Yuya to stop worrying, and promise that he would take care of the family? Yuya’s lungs began to flutter with his hiccuping breaths, as the tears fought to leave his eyes and caught in his eyelashes.

“You have to stop,” he whispered. “You have to. You can’t...you can’t do this. You can’t work with them.”

Shun’s expression didn’t change, his cold eyes still meeting Yuya’s.

“And how are you going to stop me?” he said.

Yuya dropped his bag from his arm. He cranked his arm back, and he let it fly.

Shun clearly hadn’t been expecting it, because Yuya’s fist connected directly with the side of Shun’s face. Shun’s bag clattered to the ground as he stumbled, eyes wide. At their feet, Pinku socked Ao in the jaw, sending the little blue hippo flying.

Yuya put up both his fists.

“I’ll stop you,” he said, voice shaking. “Whatever it takes, Shun. I won’t lose you, too.”

Shun touched his cheek gingerly, touched the red mark where he’d certainly have a bruise. He straightened. He dropped his coat from his shoulders.

“Yuya,” he said. “This is your last chance to give up on this.”

Yuya let fly another punch, this time to Shun’s gut. Shun caught the fist and redirected it off to the side, his other hand coming up and cracking into Yuya’s gut. Yuya’s eyes bulged, and he choked — spittle flew out between his lips. Ao charged Pinku and tackled it to the ground, and the two began to roll against the sidewalk, butting heads and flailing their stubby arms.

For a moment, Yuya thought he would immediately fall to his knees from the force of the blow.

But then he thought of the pictures again. The pictures of Shun in the Kiga Group coat, taking packets of money from a man in a wide brimmed hat. The cold, dead look on his face in every photo. He thought of the Shun he used to know, the one who told him that everything would be all right, the one who gave out noogies and warm hugs. The one who loved his family more than anything else in the world.

Yuya would die before he gave that Shun up.

The adrenaline kept him on his feet, and he swung back up, catching Shun on the chin with his fist. Shun choked as his head snapped back up, and he almost fell. Yuya went in for another punch, but Shun ducked to the side and clotheslined him with an arm, sending him flying back and around against the wall surrounding the shrine grounds. Yuya hit the wall and saw stars, but he couldn’t stop now. He shoved off the wall and surged forward again — his vision blurred from the impact, though, and Shun caught him by the arm, flinging him past him onto the ground. Yuya hit face first and gasped. Every bit of him ached and twinged, and he heard Shun gasping for breath behind him. Somewhere, he heard the soft thwumping of their hippos still going at each other.

Yuya tried to get his fists underneath him. His lungs ached. He felt sick — his binder crushed against his chest and it was hard to breathe.

“Stay down,” Shun said.

“I won’t,” Yuya gasped.

Shun kicked him back down onto his side and Yuya cried out in pain.

“Stay down, Yuya, don’t make me hurt you any more,” Shun snarled.

Yuya wanted to try and get himself back to his feet, but his entire body screamed with pain, and his limbs shook when he tried to force strength into them again. Tears rolled down his cheeks.

“I won’t lose you,” he mumbled. “I don’t want to lose you.”

He heard Shun grabbed his bag back off the ground.

“We were never a family to begin with,” he said. “And with this...we’re strangers again.”
Yuya heard Shun’s feet scuffing against the sidewalk. No, No, Yuya couldn’t let him leave! He tried to get up again, but all he could do was roll over, and watch the blurry shape of Shun disappear.

“Shun,” he gasped. “Shun! Please...don’t go.”

Shun hesitated only one more moment.

“You aren’t capable of saving Ruri,” he said. “But I will.”

And then, he was far away. Yuya laid on the ground, twinging with pain, the adrenaline fading away and leaving him only with the ache. Shun was gone — long gone. Pinku laid against the shrine grounds wall, looking all scuffed up.

“No...” Yuya gasped. “I can’t...I can’t accept...I don’t want...”

Tears fled his eyes and stained the ground. He got his fist underneath him, and shoved himself up to his knees with a cry of pain. One leg at a time, he got them underneath himself. He wouldn’t...he wouldn’t...he wouldn’t let Shun leave. He had to — follow.

He got himself to his feet. He grabbed Pinku by the scruff of its neck, and dragged his bag into his other arm. One step at a time, he stumbled down the sidewalk. His lungs crushed against his binder. He didn’t stop to try and take it off under his shirt. No time. One step at a time. One more step. And another one. Another one. Tears blurred the sight of his passing, and every step was another chance for him to drop to his knees, but he wouldn’t.

Stopping now meant giving up. Meant giving up on all of it. On Shun. On the whole family. Yuya wasn’t ready to give it up. He wasn’t...ready....to give...up.

~ * ~ * ~

Shun leaned over the railing, staring down at the traffic beneath the foot bridge. The car below idled near the sidewalk. Shun could see the man’s arm resting on the windowsill, and catch a glimpse of the glint of light on the cheap knockoff watch he wore. He held the cell phone near his mouth, waiting, his eyes watching the switch of the red and green lights at the intersection up ahead.

His eyes flickered. A familiar shock of red and green hair stumbled into view — down the sidewalk, far away from the car. Even from here, Shun could see Yuya’s red, exhausted face, the slump of his shoulders and the struggle it was for him to breathe. He felt something tighten inside of him. He followed. He always followed him.

I can’t let you follow me any further, Yuya.

He drew the cell phone to his lips.

“That’s the car,” he said. “With the novelty license plate.”

He looked back up, and despite the great distance, Yuya did too. Their eyes met. Shun didn’t drop his gaze. Yuya deserved that much, at least.

“Do it.”

Yuya started to take a step forward. But his eyes flickered. A blaring horn and the screech of tires sounded from somewhere behind Shun. Then came the truck, with the big black hippo face stamped on the side.

The reporter’s car didn’t stand a chance. The truck slammed into the car, crumpled it like a leaf. Horns and shrieking tires sounded off as cars tried to swerve around the wreckage. The man’s hand hung limply from the car window, only the knockoff watch still visible.

Shun didn’t need to look at Yuya’s face to see the horror in his eyes. To see the way that he gave up, in that moment, of ever bringing Shun back.

Goodbye, Yuya, he thought, pushing away from the railing and walking back towards the shadows. Stay behind. You belong in the light, after all.

He disappeared into the darkness on the other side of the bridge. He pretended not to feel the pain of the rope he’d severed dragging behind him.
Zarc inhaled sharply, pressing his back to the wall and peering around the corner. The old ramen shop sat, unassuming and seemingly empty, at the corner of the street. All of the lights were out. It looked like there was no one inside.

But if he was correct, he thought, clenching his fists: then he’d finally found where the Sakaki parents were hiding. His revenge was in his grasp.

He couldn’t wait any longer. He stalked across the street, keeping an eye on the windows to see if anything moved; to see if they tried to flee. But nothing moved. And when he opened the door, he almost choked on the dust. He coughed, covering his mouth with his sleeve and squinting into the dark.

It looked like no one had been here in decades. A thick coat of dust covered the whole building. Posters sagged half ripped from the walls, old rusty dishes and pots laid in sinks. It smelled awful. Like something had rotted in here.

“Are they really here?” he muttered. He’d seen Shun walk in and out of this place several times — he was sure that this must be where Shun was meeting with his parents, and getting the money for Ruri’s treatment.

His foot scuffed along the ground as he made his way around the booth. Where could they —

He stopped dead. His hand clamped over his mouth before he could scream, eyes widening. Oh god. That’s — that’s why it smelled like something was had rotted in here.

Two bodies lay crumpled against each other in the corner of the room. They were nothing more than skeletons by now — only their orange jumpsuits made them recognizable. Their name tags — both of them read Y. Sakaki.

Zarc stumbled back, choking again on his own air. Oh god. Oh fucking god. They...they were already — for years, they must have been lying here —

“How ironic...that our revenge was already over before we knew to take it.”

He spun around to see — Grace. Grace, coming through the other set of doors, her eyes fixed on the bodies in the corner. She didn’t look upset, or shocked. Only distant. She turned to Zarc, then, her eyes glittering in the dark, and held out a hand.

“It’s over, Zarc,” she whispered. “It’s been over for a long time.”

He wasn’t sure, but he thought he might be starting to cry. Her hand simply hung in the darkness, and for a moment, he couldn’t be sure which hand he was seeing. Grace’s? Or Ray’s?

Grace smiled at him, with more softness and tenderness than he deserved.

“Let’s go home, Zarc,” she whispered.

“Home?” he whispered, his voice stumbling on the word.

Something moved in the open doorway. A dark shadow flashed behind Grace — Zarc saw the glint of the moon outside across the blade of a knife. He moved before he thought about it, grabbing Grace by the arms and yanking her towards him, spinning them both around so that he was in between her and the assailant.

“Zarc!” Grace shrieked, and then the pain caught up with him, as he felt the blade stab deep into his side, and his blood splatter against the ground.

Ruri heard Yuya’s heavy feet scuff through the doorway, and she leaped from her chair. She ran down the hall, skidding to a stop before she ran into him.

“Yuya,” she gasped, reaching for his cheeks. “What happened??”
One of his eyes was nearly swollen shut, and bruises littered his face. His jacket was rumpled and dirty, and even Pinku, swinging from his limp grip, looked as though it’d been dragged across the ground.

Yuya let her cup his face for a moment. Then he put down Pinku and his bag, took her hands, and pulled them away from his face.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “It’s over, Ruri.”

Ruri felt something in her tense.

“This fake family we put together — it’s over. I can’t hold it together anymore. I’m sorry.”

“Yuya,” she whispered, her voice cracking.

“We won’t be able to afford this house,” he said. “So I’m going to send you to live with Aunt Asuka. I’ve already called her. You should pack your things.”

Ruri trembled in the doorway for a moment. Tears fought to release from her eyes, and her hands shook. She wanted to grab him, hug him tightly, tell him that it wasn’t over, that it didn’t have to be over. That they weren’t fake.

But the other part of her understood. It was over. Shun had left.

Their game of playing house was at an end. And she’d caused enough trouble to Yuya already. It was time to say goodbye. Yuya was, at least, extending one last kindness, by offering to send her to his aunt’s house. It was more than she deserved, after all of the trouble she’d put him through. After everything she’d done, and everything she’d never been able to repay.

It...hurt. It hurt so much. She wasn’t ready to say goodbye. And to not even be able to accept Yuya’s last kindness.

Because she had a mission. And she would not drag Yuya into the messes she created any longer.

She forced a smile through her tears, even though he wasn’t looking at her.

“All right,” she said. “Give me just a few minutes.”

Yuya was still standing in the entryway, leaning against the wall and staring at the ceiling when she returned, with her bag and her coat. Kii waddled at her feet, looking almost sadly at Pinku, who sat facing the wall and not looking at them.

Ruri stepped down onto the lower step, sliding each foot into her boots. Then she turned to face Yuya. She shifted her bag into one hand, and with the other, she produced the long red scarf.

Yuya’s eyes finally flickered at that. His lips parted, and his eyes shone with just the faintest hint of tears.

“You still have it,” he whispered.

“Even before I remembered how I came here, it was precious to me,” she said. She pressed her face into the fabric for a moment, inhaling. It was the scent of home.

But she held it out to Yuya. Yuya almost flinched, staring at it. His hands shook.

“I’ll return it to you,” she said.

“You...you can keep it...” he whispered.

She shook her head, and held it out to him. With shaking fingers, he took it. He stared down at it, as though it was taking everything he had not to shove his face into it right now.

“And now we’re strangers,” Ruri whispered. She almost felt something leave her chest, as though some heat had leaked from it and into the scarf, left behind in Yuya’s hands. “Thank you, Yuya. For everything.”

For a moment, Yuya looked like he was about to change his mind. His eyes welled, and he took a step forward. But Ruri knew — it had to end now. She had to break herself away from him now, before she hurt him more.

She spun on her heels, and she stepped out the door, into the cold afternoon. Kii waddled off with
She didn’t look back. She was too afraid that what she saw on Yuya’s face would make her change her mind.

But it was too late, anyway. She inhaled the sharp, cold air, and let it back out. All the warmth of the world was gone, she thought. She would never see the summer again.

She gripped her bag in both hands, and walked away from the house painted brightly.

~ * ~ * ~

Yuya stares at the scarf in his hands. His hands shake, and the image of it blurs. He presses it to his face.

“The medicine has stopped working.”

He collapses down to a crouch, leaning face first into the scarf and trying to still the tears. It doesn’t work.

“She has about two months to live. Maybe less. I think we’ve run out of miracles.”

He can’t stop. He collapses to his knees, and then to the floor, sobbing into the scarf.

I’m sorry. I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, Ruri. I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t have sent you away. I just wanted — I wanted your last months — you didn’t need me, screwing up your life anymore —

He sobs into the scarf until he can’t breathe anymore. He feels as though his limbs have been severed from him. The house yawns cold, empty, and alone.

The threads of his family are broken. And he feels them as though they’re bleeding.

~ * ~ * ~

“And once that shipment is complete...”

Shun trailed off briefly, eyes flickering away from his compatriots. In the back of the room, seated on the pile of boxes, he saw her. She perched on the edge of the boxes, her hair cascading down her back, her hippo sitting at her feet.

Ruri smiled at Shun. Shun smiled back. He knew that she’d come to him.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “I’ll definitely save you.”

Her eyes softened, and she nodded. He turned away from her.

He didn’t see her eyes harden, and her jaw set.

“I’ll save you, Shun,” she whispered, in a place where he couldn’t hear.
~ * ~ * ~ F L A S H B A C K ~ * ~ * ~

Shun

Yuuri’s Office

“You’ve got to be fucking shitting me!”

Shun launches himself from his seat so abruptly that the chair rolls backwards a few feet. Ao headbutts a table.

Yuuri only continues to smile that awful, unchanging smile of his. Shun can’t handle it. He grabs Yuuri by the collar, heaving him inches off his chair.

“You’re lying!” he says. “You told me that medicine would save her!”

“Medicine can lose its potency the more it’s used,” Yuuri says, completely unperturbed by hanging from Shun’s grip. “Surely you’ve heard of that before?

Shun’s hands tremble, but he doesn’t release Yuuri. His mind is a screaming maelstrom. If the medicine isn’t working — if Ruri is going to —

“Ruri is going to die.”

Shun snaps. He latches his hands around Yuuri’s throat instead. That lying son of a bitch! If Ruri’s going to die, then — then what has he been doing all of this for?

“I’m going to fucking kill you!” Shun screams.

His hands clench around air. For a moment, he only stares at his empty hands. What...where did he...?

“You can’t kill me, Shun.”

Shun whips around at the voice from behind him, and when he does so, the office is gone. He’s staring instead at Yuuri, standing before the door of a train car. The walls glow with dark red circles that wallpaper every single surface of the inside of the train car. He can feel it rattling beneath his feet, the world outside the windows pitch black.

“I’m not the kind that can be killed,” Yuuri says, hands in his pockets, smiling lazily at Shun.


Yuuri only laughs. And Shun feels ice seep into his chest as two new shadows appear behind Yuuri — shadows that he recognizes. Dead, empty eyes that he refuses to quite meet, as the figures of Sakaki Yoko and Yusho appear behind Yuuri.
“There’s still one way to save Ruri, Shun,” Yuuri says soothingly. “All you have to do is accept the curse. Finish what was started.”

Shun feels the weight of the train car above him pushing down against his shoulders. His body slumps.

“It will save her?” he whispers.

“Most assuredly.”

Shun can only nod. He can’t voice it. But it’s acceptance enough. Yuuri smiles.

“The train is leaving soon,” he says. “You’d best be ready to board.”

Her bag felt so heavy. Even her scarf felt heavy. Honestly, everything just felt oh so heavy. Yuzu couldn’t even remember what she’d learned in school today, or if she had homework. Her breath fogged the air before her, but she couldn’t feel the cold. The world felt somehow far away, as though she weren’t a part of it. If she was a part of it, she’d have to think about the things she didn’t want to think about, and remember the things she didn’t want to remember.

Her mind jostled out of its gray monotone as her eyes fell on something that she didn’t think was supposed to be there.

In front of Yuya’s house, a pair of people in long dark jackets stood by the door. One of them was taking their hand off of the doorbell, as though they’d just rung it. They turned to each other for a moment, gesturing — both of them wore sunglasses, and face masks, and their hair was covered by matching dark caps. The only thing that differentiated them were the scarves they were wearing — one of them wore a bright green scarf, and the other, a pale blue one. They looked hand-knit.

Suspicious, Yuzu thought, immediately standing straight up. That’s super suspicious!!

Was it another pair of reporters? Hadn’t they all given up bothering them by now??

Yuzu marched across the street — the pair had crouched down in front of the door, clearly still discussing something.

“All right!” Yuzu shouted, and both of them flinched so hard that one of them fell over. “What do you think you’re doing here?? Are you trying to bother the Sakakis??”

The one who’d fallen, with the blue scarf, gave out a little squeak of surprise, and Yuzu was surprised to hear a higher, more feminine voice. The one who was still on her feet, in the green scarf, shot up, waving her hands back and forth.

“No, no, no!” she said. Something about her voice sounded...familiar? “I promise, we’re not being creepy!”

“You certainly look like you’re trying,” Yuzu said, raising her eyebrows and looking them up and down.

Even though her face was mostly covered by the mask, Yuzu could see a faint blush on the girl’s cheeks. The girl with the blue scarf groaned as she carefully stood up.

“I told you we looked like stalkers, Rin,” she said.

“What did you want to happen? Did you want the paparazzi to follow us??” said the girl with the green scarf — did the other just say her name was Rin?

All of Yuzu’s concern faded away into absolute confusion instead. What the heck was going on here?

The girl called Rin sighed and took off her mask and sunglasses first. She pulled off her cap, and a short bob of bright green hair tumbled out against her neck. The other girl pulled off her mask and glasses then, and when she released her hair from her hair, a dark blue ponytail bounced free.

Yuzu’s mouth dropped open.

“Y-You’re...” she gasped. “You’re Double B!”
The two girls smiled. Rin was still blushing a little, and Selena rubbed the back of her neck. Holy shit, Yuzu thought, feeling a little dizzy with shock. She was standing in front of the biggest and most popular idol duo of the century. What were they doing here? Come to think of it, they looked a lot younger in person — no older than Ruri, definitely.

“Sorry to look so weird!” Rin said. “We, uh…”

“We came to see Ruri!” Selena said, holding up a gift bag.

“She gave us these scarves,” said Rin, patting the scarf against her throat. “We wanted to thank her in person.”

“Oh, uh, we all went to elementary school together,” said Selena quickly. “That’s how we know her!”

“She was supposed to be the third member of our group,” Rin said, rubbing the back of her neck. “But she got sick, and…we lost contact.”

Yuzu was having a hard time wrapping her head around all of this at once. First, a popular idol duo shows up at the Sakakis’ front door. Then, they admit that they know Ruri? And that Ruri was originally supposed to be one of their idol members?? Ruri had never said anything about this.

Oh, but thinking about Ruri...

Yuzu let her gaze fall to the ground.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “But I don’t think…Ruri is going to be around for a while.”

Rin’s face fell.

“What? Why not?”

“Yeah, and how do you know??” Selena said, immediately looking suspicious.

Yuzu flushed — whether they were Ruri’s old friends or not, should she really tell them the truth…?

“Sorry,” she said. “My name is Hiragi Yuzu. I’m a friend of Yuya’s and Ruri’s. And…well, Ruri went to go live with her aunt for a while.”

Both of the girls’ faces fell.

“I really wanted to see her,” Selena mumbled.

Rin patted her on the shoulder.

“We’ll have to find another day off to go find her,” she said. She sighed, her breath misting up the air before her. Carefully, she put her hat back onto her head, tucking her hair into it.

After a beat, Selena held out the gift bag to Yuzu. Yuzu blinked. Her lips parted.

“You’re friends with Ruri, right??” Selena said, pouting at her. “Make sure she gets this then!”

She shoved the bag into Yuzu’s chest, and Yuzu quickly grabbed it, mostly out of shock than anything else. Selena huffed, folding her arms.

“What…is it?” Yuzu said.

“It’s a thank you present for the scarves,” Rin said. “It’s our newest song.”

“It’s a special one,” Selena said. “It’s for Ruri. It has her most favorite phrase in it.”

“Her favorite phrase?” Yuzu said, blinking.

“We probably won’t have a chance to see her any time soon,” Rin said. “And we really don’t want to send it through our agents, because that feels really impersonal. So, can you please get it to her?”

Rin looked so earnest, and even the pouting Selena looked concerned. Yuzu tightened her grip on the bag, and she smiled. They really were worried about Ruri, weren’t they?
“I promise,” she said. “I’ll make sure Ruri gets it.”

Rin brightened. She threw her arms around Yuzu for a brief, tight hug, that Yuzu was too startled to return.

“Thank you so much, Hiragi-san!” she said. “Selena, we’d better go, before Nico realizes we’re gone.”

“Right,” Selena sighed, tucking her hair back into her hat.

They replaced their masks and sunglasses, waved, and scurried off down the sidewalk. Yuzu just waved after them, standing in front of Yuya’s house and feeling the tiniest bit shell-shocked. Wait til she told Yuya about this...

Speaking of Yuya, she saw him turn the corner just as Double B scurried around it. They passed each other without comment. Yuya had his eyes on the ground, and he was dragging his feet. Yuzu’s hand slowly wobbled back down to her side, and she felt all of the strange giddiness from the encounter with Double B fade away. Maybe she wouldn’t bring that up with him. It didn’t seem like the time.

She waited without saying a word until Yuya was almost to his house.

“Yuya,” she called softly.

Yuya startled. He glanced up, suddenly noticing that she was there. For a moment, he just stood there, staring at her. He had dark circles under his red eyes, and he looked even heavier than Yuzu felt.

“Oh,” he whispered. “Hey.”

He let them both inside the cold house. It felt so big and empty all of a sudden, Yuzu thought with a shiver. Without Shun or Ruri here...

Yuya stumbled into the kitchen and started to fumble for the tea kettle. Yuzu put her things down on the table. She crossed over him to pull the things for making tea down, gently pulling them out of his hands. He didn’t fight her on it. She got the water boiling, and set out the cups and tea bags. When the water was boiling, she returned to the table. Yuya was sitting there with his face pressed into the old, ratty red scarf. He hadn’t explained much about it — just that it had been Ruri’s. And since he’d sent her to his aunt’s, he hadn’t once let go of it.

Yuzu poured him a cup of tea, and then one for herself, before sitting across from him. She cupped her hands around the tea and let it warm against her hands. She stared into the steam and the dark circle of water below her for a long moment.

“I went to the police again,” Yuya whispered, face still buried in the scarf.

“Anything?”

“No one’s seen her.”

Yuzu’s hands tightened in her lap.

“I can’t believe she didn’t go to your aunt’s house,” she whispered.

Yuya curled up deeper into the scarf and let out the tiniest moan.

“Where is she?” he mumbled. “Ruri...where are you? Where did you go?”

Yuzu slid her arm across the table, and laid her hand against his arm.

“It’s going to be okay,” she whispered.

“I shouldn’t have sent her away,” Yuya mumbled. “I should have thought about her feelings. I can’t believe I sent her away.”

“Yuya, it’s not your fault,” Yuzu said softly. “Cheer up...I’m sure she’s probably safe. She might even be with Shun.”

That made Yuya tense up a little, and she let her fingers curl away from him. He’d told her about Ruri, about how she was dying, and how he’d sent her to live with his Aunt Asuka for her last days since they couldn’t pay for this house for much longer. He’d also said that Shun was no
longer living with him, but he hadn’t told her why. Maybe she shouldn’t have brought him up. Something must have happened.

Her mind cast back to that day in the construction site, and the photos that Zarc had thrown to the ground, claiming that Shun was working with the terrorist group that had killed her sister. She shivered.

*Please*, she whispered to any god that might be listening. *Please, let this family be all right. Let everyone come home.*

Her phone buzzed softly, and though she didn’t want to be distracted from the now, she had nothing else to say. So she opened up the message.

Her eyes widened.

*Please come to the hospital*, was all it said. *I have something for you.*

The message was from Grace.

~ * ~ * ~

“We’re going to need more. About three hundred. Make it happen.”

The voice echoed off the walls of the compound as Ruri made her way around the piles and piles of boxes towards it.

“If it’s been compromised, then delete the damn files. And get that last load of the teddies into the trucks. We’re going to need about five hundred per car.”

She tried not to look at the piles of boxes, with the hippo faces stamped on them. A few were open, and she could see the black metal teddy bears inside. She could almost smell the gunpowder on them, even though they weren’t the type of bombs to use them. She shivered.

She came around the pile and into the main office. From here, with all of the screens before him, the light made him almost impossible see. But she could make out the shape of the back of his head. He had a phone to one ear, as his other hand blurred over the keyboard before him, leaning forward towards the screen and shaking his head at something.

“Just make it happen, you got it? I don’t have time to field every little thing. I have to go before the last forest gets compromised. Deal with your end yourself.”

Shun hung up and slammed the phone down onto the counter. He began to type faster, and then abruptly stopped. She reached him, then, and slid her arms around him from behind. She buried her face against his neck, inhaling the sharp, metallic scent of where he’d been. His body did not relax at her touch, as it normally did. It was like hugging a rock. But she didn’t let go. Behind her, Kii-chan stuck its nose against Ao’s back, but Ao didn’t turn around.

“What is it?” he asked, after she held him there for a long moment.

“Nothing, really,” she said. “I just...wanted to.”

She laid there against him for another long moment. He didn’t move from his chair. She moved her lips to his ear.

“We’ll always be together, right, Shun?” she said. “I love you.”

That got a reaction. She felt his shoulders tense and then relax, felt his head slump a little. She pressed her advantage.

“I...already know,” she whispered. “It’s okay. We don’t have to be afraid anymore.”

He and she both knew that she wasn’t talking about his mission. He tensed up against her again. Kii tried to bat at Ao, to bait it into punching, but Ao only turned away.

“You taught me not to be afraid,” she whispered. “Thank you.”

Just the thinnest tremble passed through his shoulders, and she tightened her hug.

“It’s enough,” she said, her voice cracking now, with the desperation she was trying to hide.
“You’ve done enough, Shun. You’ve suffered enough.”

Shun stirred. His hands reached up to press against hers on his chest.

“It was my choice.”

She shook her head against him.

“No. It was my fault...I pretended I didn’t see how much you were hurting.”

She felt tears pricking at her eyes.

“I saw all of it. How you sacrificed everything for me. Even putting your life in danger. It’s enough, Shun.”

Shun looked down. She held to him like a lifeline. As though if she let him go, he’d disappear before her eyes.

“How you sacrificed everything for me. Even putting your life in danger. It’s enough, Shun.”

She held to him like a lifeline. As though if she let him go, he’d disappear before her eyes.

“Do you remember the day we became a family?” Shun whispered. Her lips parted. “Do you remember what you gave me?”

Ruri’s lips slackened. What she gave him? It was so long ago, she barely remembered — as far as her memory was concerned, Shun had always been her brother. She tried to remember: the day of Shun’s real mother’s funeral, and the day that he’d become a part of the Sakaki family.

“I...I gave something to you?” she said.

Shun seemed to slacken in her grip. His head slumped forward ever so slightly.

“It’s nothing. Never mind.”

He stood up, and her arms fell away from him as he stepped out of his chair. He didn’t turn to face her. He didn’t even look towards her. Her hands hovered in the air where his shoulders had been, and she felt like he’d already disappeared. Kii-chan wheeled its tiny arms at Ao, but Ao only waddled out of reach so that Kii fell over on its face.

“I will save you,” Shun said. “No matter what it takes.”

He turned, and his feet echoed against the floor as he made his way towards the door. Turning without once ever looking at her. She flinched — no. She couldn’t let him walk away. She had promised that she would save him!

“Wait!” she shouted.

She ran after him. She grabbed his hand, and he stopped. She fed her fingers between his, clinging to him, to his warmth and strength, her big brother’s hands who had put bandaids on her scraped knees and patted her head when she cried. But they felt so cold, now. Like she was holding onto empty marble.

“Niisan,” she said, eyes brimming with tears. “Don’t do this. Don’t do this horrible thing.”

Shun didn’t even move. He didn’t take his hand away from hers, but he didn’t move. He didn’t even look at her. She ran both her arms under his, grabbing him in a hug from behind. She pressed her face against his back, tried to will the warmth of her big brother back into it, instead of this cold shell of a stranger.

“It’s all right for me to die,” she said, the words finally coming out in the open. “You’ve done enough. It’s all right if I disappear here. But if you...”

He wrenched himself out of her grip with such force that she actually stumbled back. Kii-chan let out a little snort of surprise when Ao pushed it back, and it plopped onto its butt.

“I will never forgive the world if you die,” Shun said, his voice finally edged with heat and fire. “I’ll burn it all to cinders before I let it take you from me.”

“Shun!” Ruri shouted, but he was already almost to the door.

“Stay here,” Shun said. “And I promise I’ll save you.”

The door swung shut behind him, leaving her in the dark, with only the dead computer screens to light from behind her. She could see his afterimage, almost, painted against the door. Her hands
trembled.

No.
She couldn’t let him do this.
She bolted to the door, grabbed the handle, and ripped it open.

“Shun!” she screamed.

The hallway of the Kiga Group compound stretched out before her, and she bolted down it. Her skirt smacked against her legs as she ran, faster, faster, faster. She careened around a corner, and up ahead, she saw Shun in his dark jacket going around the corner.

“Shun!” she shouted again.

Come back, she thought.

Her legs ached, her arms pumped, she could hardly breathe.

Come back.
She careened around another corner, and at the end of the hall, she saw a single door.

Come back!

She exploded through the door, Shun’s name ready to scream from her lips again.

But then she had to stop. And she had to stare. Because she wasn’t in the Kiga complex anymore.

Instead, in front of her lay the hippo exhibit at the zoo.

Slowly, she approached the fence, her hands clasped to her chest. The hippos munched at their food, tails flicking back and forth, calm and uncaring of the girl who stared at them. She heard a small child exclaiming to his mother about how cool the hippos were.

Ah, she thought distantly. I understand. This is where I died the first time.

She turned, and she started to walk. She passed the gift shop, her feet wobbling against the cobblestones, and came to a stop, standing right over the place where she had died. She lifted her eyes up to the sky above.

If I had died here, she thought. Shun wouldn’t have gone where he did. If I had only died right then...they would have cried, but they could have lived on. They could have been happy. Shun could have been happy. I...I stole that from them.

And then, slowly, she sank to her knees. She clasped her hands before her and pressed her face to her hands.

“God,” she whispered. “Any God — if you’re there, please...take it back. Take back my life. Give it to Shun. Save him.”

She extended both her hands towards the sky, begging for something to hear her.

“Please,” she said, tears rolling down her cheeks. “Please! Take it back! Take back what I stole from them, what I stole from him! Give it back to him! Save Shun!”

For a moment, the whole world went dark. And then she inhales.

All around her, there are stars. They spin and swirl past her, as though she’s shooting through the galaxy. Sparkles dust her arms and tingle down her skin like soda fizz. She’s...she’s —

Pain shoots through her chest. A scream rips from her throat, as though huge needle has just stabbed through her heart and kept going. She feels something in her snap.

When her eyes clear again, she’s tumbling forward onto the stones of zoo courtyard. The stars are gone. Her hair splays about her, and she can’t lift her arms. Just in front of her face, she sees Kii-chan, lying on its side. Staring at her with its small, unblinking black eyes.

She feels...weak. She feels as though something is leaking out of her like blood — or life.

Before her eyes, Kii-chan starts to become see-through. Her lips part. And then she manages just
the faintest smile.

*God heard me,* she thinks.

She closes her eyes, and she lets the darkness take her away.

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Yuzu found Grace waiting in the hospital lobby. She looked tired, her normally effortlessly beautiful face marred by dark circles beneath her eyes and a hollowness to her cheeks. Yuzu didn’t complain when Grace wrapped her arms briefly around Yuzu, holding her tight. She let the hug last for a moment, and then gently pushed herself free.

“What’s wrong?” she said, her voice cracking just a little. “What happened?”

Grace put a hand to her cheek as though to stabilize it, her eyes drooping a bit with exhaustion.

“Zarc was stabbed,” she said.

Yuzu’s eyes bulged.


“It was...my fault,” Grace said, looking down. “Zarc and I found what happened to the Sakaki parents.”

Yuzu’s mouth dropped open. She took a step back from Grace, and looked at her. Really looked at her.

She still didn’t know what to make of the beautiful, but distant woman who had once known her sister. What did Grace really think about Ray? What...what did any of this mean?

“And?” Yuzu said.

Grace shook her head.

“They were already long dead,” she said. “But a...former associate of mine followed me. My costar Melissa. She tried to attack me, and...Zarc protected me.”

Her eyes filled briefly with tears, and she pressed a hand to her mouth. Yuzu could only stare. She felt...like she’d been punched. It...it never ended, did it?

“Never mind,” Grace said, shaking her head, tossing her hair over her shoulder. “He’s going to be absolutely fine, the doctors said. That’s not why I called you here.”

Yuzu opened her mouth to ask what else could possibly be more important than either, a: Yuya, Ruri, and Shun’s parents being dead, or b: Zarc being stabbed. But her words withered away when Grace reached into her bag and pulled out the torn half of Ray’s diary.

Grace held it out to her. Yuzu just stared at her.

It felt like it had been years since she’d seen it. She’d forgotten the pink designs of dolphins and flowers, and the heart in the center. She’d forgotten its weight, and the feel of its cover, when she finally gently, almost reverently took it from Grace’s hands.

Once, this had been her whole world. And now, it felt like it was nothing. Just an old, ripped up half of the diary.

“Why are you giving me this?” Yuzu asked, looking up at Grace. “You said you needed this...”

Grace shook her head, her eyes closing. She reached up and put her hands onto Yuzu’s shoulders.

“It should have stayed with you all along,” she said. “I think Ray knew that. That only you’d be able to use it.”

Yuzu felt a faint tremble pass through her.

“This diary made me try to ruin my own life,” she whispered. “Why would my sister want that?”
Grace gave Yuzu the smallest smile. She put her fingers beneath Yuzu’s chin and tilted her up to look at her.

“And you’ve grown so much since then, haven’t you?” she said.

Yuzu felt tears bubbling to her eyes, and she had no idea why. She tugged her chin out of Grace’s grip and wiped her tears away with the back of her arm. She hugged the diary to her chest with the other.

“You know, Zarc told me something before he went into emergency,” Grace said. “He sai that he finally knows, why he and I remain, but your sister doesn’t.”

Yuzu looked up at her, lips parting. She felt her breath catching — her whole body thrummed with the need to hear this answer.

“And what’s that?” she whispered.

Grace smiled, and once more squeezed Yuzu’s shoulder.

“He and I were lost children,” she said. “But so many children are. Ray was the one who saved us — or rather...she was the one who knew what we needed.”

Her eyes softened as she gently stroked Yuzu’s bangs from her eyes.

“All we needed was for someone to tell us that they loved us,” she said. “And Ray touched our lives that way. So that we can start to touch others’.”

Yuzu’s eyes blurred. She couldn’t see Grace for the tears. She hugged the diary to her chest with both arms, tilting her head down so that her bangs would hide her soft sobs.

Why did you have to be so good, Ray? she thought. And how can you possibly expect me to be even halfway enough?

Grace gently put her hands to Yuzu’s shoulders, and drew her in for another soft hug. Yuzu let her do it. She could only hug the diary, and cry.
“You know the police are tracking your movements, don’t you?”

Shun didn’t respond, and Reiji tightened his grip on the railing behind him.

The train station was loud and bustling. A train had just pulled into the station with a hiss as it settled, as hundreds of feet began to bustle back and forth and people’s voices shouted into phones or giggled with their friends. No one noticed the two stationary figures in the middle — Reiji, leaning with his back against the pillar, and Shun, standing on the other side with his back to Reiji, staring at the train without really looking at it.

Reiji turned around, looking around the stylized statue of the hippo carved into the pillar between them. At Reiji’s feet, Devaraja peeked around the corner at Ao, who was not looking back. For once, the little blue hippo was very still, and not trying to punch everything that moved. Shun did not look back at Reiji.

“This is your chance to stop this,” Reiji said. “Turn yourself in.”

Shun’s shoulders hunched up near his ears, the flaps of his dark purple coat covering what little of his face that Reiji could see.

“I can’t stop,” he said. “I will finish the mission.”

“Hundreds will die.”

“I can live with that.”

Reiji’s hand tightened around the thin railing around the pillar, his knuckles going white with the exertion. But Shun’s phone buzzed, and he reached into his pocket to pull it to his ear. Shun listened for a moment, and then nodded.

“Understood. I’ll take care of it.”

He hung up, and turned the smartphone towards him, tapping on an app. Reji frowned, peering up and over Shun’s shoulder. It looked like...a bowling game. A stick figure cranked its arm back when Shun dragged his finger against the screen, and then released it at the flick of his finger towards the pins.

The bowling ball struck all of the pins for a strike, and the words DELETE flashed over the screen. A distant boom and rumble sounded from somewhere, making a handful of people glance up towards the stairs.

Shun put his phone back into his pocket, pushed off the pillar, and turned back towards the stairs up to the street. Reiji spun to follow.

As they reached the street above, Reiji heard the hum of frightened voices, the scream of a distant siren, and the crackle of fire. Smoke blasted him in the face, and he coughed at the acrid scent of burning metal and rubber.

The blood drained out of his face when he saw the burnt out, flaming shell of a car sitting on the
side of the road near the station exit. There were people clustered at a distance on the sidewalk, some of them taking pictures, others clearly on the phone with the police.

Shun walked right past it as though he didn’t even see it, looking down at his phone instead. Reiji could hardly tear his eyes away. If he looked too closely, though, he could see something very much shaped like a twisted human body inside the blown out car...

He tore his eyes away, hurrying to follow Shun. Was Shun responsible for this? Could he really have done that?

Reiji’s eyes flickered towards another car parked on the side of the road, across from them. A man in a suit sat at the wheel of an unmarked black car, and Reiji saw him lifting a phone to his lips. Police, he thought with a twist of his stomach.

He heard the little sound cues of Shun’s bowling app once again. His eyes flickered at the sight of movement, and he looked down to see a small round object rolling out between the feet of the crowd of people, unnoticed. It rolled across the street and stopped beneath the police car.

Reiji knew what was going to happen only seconds before it did.

The car exploded in a rain of fire and smoke, drawing out screams and panicked cries from nearby civilians. The fire was so bright and hot that Reiji could only see the policeman’s arm hanging out of the window, already practically charred beyond recognition. He threw up in his mouth, clapping a hand over his lips before he spat it out onto the ground.

And still, Shun didn’t stop walking. His step didn’t even hitch. He put his phone away and continued on.

I should call the police, Reiji thought. Tell them where he’s going.

But then, I can’t.

He followed, at a distance now, as Shun wound his way through the city, leaving the burning cars behind. After a time, Shun turned down an alley, and climbed upon onto the fire escape. Reiji climbed after him, following him up every flight of stairs until they reached the roof. From there, Shun climbed up the ladder of a water tower. Reiji followed silently, wondering where he was going, until Shun reached the top of the ladder and pulled at a panel on the side.

It opened up to an empty darkness — there was no water inside. Shun pulled himself through and began to climb down the ladder on the other side. By the time Reiji had swung himself around to climb down after him, Shun had reached the bottom. Reiji looked down over his shoulder to see Shun pulling what looked like a cattle prod out of his jacket and jamming it into the hard-drive of a computer on the ground. What was this, some kind of secret hideout for the Kiga Group?

After the computer finished shorting out, Shun left the prod sticking out of it and kicked it over. There must have been important information about the Kiga Group’s plans in there.

Down below, a siren went off once, and Reiji looked over the edge of the ladder down to the street below. Police lights spun and bounced light off of walls. There must have been at least twenty police vehicles down there, and Reiji thought he could hear the hum of a helicopter somewhere out of sight.

A megaphone crackled, and far below, a police officer’s voice bellowed into it.

“Sakaki Shun. We have you surrounded. Turn yourself over immediately.”

Reiji looked back down at Shun’s shadowy back.

“Shun,” he said. “You need to turn yourself in. It will be all right. I’ll go with you. We can —”

“Can’t,” Shun grunted. “It’s too late for things like that.”

He slammed his foot into a spot on the floor, and a panel punched open, falling down into the darkness. Shun turned around and began to climb down yet another ladder. Inside the water tower structure? Reiji hurried to reach the bottom of the compound and follow Shun down into the darkness. He wasn’t about to let that bastard get out of his sight again.

There wasn’t much light down below, save for a few dim, greenish emergency lights that must have been glowing down here for decades. When they reached the bottom of the ladder, Reiji’s feet hit thin metal, which clanged softly at his impact. It was dark, cold, and smelled of acrid metal and sewage — not quite a sewer, but not the type of place that people would normally go, either.
Shun was already headed down a set of stairs very like a fire escape, which wrapped around a thick metal pillar that must serve as the support for such a large underground bunker. Reiji turned and strode after him, his scarf flapping behind him. He could hear Devaraja waddling near his feet, and didn’t stop to think about how the hippo had managed to follow.

“What is this place?”

“You don’t know? I thought you knew everything,” said Shun in that infuriating voice of his.

Reiji didn’t rise to the bait. He waited until Shun responded, and when he did, he sounded irritated that Reiji hadn’t forced the question.

“Underground tunnel system. Built when the city was. Hasn’t been used in decades. No one will know where we’ve gone.”

Reiji grit his teeth.

“This is madness,” Reiji said. “You’ve already killed so many, Shun — how many more are you going to kill on your way to this goal?”

“As many as it takes.”

Shun disappeared around the corner of the wrapping staircase, and Reiji picked up the pace, coming around the corner to see Shun’s back again.

“That man will not help you, Shun,” Reiji snapped. “I know what he is — he’s not human. He’s a curse — the curse of that family, and of ours.”

“It doesn’t matter. As long as it saves her.”

Anger spiked through Reiji’s head, and for a moment, he almost had to stop. He didn’t dare, though, lest he lose sight of Shun again.

“Why will you go so far for her?” he shouted, his voice echoing through the underground bunker, bouncing off the walls and back into his ringing ears. “She’s an outsider! She has nothing to do with you!”

That got Shun to finally stop. He stood very still on a flat stretch of the wrapping staircase, hands deep in his pockets, staring ahead. Not looking back at Reiji.

“She’s my sister,” Shun said finally. “I have to save my sister.”

“Look around you, Shun! Look at me!” Reiji shouted. “I’m your brother, Shun. Reira and I are your siblings! How much longer will you abandon us for her?”

Shun looked up towards the ceiling. He sucked in a long breath, and let out a longer one.

“You were never the type to cling,” he said. “So why are you still following me?”

Reiji’s hands curled up into fists. For a moment, he just shook. He could barely think. It was cold, and it smelled awful down here, and the sight of Shun’s back never facing him made him want to ruin something. But he sucked in a breath, and forced himself to be calm.

“I have sacrificed everything to keep this family safe,” Reiji said. “To protect Reira, and our home, despite the awful things our mother did, despite the cruelty of our father. I have tried to build a life.”

Shun still wouldn’t turn towards him.

“And as I was building that life, Shun, it was always built to be one where you would be a part of it, when you finally came home.”

Shun didn’t answer. Didn’t even move. He was like a statue.

“I still remember it. The day that you convinced mother to send Reira and I back home to the Akaba estate. It was against the rules of the Kiga Group to send children away because they wanted to be able to brainwash us. But you saw them for what they were. And you promised to stay behind in order to let Reira and I have a chance to live apart from them.”

“And you think you owe me, or something?”
“On the contrary,” said Reiji, fixing his glasses. “I have still never forgiven you for it.”

Their silence rang between them.

“Shun, this is enough,” Reiji said, softly now. “It’s time to give up. You still have a life to live. We can leave the curse of our family and theirs behind. Leave, now, before they use you up and toss you aside, the way they did our mother.”

For a moment, the air changed, like an extra breath was added to the silence. For a moment, Reiji thought that Shun might be about to respond.

A spotlight exploded across them from somewhere down below. Reiji swore, drawing back against the far wall, and Shun whipped around, eyes flashing in the light.

“We have you surrounded,” came the voice of the police again. “There is nowhere to go. Turn yourself in now.”

Still stunned by the shock of light, Reiji didn’t have a chance to react. He heard Shun swear, and then, he heard the musical cues of the bowling app game again.

The echoing sound of something rolling through a metal pipe rattled to Reiji’s right. He turned his head and adjusted to the light just in time to see another spherical bomb drop out of an opening in a pipe, and fall down towards the ground below.

The explosion sent a plume of smoke like a tsunami roaring upwards. Reiji pressed against the wall as he heard glass shattering and the spotlight went out, heat exploding past him.

Once the explosion subsided, Reiji heard Shun climbing down the stairs again. Reiji coughed into his hand. He grabbed his scarf and pulled it over his mouth to breathe against the smoke, and he followed Shun the rest of the way down to the bottom.

He threw up into his mouth again, and this time he had to spit it out against the metal floor. Bodies littered the ground — or what was left of them. Cracked SWAT helmets scattered their visors across the floor. Torn black uniforms were stained with pools of blood. Reiji had to look away at something else; he couldn’t handle looking at the torn and charred bodies.

Shun nudged at a limp leg with his boot and shook his head.

“The pests are gone now,” he said, his voice sounding distant and dull. Frustrated tears rose to Reiji’s eyes. Dammit. The Shun he had known would have never gone this far. Perhaps that Shun was completely gone. There was no getting his brother back. He slumped against a wall, not even really comprehending the complex they’d descended into.

He’d been telling Shun to give up this whole time, but maybe Reiji was the one who needed to give up.

Distantly, Reiji heard a soft click. Shun’s head snapped to the side. A window set into the wall nearby shattered with the hail of bullets that passed through it. Reiji’s eyes widened and his lips parted — the whole world seemed to grind to a halt, as the bullets cascaded through the air between the rain of glass.

“REIJI!”

Reiji felt something pummel into him. Felt arms shoving him back.

Oh, Reiji thought, as the world slowly chugged back to a stop.

He was on the ground, and Shun was on top of him, and there was blood on the ground and it wasn’t his.

“Shun,” Reiji coughed. “Shun.”

Shun coughed too, and it came up with a small splatter of blood near Reiji’s face. With a groan, Reiji managed to sit up, trying to support Shun’s suddenly limp and heavy body, but his hands shook too much, and Shun simply slid to the floor.

“Shun,” Reiji gasped again. “Shun!”

He was still breathing, but it looked like he was having a hard time. Glass dusted the back of his
jacket. Just a foot away, Devaraja laid on the floor with Ao laying on top of it in almost the exact same position. Reiji shook Shun’s shoulder once. Shun sucked in a rattling breath — alive, but for how much longer?

“You absolute idiot,” Reiji hissed. “You...why did you...”

Shun had saved his life. Despite everything, Shun had turned around, and he’d saved Reiji’s life. Reiji couldn’t...he couldn’t forgive this either.

He didn’t realize that the men in the black coats and dark hats had appeared around him until they were all standing in a circle around him. He looked up, tensing with his arms making to cover Shun, not relaxing when he saw the black hippo face on the lapels of their jackets.

“This is bad,” said one of them.

“They’ve got us surrounded.”

“This could be the end.”

Reiji looked from one unrecognizable face to the other. He looked back down at Shun, still just barely alive.

“You ought to turn yourselves in,” he said, his voice sounding hollow even to himself. “If you do, they might...”

“It’s too late now.”

“They’ll never forgive us.”

“If we walk out there, we’ll be shot on sight.”

Reiji’s hands curled up against the ground. He wanted to argue, but as they spoke, he knew they were right. Everyone remembered the incident. Everyone was willing to write off the deaths of a few terrorists to prevent such a thing from happening again. Reiji could only stare down at Shun — at his brother — who had just decided that his single-minded mission was less important than saving Reiji’s life.

Reiji looked up at the shadowy faces surrounding him.

“Can you get him to safety?” he said.

“We’re pinned down. It will be hard.”

“What if someone drew their fire?”

There was a brief, quiet contemplation.

“...we will make sure he is safe, in that case.”

Reiji nodded. He stood up, and took his crossbow from his belt. He loaded in the little red balls. How odd, he thought, feeling distant from his own body. It seemed like just yesterday that Shun was the one barging into his office, demanding to know where Reiji had purchased his weapon, knowing full well he had bought it from the Kiga Group. How odd that it seemed like just a moment ago that Shun was the one trying to convince Reiji to break ties with them.

“It seems this curse isn’t one that we’ll leave behind so easily,” Reiji said.

He turned, weapon loaded. He heard, but did not look to watch, the Kiga Group pulling Shun onto their shoulders and bundling him away. Reiji let out a short sigh.

*Forgive me, Reira*, he said. *I was not able to save you, or Shun.*

A spotlight exploded in his face, but he did not falter. He turned his crossbow into the light, and fired.

The echo of a thousand machine guns ripped through the compound, silencing all other sounds and thoughts.
His eyes crack open. He can see his hands, tiny and bony, and he’s too tired to even twitch them.

The shadow of the bars falls against his impossibly thin arms. His stomach has forgotten how to growl. He smacks his lips, but it takes all of his energy, and there isn’t even any saliva left to wet them.

His red eyes are the only thing he has the energy to move, and he stares up at the bars, at the box that he’s crunched into, just big enough to fit a child his size.

_Ah, thinks Yuya. I wonder what I’m doing in here._
The train clicks and clatters. It’s dark inside the tunnel, but the lights of the train, and the faces illuminated by phone screens, keep the world afloat in a bubble of light.

A man in an orange shirt emblazoned with a hippo face on the lapel stands up from his seat when the train stops. He walks to the door and leaves. As the doors slide shut, no one notices the black, robotic toy teddy bear left on the seat.

More people shuffle in, not noticing the splashes of orange among the tight, sardine packing of people. Not noticing the identical black bears seated on other random seats, tucked against the floor, laying on the luggage rack.

He sits quietly in the middle of the car, one leg crossed over the other.

“I realized it one day,” he says out loud, but no one hears him. “I truly hate this world.”

Yuuri leans back in his seat, staring up at the ceiling as the train pulls away from the station with its fresh packing of passengers.

“Everyone is living in a box,” he says. “They fold and pinch and crunch themselves to fit inside this box. No matter what happens outside it, no matter how tight it becomes, they stay inside the box.”

He leans his elbow on the back of the seat, and his head on his arm. He inhales the sharp scent of warm bodies all pressed up against each other. The train is so thick that it’s impossible to move freely. Perhaps only a very small child would be able to squeeze in the space between legs.

“So I’m going to destroy it,” Yuuri said. “I’m going to rip this world apart, and break open all of the boxes. I am going to leave my box.”

As though in answer to his thoughts before, he blinks. There is a child standing in front of him, who was not there before.

The girl stares at him with more calmness and assuredness than a child her age, nine or ten, ought
to have. Her pigtails sway slightly with the movement of the train.

“My name is Ray,” she says.

He smiles at her.

“I am Yuuri,” he says.

She is holding a bright pink diary in her hands, and he finds his eyes drawn to it. She holds it up to her chest.

“I know what you’re about to do.”

Yuuri smiles.

“Do you?”

She nods.

“I’m going to drive you from this world.”

He tries not to laugh. It sounds so strange, coming out of a child’s lips with such conviction.

“Oh? And how are you going to do that?”

It feels to him then that the entire train is empty. That the world is only him and her, and the teddy bears left behind throughout the train. The walls turn black, and he can see the swirl of the red circles that glow along every surface, as the world outside the windows begins to warp. A world that only he can see — except, perhaps, he thinks he might see the spark in her eyes. Perhaps she can see the world like he does, too.

Perhaps he’s finally found someone who understands what he sees.

But her eyes betray no acceptance. She only holds up her diary.

“I have the charm to transfer destinies written in here,” she says. “I’m going to chant it. I’ll save everyone, and you’ll be cast into darkness.”

He leans his face against his fist, smiling. How interesting. He’s found something so very interesting.

“I’ll seal you into a curse, then,” he says.

She doesn’t respond. She opens her diary, and begins to flip the pages. He doesn’t hear the words, but he sees her lips moving, faster than they should, as the pages flip and flip and flip.

As she works, so does his own plan. The teddy bears’ eyes begin to glow, their bellies ticking with the timers. The bombs begin to heat up, as the train hurtles along. He can’t just let her undo all of this hard work, now can he?

He takes the hippo sticker from his lapel, and reaches forward, pressing it against her forehead.

Her voice hitches, and her eyes widen. All of the air seems to have left her.

“You’ve only completed half of your charm,” Yuuri says with a smile. “You won’t be able to save everyone.”

But her charm has done at least some of the work already — he can feel the cracks running through his chest as though he’s been heated up from the inside until the glass that makes him up begins to shatter.

He hears her scream first. The world goes white and black and the circles of red encase them both separately. She lets out another scream — and then his curse, and the cost of her charm, both take effect at once. He watches her split in half. He watches each half melt and reform.

He watches the pair of hippo hats that form from her shattered pieces fall away into the darkness.

And then her charm takes hold of him. He screams, too, feeling his whole body rip in half — feeling what remains of him shatter into pieces. He lets out another, fragmented scream —

All that remains are a pair of black rabbits, which turn, and flee into the darkness.
And the hats keep falling down and down and down...

~ * ~ * ~ E N D   F L A S H B A C K ~ * ~ * ~

Yuzu stood with her back to the wall, staring up at the ceiling. It was cold and dark and empty in the hospital this late at night. The door to the office beside her was slightly open, and she felt like she wasn’t supposed to be there. But when Yuya had called her in tears to say that Ruri had been found and to please come to the hospital, she hadn’t hesitated.

She needed to be here. For Yuya. For Ruri. Even for Shun, who wasn’t here.

“It seems when they found her collapsed at the zoo, she was calling out for your brother,” said the voice of the doctor from inside the room beside her. “He didn’t answer when we tried to call him as the first emergency contact. Is everything all right?”

She didn’t hear Yuya respond. She tried not to let the raw, wry laugh come out of her throat, instead opting to put a hand over her mouth. Could the doctor really not have been listening to the news? Did he not know what Shun had done, and what group he was associating with?

For a long time, she didn’t hear anything from inside the room. But then a small, raw voice parted the quiet.

“How much time does she have?”

Yuzu’s air stuck in her throat, desperate to be able to hear the answer. The doctor didn’t respond for a moment.

“Through the night. Perhaps she’ll hang on until morning. But I’m afraid this is the end, Sakaki-san.”

Yuzu pressed herself into the wall, and tried to smother her sobs into her palm.

“...what ever happened to Doctor Yuuri? And...and the medicine he was giving her?”

There was a long, long pause.

“Doctor Yuuri?” the doctor said finally, and Yuzu could hear the frown in his voice. “There’s no doctor like that here.”

Yuzu hesitated, her lips parting. But...hadn’t that been the doctor who...Ruri had always mentioned?

“But — but he was here, taking care of Ruri.”

“You know, that’s very curious,” said the doctor. “But I used to have an assistant named Yuuri.”

She heard the sound of a chair squeaking as it turned slightly.

“I had a dream about him last night. He came into my office and we spoke of old times.”

“What...what happened to him?” Yuya mumbled.

For a moment, Yuzu only heard the buzz of the x-ray viewer from inside the room.

“He died. Nearly...sixteen years ago.”

Yuzu didn’t say a word, didn’t let a single tear escape her, until she heard the door open the rest of the way, and saw Yuya appear, shuffling into the hallway. He closed the door behind him, and then he just stood there. Staring at nothing, with big circles under his eyes.

Yuzu didn’t say anything. She stepped forward, and she slipped her hand into his. He twined his fingers into hers, and he didn’t speak as she turned towards him, and pressed her head into his shoulder.

“She’s going to die,” Yuya mumbled. “She’s really going to die.”

Yuzu tightened her grip, and tried not to cry. It wasn’t her place to. She needed to be here for Yuya.

“I’m here,” she whispered. “I’m here, Yuya.”

He stood there, pressed against her, for a long time. She could hear him crying, could feel the
tears littering her shoulder. But then he put his hand on her shoulder, gently putting space.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “You don’t have to stay.”

“She’s my friend, too,” Yuzu whispered.

Yuya looked like he was going to collapse to his knees.

“Is it...all right...if I just...have some time with her?” he mumbled.

Oh, Yuzu thought, feeling her own tears bubble up to the surface. She’d already seen Ruri once, right when they’d brought her in. She hadn’t even been strong enough to open her eyes, but Yuzu wanted to believe that she’d seen a tiny, relieved smile on her lips when Yuzu had called out to her.

But Ruri...had she really only known her for a handful of months? Had she really only known this family for such a short time? She lowered her head. Yuya deserved his last time alone with his sister.

“Is it all right if I say goodbye to her before I go?” she said.

He could only nod.

She didn’t linger long, as much as she wanted to. She just held Ruri’s hand, and whispered a few things she didn’t even remember now. How awful is that...not remembering what her last words to Ruri had been. Her hand had felt so cold and limp.

Fighting back the tears, then, she’d given Yuya one last hug.

She wondered when she’d ever see him again, when there was no Ruri to brighten up the Sakaki house. When the Sakaki house was sold away, and Shun was a terrorist with the police on his heels, and Yuya looked like he was going to wither away.

I’ll see him again, she reminded herself, as she walked out into the cold winter evening, her tears freezing to her cheeks. I...I have to believe that I will.

She felt the diary, still in her back after Grace had returned it to her. For once, it didn’t seem like it was on fire. For once, it seemed only a pleasant heat against her side.

Not yet, at least.

~ * ~ * ~

“You know what I am, don’t you?”

Shun didn’t want to listen to him right now. Everything hurt. He’d needed stitches on his back, from the bullets that had grazed him and the glass that had cut into his skin. The bandages were too tight, and too itchy. He slumped in his chair, his entire body aching for sleep. But he couldn’t. He had no time for sleep.

“You’ve told me,” he finally responded, knowing that Yuuri was waiting for an answer. “You’re a curse.”

Yuuri sat on top of one of the boxes holding the teddy bombs, flipping through a book that Shun couldn’t see the title of.

“Precisely,” said Yuuri. He flipped another page, but his eyes didn’t seem to be on the pages. “I want to show it to her.”

Shun was too tired to ask him what he meant. Yuuri elaborated anyway.

“I want to show the girl in the hat a broken world.”

The girl in the hat. Yuuri had never mentioned his before. Shun tried to think, but his brain was so slow and heavy. The...the hat. The hippo hat? He put his hand to his forehead to block out the glowing screens before him. One last plan. One last mission.

“I don’t care if the world breaks,” Shun said. “As long as Ruri lives.”

He looked up to see Yuuri smiling at him over the top of his book, suddenly standing right next to
“You needn’t worry about that,” said Yuuri, placing the book down on Shun’s desk. “In fact...shall I show you one of my spells? The survival strategy?”

Shun blinked. He didn’t remember standing up, and he didn’t remember walking into this room. This room. He remembered it, more clearly than he thought possible. He remembered all of the ornate carvings on the wood paneled walls, and the grand piano against the back wall, and the small tea table beside the thick, plush bed. It hadn’t changed a bit since he’d been eight years old.

He heard the beep of a heart rate monitor, and that drew his eyes to the bed. A man in sunglasses was crouched over the bed, a hand against the forehead of...Shun sucked in a breath. Reiji.

Reiji’s entire visible body was wrapped in bandages. His eyes were closed, glasses folded against the night stand. A doctor hovered over him with a clipboard, shaking his head. Shun felt something in him crack — something in him that he’d tried to lock away so that it would never be hurt again.

“Reiji-sama,” the man in the sunglasses said. “Reiji-sama. Please, wake up.”

The heart rate monitor was beeping so slowly. And before Shun’s eyes, it grew slower, and slower...and it flattened. The doctor sighed, shaking their head.

“The damage was too severe,” he said softly to the man in the sunglasses.

Shun didn’t hear the rest. He could only stare at the bed, his mouth hanging open and his eyes wide. He’d...he didn’t. He was too stubborn to die.

“How sad,” Yuuri said. “It seems your twin brother is dead.”

Yuuri walked across the room and sat down on the bed beside Reiji’s limp body. Neither the man in the sunglasses nor the doctor seemed to see him, even as he leaned down towards Reiji’s face, cupping his cheek in one hand and running a thumb over his lips.

“You look very alike,” Yuuri said with a smile.

Shun couldn’t answer. His hands trembled. He gripped his wrist with one hand to still it. Why — why had this bastard brought him here? Just to see Reiji — to see his brother — die?

Yuuri looked up, caught Shun’s gaze, and smiled. Then he leaned over to the heart rate monitor. Without a word, he ran his finger down it, flicking with a flourish at the end.

A beat later, the monitor hiccuped. And then it began to beat. Shun’s breath caught in his throat. It...did it...

Reiji stirred. His lips opened and closed, and then his eyelashes fluttered, his eyes squinting up towards the ceiling. He tried to speak once, and his voice caught. He had to swallow before he spoke again.

“Where am I?” he mumbled.

The man in the sunglasses and the doctor both spun around. The man in the sunglasses dropped down next to the bed beside him.

“You’re home, Reiji-sama. You were found in an underground transport system gravely injured.”

Reiji let out a tiny cough again, turning his head and squinting at the man in the sunglasses.

“Where...where is Reira?”

“You are sleeping in the next room, Reiji-sama.”

Shun felt a breath he hadn’t known he was holding unfurl from his chest. Reiji was...he was alive. It was...Yuuri had just performed a miracle.

“How do you believe me when I say I can save Ruri’s life?”

Shun stared down at his brother, still pinned down to the bed by his wounds — but alive. His heart was beating, and he was alive. Alive...Yuuri could...could really...

He felt something in his chest clench. Something...different. He didn’t look at Yuuri, but he could
sense the man standing next to him again. Something in his chest released. A single thought came to him.

*He could have done that before. The medicine wasn’t real.*

“Finish this last mission, and I will save Ruri,” Yuuri said.

Shun set his jaw. Yuuri wanted this from him in exchange for Ruri’s life. He inhaled again.

“Shun, don’t do it.”

Reiji’s voice cut through him like a knife, but he didn’t dare react. Yuuri was standing on the other side of the room now, tilting his head towards something sitting on a table. Half of a pink diary. Shun walked towards Yuuri.

“Destiny can’t be changed so easily, Shun,” Reiji gasped.

“Reiji-sama? Who are you talking to?” the man in the sunglasses asked.

Shun picked up the diary at Yuuri’s prompting. He felt something twisting in his mind. But he couldn’t let it show. He couldn’t reveal it. He couldn’t...he’d have to make Reiji worry.

“Well, let’s go, Shun” Yuuri said. “Let’s see just how much you can destroy through love’s power.”

Shun didn’t look at Yuuri. He didn’t look at Reiji. He tucked the diary into his jacket at Yuuri’s nod, and turned to follow him.

“Shun!” Reiji shouted. “Don’t get on that train!”

The train car was open before Shun. Inside, the people in the dark coats and the wide brimmed hats waited for him. Yuuri boarded first.

Shun knew that he couldn’t hesitate. If he hesitated, Yuuri might know that his brain was turning. He stepped onto the train, ignoring Reiji shouting after him.

I’ll save you, Ruri. No matter what it takes.

This chair was so uncomfortable. Yuya’s elbows dug into his knees where they rested, and his legs were starting to fall asleep. But he didn’t get up. He didn’t move. He just sat in the chair beside Ruri’s bed, and watched her sleep.

Her breaths were so short and shallow, so soft that sometimes he thought that she had stopped already. Her hands laid limply on the covers. But she looked peaceful. Her face wasn’t tense with pain. She seemed to only be asleep. Maybe this was the best he could ask for. The most peaceful end he could possibly hope for.

We were given so much extra time, he thought, his eyes briefly twisting towards the hippo hat sitting on the table beside them. *I never liked you much, but...I suppose I should thank you for what you gave us. Even if we never found the Hippodrum in the end.*

He looked back at Ruri. He didn’t want to take his eyes off her — he wanted to be here, for every last moment that she was alive, even if she wasn’t awake to hear him or see him or say anything at all. He’d spent the last thirty minutes talking to her, but his voice was hoarse now. He wasn’t sure if there was anything left to say to her. He’d already cried so much.

I wish I could have done more for you.

A cloud moved out of the way of the moon, and the light spread through the open window, spilling over her face and her hair. His eyes felt so heavy. But he had...he had to stay awake. He had to stay here for her. He had to be here for every single moment he had left. He never should have sent her away.

His eyes drooped. He forced them open. They drooped again. His body was so heavy. It trembled slightly. When was the last time he’d slept? He didn’t remember.

“Hey, Yuya?”
His eyes slowly, slowly closed.

“Ruri?” he said, but his voice seemed only to be in his head.

He could almost hear her smiling, though she was still sleeping soundly on the bed before him, and he himself was drifting off to sleep.

“You’re tired, Yuya-nii. You should sleep.”

“I don’t want to miss anything...I want to be here until the end.”

He heard her laugh softly.

“Yuya, do you remember the day that we went digging for clams?”

The scene seemed to draw itself before him, and though he knew logically that he was still falling asleep on a chair in a hospital, he found himself standing on a beach. Down near the waves, he could see three small, shadowy lumps, blurred by time and memory. He recognized the backwards baseball cap on one of them, and the dress with the tear on another.

“I remember,” he said.

The shadowy shapes came into focus, and he saw Shun, nine years old, helping Ruri build a sandcastle. He saw his own nine-year-old self patting at the tower with a shovel to level it off, while a seven-year-old Ruri toddled around with a bucket of sand, trying to tip it upside down with her tiny hands.

“It was the first time we all went out together as a family,” Yuya whispered, feeling a small smile come to his lips.

The sand castle collapsed, and Ruri started to cry. Shun and Yuya both ran over to her, patting her shoulders and wiping her tears away. Shun gave her a small shovel, and pointed down the beach. Yuya jumped to his feet and started waving his arms, eyes bright and chattering at high speeds about all the clams they could find. Ruri stopped crying and scurried after them.

The Yuya of the present didn’t look to his side, but he could hear her footsteps, and sense her presence, as Ruri appeared beside him, watching their younger selves run off down the beach.

“I got lost,” she said. “I went too far. Remember?”

“I do,” Yuya said. “We weren’t paying attention to how far we were getting from each other. And then the sun started setting, and everyone else was leaving, but we couldn’t find you.”

The scenery changed. The sun was setting in the ocean now, setting it alight with orange and red and turning the beach shades of yellow. A tiny Ruri crouched near the surf, sitting and staring at it blankly.

“We looked for you for hours,” Yuya mumbled. “And then when we finally found you, you started crying. You hadn’t cried before that — just when you saw us running towards you.”

The tiny Ruri looked up at a shout that Yuya didn’t hear in the memory. Shun and Yuya ran down the beach to her. Yuya was already crying, tackling her in a big hug while Shun made sure neither of them fall over. Ruri immediately started bawling, clutching both her brothers’ hands as she shook and trembled.

Beside Yuya, he heard the wind pick up at Ruri’s hair, and tousle the hem of her long white dress. He finally turned to find her in his dream, standing barefoot in the stand and looking out at the memory with a soft smile.

“You know why I cried?” she said, smiling at the three smaller versions of them. “Because before then...no one had ever looked for me.”

She turned to Yuya, smiling. He felt tears prickle at his eyes.

“It was then that I knew that I was wanted,” she said. “That I was a child that someone would look for.”

She tilted her head, hair flying up in a beautiful obsidian wave behind her.

“I loved every moment I spent with you two,” she said. “Thank you. It was fun. It was worth it. All of it.”
Yuya’s tears blurred his vision, and he wiped them away with the back of his hand. When he could see clearly again, they were no longer on the beach. This scenery was unfamiliar to him. They stood knee deep in cool, clear blue water, an ocean that spread as far as the eye could see, blending into the horizon. A sky of stars blossomed over their heads. In this light, Ruri looked radiant, as though she reflected the entire beautiful world.

“It’s not fair,” Yuya mumbled. “We all should have been together forever.”

Ruri smiled.

“We will be together forever,” she said, putting her hand on his chest. “Don’t forget that.”

Yuya put his hand on top of Ruri’s, squeezing.

“I’ll never forget you, Yuya, no matter where I go,” Ruri said. “You saved me. We’re soulmates, after all.”

“I wish I could have done more,” Yuya whispered, a tear rolling down his cheek. “I wish...I wish we had one more miracle.”

Ruri smiled, but her eyes were softer with sadness this time. She slid her hand down his arm and reached his hand, and he automatically twined his fingers into hers. She pressed up against him, and he slid his other arm around her, just memorizing the feeling of holding his sister in his arms.

“I’m going to be gone soon,” she said. “So now, it’s your turn.”

His lips parted, and he felt her breath on his lips.

“What do you mean?”

“Shun is lost,” Ruri said. “He’s lost, and alone. He needs someone to find him, the way I did. You’re the only one who can find him, Yuya.”

Yuya’s eyes bubbled with tears.

“Maybe he doesn’t want me to find him.”

Her body pressed up against his, and the world around them was cool and silent. The entire world, for just a moment, was just them.

“He does,” Ruri said. “Don’t forget, Yuya-nii. You and Shun share something too. We’re a family, after all.”

Yuya closed his eyes. He felt Ruri’s breath near him again, and then he felt her hand leave his, and her body move away.

“I love you, Yuya-nii,” she said.

“I love you, Ruri,” he whispered, tears rolling down his cheeks.

Something shattered. Yuya threw himself out of his dream with a start, gasping and stumbling to his feet. Ruri still laid on the bed, unmov ing, and barely breathing as glass flew from the shattered window. Something blurred past his face, hit the opposite wall, and bounced. He choked with a gasp, and spun to look at it.

Shun’s dark blue hippo bounced back onto its stubby feet, letting out a little huff through its nose.

A shadow moved in front of the moon. Yuya slowly turned his eyes to the window.

Shun’s coat fluttered in the breeze, his silhouette blocking out the moon. But Yuya could still see his eyes, cold and dark, and his jaw set.

“Shun,” Yuya whispered, feeling his chest tighten up.

Shun didn’t respond to his own name. He only turned his eyes away from Yuya, and looked down at Ruri instead.

“I’m here for Ruri.”
The cold winter air snaked into the room from the broken window, and Yuya shivered. He wanted to run forward and do something to cover it, to protect Ruri from the chill.

But Shun was still standing there, staring at him, illuminated by the stars and the moon like a hulking shadow, and Yuya didn’t dare move.

Ruri’s words from his dream rang in his mind. *It’s your turn to find Shun.* He swallowed. *But what if he doesn’t want to be found?*

Shun jumped down from the window, landing on the glass and crunching it beneath his boots. Yuya wanted to flinch backwards — the last time he’d seen Shun, they’d tried to beat the crap out of each other. He stood his ground, though.

“Where have you been?” he finally said, his voice cracking. “She doesn’t have much time left, and you’ve been... where?”

Shun’s eyes flicked from Ruri to Yuya, and his lips curled slightly. “She’ll live,” he said. “I’m going to save her.”

Yuya stepped forward, planning on putting himself in between Shun and Ruri, but Shun was a little bit faster, moving to the other side of the bed so that he stood in the way of Yuya’s path to Ruri.

“And how are you going to do that?” Yuya said, his voice cracking. “By killing hundreds of people?”

Shun scowled, his shoulders tensing, hands shoved deep in his pockets. “The day we were born was the day of fate,” he said. “And from that moment, this unfair world will finally end. Ruri will be saved.”

“You must be stupid!” Yuya shouted, flinging his arms out to both sides. “Doing this — this won’t save Ruri! It won’t save anyone!”

He could see Shun’s hands tightening through the folds of his jacket pockets. His jaw tightened. “You can’t see the truth of the world,” he said. “It will never give us — anyone — what we truly deserve. So we have to remake it.”
“This isn’t the way!” Yuya shouted, hoping that maybe his voice would call a nurse, get them to call the police, before Shun took Ruri away. “Shun, please — listen —”

Shun’s lips curled, and he closed his eyes.

“Don’t get in my way, Yuya.”

In one fluid motion, he pulled his hand out of his pocket. Yuya started to move, but he froze as Shun’s hand stopped in midair. The barrel of a gun pointed right at Yuya’s head.

Yuya’s mind went deadly quiet. His breaths came short. Was...was Shun going to shoot him? Would he actually shoot him? Would his brother actually....

He felt his hands trembling, but he didn’t let himself falter. He set his jaw, even as his lips trembled and his body shook. Shun’s eyes were cold and hard, but Yuya would not drop his gaze.

If this was a bluff, he would call it. He and Shun had — had broken on their separate ways but...but Shun would never truly hurt him. He was...he was sure.

Shun’s hand slightly lowered. Yuya let out a breath he hadn’t known he was holding. And then Shun let out a burst of a sigh. Yuya froze as Shun walked towards him, as his head fell against Yuya’s shoulder and his arm wrapped around him from behind, tugging him against him in a hug. Yuya held still, held his breath. Shun had never been much of a hugger, but...

“Shun?” he whispered.

He could hear Shun breathing near his ear, could feel his heart beating against his own.

“To be honest, Yuya,” he breathed. “I’ve always wanted to do this to you.”

Yuya choked as he felt the gun dig into his chest.

He heard the bang, and everything immediately went black.

~ * ~ * ~

“Yeah. It looks like she doesn’t have much time left...maybe until morning.”

Yuzu shifted her phone to her other ear, pulling a shirt out of Yuya’s dresser.

“Yes, Yuya’s staying over to...to be with her until the end. I’m bringing him a change of clothes...don’t wait up for me, papa. I’ll be home late. Mmhm. I know. I love you too.”

She hung up her phone, looking briefly at the little hippo keychain dangling from it. She couldn’t bring herself to smile at it this time. She tucked her phone away, and put the shirt she’d grabbed into a bag.

Her eyes wandered, however, away from Yuya’s dresser and to the nightstand near his bed. More accurately, to the half of the diary that she’d set down there. She bit her lip, staring at the back of its beat up, water damaged cover.

“I understand now,” she remembered Grace telling her. “Ray left this diary behind for you.”

“For...for me?”

“She must have known. Only you have the strength to use the charm written inside.”

“I...I don’t understand.”

“Ray had a charm inside her diary. A spell that could transfer destinies. She must have left it for you.”

“But I’ve...I’ve never thought anything of changing destinies.”

She could remember Grace’s warm, soft hand alighting on hers.

“Well, then save it. Because I’m sure that someday, there will be someone important to you that you want to save.”

Yuzu found herself standing over the diary again. She picked it up, cradling it gently, feeling the worn, soft pages. So long ago, it seemed, this diary had been her life. But now...
Now, maybe it could save someone else’s.

She tightened her fingers on the cover. All right. She would find the other half, and she would learn the charm. And then....

Then...she would save Ruri.

Downstairs in the kitchen, a phone rang. Yuzu jumped, almost dropping the diary. She managed to keep hold of it, fumbling it against her chest. The phone kept ringing, and for a moment, she was paralyzed. Who was calling the Sakakis? Should she answer it? She didn’t live here, after all, what if it was something that was private? Or something that only Yuya could answer?

Hang on, what if Yuya was calling her? She wasn’t sure why he wasn’t calling her cell phone, but maybe he’d been too frazzled to think straight. With that thought in mind, she bolted out of Yuya’s room, tucking the diary into her waistband so that she could slide down the fireman’s pole and run over to the landline. She grabbed it just before the answering machine picked up.

“Yuya?” she gasped.

“Hello, Yuzu.”

Yuzu’s eyes widened, and her mouth dropped open. That wasn’t Yuya’s voice — but it was a voice that she knew.

“Shun?” she said, gripping the phone with both hands. “Shun, is that you? Where have you been??”

“I have the other half of the diary. Bring yours to where I tell you. Let’s work together to save Ruri.”

Yuzu’s words died on her lips. She felt a nervous tingle in her fingers. Shun...Shun had the other half of the diary? Where had he gotten it? And how did he even know that she had it? She hadn’t told him or anyone that Grace had given it back to her yet.

“Shun, Ruri’s in the hospital. She’s been calling for you,” Yuzu said. “You need to go see her, before it’s too late.”

“It won’t be too late. Because you and I are going to save her.”

She heard a faint burst of static, and then Shun’s voice came through again — he sounded so...monotone. It made her feel uncomfortable.

“I’m sorry. I can’t leave where I am right now. The police are looking for me. I need you to bring the diary where I tell you. We can save Ruri.”

We can save Ruri, Yuzu mouthed to herself, feeling her heart tremble. It was true that...that was what she had decided she wanted to do. And if Shun had the other half...if she could learn the charm that her sister had known...

“Okay,” she said. “Tell me where to meet you.”

~ * ~ * ~

The zoo was spooky at night. Yuzu shivered, hugging the diary to her chest. Her breath fogged the air before her, and her scarf wasn’t quite doing enough to keep out the early winter chill. The fact that the gate had been left open was pretty creepy, too. Had Shun left it open for her?

It was so dark and hard to see. She could make out the shapes of enclosure edges, and signs set up showing where the exhibits were, but other than that, everything was a shadowy blob. She walked forward carefully, trying not to catch on the cobblestones and fall.

The hippo exhibit wasn’t far from the front of the zoo. She made her way carefully, using her phone as a rudimentary flashlight.

“Shun?” she called, as her phone light shone on the railing of the hippo enclosure. “Shun, are you there?”

She heard a faint, distant crackle. Then an echoey voice sounded from a way down the path.

“Did you bring the diary?”
“Yes,” Yuzu called.

She stopped, feeling horribly nervous. This felt wrong. The last she’d known, Shun was working with a terrorist organization to save Ruri. Would he try to steal the diary from her? Or was he telling the truth about working together? She didn’t mind if he wanted to take the diary to save Ruri but...but all of this felt ominous. Why wasn’t he coming out to meet her?

“Where are you?” she called.

“Around the corner,” Shun’s voice echoed. “Sorry, Yuzu, but there are cameras near where you are. I don’t want to get picked up on them.”

Yuzu tensed. But...but she needed the other half of the diary. She couldn’t save Ruri without it. She had to take the risk. After all...Shun wanted to save her, too, right?

She took a step forward.

“You should be at the hospital,” she called. “Yuya is there, and...and Ruri wants you to be there with her.”

“I’ll be with her once she’s saved. We’ll go into a new world together.”

That didn’t sound ominous at all. Yuzu shivered, but she walked slowly through the dark around the corner. She caught sight of something small and glowing. She squinted. Were those...eyes?

She walked slowly up towards the pair of glowing red eyes.

“Shun?” she called again. “How did you know that I had the diary? I didn’t tell you, or Yuya.”

Yuzu reached the glowing red eyes, and found herself standing in front of a small, black, robotic looking teddy bear with blinking red eyes. She stepped back from it, feeling a sudden burst of nerves. What was this? A toy? What was it doing here?

Shun took a long moment to respond to her question.

“A friend told me.”

Yuzu’s lips parted. A friend? But who would know that...

The back of her neck tingled, and she felt the hair on her arms rise up. Someone was watching her.

With a gasp, she spun around. Despite her intuition, she had expected to be wrong, and find no one there at all. But standing behind her, as clear as though it were daylight and he alone did not belong to the natural shadows of the night, stood a tall, lean man with an easy smile. His dark purple hair was slicked back from his head, and he wore a long purple coat. Something about his eyes made her want to scream for help.

“Who are you?” she said, dropping her phone to hug the diary protectively to her chest.

He smiled at her, and to her surprise, he swept one arm before her and bowed.

“I am a ghost,” he said. “I have to admit, my dear...with you and that diary, I was quite worried that Ray would do me in again.”

Yuzu’s eyes widened. Her lips parted with a question that she never got to ask.

Because right at that moment, the teddy bear behind her exploded.

She screamed, flung several feet forward before she hit the ground and skidded across the cobblestone. Heat exploded all around her, driving away the winter chill with the sudden explosion of flames that clung to the ground. Her skin felt seared and for a moment, she couldn’t breathe for the smell of singed hair and smoke.

She gasped for breath, her whole body rattling as she tried to make sense of where she had ended up, sprawled across the floor.

It took her too long to realize that she was still holding the diary in one hand — and that one corner of it had caught fire.

With a cry, Yuzu dragged it towards her, hugging it against her chest. Her body was too heavy,
too hurt to move yet, but she — she couldn’t let the diary disappear! She needed it to save Ruri!!

She tried to smother it against her chest, to put out the flames by hugging it to her. All she did was press the fire against her, and she screamed, feeling the pain burn through her shirt. Her legs curled and flailed, but she didn’t let go — she couldn’t let go!

“It seems your love is being tested.”

The ghost’s voice rang out just above her, as though he were standing right next to her. She couldn’t see for the smoke and the tears of pain, and she tried to ignore him, pressing the diary harder against her. The flames continued to eat away at it, not responding to her desperate, weak attempts to blot out the flames with her body.

“Try harder, my dear. If you don’t, the diary will be gone. You’ll lose everything.”

Yuzu screamed with the burning, fiery pain that seemed to be eating away from her from the inside. Tears rolled down her cheeks, and fire licked at the air all around her, but she didn’t try to get up, she didn’t try to run, she just held the diary as tightly as she could, clinging to the one last bit of her sister — the one last bit of her hope to save Ruri.

It wasn’t enough. She felt the pages crumbling into ash, her hug tightening against her own chest as the diary disappeared. Charcoal and ash tumbled from her empty fingers.

“Ah,” the ghost said softly. “How unfortunate. Sometimes, even the power of love isn’t strong enough.”

Yuzu’s tears rolled down her face, pooling into the cracks of the cobblestone. She heard footsteps beside her, and she managed to twist her eyes upwards. She saw the shadow of Shun, and the ghost beside him, both of them standing near her. Fresh tears rolled out of her eyes. Shun...how could he have...

He had the other half of the diary. Her eyes were so blurry that she couldn’t see his face, but she could see what he held in his hand.

“Burn it,” the ghost whispered to him. “I can’t touch it. You’ll have to get rid of it.”

Yuzu wanted to scream, but she had nothing left in her. She could only watch, helplessly, as Shun dropped the other half into the flames, watching it blacken and char until there was nothing left.

The ghost let out a soft, contented sigh.

“Now,” he whispered. “Now there is no one left who remembers the charm.”

She saw their shadows turn away and heard their boots disappearing into the flames. The heat still crackled around her, and she felt her entire body starting to fall into darkness.

Ruri... she thought as her eyes drooped. I’m so sorry.

~ * ~ * ~

Yuya woke with a gasp, shooting straight up. His head spun. Where — where was he? What time was it?

He groaned, wincing at the faint light of morning glancing through the open window, a frigid breeze hitting him in the face. That...that was right, he was in the hospital, and Shun had broken the window, and...

Ruri!

He scrambled to his feet, panic thrumming through him. But his worst fears were already confirmed.

Ruri’s bed was empty.

The curtains fluttered in the wind, and Yuya felt his heart sinking into his stomach. Ruri was going to die, and...and Shun had stolen her away. Where had he taken her? Where...why had he taken her away from him? He wasn’t even allowed to be with her in her last moments?

He stumbled back, and his heel crunched on something. His lips parted, eyes flicking down. He lifted up his foot to find...something small and blue, broken open like a used up party popper. As
he watched, the blue drained out of it, leaving it a dull white. A black hippo face was imprinted on
the top.

His chest thrummed with a faint pain. That was right...Shun had shot him, hadn’t he? He put a
hand to his chest, but he didn’t feel any hole, or even a rip in his shirt. Had...had that strange thing
on the floor been what Shun shot him with? But why had he blacked out, then?

Something niggled at his mind, like the twist of a memory. His lips slowly parted. What was this?
Was he...remembering something?

“Yuya-kun!”

Yuya startled from his thoughts with a yelp, wheeling his arms and spinning around. Where had
that voice come from?

The light of the rising sun spread from the window and across the room, spilling out over the
hippo hat set on the table beside the bed. Yuya’s eyes slowly turned towards the hat.

“You’re finally awake!”

The voice was definitely coming from the hat. Yuya’s eyes widened. Was it the hippo princess?
No, this voice didn’t sound quite as harsh as her...but there was something the same, too.

“Who...who are you?” he said, feeling weird about talking to a hat, despite everything else going
on around him.

“My name is Ray,” the hat said. “You have to hurry, Yuya-kun. The train is going to leave, and
you have to be on it.”

“The train?”

“The train of fate. It will depart soon, and the dark rabbits will try to destroy the world. You two
are the only ones who can save it.”

Yuya approached the hat, lifting it up in his fingers. He didn’t feel anything, no strange spark of
life or anything, but the voice still rang in his head.

“You two?” he said.

“Yes. You and Shun.”

Yuya tensed.

“But Shun...”

“Hurry, Yuya-kun. The train will leave without you. You two can definitely do it!”

He felt a little tap on his leg, and looked down. Pinku was staring right up at him, and for the first
time, Yuya felt like he saw a spark of strange intelligence in those beady black eyes.

“But what can I do?” he said, his voice cracking, looking back down to the hat.

“You’ll know when you get there,” said Ray. “And when you get on board, you’ll find it.”

Yuya felt his heart leap in his chest.

“Find it? Find what?”

This time, he did feel a small vibration in his fingers, coming from inside the hat.

“You’ll find your Hippodrum.”

~ * ~ * ~

The train clicks and clatters, jostling the people packed inside it. None of them seem particularly
bothered, their eyes on phones or newspapers or out the window, swaying along with wherever
the train takes them.

None of them notice the black teddy bears tucked on empty seats, in luggage racks, stuffed
between legs. No one pays much attention to the men in the dark coats and hats, or the people in
the bright orange shirts with the hippo faces pinned to the front.
“I really do hate this world.”

Yuuri stands in the middle of the crowd, pressed in on all sides by people. But he is not a part of them. He never was, and he certainly isn’t now.

“This world is made up of people in boxes,” he says. “People who stuff and hide themselves inside the boxes called Self.”

He looks over his shoulder, to where Shun is surrounded by the rest of his fellows. Watches him talking in a low voice to them, explaining the last phase of the plan. Yuuri smiles.

“Everyone is trapped inside this box. Even if there is a person on the other side of that box, you can’t climb the wall to reach them. People are content to stay inside.”

He runs a hand through his hair with a sigh.

“So I’ll break all of those boxes,” he said. “I’ll free the world from the boxes called Self.”

The train pauses at the next station, and people clamber on inside, packing themselves in tighter with the bombs. Yuuri smiles again.

“SHUN!”

Yuuri turns as Shun does. Yuya stands at the far end of the car, gasping for breath, his face red from exertion. Yuuri can’t help but smile. So the other one came after all. He carries the hat under one arm, but it’s not as though the girl in the hat can do anything without her charm. Without her diary, and without her sister. It pleases him, actually, to know that at least a part of the girl in the hat is here to watch the world burn.

Shun turns to Yuya. His lips tighten, and Yuuri smiles. Shun is very much his. Yuya’s words can’t reach his “brother” now.

“So, you came, Yuya,” Shun says.

Yuya pants, his gaze hard.

“Let’s settle this, Shun,” he says.

~ * ~ * ~ FLASHBACK ~ * ~ * ~

Yuya

???

He isn’t sure how long he’s been here. The box is small. Big enough for him to sit up, if he’d had the strength. But he’s so tired. It’s all he can do to just lay at the bottom of his cage, and stare out at the nothingness through the bars.

Why am I here?
Who put me here?
How long has it been since I got here?

He’s stopped thinking about those questions. They never seem to have any answers. He’s simply here, in his box. There is nothing in the world except for this box, and the bars, and himself. He is alone.

At least...that’s what he thinks.

As though by magic, he squints into the nothingness outside his cage. His dry lips smack slightly as he lifts his head. Is that...

He sees another set of bars, across from his own. Another box. Where did it come from? And when? As he pushes himself onto his bony elbows and leans forward, he can see another shape inside the other cage. A shape about his size, his age, round with childhood but bony with lack of food. The boy in the other box hugs his knees to his chest and stares at the floor.

Yuya’s lips part.

“Who are you?” he calls, to the only other person he’s ever seen.
The boy’s glinting, hazel-yellow eyes lift up to meet Yuya’s. He frowns, and with the shadows from his swoop of aqua-green bangs, it almost looks like a scowl.

“Who are you?” he counters.
“Hiragi-san — Hiragi-san, you must get up. You’re the only one who can save them. Hiragi-san!”

Yuzu coughed, her whole body racking with pain as she tried to dislodge the smoke from her lungs. She shook, but the hand on her shoulder only became more insistent.

“Hiragi-san! The train is going to leave. You must be on it.”

Yuzu managed to crack her eyes open. She coughed again, and spittle came up with it. She...she remembered the bomb. She remembered Shun burning the diary, and the cold eyes of that man who’d been with him. Oh — oh, the diary. She’d...she’d lost it. Her sister’s precious words, and the charm to save Ruri....to save everyone...she didn’t...

The hand on her shoulder shook her even more insistently and she rolled over, shaking and coughing.

“You are the only one who can change this fate, Hiragi-san,” the voice said. “If you do not go, the whole family will die.”

She tried to squint through her tear-blurred eyes. She didn’t quite recognize the man leaning over her, but there was something familiar about the shape of his face...as though maybe she knew someone related to him. He looked pale and sallow, as though he’d just come out of a hospital bed to find her, his glasses sliding down his nose.

Her eyes welled with fresh tears.

“I can’t...I can’t save anyone,” she gasped. “I don’t have the...”

The hands held her even more tightly, forcing her to sit up by her shoulders.

“You don’t need it,” he said through grit teeth. There was a bandage wrapped around his forehead, and she could see more wrapped around his hands and arms from under his sleeves, and yet he still seemed to move as though possessed. “I know you do not. I have seen his power, but I know the one who wrote the diary was more powerful — you must have that within you. If you do not, the whole family will die. Shun will die.”

Ruri. She needed to...she had to save Ruri.

She shoved herself forward, trying to get to her feet. The man who had awoken her didn’t seem able to stand himself, his shoulder shaking with the effort of breathing.

“I don’t know the words,” she said.

“Then find them. The train will be leaving soon. I feel that you must be on it.”

Yuzu met his eyes for just a moment — this man she did not know, who had found her somehow even though she’d told no one she was going to the zoo to meet Shun, who seemed so invested in the survival of the Sakaki family, and she didn’t even know why. Why was he here, urging her on?
“Why are you doing this?” she said. “Who are you?”

“We don’t have time for questions right now,” the man said, eyes meeting hers with a ferocity that did not match his weakened state. “But I cannot, in good conscience, let them go without all the help they can get. There is nothing I can do — but I know there is something that you can do.”

The words. She didn’t have the words. The diary was gone — she didn’t know the charm.

But something of Ray must be within her. She could learn the words. She could figure it out, somehow. She could...

“It’s our newest song.”

“It’s a special one. It’s for Ruri. It has her most favorite phrase in it.”

Ruri’s most favorite phrase. Her favorite words. Yuzu choked on her breath.

She knew the words.

She just needed to make it to the train in time.

She didn’t waste time on goodbyes or thank yous, and she thought that whoever he was, he would probably approve. She only turned on her heels and ran. The train — she knew what train that the next attack would be on. That was the train of fate.

That was the train of her destiny.

~ * ~ * ~ F L A S H B A C K ~ * ~ * ~

Yuya

10 Years Ago

The Box

How long has it been since I’ve last eaten something?

Yuya lays on his side, staring at the side of his box. Light from somewhere casts the shadow of the bars across his arms, but he hasn’t looked outside in a while. There’s little to see, and it takes so much effort to move. His stomach hasn’t even growled in what feels like several days, but time is impossible to count in here. His vision spins, and he thinks about closing his eyes.

How long has he been in here, in this box, forgotten by the world? How long has he been aching for something to eat? He doesn’t even remember how he got here, or who put him here. Or why. Or if there’s anyone waiting for him outside the box.

“Yuya? Are you still alive?”

The voice is familiar, and the phrase is too. Yuya manages to wiggle his fingers.

“Yes,” he mumbles. “What about you, Shun?”

“...I’m hanging in there.”

Yuya slides his head forward just a bit, so that he can look outside the bars instead. Through the bars of his cage, at least two or three feet away from him, are the bars of another cage. Inside, it’s dark and shadowy, but he can still make out the shape of Shun, crunched with his knees against his chest, leaning against the side of his box. He looks exhausted. There are huge circles beneath his eyes.

“I dreamed that I was eating a really big bowl of curry,” Shun mumbles.

Despite thinking his body had given up on ever eating again, Yuya feels his mouth begin to water at the mere thought of it.

“Yes,” he mumbles. “What about you, Shun?”

“...I’m hanging in there.”

Yuya slides his head forward just a bit, so that he can look outside the bars instead. Through the bars of his cage, at least two or three feet away from him, are the bars of another cage. Inside, it’s dark and shadowy, but he can still make out the shape of Shun, crunched with his knees against his chest, leaning against the side of his box. He looks exhausted. There are huge circles beneath his eyes.

“I dreamed that I was eating a really big bowl of curry,” Shun mumbles.

Despite thinking his body had given up on ever eating again, Yuya feels his mouth begin to water at the mere thought of it.

“Oh,” he mumbles. “Maybe I should eat in my dreams, too.”

“Don’t bother,” says Shun. “You’re only hungrier when you wake up.”

Yuya falls silent. His stomach is so empty that he’s forgotten it exists. His limbs are so heavy that he doesn’t think even an earthquake could move him again.
“It’s better not to sleep,” Shun says then, and Yuya takes the effort to refocus his eyes on the other boy.

“W...why?” Yuya whispers.

Shun’s tiny hands tighten on his knees.

“Because the next time we close our eyes, we might not open them again.”

Yuya shivers, the most movement he’s managed to get out of his weak and useless body in a long time. He wonders what it would be like, to fall asleep and never wake up.

Maybe that would be all right, after all.

~ * ~ * ~

Somehow, no one on the train seemed to notice them, despite Yuya’s shout. Shun turned, standing in the middle of the men in the dark coats and wide-brimmed hats, and his eyes met Yuya’s. His face tightened, and Yuya felt something in him tense as well.

“So you came, Yuya,” Shun said.

“Let’s settle this, Shun.”

Yuya inhaled. No one on the train paid them any attention, even though they were all packed together so tightly that Yuya could barely see Shun’s head through the crowd of people. He tried to push forward, but it was as though the people were frozen, even though the train continued to rattle along, bouncing him up and down and back and forth against the still bodies. He could see the black teddy bears everywhere. Left on seats, dropped between people’s feet, tucked into the luggage shelf. A thousand pounds of explosives, and the train hurtling towards death.

“Where’s Ruri?” Yuya asked, his voice suddenly small and hoarse.

Shun’s eyes were so cold, so unreadable. Yuya still remembered the weight of his body leaning against him, and the bite of the gun barrel in his chest.

He still remembered the slowly growing memories in the back of his mind, the ones that Shun had restored to him. The ones he wanted him to remember.

Say something, Yuya thought. Tell me I’m not wrong. Tell me I’m not wrong about you.

Tell me the truth. Please.

But Shun’s face didn’t change. He still looked as cold and distant as before. Maybe Yuya was wrong. Maybe Shun hadn’t been trying to make him remember.

“Ruri is here,” Shun said finally.

All at once, the world seems to melt away.

An explosion of curtains rippling through the air fills Yuya’s vision. They flap and bulge out at him, rippling in a wind he doesn’t feel and smacking their velvet sides against his skin. A light glows somewhere at the end of the suddenly pitch black train car — pitch black, except for the glowing red circles that line every available surface, with the number 95 glowing in the middle. The people in the train car are gone before Yuya can even comprehend the transition, and the world outside the windows is as black as ink. Only the teddy bears, Yuya, Shun, and Yuuri, seated on a now empty bench, remain.

But the light continues to glow at the other end of the train car, and as the curtains finally settle, fading away and leaving only the now transformed train car behind, Yuya sees the cloth retreat and drape instead over the shape at the back of the room.

It’s a bed, he realizes with a start. A huge four-poster bed with a thick, colorful canopy and...and it’s a bed he knows. It’s the bed that Shun and he made for Ruri.

And on the bed, Ruri lays silent. Her eyes are closed, her hands clasped over her chest, her hair flooding the pillow beneath her, her skin pale with the color of death. Instead of a headboard, there are multiple heart monitor machines. Every single one of them reads a flat line and zero beats per minute.
Yuya feels something in him break, and for a moment, he almost collapses. Tears fill his eyes. No. No, she can’t be gone already — he wasn’t here for her when she passed!

“There’s still time to complete it,” Shun says, and Yuya’s eyes snap to him.

His face is unreadable as ever. Eyes as cold as ever. His jaw is set.

Is Yuya wrong? Is he wrong about why Shun wanted him to remember? Yuya’s eyes slide briefly over to the man sitting in the seat on the side of the car, in between them. Yuuri. Ruri’s old doctor. The man who died in a terrorist attack that he led sixteen years ago. The reason that Shun abandoned them for this.

“Complete it?” Yuya says, voice shaking. “Are you really going to go through with this, Shun?”

Shun doesn’t drop Yuya’s eyes, and Yuya is afraid to look away. After that if he does, he’ll lose Shun yet again. He doesn’t know what to do. He feels like Shun is waiting for something from him, but he still doesn’t have all of the pieces yet. He’s still trying to understand, and Shun hasn’t given him much to work with.

“The only way to save Ruri is with the survival strategy,” Shun says.

The way he puts emphasis on the last two words makes Yuya think he must be missing something important. Shun is trying to convey something to him. But Yuuri’s eyes are on the both of them. Ao begins stacking up boards in front of it and then breaking them with its stubby legs. Pinku, as though in some strange attempt to counter, has a package of eggs in front of it, which it proceeds to begin to break against its forehead one at a time.

Maybe Yuya is grasping at straws. Maybe Shun truly is lost, and doesn’t want to be found, no matter what Ruri says. Maybe he’s just desperate to believe that he hasn’t truly lost his brother after all, and wants to believe that there’s more meaning in what Shun is doing, instead of inane bloodshed that Ruri never would have wanted.

Maybe this is the end.

~ * ~ * ~ F L A S H B A C K ~ * ~ * ~

“Are you still alive?”

Yuya’s lost track of how many times Shun’s said that. He’s lost track of how many days it must have been. But every so often, he’ll hear Shun’s steadily quieter voice asking over and over again:

“are you still alive?”

He clenches and unclenches his fists.

“Yeah,” he gasps through his painfully dry throat. “Guess you are too, huh?” “How long do you think it’s been?”

Yuya can’t even begin to imagine. He can feel the bones in his cheeks without even touching his face. He can see how badly his wrists are protruding, but sitting up or moving is pain, so he doesn’t bother. He doesn’t remember if he’s slept or not.

“Yuya?”

“Shun?”

Shun doesn’t respond for breath.

“Can we make a promise?”

Yuya blinks, his lips parting.

“What do you mean?”

He hears Shun licking his lips to try and stave off the dryness, and becomes intimately aware of how dry and cracked his own lips are.

“At this rate, one of us is going to die,” Shun mumbles. “So I...I want us to make a promise. That if one of us makes it out of here, the other will do something for them.”

“Something like what?”
Shun shifts very slightly in his cage, but everything is so loud here against the silence.

“Like...passing on a message to someone important.”

Yuya lets his head fall back a bit so that he can see the top of his box. Someone important? Maybe he’ll ask Shun to do that too. But who would he send a message to? Who...who’s someone important enough that he would want to tell them something if he doesn’t make it out of here?

Shun shifts in his cage, the sound of his shirt against the floor echoing in Yuya’s tinny ears. Shun inhales sharply.

“Hey,” he gasps. “There’s something inside my box.”

“This is such a cruel world, isn’t it?” Yuuri muses, and Yuya shoots a glare at him. The hippo hat is sitting on the seat beside the doctor, who folds his hands against his knee. Yuuri doesn’t appear to be looking at Yuya, instead, his gaze is down towards the hat. “What do you think, Ray? How will you enjoy seeing the world be broken?”

Yuya feels faint of breath, and sick. He doesn’t know what to do. Doesn’t know what to say. He feels completely alone in this train, as though he’s been stuffed into a box with no way out.

A box with no way out.

His eyes slowly move back to Shun. He inhales. He steps forward.

“Shun,” he says. “Please.”

Shun finally drops his eyes from Yuya’s. He turns around towards Ruri, and walks around to the side of her bed, crouching beside her lifeless body. Gently, he scoops one of her hands into his, holding it between both of his hands, leaning over her, his eyes finally softening and lips parting.

“Your words can’t reach him,” Yuuri says, and this time, he’s speaking to Yuya. Yuya shoots him another glare. “After all, this life is so poor and cruel. It takes so much to find something to live for — to find a light to stay alive for. He found his light...and the world is trying to take it away.”

Yuuri smiles, and tilts his head, bangs falling against his cheeks.

“And you’re trying to stop him from saving his light. Doesn’t that make you the world’s accomplice?”

Yuya chokes. His eyes flash back to Shun, to the vulnerable expression on his face as he looks down at Ruri. His eyes well with tears, and his fists curl up.

“I...”

Ruri was my light too, he thinks. And so were you. So why are you the only one who...

“I’m the only one who can give him what he wants,” Yuuri says. “I’m the only one who can save him.”

He smiles again, tilting his head down towards the floor now.

“After all,” he says. “What can you offer him?”

Yuya chokes on his words. He has nothing. He has nothing to say. Nothing to give. He was wrong this whole time. He’s useless. He came here for nothing — he can’t save Ruri, and he certainly can’t save Shun.

He can’t even save himself.

The train rattles to a stop, and the doors slide open. Instead of the usual rush of people, there is only an endless blackness outside the open doors.

At least, until a shape appears, and there’s the clatter of a pair of feet stumbling to a stop inside the doors before they snap shut, and the train continues hurtling on towards its destination again.

Yuya’s heart catches at the sight of the girl bent over and gasping for breath.
“Yuzu!” he says. “What are you doing here?”

Yuzu takes a moment to catch her breath, a hand crushed to her chest as she struggles for air. When she looks up, her eyes are hard and determined, her jaw set.

“I’m here to save Ruri,” she says. “I’m going to use the charm to transfer destinies.”

Yuuri smiles like one smiling at a very small, amusing child.

“You work so hard, don’t you?” he says with a small laugh. “But how will you do that, my dear? I burned the diary. The charm is gone.”

Yuzu sucks in another few deep breaths. She straightens her shoulders and closes her eyes.

“I know them,” she says. “The most important words...I know what they are.”

Yuuri doesn’t look particularly perturbed, but he does switch his crossed legs.

“Oh? But even if you use it, you’ll have to take the penalty. You’ll be burned away from the world’s scenery. Nothing will be left of you.”

Yuya’s heart squeezes, and his eyes widen. No — no way! She can’t —

But Yuzu looks up, not at Yuuri, but at Yuya. Her jaw is set so tight that her face is shaking, but there’s no fear in her eyes.

“I don’t care,” she says. “I want to save an important person. I’ll take the punishment.”

“Don’t!” Yuya cries, stepping towards her. “Yuzu, don’t! You don’t deserve to — this is our —”

Yuzu shakes her head, cutting him off.

“I’ve already made up my mind, Yuya,” she whispers.

Yuya’s tears finally escape him, rolling down his cheeks, and scattering onto the black and red floor. He can’t look her in the eyes. He can’t bear this — Ruri, Shun, and now Yuzu? Will everyone disappear?

He feels a stirring in his chest, and chances to look back towards Shun. Shun is still crouched over Ruri, but his eyes are back on Yuya.

Yuya lets out a thick, strangled breath.

Oh.

He finally understands.

“So this is how it ends,” he mumbles. “In the end, we were all always doomed to be destroyed by our past.”

He turns towards Shun and Ruri, tears in his eyes.

“Right, Shun?”

~ * ~ * ~ F L A S H B A C K ~ * ~ * ~

“It’s...it’s an apple. There’s an apple in my box!”

Shun’s voice is full of so much excitement, so much more animation than he’s ever had, that Yuya manages to push himself up onto his elbows, turning his head towards Shun’s box. As though it’s lit by its own internal light, he can see the apple in Shun’s hand as bright as day, glowing as red as blood.

“Check yours too!” Shun says, spinning towards him with as much force as his weak body can manage. “There must be one in yours too!”

Yuya’s lips part. Could...could there...?

He manages to swing his head around, looking back into each corner. He even takes the effort to look up towards the ceiling as though it might be growing there somehow.

But he knew from the beginning, he thinks as the faint flutter of hope dies in his chest. There was
no apple here. There never was.

“There isn’t,” he whispers, letting his head loll forward. “It looks like you were...chosen, Shun.”

Shun’s entire face falls. His eyes widen.


Yuya shakes his head. He feels even more tired that before, and he wants to melt into the floor. He wants to stop existing right now — everything hurts so much.

“Looks like you’re the one who’s going to live,” he says.

Tears well in his eyes. He didn’t think he had any space left in him for tears anymore. He chokes for a moment on the lump in his throat.

“W-will you do it, Shun? Will you keep our promise and take a message to my important person?”

He tries to look at Shun through his blurred eyes, and all he can see is the horror etched on Shun’s face, the panic in his eyes and his parted lips. His fingers tighten on the glowing red apple, and faint tears grow in the corners of his eyes too.

“S-sure,” Shun mumbles. “I’m...sorry...Yuya.”

He sniffs, hugging the apple to his chest and closing his eyes.

“I guess this was destiny.”

~ * ~ * ~

Yuya looks down at the floor, his hands rolled into fists.

“I understand now, Shun,” he says. “The reason we met that day.”

His eyes lift up to the bed. The canopy is starting to flutter in a wind he doesn’t feel. The heart-rate monitor is registering a heart with negative four hundred and ninety eight beats per minute, and going down fast. Curtains begin to wash over the floor past his feet.

“It was all for this moment,” he says. “It was all for this, right now.”

Shun stands up. On the bed, Ruri’s body starts to lift up, her head still lolling back, her hair whipping about in the breeze, as though she’s being dragged up by puppet strings. Her bed sheets and canopy whip about in a wild windstorm. The stuffed bear on her pillow, with its stomach stitched up, watches impassively.

Yuya exhales, and closes his eyes.

The train car fills with a thick static, and Ruri’s eyes snap open. She feels the hippo hat snug on her head, but for the first time while wearing it, she is awake. Her mouth opens, and her voice rushes out.

“SURVIVAL STRATEGY!”
She falls.

It’s gentle, like floating down through a substance that is half water, half air. The weight of her skirt flutters around her legs. Below her, the hat spirals down, leading the way into the dark.

Slowly, the world becomes visible. Frozen designs of circles and circuits and numbers coat the air, all the world around her frozen in gray instead of the normal burst of color, noise, and movement within the world of the girl in the hat. A distant echo of music plays briefly, but the girl in the hat is not here. Ruri is the only one. She’s the one who chose to come to this world this time. She’s the one who put on the dress, the corset. She’s the one who followed the hat here.

Ruri twists gracefully in the air until her feet are facing downwards, and she lands, lightly, balancing on her tall heels as she descends on the middle of the staircase between the two gigantic bear platforms.

Up at the top, ahead of her, she can see a single glowing circle, orbiting around a shadowy shape who stands at the top. She cannot see Shun’s eyes from this distance, but she can tell who he is. He looks so heavy. His whole body is weighed down by the world.

Ruri tilts her head, her hair falling down around her bare shoulders, and she smiles.

“Shun,” she whispers, without moving her lips. “It’s time to wake up.”

Shun stirs at the top of the stairs. His eyes don’t lift to hers, and nor does his mouth move when he speaks. His voice echoes around the cold, frozen world.

“Ruri? Is that you?”

“I’m here, Shun. Let’s go back together.”

“Go...back?”

Shun’s shoulders shudder, and his head bows further down.

“I can’t yet. I haven’t done anything for you.”

Ruri feels sadness tug at her smile, her eyes softening. She raises up one foot, and steps to the next stair.

Her heel digs into the glass surface of the step, and the glass cracks. All at once, before she can blink, the surface of all of the stairs shatters in explosion of shards. She throws her hands in front of her face, but when she lowers them again, the glass is as frozen as the world around her. The shards hover in the air, glinting in some light she can’t see. They coat the air between her and Shun.

She smiles again, and walks forward. The glass, frozen in space, tears against her dress and skin as she walks, but when her blood spurts to the surface, it flits away down the stairs in glitter like a rain of sequins. It hurts. But she keeps climbing the stairs.
“Hey, niisan,” she says, her voice carrying up through the empty world. “Living is a punishment, isn’t it?”

The glass rips at the ruffles on her skirt, making them sag and drag behind her.

“As long as I lived a Sakaki, I’ve received small punishments.”

Yuya stares up at Ruri’s back, standing down at the first platform, watching her climb. Watching her walk through the frozen storm of glass, even as it slices through her skin. The glitter her blood turns into wafts down the stairs towards him. His heart squeezes in his chest.

“Oh,” he murmurs. “I understand. It’s all been a punishment.”

He climbs the first stair. Above him, Ruri continues to climb towards Shun, alone at the top of the world. And he climbs towards him, too, towards his brother, and his sister. The glass begins to tear at his clothes and his skin, cutting a line of blood into his cheek.

“One day, my parents told me to start calling Shun “brother.” What was up with that, I thought. You can’t just become brothers just like that.”

The cut on his cheek stings from the tear that rolls down from the corner of his eyes. But he keeps climbing, even as he continues to push through the cutting glass.

“I didn’t need a brother,” Yuya whispers, tears welling up against his eyelashes. “I didn’t know what to think when you came home with my parents.”

Ruri smiles at the sound of Yuya’s cracking voice, his steps on the stairs behind her. She keeps climbing. She’s nearly halfway to Shun.

“Yuya, you were always like a nagging mom,” she says, her lips finally moving with her words. “Always telling us to take off our wet shoes before we came in. Insisting that we didn’t eat until everyone was home.”

The sound of her heels click and echo through the world, but her voice is stronger.

“Shun would always lie down after dinner. We always had to tease you into helping out.”

She feels the tears welling in her eyes now, and she chokes for a moment, but she doesn’t dare stop walking. Shun is so close, now. Her skirt has entirely shredded away, and her boots are falling apart. Her corset only dangles together by a few strings. Her skin is littered with tiny cuts that sting against the air.

“But it was because of you both that I felt alive,” she said. “Every punishment, no matter how small or petty, is a precious memory. Because were together. Because I could be Sakaki Ruri.”

She reaches the top of the stairs, feet now bare and cold against the chilled floor.

“So please,” she whispers, as the last of her hippo dress dissipates, leaving her bare. “Shun. Come back.”

Shun has been trying so hard not to listen. He feels sick. No. He didn’t want to make her come this far. He has a plan. A plan where he gives it all up for her. Where she and Yuya don’t come after him, and he can disappear without regrets. A plan where he never acknowledges the roil of pain he’s suppressed inside his chest.

But he can’t hold it back. A hole pops open in his back, and a red flake escapes.

“I can’t,” he gasps. “I can’t. I haven’t done anything for you yet.”

He can’t stand up. His knees give out, and he clutches at his chest. He was supposed to be the villain until the end. The one who would destroy the world for Ruri, so that they wouldn’t feel sorry when he was finally gone. So that they would never see his pain.

He can’t hold it back. Another hole pops open in his leg, tearing through his pants as another flake of pain escapes. He doubles over, gasping and panting. He has to hold it back.

It’s too late. His back explodes.

Ruri stands silently before the raining storm of red flakes, washing over her as Shun screams. All his pain, everything he’s tried to hide from her, from Yuya, from the world, it all spills out, cuttin through the air and blowing back the frozen glass in a storm of shards.
She pushes forward through the rushing wind. One step. Another. She threatens to slide away, but she doesn’t give up, not until she’s right in front of him — not until she’s managed to wrap her arms around him. He flails in her grip, not to get away, but because his body can’t contain the pain that spills out of him. She buries her face into his chest and holds on, her hair whipping about in the rapid wind. She can feel it — burning against her cuts, stinging her with the ferocity of it.

Yuya braces himself as the shards of glass all rush away from the explosion of wind, arms crossed over his face, but he doesn’t step back. He pushes forward against the wind.

“It was Shun’s idea to paint our house,” he gasps. “I was against it — why do we want to stand out anymore? Why do we want the world to notice us more?”

The glass has all but vanished in the wake of Shun’s storm of pain, but the wind is obstacle enough. Yuya leans against it, forcing himself to take another step forward. He wants his voice to reach. One last time, he wants his voice to reach Shun.

“But you said,” he gasps. “You said that a house where Ruri could come home smiling — that was what we wanted most of all.”

He’s sure his voice has been lost to the wind, lost in the sound of Shun’s screams.

But somehow, he hears Shun’s voice, echoing in his head.

“It was raining the day we found that four poster bed,” Shun gasps through the pain, his eyes bubbling with tears he promised he’d never cry. “But it was exactly what we wanted. We struggling to carry it by the legs, all the way home.”

Yuya’s voice echoes in his mind, and he lets the tears roll down his cheeks.

“We came home soaked, and Ruri scolded us,” he says, finding a smile on his lips as the tears roll away in the wind. “But then she smiled. And that was what we wanted. We just wanted her to smile.”

Slowly, slowly, the torrent of pain subsides. Shun gasps for air, leaning heavily against Ruri still holding him. He feels her fingers, cool and soft, cup against his cheek, and his eyes flutter open.

He sees her eyes, first, inches from his own, her breath soft against his lips. She smiles. Around him, the flakes of blood, the pain released from his body, float in the air like drifting snow. One by one, they spin, and pop outward. Apples hang in the air all around them. But Shun has eyes only for Ruri, cupping his face in both hands. He feels...light. The pain is gone. He finally let it go.

Yuya is nearly at the top of the stairs. His chest feels hot as he gets closer.

He understands, now. He knows what Shun wants from him. And he’s more than willing to give it.

“It was fun,” he says, smiling through the tears. “Thank you, Shun. I’ll give it back to you now. The life that you shared with me.”

Yuya presses his hand to his chest. The heat is overwhelming now, so hot that he can see the burning red embers glowing through his skin. He chokes, grunting as he shoves his hand into his chest.

A scream threatens to rip out of him, but he doesn’t let it. He grasps hold of the hot, red thing in his chest.

The scream finally escapes as he rips it out of himself, and the heat floods out of him all at once. He is empty.

He lifts his eyes. Ruri stands in front of him. She smiles — for a moment, she is the child that he first met her as. And when he cups the red orb in both hands, stretching them out towards Ruri, his hands are small, too.

Ruri accepts the orb, wisping with a haze of red heat wafting off of it. She smiles as for a moment, her hands linger on Yuya’s.

Then she turns, feeling the heat of Yuya’s gift in her hands, and returns to Shun. He still wobbles on his knees, only half conscious. His eyes flutter when she stands before him, extending both hands forward. The orb in her hands looks whole for a moment — but is not. It’s only half. The
Shun’s eyes widen as he sees it, sees her offering it to him. She smiles.

“Here, Shun,” she says. “This is the Hippodrum.”

~ * ~ * ~ F L A S H B A C K ~ * ~ * ~

Yuya

Ten Years Ago

The Box

Yuya’s breath catches in his throat. He stares. He’s not sure he wants to believe what he’s looking at.

Shun strains against the bars. His face presses against them as he tries to stretch his arm as far as it will go, his body almost thin enough to fit between the bars.

In his hand, he cradles half of his apple.

Yuya forces himself to his weak knees. He crawls forward. He presses against the bars the way Shun does, his whole body wracking with pain as he tries to fit his arm through the space, lodge his shoulder through, stretching to reach Shun’s fingers.

The sound of their heavy breaths tangle as inch by inch, they reach for each other. Yuya’s hand brushes Shun’s fingers. A tingle runs up his shoulder at the first human contact he can remember. Shun presses further.

Yuya manages to get his hand beneath Shun’s gripping onto him. The half of the apple rests between their cradled hands.

Shun’s eyes fill with tears as he smiles at Yuya — that smile is the most beautiful, most defiant thing that Yuya has ever seen. Yuya tightens his grip on Shun’s hand.

“This is the fruit of destiny,” Shun gasps. “Let’s share it together.”

~ * ~ * ~

Yuzu inhales, and lets out her scream all at once.

“Let’s eat the fruit of destiny together!!”

The words are correct. She knows they are. And the moment they leave her lips, she feels it.

The train car shudders beneath her feet. The tracks shudder, and with a snap, the track changes directions, sliding from one direction to the next. A line of fence poles shoot up from the floor of the train, flipping upwards and splitting the car in half. The circles on the walls and floor begin to spin at dizzying speeds, cutting their red lights through the darkness. A million voices echo through the car:

“Destiny transfer requested.” “Este tren está transfiriendo destinaciones.” “這列火車正在轉移命運。” “Пассажирам, пожалуйста, перейдите в нужный вагон.” “Має улюбленцям перейти на вагон.” “Ce train est en train de transférer des destinées.”

Up on the wall, the destination sign flips over — one side reads “the new destiny.” The other reads “the scorpion fire.”

The heat starts in Yuzu’s chest. Before she can even comprehend it, the fire catches in her heart, and explodes to envelope her entire body.

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She doesn’t even hear her own scream as she drops to her knees, clutching at her chest. When Shun detonated the bomb and she tried to hold the burning diary to her chest, she had thought that was pain. But this — this is indescribable. She can feel herself being consumed, wholly, right down to her bones — right down to her soul. She is burning away into nothing.

But she’s saved them. Ruri. The people on the train. She did it. She knew the words. She completed Ray’s mission — she saved the people most important to her.

This pain is worth that.
“Yuzu!!” Yuya cries, and she feels him throw his arms around her — he feels deathly cold, even in the midst of the flames that consume her.

She is going to disappear, as the price for her charm. That’s all right.

She’s saved Ruri. That’s what she wanted most of all.

Shun returns to the train, at Ruri’s bedside, feeling light and warmth flooding through him. He has it. He puts his hand to his chest, feeling the heat inside.

Ruri lays on the bed. All her heart rate monitors are flat. But that’s all right.

Gently, he scoops her from the bed. She is limp, cold, and her skin is as gray as death. He feels light. The pain has fled from him.

“I have it, Yuya,” he whispers. “The Hippodrum. Thank you.”

He props Ruri’s head up against his arm, memorizing her face. She looks as though she is only asleep. And in a moment, that is all she will be.

He closes his eyes, and breathes out. The heat of the Hippodrum, complete at last, leaves with his breath. The color returns to Ruri’s skin immediately, though her eyes do not yet open. The heart rate monitors all blink on at once, shooting up to fifty beats per minute.

The heat leaves him at all at once. He is empty. He feels the weight of the world crushing down on him, now. He can feel his shape starting to crack like glass.

But Ruri is alive. And that’s what he wanted.

He carries her from the bed, towards the other side of the train. This half will be disconnecting soon. She must not be on this half. As he walks, the pieces of him begin to break away, drifting away like glassy snow.

Yuuri stands silently between him and the empty train bench. He doesn’t move to stop him, but only watches, with a flat, inexpressive face. Shun does not pay him any attention.

“You can’t escape your curse.”

Shun walks past him, ignoring him. Yuuri does not turn to stop him, or even to face him. Perhaps he knows that he’s already been beaten, and that any further actions would be a lost cause.

“You are all just like me. Inside the box, unable to receive anything.”

Wrong.

I received everything.

Shun reaches the other side of the train, and carefully lays Ruri down on a bench. She’ll be safe on this side. Safe to ride the train all the way on its new destination. His body is half gone, now, the shards falling away from him.

“You will leave nothing in this world, Shun. You and Yuya will both disappear. You won’t even leave dust.”

Shun reaches for Ruri’s face, cupping it gently. He can feel the warmth of her skin, even in his empty, cold body.

“There is no way you can end up being happy. You’ve lost everything.”

Shun smiles down at Ruri’s face, as his face begins to break apart. He doesn’t bother giving Yuuri an answer, as the rest of him dissolves into dust.

The fire rises higher, and the train begins to wobble as the two halves of the car start to pull apart. The ground splits between Yuya and Yuzu.

He grips her tighter, even as the flames threaten to burn him. He is empty. He no longer has what Shun gave him to be able to live. He’s going to disappear, soon. He is already dying. Yuzu’s screams ring in his ears. She shouldn’t have to die, too.

“Yuzu,” he gasps into her ear. “This is our punishment. Not yours.”
Yuzu gasps, eyes cracking open. He hugs her once more, as tight as he can, pressing his face against her shoulder.

“Thank you, Yuzu,” he says. “I love you.”

Yuzu’s fire goes out. And then, in a rush, it catches on Yuya instead.

He puts his hands against her collarbone, and gently pushes her back. The split ground between their knees pulls apart as the train connectors release, and the two cars break apart. Yuzu’s eyes widen as she watches Yuya start to drift away, his entire body encased in fire.

She screams out something, but she’s not sure what it is — his name? To wait? His hand drifts near hers, and she grabs for it.

The moment she feels his skin beneath hers, however, it dissolves. Only a plume of fire rushes away from her hand.

Curtains fill the train car. They flap in the furious windstorm, a brilliant, blinding light filling up the car. The released car shoots away on the path it had been intended to take — but the one filled with light switches tracks.

The curtains swell and rise like waves, filling up every available space as the light burns through everything. Kii waddles back, staring up at the empty four-poster bed. It nods with a soft huff.

Then it turns towards Ao and Pinku, and waddles over. One at a time, the three hippos crawl inside their box. It closes up on top of them, and shoots back away on its conveyor belt.

The light gives one last flash.

The darkness rushes in to fill in the emptiness.

~ * ~ * ~

“Are they all right?”

“What happened?”

“Someone call an ambulance.”

White teddy bears laid quietly, untouched, tucked into seats and on luggage racks over head inside the train car. They made no sound. One by one, they dissipated.

Feet shifted backwards as confused and nervous train goers shifted around the two girls collapsed on the floor of the train. Their fingers were intertwined, their heads close together so that their pink and purple hair swirled together on the floor. Both looked somewhat disheveled, as though they were just caught in a brief kitchen fire. Their clothes were worn and torn in places, their hair falling out of their updos, slightly singed on the edges.

The girl with the dark purple hair shifted.

A shard of glass slid from her forehead to the floor, leaving behind a tiny scar.
A light breeze caressed the rooftop, causing the hospital bed sheets drying on lines to flutter like clouds.

“I finally understand why you and I were the only ones left.”

Grace leaned against Zarc’s back. He sat directly behind her, staring at the sky in the opposite direction. It was the first day the hospital had deemed him well enough to come to the roof for some fresh air with her. Her hair rippled in the wind over her shoulders.

The city was vast before them, and the skyline was unmarred by the tower she remembered so clearly. But it was not there. It had never existed.

“Tell me,” she whispered, as the silence dragged on.

Zarc leaned his head back against Grace’s.

“You and I were already lost children,” he said, his voice soft and hoarse. “But most children in the world are the same as us.”

His fingers brushed against hers, and she lifted her hand to twine her fingers into his.

“That’s why even once was enough. We just needed to hear someone say ‘I love you.’”

Grace closed her eyes, letting the breeze rush over her.

“Even if destiny has robbed them of everything else, a child that has been loved will surely find happiness,” she whispered.

He nodded, and sighed as he leaned back against her, tightening his hand in hers.

“We were left behind in this world to make that happen for others.”

Grace nodded too, smiling as she opened her eyes to the bright blue sky.

“I love you,” she whispered.

His hand squeezed hers, and she squeezed back.

“I love you,” he said.

~ * ~ * ~

“Niisan. Niisan?”

Reiji blinked, his lips parting. Where...where was he? His face hurt from pressing into something, and as he sat up, dizzy with sleep, he found that he’d been leaning against a wooden pole. A light, spring breeze drifted through the gardens, rustling flowers and sending ripples over the pond near the gazebo. Oh, he realized. He’d fallen asleep in the garden.

A tiny hand tapped his leg, and he looked down.
Reira tilted their head at him, their hair spilling down over their shoulders.

For a moment, Reiji was seized with a faint, distant panic that he couldn’t place. Reira shouldn’t be out — they were sick. They need to rest...

Sick? Sick from what? He couldn’t remember. Maybe it had been a dream.

He pressed a hand to the side of his face, still feeling the threads of dreams tugging at him.

“Are you all right, niisan?” Reira asked.

Reiji smiled. He patted Reira’s head gently to reassure them.

“I’m fine,” he said. “I’ve only had a very strange dream.”

And as he said the words, part of him remembered it.

“What kind of dream?” asked Reira.

Reiji looked out over the vast garden, at the sun sparkling over the water in the fish pond.

“I had a dream that I had a twin brother,” he said.

Reira smiled at that idea, scootching closer to Reiji.

“Was he like you?”

Reiji snorted.

“No. He was a very crude sort of person.”

Something warm blossomed in his chest, though, and he smiled. He felt somehow nostalgic, even as the details of the dream left him.

“But he told me that we were special to him,” he said softly. “And that nothing would ever change that we were his precious family.”

He wasn’t sure why he felt a tear growing in his eye. It had only been a dream. But Reira noticed, and snuggled up close to him, tucking their head against Reiji’s arm, and Reiji draped his hand over their shoulder.

It was a nice day, he thought. And it had been a nice dream.

~ * ~ * ~

The phone rang, and Ruri kept one hand on her spoon as she reached for the phone, tucking it between her ear and shoulder.


She shifted the phone and continued to stir the curry. It was starting to smell so good, filling the kitchen up with the sweet, spicy scent.

“You and uncle will be late tonight? Oh, that’s fine! ...no, don’t worry about me, I’m not lonely. My friend is coming over for lunch.”

She heard a soft knock at the door, and smiled.

“All right, I’ll see you when you both get home. I’ll have dinner ready.”

She hung up and ran to the door. Yuzu stood on the steps, smiling as the scent wafted outside.

“Oh, that smells great,” she said. “Seems like you’re getting even better, Ruri-san!”

“I’m trying the recipe you shared with me,” Ruri said, stepping back to let Yuzu come in and take
off her shoes.

Yuzu padded after Ruri into the kitchen, but paused as her eyes were drawn to the screen.

“Oh! Double B!” she said. “Is this their new music video?”

“I was listening to the news and it came on,” Ruri said, bustling over to get some plates and start divvying up the rice and curry. “They’re cute, right?”

“I love this song,” Yuzu said. Her eyes half lidded as she began to sway back and forth to the rhythm. Ruri set the two steaming plates on the table, smiling as Yuzu began to conduct her hands through the air.

“I actually just bought their new CD. Do you want to listen?”

“Oh, sure, if it’s not too much trouble!”

“It’s right over here, no problem.”

Ruri scurried over near the television to where all of the CDs and movies were neatly lined up on a shelf. She ran her finger down the length of the spines, searching for the one she wanted. A strand of her hair fell down from her ear, and she pushed it back up. As her hand moved, however, her gaze flickered to something beyond it.

She blinked, turning her gaze to the stuffed teddy bear sitting against the shelf. She’d never seen it before — it was floppy, with a big belly that seemed to be bursting at the seam from all the stuffing inside.

“A toy?” she said, blinking. “When did I get this?”

She picked it up, cradling it in both hands. She felt something whisper against her arms, making her hair stand up on end, as though something small had just walked past her. But when she looked up, she saw nothing. She turned her eyes back to the teddy bear.

Oh? Was there something sticking out of its belly? She picked gently at the bursting seam, and the corner of a piece of paper appeared tucked into the stuffing. Gently, she wriggled it out of the fraying seam. She laid the bear on her lap, turning the folded piece of paper over. What was this?

She unfolded it. There was no name. Only a short, handwritten note that seemed to have been written by two different people, as though one had written the first sentence and one had written the second.

_We love you_, it read. _From, your brothers._

Ruri’s lips parted. She read the note again. Something about the handwriting seemed familiar. Whose bear was this? Whose brothers?

“Ruri? Are you all right?”

Yuzu’s voice startled her back to herself. Ruri blinked and found tears in her eyes, rolling off her cheeks and dripping onto the bear. Yuzu was at her side in an instant, a hand on her back.

“What’s wrong? Are you okay?”

Ruri’s fingers crinkled into the note. She didn’t even know why she was crying.

But somehow...

Somehow, all of a sudden, she felt so warm. She felt so full, as though someone who loved her was watching over her. She wiped at her eyes, and clutched the note to her chest.

For a moment, she couldn’t describe it. But she felt like she was the most loved person in the entire world.
The echo of the passing train clatters against the walls, though he doesn’t see it, not even in the distant dark. Yuuri blinks at the long tracks before him, shooting straight off into the darkness.

A light shines down on him like a spotlight, and up ahead, on the tracks parallel to his, another light flicks on. In the shadow of the second light, on the tracks, stands Ray, a hippo hat in each hand with their tassels dragging on the ground.

She smiles at him, but it is a smile of triumph and smugness, not the sweet little girl smile that belongs on her young face.

“The train’s left,” she says. “You can’t go anywhere.”

Yuuri tucks his hands into his pockets, sighing. He looks up into the endless dark above them. Beside him lay the shelves of his books from his Hole in the Sky.

“Another train will come,” he says. “I will try again.”

At the very least, he can take some comfort, after all. The two boys stopped him. But they also disappeared. Nothing is left of them. Not even a memory. They gave it all up, and for what? How pitiful.

Ray laughs softly, though he can’t be sure if it’s at his words, or somehow at his thoughts.

“Who knows?” she says, shaking her head so that her pigtails bounce. “But I’m leaving.”

She turns away from him. Deliberately, she hops over the side of the tracks, and leaves them.

Yuuri does not watch her go, as she walks away, tassels of her hats dragging through the soil. And in a moment, she leaves the tracks behind entirely, and disappears into the unknown darkness.

~ * ~ * ~
The train clatters along beneath them, bouncing the two boys up and down. One of them crunches into an apple.

“The apple is the reward for those who have died for love,” he says.

He passes the apple over to the other, who takes it, and takes a bite. He crunches loudly and sloppily.

“But once you die,” he says, though his mouthful. “It’s all over.”

A pink hippo hops off the seat across from them to open up the compartment. A little yellow hippo toddles inside, carrying a bag heavy with yarn. A blue hippo helps it and the pink hippo to clamber up onto the seat beside it, and all three hippos fall to lean against each other. The pink one yawns, and closes its eyes.

“No,” the first boy says, shaking his head vigorously. He points at the book on his lap. “What Kenji’s saying is that that’s where everything starts.”

The second boy hums and takes another bite of the apple. He passes it back to the first.

“So,” the second boy says, licking the juice from his lips as his red and green bangs bounce between his eyes. “Where do you think we should go?”

The first boy closes his book and leans back, the swoop of his aqua bangs bouncing along with the train.

“Hm,” he says, kicking his legs back and forth. “I think I know just the place.”

~ * ~ * ~

I love the word “fate”.

Because, you know how they talk about “fated encounters”? A single encounter can completely change your life.

Such special encounters are not just coincidences. They're definitely fate.

Of course, life is not all happy encounters. There are many painful, sad, moments. It's hard to accept that misfortunes beyond your control are fate.

But this is what I think: sad and painful things definitely happen for a reason.

Nothing in this world, nothing at all, is pointless.

And I believe that I am never alone.

I won't forget. I'm sure of it. Never, ever.

Chapter End Notes

And that's the end. It never fails to make me feel weird and surreal when I finish a long-running fic.

This was absolutely one of the most self-indulgent things I've written, mostly as an excuse to rewatch Penguindrum, and I do not regret. Thank you so much to everyone who has read and commented on this very niche story. If you still have questions...so do I, haha. Analyzing Penguindrum is a task that takes a loooong time, and I don't have even half the answers. Feel free to fill in your own where you'd like them <3

To everyone who's seen Penguindrum before reading this -- I hope I did this adaptation justice. Translating the gorgeous visuals of Penguindrum into words was incredibly difficult, but it was a fun story to write.

To everyone who has not yet seen or finished Penguindrum -- this story was also my sneaky way of trying to get more people to watch it. I cannot recommend it highly enough. The original is a spectacle like no other, in terms of music, visuals,
storytelling, and symbolism, and there was no possibly way that I could make a perfect translation, even accounting for characters acting differently in different situations. I HIGHLY recommend watching the original if you haven't yet (it's available on HiDive and only 24 episodes).

This story has been an incredible ride. Writing and drawing for it have been a blast, and one of my stories that I consistently looked forward to working on. Another huge thank you to dark-angel-of-muses for drawing so many of the lovely title cards for this story. Your art is incredible and I can't thank you enough for your work <3

And one more final thank you to all of you. This isn't the kind of story that's bound to get a lot of attention, but I feel blessed from every person who left a comment, kudos, or just took the time to read this wild, incredible story. Thank you again.

And please go watch Penguindrum <3

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!