

SAPPHIRE BLUE

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&

DRAMATICAL
MURDER
FIC ZINE



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Water Church



A story, set in the ending credits AU.



The sun is just coming up, so the tiles of the plaza are still cool under the thin soles of Nagisa's shoes as he makes his way to Makoto's storefront. Over time Nagisa's seen his friend's business grow from carefully arranged wares on a rug laid out in the market all the way to this, a small but well-kept set of rooms in the mazelike central city at the heart of the wider metropolis.

"Isn't this your time of day to sleep?" Makoto asks as Nagisa draws near. Makoto's setting out a few display items to draw in customers, setting the pots and bolts of cloth out with the same consideration he used to use when he was setting out lanterns and braziers on his market rug.

"Sleep is boring," Nagisa says dismissively, waving one hand and making the gold bracelets on his wrist jingle and chime against each other. "Is Haru back today?"

Makoto smiles, shaking his head. "You'd have much more of an idea of that than I would, so if you don't know, then I don't know the answer to that any better than you do. He should be, but we'll have to wait and see."

"If he is, can we have one of your fish to celebrate?"

"Do you ever think with anything but your stomach?"

Nagisa doesn't bother to think of a retort to that, stepping past Makoto and into the store. The fish tank dominates the far wall, thick colourful glass that's clouded and warped in some places, almost as clear as boiled-water ice in others. The fish that swim inside are ghostly shapes, silvery shimmers in a dark. Nagisa presses his face against the side of the tank, trying to get a better look at them.

"Get your nose off the glass, you'll leave a smear," Makoto scolds, tugging him away. "Maybe we'll have a fish tonight. It'll depend on what Haru wants."

Nagisa snorts. "He'll want fish. That's not even a question. If he was rich, he'd eat nothing else. Hmm...the guards over at the school should have changed shifts by now, don't you think?"

Makoto gives Nagisa a small frown. "You need to leave him be. I know you think it's funny to--"

"Funny?" Nagisa screws up his face in puzzlement. "I just like talking to him. He's always so stiff and serious. When Haru-chan gets in one of his moods where he won't talk much or do anything by choice, doesn't that make you just want to prod him and poke him and push him around a lot? It's just the same as that."

"No, when Haru wants to be on his own, I let him have his space." Makoto shakes his head. Nagisa does exactly the same thing.

"What a wrongheaded way to deal with the world," Nagisa says, with absolute certainty. "Well, luckily I'm not going to listen to it. I'm off to the academy gates."

Makoto sighs deeply, shaking his head again. Nagisa just grins, and turns to go.

His guess was right; the guards at the school have changed. Rei's on the lefthand side, leaning against the wall to take advantage of the early shadows before they shorten. Nagisa would love to be able to creep up on him, but all the gold he has to wear when he's out in public -- at his throat and across his forehead and on his arms -- makes him clink like bells, and Rei can always hear him coming.

Rei sighs when he catches sight of Nagisa, dropping his head forward and making the feather in his hat droop like a disappointed ostrich. Nagisa thinks it's adorable.

"You're distracting me while I'm supposed to be working."

"I'm not! I'm here for a reason!" Nagisa protests, then racks his brains for something he can claim as legitimate cause for Rei-bothering. Everyone's so caught up in needing excuses for things, as if people can't just talk to other people because they want to! Honestly, it makes Nagisa sad for them.

"I'm here because Aiichiro needs language lessons," he answers. "Don't give me that look, Rei-chan! It's true! He's not fluent in a second tongue yet, and we're supposed to be before we start doing proper temple work, and he's already doing proper temple work because --"

"Stop telling me church gossip," Rei interrupts. "If he needs a tutor, why are you the one to come talk about it?"

Nagisa tilts his head to one side, blinking at Rei. "So I could see you, of course. So can you come teach him? Or should he come here?"

Nagisa had been the last of the novices from the water church to automatically go to the air academy for study. After several reprimands for flirting, petty theft, and telling the other

postulant scholars ghost stories that caused horrendous nightmares, it had been decided by academy superiors that in the future, church novices would be admitted on a case-by-case basis, rather than automatically, and that sometimes it would be better if they were taught at the church instead.

"You should come to us," Nagisa says before Rei has the chance to answer the earlier question. "Then you can help me with my mathematics. Haru-chan wants me to do more treasurer work for the church, but I hate trying to do sums. They give me headaches."

"Then why on earth does he want you to do treasu... never mind," Rei shakes his head. "I'll ask the other scholars and see if someone can come visit."

"No, it should be you!"

"Why won't you ever just leave me alone?" Rei sighs. Nagisa chuckles. As if anything would stop him coming to visit. What a silly idea.



There are four plazas in total, each making up an unofficial 'corner' of the more densely populated, designed centre of the otherwise haphazard, far-reaching city. Makoto's shop is in the earth plaza, and with his tank of fish and his shelves of vegetables and bolts of cloth and other everyday necessities, the store is a perfect fit among the other stalls selling simple grown and cooked and woven things.

The next hub among the labyrinthine streets is the air plaza, and since his young childhood Nagisa has felt almost as at home there as he does in the water plaza. His family hadn't had enough money for all of the children to go to the academy, and so he has many memories of being made to wait next to the guarded gate for his sister to appear when classes ended in the evening. He'd be dragged there by his other sisters, who didn't want to wait a second longer than they had to before begging their eldest sibling for details about all the things she'd learned that day. They acted like they were afraid that if they let her walk back to their home alone, she'd have forgotten everything new by the time she got in the door.

Nagisa had never cared as much as they had about the second-hand lessons, but he'd loved the breezy, open brightness of the air plaza, the scholars taking their turns to guard the gate with their feathered caps. The mosaics on the plaza walls were all images of flying things, birds and bright jewel-like beetles and dazzling butterflies. The scholars in their reds and purples had always seemed like birds and butterflies too, and Nagisa had always thought that this would be a nice thing to be -- if he'd been smarter, and less certain of his true place being in the water, he might have liked to be among their ranks.

He'd heard some philosopher in the fire plaza give a speech once about how everyone's soul was in the shape of an animal, and this was their true form that dictated their actions. Nagisa's much too familiar with human bodies to believe it's really true -- people are shaped like people, inside and out, because some things about their bodies are common to all of them -- but it had been an interesting idea. He thinks that maybe he'd like a soul shaped like a water bird of some sort, one of those birds with webbed feet and slick feathers. Almost as at home in the air plaza as in the water one.

As earth is growth and comfort, and air is intelligence and knowledge, the fire plaza is for creation: art and poetry, metalwork, the apothecary. Anything intricate and complex and deliberate is available there. It's the most popular with visitors from outside the city, who coo over the wares for sale and buy them without even bothering to barter.

And then there's the water plaza, for fertile couplings and the senses and the body, with its high-domed church of coloured glass panels and subtle scents, where any citizen from the king down to the poorest beggar can go for a tender touch and the cleansing wash of the baths. There are twenty-five oblates at the moment; the number fluctuates between twenty and thirty or so, as older members leave for marriage or other callings, and new novices join.

Nagisa isn't sure if he'll ever leave -- if he does, it'll be under some future circumstances that he can't imagine yet, so there's no point wondering too much about it. He imagines it's much the same for all the others, except probably Haruka. Nagisa can't imagine Haruka ever being anywhere else.

Haruka has belonged to the church since he was a child. He'd been a foundling, out at the coastal port where most of the overseas trade comes through, several days' ride across fairly barren terrain from the city proper. Under ordinary circumstances, a child whose life began like that would end up as a dock worker or a sailor, if they survived at all. But right from the beginning, Haruka was different: the people who'd found him swore on their lives that he'd been washed up on shore, sea-grasses tangled in his small locks of dark hair.

A gift from the ocean such as that was obviously intended to be given to the water church, and so that was that. Nagisa sometimes wonders if Haruka was such a perfect fit for the role right from the beginning, or if he'd grown into it because he'd always been told that it was destined.

Because Haruka loves the water so much that it's a part of him, he a part of it, this much is true. But it's also true that Haruka always volunteers to go on the trade journey out to the shoreside town when it's time for the church to replenish its supplies from there. No matter how much Nagisa pesters him, Haruka will never say why he does that, if he's hoping to find out something about his beginnings on those trips.

He's away on one now. Nagisa plans to ask him if he's found out anything new, when he gets back, though Nagisa already knows that as usual he'll get no reply.

Nagisa wasn't born to the church, like Haruka was, but the decision still came early and easily. Nagisa grew up loving the spectacle of it, of seeing the novices around the bazaars and plazas

in their groups of two and three, talking together with their heads bent close and their arms around each others' shoulders or waists. He'd delighted at the sight of the oblates in their silver and gold adornments, friendly and open and physically affectionate with everyone they met and spoke with, and nobody telling them to settle down and behave like Nagisa was always being chided.

Sometimes, on days when his sisters wouldn't stop pinching him and calling him names, Nagisa would run away to hide in the water plaza, by the front door of the glittering church, and watch the people go inside looking tired or sad or worried and come out later looking happier, more relaxed, like somebody had taken care of them and made them feel content.

As he sat there, a dark-haired boy not much older than him would often come and join him, sitting quietly beside Nagisa as they watched everyone go in and out.

The boy's hair was always wet, his skin never managing to completely dry off -- he was never out of the water for a long enough stretch at a time for that.

"None of the others are like you," Nagisa commented to him once. "You love the water more than any of them."

"I feel better when I'm in it," Haruka had answered, as if that was that. At times like that, Nagisa really did believe the whispers people said about Haruka being special, a child born of the waves.



Haruka comes back from his trip to the coast that afternoon, bringing more than enough of everything they'd needed. Nagisa and Aiichiro help him unpack the bundles and put away the new supplies.

Haruka's skin is parched from the harsh sun of travel, and he looks so unlike himself that Nagisa can't stop stealing glances. Haruka wears the dagger at his hip as if it's always there, and not something only used when he goes on trips beyond the city. He's hardly wearing any gold at all, either, no more than anyone might wear, than Makoto or Rei might have on them on any given day.

"That reminds me," Nagisa says, even though he hasn't said anything out loud on the subject before. Aiichiro and Haruka don't comment on it; they're both used to Nagisa making sense mostly to Nagisa. "I spoke to Rei-chan about language lessons for you, Aiichiro. He's going to talk to the other scholars about it. And maybe about some extra arithmetic for me. Isn't that great, Haru-chan?"

Haruka doesn't tell him to stop pestering Rei, like Makoto always does, but just gives a distracted nod as answer to the question. That makes Nagisa grin.

"And Mako-chan said he'd bring us fish for dinner, if you wanted it. Aha! I knew *that* would get your attention!"



Makoto does, indeed, bring fish for dinner, and it's delicious. Later in the evening Nagisa sees him and Haruka heading for one of the private rooms together, which is even more predictable that Haruka wanting fish when it's offered.

"Don't go hide in the next one over to listen," Aiichiro scolds before Nagisa has even taken a step in that direction.

"That's unfair, you don't know that I was --"

"Yes I do," Aiichiro retorts, and Nagisa sighs dramatically and slumps his shoulders, heading back towards the pile of dishes from dinner that he still needs to wash.

"They're lovely together, though," he remarks to Aiichiro as they work their way through the crockery. "Have you ever listened to them? He's Haru-chan's favourite for certain."

"We aren't meant to have favourites. We love everyone, remember?"

"Yeah, yeah." Nagisa waves his hand, sending a few soap-suds flying with the gesture. "But he's still Haru-chan's favourite. Just like the king is yours."

Aiichiro blushes so hard that Nagisa half-expects the small mole under his eye to pop off like a cork in a fizzy wine bottle. "If you've been listening to us I'm going to drown you in the pool."

"Of course I've been listening. That's how I know how much you like him. You're always worried if he falls asleep after and then wakes up with nightmares. It's sweet. And I hear you during, as well, of course. It must feel incredibly exciting, for the king of the whole country to trust you so much to have you ins--"

Aiichiro shoves Nagisa's head into the washing-up water. "Stop it!" His face has gone even redder. Nagisa splutters, wiping soap out of his eyes.

"That was mean!"

"You started it!" Aiichiro glares. "All right, if we've all got favourites, who's *yours* then?"

"Rei-chan," Nagisa answers promptly, not even having to think about it. "Or he will be, once I convince him to visit."

Aiichiro's glare gets even sharper.

"That's cruel," he says, and leaves Nagisa to do the rest of the dishes on his own.



Nagisa manages to sleep for a little while, but eventually gives up on trying to get any more than he's already had and leaves the sleeping quarters, heading for the largest of the pools instead. As expected, Haruka's there, swimming on his own by the moonlight. Nagisa disrobes and joins him in the water.

"Was it a good trip?" he asks. Haruka doesn't answer. Nagisa isn't surprised. He's mostly just talking to fill up the quiet, because sometimes Haruka's quiet self-containment makes Nagisa feel useless, like it wouldn't matter to anyone if he didn't exist at all. The feeling always passes if he breaks the quiet, and so he always does.

Haruka slips under the water and swims over to him, lithe and supple as a part of the water himself. He breaks the surface right beside Nagisa and presses him back against the edge of the pool, dipping down into the space between them to plant a hard, heated kiss against Nagisa's mouth. Nagisa opens easily under the urgency, humming happily as Haruka laps his tongue into Nagisa's mouth.

It's usually like this, after Haruka's been away. His reunions with Makoto, with all their fondness and intensity, leave him excited rather than sated. Nagisa wonders sometimes if there might be an edge of yearning in it, a part of Haruka that wants to go home with Makoto and share his bed, the two of them sharing their second round of passion together a few hours after the first. Working in Makoto's little store together, eating fish for dinner and having an ordinary life.

But that isn't the life that Haruka has. Maybe he doesn't even realise that it's a life that a part of him wants. So instead he has this, frantic half-desperate kisses in the moonlit pool, the press of his body against Nagisa's under the water.

There are fresh bites on Haruka's neck and Nagisa sucks at the reddened marks, letting Haruka close his eyes and think of Makoto making them just hours earlier. Haruka buries his hand in Nagisa's sleep-rumpled hair and pulls, which makes Nagisa moan softly against his throat. He always misses Haruka a lot when Haruka's off on his trips, worries about him and waits for him to come back. It's comforting and good to feel this, to be reassured that Haruka is safe and sound and solid against him. Nagisa hitches himself up against the wall, aligning their bodies together more closely so that it pressure and friction and the lapping of the water against them can all work in concert.

Haruka's mouth is on his again, sharp biting kisses against his lips, Haruka's hands sliding down his chest to rub his nipples. Nagisa arches at the touch, head falling back and his throat bare for Haruka to pounce on to leave his own sucking marks.

Nagisa hitches his legs around Haruka's waist and winds his arms around Haruka's shoulders, the two of them grunting softly into each other's air as they rut together, both close so close now, and Nagisa has just enough time before his climax to think that they're lucky that this particular pool is so incredibly large and so often replenished from its underground spring, because otherwise things wouldn't get diluted properly and it would be sort of messy. He has to bury his laugh against Haruka's shoulder as he comes, and he's still trying to stop his giggles when Haruka has his own climax a few seconds later.

"It's good to have you home, Haru-chan," Nagisa says fondly.

Later, when they're sitting on the edge of the pool with their feet in the water, Nagisa thinks about his earlier conversation with Aiichiro. It seems very likely to Nagisa that Makoto being Haruka's favourite is a two-way sentiment.

"I think Mako-chan's really worshipping *you*, not the water, when you're together. The water's only important to him because you're in it with him."

"He doesn't always choose me."

"Once, years ago, doesn't count," Nagisa protests, butting his head against Haruka's shoulder. "That was different."



It had been Nagisa's first official day as an oblate, and he can still remember with pin-sharp clarity how nervous and excited he was, the same kind of bubbly anxious thrill he used to feel as a child when everyone would participate in swimming races and other competitive games. Not scared, exactly, but an anticipation edged with something that felt enough like fear to send a thrill over his skin whenever he thought too much about it.

By mid-morning he'd felt like he was going to start bouncing off the walls if something didn't happen soon. Haruka was no help at all, of course, going about his daily chores and tasks placidly, as if Nagisa wasn't turning into a useless wreck with waiting for someone, anyone to come to the church so he could just get this over with and stop worrying so much about whether it would go okay.

When a knock had finally come at the temple door and Nagisa had hurried over to open it -- nearly stumbling head over heels in his rush -- the familiar sight of Makoto's face on the other side was such an overwhelming comfort and familiarity on such a nerve-wracking day that Nagisa grinned as hard as he could.

"Mako-chan! Hi!" He'd held the door wide open. "Haru's cooking, I think, so you might have to wait a little while before he can go with you, but you can have lunch with us first!"

Makoto raised his eyebrows in surprise (something people tended to do a lot when Nagisa was that enthusiastic in their direction) and then gave a small smile.

"Actually, I'm here to see you," Makoto told him.

"What?" Nagisa's jaw fell open and he blinked, shocked into momentary silence. He leapt at Makoto, sending them both stumbling backwards a few steps with the force of the pounce-hug. "Really? You're amazing! You're the best!"

"Ooof! Settle, settle. You don't want to break the back of your first visitor before you've even got him in the door, do you?"

So Nagisa had relinquished his python-grip on Makoto for long enough to get them both inside and into one of the private rooms, at which point Nagisa's heart started pounding so hard that he was half-convinced that everyone else in the building would be able to hear it.

"All right, there's massage oil just over -- do you want a massage? Or there's cups if you'd like a drink, or I can go to the kitchens and get us food, I know the bread's just freshly made so it'll be good, or I can --"

"Nagisa," Makoto interrupted gently, smiling. "It's all right. It's nothing to be nervous about." He cupped Nagisa's cheek and his hand was so big and warm and comforting that Nagisa's nerves faded and his heart stopped feeling like it was about to explode.

"Your skin smells like your store. Or your store smells like you, I suppose. Both at once," Nagisa said, because even if his nerves were dying down, his mouth was still stuck at full anxiety.

He felt just brave enough to cut his own words off by stepping forward and up onto his tip-toes, pulling Makoto down at the same time so their mouths could meet. Makoto's taste was a stronger version of his scent, and that made Nagisa smile. He could do this. It was going to be all right.

Leaving one hand against the nape of Makoto's neck, the two of them still kissing, Nagisa slipped his other hand down to trace across Makoto's belly lightly, fingertips skating against the skin with as much delicacy as Nagisa could manage.

"Lie down," Nagisa suggested, surprised by the huskiness that had crept into his own voice. "Here, on the pillows."

Makoto had complied, his breathing a little less even than it had been, a flush creeping across his face. That made Nagisa feel more powerful, braver. He knelt beside the soft floor cushions that Makoto was now propped against, and kissed him again. letting his hand stroke up and down the full length of Makoto's chest.

After a while Nagisa moved from kissing Makoto's mouth down to kissing his throat, his chest, the muscles of his belly, nuzzling at the skin sometimes to get a quiet laugh out of

Makoto. From there it seemed like the most natural progression in the world to unlace Makoto's pants and slide them down, revealing Makoto's dark-flushed length.

"I wonder what you taste like here," Nagisa murmured, giving an experimental lick. Makoto made a sound that was halfway between a laugh and a gasp, so Nagisa did it again, and then another time. "You taste wonderful," he said quietly, shifting his position beside Makoto so he could see Makoto's face as he worked.

Makoto had his head thrown back against the pillows, eyes closed, the lashes fluttering as Nagisa dipped his head again and took the head of Makoto's cock into his mouth. Makoto looked so beautiful in that moment, as beautiful as anything Nagisa had ever seen. Later, he'd notice that everyone was at their most wonderful, their most gorgeous, in that same moment, and Nagisa felt infinitely lucky that it was his lot to make them look like that, to see them in that state.

He spent that whole first day with Makoto, learning the different things he could do to make someone look that overwhelmed, that free. Nagisa had taken lessons, of course, and seen the same demonstrations all novices did from the oblates, but it was a completely different thing entirely to be there himself, to experience it all firsthand. He would always be grateful to Makoto for being there to help him, for giving him that first gift of surrender.



On the day after Haruka's return, Nagisa sleeps in late and is still in the process of waking up properly when he gets a visit from royalty.

"You've only just woken up, haven't you?" the Princess Kou, Light of the Realm and Most Beloved of All, says, looking like she's personally offended by Nagisa's sleep schedule. "How unfair. Stories always talk about the endless devotional work of oblates, and the luxury of the palace, and it's completely the other way around. I've been in horrible trade negotiation meetings since the sun came up."

Nagisa can believe it, too. She looks exhausted and tired. "Come on," he guides her towards their usual private room. "I'll give you a massage better than any you've had before."

"You say that every time I visit."

"And isn't it always true?"

She snorts softly in response to his joke, and lets herself stretch out on one of the high couches as Nagisa collects the massage oil and sits down beside her.

"Did the negotiations go well?"

"Yes, I think so."

Nagisa starts work on a particularly evil knot high on Princess Kou's back. She sighs happily as he works the tension out.

"It's all your sex appeal. They can't help themselves."

"I don't use 'sex appeal' in trade bargaining!" she objects, sitting up and giving him a look that's pure murder.

"What a seductive glare," Nagisa says, batting his eyelashes mock-flirtatiously. "Are you sure you're just here for a back rub?"

With another few seconds of murder-look, Kou lies down again and lets him resume the massage. "Can you imagine if we tried to couple?" she asks, amusement in her voice. "I'd end up strangling you."

"But then you'd never have another of my back rubs."

"Which is why we mustn't ever make the attempt," she replies, sighing again as Nagisa undoes another knot of tension in her back.

"The unresolved lust between us is going to send me crazy," he tells her. "You and Rei-chan are conspiring to torment me."

The princess sits up again, turning around to face Nagisa properly, the massage momentarily forgotten, her nudity unimportant. "Leave him alone. It's mean, the way you tease him."

"Why does everyone keep saying that?!"

"Because he's a eunuch!" Kou snaps. "And you *know* that."

"So what?" Nagisa snaps right back. "I know everyone only remembers the fact that I was a troublemaker when I was at school, but I did actually *learn* things, you know! I know all about what differences their bodies have depending on how old they are when they're cut, and what changes as they grow older. I know as much about eunuch bodies as I do about men's or women's."

Princess Kou's expression is puzzled. "You're really serious, aren't you? It's not a joke?"

"Have you ever seen him when he takes his students out into the plaza for practical lessons?" Nagisa asks. Kou shakes her head. "He sets up little experiments, to teach them about telling the time of day and the distance to objects by measuring shadows. He's really beautiful when he does it. Sometimes I sit in the plaza there for hours, just watching him."

"I didn't know."

"And he's so tense and serious! I bet he grinds his teeth in his sleep! I just want to make him feel *better* and he doesn't *let me*." Nagisa pouts, feeling sorry for himself.

Kou gives a long, thoughtful huff. She looks as if she's planning something in her head, and for a few seconds Nagisa gets a sense of how intimidating she must look from the other side of the negotiation table. "Next time you see him in the plaza on his own -- not on guard duty, not teaching -- go to him and offer a back rub. Nothing else. No fl... as little flirting as you can manage, which is still going to be more than anyone else ever puts into ordinary conversation, but we have to work with what we have here. That's the best way to do it."

Nagisa gives her a kiss on the cheek. "You're a mastermind."

"See? I told you I don't use sex appeal." She lies back down, letting him resume work on her back.

"Would you like anything else at all today, apart from the back rub?" he asks, an arch note creeping into his voice, a sly smile on his lips. "Not even something nice to watch?"

"Hmmm... I could be convinced, probably," Kou concedes. "Is Seijuro available?"

"I'll go find him when we're done," Nagisa promises. "We'll be much more interesting than trade negotiations."



In the evening, after the Princess Kou has gone back to her work and Nagisa has spent a long time lazing in the water and a longer time being a general pest to his fellow oblates, he goes to the air plaza.

He feels more like Haruka, about to set off on a trade journey, than he does like his usual self. He's left most of the clinking, tinkling jewelry behind, at Kou's suggestion. Nagisa hasn't been this unadorned while clothed in what feels like years. It might actually have been years, come to think of it.

Rei is reading, sitting with his back against one of the murals, butterflies and birds in frozen flight around him, the fading light catching on the rims of his delicate glasses.

"You'll ruin your eyesight if you keep reading any longer," Nagisa says as a greeting. Rei's posture tenses, as if he's readying for a strike or an unkind word. Nagisa has no idea what to say or do to convince Rei that he never, ever has to fear that from Nagisa.

He knows he's supposed to be non-threatening, low-key. That's what the princess told him he should do. But it feels stilted and unnatural, and he doesn't know how to do it properly.

Nagisa remembers Makoto's hand on his cheek, all those years ago. It's all right. There's nothing to be nervous about.

"I love to watch you when you teach," he blurts. "You look so beautiful, Rei-chan. And when you're stiff and serious, you make me want to be stupid until I can make you smile. You deserve to smile."

Rei stands up, looking down at Nagisa with frank confusion. "You aren't anything like beauty is meant to be. Beauty is perfect form and exacting logic, and you're... you say things that don't make any sense and hang around when anybody reasonable would have left long ago, and now you come here and say *I'm* beautiful, and I don't understand you at all."

Nagisa doesn't mind the annoyance in Rei's voice. He's used to people being annoyed when they talk to him. "But you are, Rei-chan! You're really beautiful!"

"And so are you!" Rei retorts, sounding even angrier. "You *shouldn't* be. By any logic I should think you're *terrible*. But I don't! And I don't understand!"

Nagisa couldn't stop the grin that spreads across his face even if he tried. "Really?"

Rei hangs his head, defeated. It makes his feather droop adorably. "Yes."

All plans of reserve and low-key approaches fly out of Nagisa's head, and he jumps at Rei and hugs him. "You should come have dinner! Haru-chan brought back the nicest wine, you should try it. And if you like beautiful things, wait until you see what the big pool looks like in the moonlight. And Haru-chan's swimming, that's beautiful too! And back rubs, you should have one of those, I'm really good at them. Even the princess says so, and she wants to kill me most of the time. And --" Nagisa grabs Rei by the hand, and pulls him towards the exit from the air plaza that leads in the direction of the water chuch. "Come and see."

Protesting loudly, but not actually resisting, Rei follows after him. It's a small victory, but Nagisa thinks it makes an excellent start.



DRAMAtical Murder

Aoba: Kisaichi Atsushi

Ren: Takeuchi Ryōta

Koujaku: Takahashi Hiroki

Noiz: Hino Satoshi

Mink: Miyake Kenta

Clear: Nakazawa Masatomo

Sei: Iguchi Yuuichi

Beni: Goto Keisuke

Ryuuhou: Sasanuma Akira

Virus: Majima Junji

Trip: Higuchi Tomoyuki

Mizuki: Takahashi Kenji

FREE

Makoto: Suzuki Tatsuhisa

Rei: Hirakawa Daisuke

Nagisa: Yonaga Tsubasa

Haru: Shimazaki Nobunaga

Rin: Miyano Mamoru

Nitori: Miyata Kōki

Miho / young Mako: Yukino Satsuki

Kou / young Rin: Watanake Akeno

Goro: Yanaka Hiroshi

Seijuro: Tsuda Kenjiro



Mary's Probably-Not-Comprehensive Guide to BLCDs with Dramatical Swim Club pairings!		
Free!	Dmmd	Title of work
Nagisa	Koujaku	オレンジのココロトマレー (Orange no Kokoro -Tomare-)



Rei	Noiz	Kimi no Heart niKiku Supplement (Heart's Supplement)
Rei	Beni	KichikuMegane
Rei	Beni	Junk! Boys



Makoto	Sei	Lucky Dog Summer Chance
Makoto	Koujaku	3 Shake
Rei	Koujaku	Boukun no KajounaAijou
Rei	Aoba	the ugly duckling and the prince (mi nikuiahira to oujisama)
Nitori	Koujaku	Bukiyouna Silent
Rei	Mink	ドロップアウト甘い爪痕 (Drop out)
Nitori	Mink	兎オトコ虎オトコ 1 (UsagiOtokoToraOtoko 1)



Rei	Virus	ヤンデレ天国BL ～真誠学園男子寮編 (Yandere Heaven Black: SeishinGakuen Boys Dormitory)
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Mary's Probably-Not-Comprehensive Guide to other works with Dramatical Swim Club crossovers!			
Free!	Dmmd	Title of work	Type of project
Kou, Miho	Aoba, Noiz, Mink, Virus, Trip	銀魂 (Gintama)	Gintama anime
Rei	Sei	humANDroid〜マイカノセンゲン!〜 Type M	Masochist android and scientist
Kou	Mizuki, Mink, Trip	進撃の巨人(Shingeki no Kyojin)	Attack on Titan anime
Nagisa, Rin	Aoba, Noiz, Mizuki, Trip	おおきく振りかぶって (Oofuri)	OokikuFurikabutte anime
Nagisa	Sei	Arcana Famiglia	Otome game
Nagisa, Rei	Sei	Arcana Famiglia 2 ~La storiadella Arcana Famiglia~	Otome game
Rei	Virus	蝶の毒華の鎖(Poison of Butterfly, Chain of Flower)	Otome game
Nagisa, Seijuro	Noiz	いっしょにごはん。あらかると vol.9 大豆納 (Issou no GohanAla Carte - Natsu Daito)	Otome game drama CD
Nagisa	Mink	いっしょにごはん。あらかると Vol 10 サトウ (IsshoniGohanAla Carte 10)	Otome game drama CD
Seijuro	Mink	IsshoniGohan a la Carte ~ Yosuke Toriyama	Otome game drama CD
Nagisa	Aoba	ワルイコトシタイ (Waruikotoshitai)	Supporting cast members of BLCD
Makoto	Noiz, Mink	花は咲くか2 (Hana wasakuka 2)	Supporting cast members of BLCD
Makoto, Rei	Trip	Kouboku no Koi (A Public Servant's Love)	BLCD with multiple pairings, inc Makoto/Rei, Trip is in another pairing
Nitori, Rei	Koujaku	Big Gun o MotsuOtoko	BLCD with multiple pairings
Makoto, Rei	Koujaku	ラブプレゼンター (Love presenter)	Love/Romance CD
Nagisa	Noiz	あなたのダイエットをアメとムチで指導するCD (LOVE×EXERCISE vol.3)	Love and working out CD
Nitori	Koujaku	メガネブ! (Meganebu!)	Glasses club anime!
Makoto	Noiz	黒執事 (Kuroshitsuji)	Black Butler anime
Nagisa	Virus	"Shūto! BatsuKyara o Yattsukero!" (シュート! ×キャラをやっつける!)	ShugoChara! Episode 5
Makoto, Haruka	Trip	黒子のバスケ(Kuroko no Basuke)	Kuroko's Basketball anime
Seijuro	Sei	Fairy Tail OVA	Fairy Tail special
Nitori	Virus	Ikemen Album vol 1	Handsome men CD

Chimichara sprites by Nitro+CHiRAL artist Yupon

CORRECT

A **DRAMAtical**
MURDER story, set after the end of the True Route

Illustrations by nordreys.tumblr.com

Chapter 1



Learning to touch-type is, in some ways, more difficult than the physical therapy that helped him learn how to walk. Ren had never walked on human legs before, not in the physical world, but he'd known about balance and steps and momentum, the difference between a walk and a run. It had been hard work, but he'd at least known where to begin.

Typing, on the other hand, is a completely new thing. Compared to how he used to interface with this same computer, it's the difference between diving into a pool of water and being forced to learn how to row a boat across it.

He's grateful for the distraction when Koujaku climbs the stairs and comes into Aoba's room, Beni flitting in a moment later.

"Aoba's out doing a last delivery," Ren says, after greeting the visitors. "He'll be a long while yet."

"More dinner for us, then," Koujaku answers with a grin. He walks through the room and out onto the balcony, forgetting to take the ashtray with him as usual. Ren picks it up and follows him outside.

Ren's used to his height, for the most part, but there are times when he feels more comfortable sitting on the floor than standing, particularly when he's out on the balcony. The ground seems a long, long way down when he looks over the railing these days.

He sits with his back against the railing now, beside where Koujaku leans on it in his habitual way as he smokes.

"How's the typing going?"

"Terribly. And it doesn't help that I'm trying to learn on a computer that's been customised and upgraded and modified within an inch of its life. Anything that might have been intuitive about using it is long gone."

Koujaku chuckles at Ren's despairing tone, scritchng at the hair just above the nape of Ren's neck. "I know how you feel. Beni complains sometimes that I make him be my carrier pigeon when I should just use my coil to contact people."

"Imagine how much worse your coil would be if it had layer after layer of reprogramming from Aoba and Noiz getting in the way of it working properly," Ren grumbles. Koujaku's fingernail's scratch pleasantly across his scalp, easing the tension in Ren's mood.

Abruptly, the touch leaves his head. Ren opens his eyes, puzzled. Koujaku's looking away from him, a light flush of embarrassment on his cheeks.

"Sorry," he mutters. "I didn't mean to. It was just habit, like I used to do when you were in your allmate form."

Red shakes his head, smiling. "No, it's nice. It makes me happy that you see me the same way as you did then."

Koujaku coughs, clearly still uncomfortable, which Ren thinks is silly.

"Your hair's a lot healthier these days, but you shouldn't let Aoba cut it. He's terrible at it. Come by the shop one day."

That makes Ren laugh. Koujaku shoots him a puzzled look, and now it's Ren's turn to feel embarrassed.

"Your groupies remind me a lot of Yoshie's Clara," he confesses, still laughing a little at his own ridiculousness. "I feel uncomfortable around them."

Koujaku laughs too, ruffling Ren's hair teasingly, and the momentary awkwardness between them is gone again.

Koujaku finishes smoking and they go back inside. Beni's still perched on the head of Aoba and Ren's bed.

"If I had your luck, and got to be human, I'd finally be able to fight everyone who doesn't take me seriously," the little bird says to Ren wistfully.

"Be careful what you wish for," Ren warns with insincere sternness. Then, more seriously, he adds with a sigh, "It can be extremely strange."

Koujaku sits on the bed, Beni alighting on his shoulder as he does so. Ren sits on the floor facing them.

"How has it been strange?" Koujaku asks, sounding concerned.

Ren's tempted to answer 'in every way you can possibly think of'. Instead, he shrugs.

"Some things I do now are things I know have always been mine. I like having my head scratched while you're out on the balcony, for instance," he offers. "Or how Aoba and I work together. That's the same as always, for the most part."

"But then there are things that don't seem to have come from me at all -- I have a habit now of rubbing my eyes, for example. It seems to be something my body remembers."

"And then there are things which don't make any sense at all. It makes sense that this body looks different now to how it used to, because of the physical therapy I do, and the fact that my diet is different to what Sei's must have been. But those things alone can't account for the height I've gained, or the muscle mass, or the fact my incisors are longer."

Ren turns his palms up, to demonstrate that he's basically at a loss on the whole subject. Human body language doesn't always come easily to him, so he tries to use it where he can as a way of learning it.

"It isn't that I'm sad it happened, believe me," Ren finishes. "But I think, Beni, that you should be grateful to have a body you know. Wouldn't you miss being able to fly?"

"Yeah. And Koujaku would have to learn to use his coil," Beni says. "In fact, I'm going to take advantage of my wings and go for a trip around the neighbourhood."

With that he's gone, out through the door to the balcony that Ren and Koujaku had left open behind them when they came inside.

Koujaku's looking at Ren, but there's something distant and sad in his eyes, as if he's thinking of other things as well. "I know how hard it can be," he says quietly. "Living in a body with secrets, things you can't control. How frightening that is."

The sorrow in his voice makes Ren's own heart ache. He doesn't know the story behind Koujaku's words, but the specifics are less important than the obvious distress they carry with them.

One definite advantage to a human body is that now Ren can climb off the floor, sit down beside Koujaku on the bed, and pull him into a strong hug. For a moment, Koujaku stiffens in the embrace, surprised, but then with a pleased sigh his body molds to Ren's own.

"Whatever it is, it isn't yours alone," Ren says, his mouth against Koujaku's clothed shoulder. "You don't have to carry it without help. It's like when all of you came to the tower to help Aoba. Nobody has to face their horrors alone."

Koujaku draws in a deep breath. His face is buried in Ren's hair, and so the movement tickles slightly. It makes Ren smile.

"We all got lost on the wind again after that, though," Koujaku argues. "The united team-work wasn't permanent."

Ren breaks off the hug and sits back a little, so he can look at Koujaku's face. His hair has been pushed askew from its usual long fringe, and the dark edge of... a tattoo? peeks out from the newly exposed sliver of skin.

"That's our past mistake to correct, then," Ren tells him quietly, touching careful fingertips to that secret mark on Koujaku's cheek.

Koujaku's eyes darken, his lips parting, and Ren surges forward to kiss him before the moment can stretch on too long and one or the other of them can ruin everything by thinking too much.

Koujaku makes a startled sound in his throat. His mouth opens, his tongue wet and warm against Ren's own, his hand gripping at Ren's forearm tightly.

It's different to kissing Aoba. Ren likes that a lot, likes the idea that everyone's body has secrets unique to them, things that only their lovers will ever know.

Koujaku's scent is a complex, organic smell. There's a sharpness from smoking, but the earthy warmth beneath it takes the bitter edge away. Ren breathes in deeply through his nose, his mouth still happily occupied with kissing.

Ren slips his hand inside the open front of Koujaku's kimono, brushing his thumb over the pebbling flesh of the nipple and then smiling against Koujaku's mouth at the new small surprised noise that elicits from Koujaku.

Koujaku's own hand is in Ren's hair, and Ren's surprised at how good it feels. It's all so new and interesting to him, the different ways that bodies respond to different kinds of touch.

"I'm still getting the hang of clothes," Ren confesses when they break apart to catch their breath. It's funny seeing how undone Koujaku looks just from kissing, considering how many different people he's been with in the past. Ren at least has the excuse of only ever doing this with Aoba.

"T-shirts and jeans I can manage," Ren goes on, laughing a little at himself. "But yours are a little too complicated for me yet."

Koujaku's flushed cheeks darken further as he starts the process of shedding his garments. "Don't watch me," he complains, when he sees Ren staring, so Ren busies himself with his own clothes instead.

They both have more than their fair share of scars scattered over their skin. Some of Ren's are Sei's, some are his own. Koujaku's are interspersed with surprisingly extensive tattoos, though the way he holds his body and positions his arms makes Ren think that Koujaku would keep them hidden if he could.

The height difference between them is about the same as that between Ren and Aoba, only this time it's Ren who's the shorter one, who gets to stretch up and draw his partner's face down to him in order to kiss while standing. Koujaku rests his hands against Ren's sides and his touch is so gentle, always, despite the power Ren knows he has in those hands.

Probably, there's a more elegant way to ask this, but Ren doesn't know it. "Which role do you want?"

"Hm?" Koujaku's eyebrows draw together as he tries to work out Ren's meaning. Their bodies are pressed against one another and it feels so good, so hot, that frankly Ren thinks that he should get applause for remembering how to use words at all.

"Aoba and I, we... switch," Ren explains, hesitant as to whether he's using the correct terminology.

"Don't tell me that!" Koujaku splutters. "I don't want to know anything about what Aoba does in bed!"

His face has gone so red that Ren's worried he's going to get a nose bleed. He looks away from Ren, too embarrassed to meet his eyes. "You be on top," he manages to say. Ren restrains an impulse to pat Koujaku on the head for getting an answer out.

"Lie back on the bed, then," Ren says. "I'll get you ready."

Ren settles himself in the junction between Koujaku's legs. Koujaku's penis is hard, the scent of it a strong enough version of Koujaku's smell that it makes Ren's mouth water with desire. He nuzzles at the base of it, then moves down past Koujaku's scrotum to the sensitive skin behind it, lapping his tongue there happily.

Koujaku jerks in surprise, and Ren uses the movement as an opportunity to lift one of Koujaku's thighs onto his shoulder, spreading Koujaku's legs apart to give himself better access. He drags long licks across Koujaku's hole, groaning happily to himself at the tastes and textures of Koujaku's body.

"R-Ren!" Koujaku stutters out, tremors running through him, the heel of his foot resting on Ren's back and then twitching suddenly, a cry dragged out of him as Ren presses sloppy, forceful kisses against his entrance.

Ren slides two fingers inside Koujaku, still licking and sucking at the skin around where they enter him, carefully coaxing the muscles to open and relax. He crooks his fingers and Koujaku cries out again, this one a fractured, breathless sound.

"No more, no more, that's enough," he tells Ren, gasping. Ren's not sure that this is true, but if Koujaku wants to feel the burn and stretch of it, Ren isn't going to take that away from him. Ren sits back, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand and repositioning himself to kneel between Koujaku's legs, lifting the other one high this time so Koujaku won't get a cramp.

Ren lines them up and eases himself inside slowly. They both have to pause, bodies shaking from the intensity, before pressing closer. Koujaku is staring at the ceiling above them, mouth tense from the effort of trying not to fall apart completely. His face is flushed dark and the corners of his eyes are

glittering, and Ren thinks that he's never been more gorgeous, more seductive, than he is in that moment.

Ren pushes in, still careful but with more force now, and it's enough to make Koujaku screw his eyes shut, his mouth falling open with a choked moan. Ren pushes two fingers from his clean hand past Koujaku's teeth, giving him something to suck and bite, something to centre himself on.

They find a rhythm together, fast and urgent, both of them too far gone already for anything slower or with more obvious tenderness. There's still nothing but the utmost care for one another between them, of course, it's just that it would be unbearable, sweetness to the point of pain, to keep this sustained for any great length of time.

Ren nips and licks at the place where Koujaku's neck and shoulder meet, fucking his fingers in and out of Koujaku's mouth at the same pace as his thrusts. Koujaku's moans are continuous now, his fingers raking against Ren's back, leaving new marks with better histories in the map of scars already there.

It makes Ren want to offer the same marking in return, so he bares his teeth and bites down harder at Koujaku's shoulder, unable to hold back the quiet growl in his throat. As he lightly breaks the already tender skin it makes Koujaku clench around him, his whole body shuddering underneath Ren's as he climaxes. It's enough to bring Ren's own orgasm on, pleasure cresting in him as he thrusts in hard a final time, their bodies pressed together.

Ren eases himself out but Koujaku's clinging on too tightly for Ren to move away more than that. Koujaku's still trembling hard, his breath coming in wet gulps. Ren rolls them together gently, so Koujaku can rest his face against Ren's shoulder and chest, and strokes his hair with slow, light touches.

"It's all right," Ren tells him, petting Koujaku carefully. "Everything's all right."

Chapter 2

"Having you two lounging around here like hippos in the mud makes it very hard for me to get work done, you know," Aoba says without malice. Ren and Koujaku ignore him, continuing to watch as Mio, Kio and Nao wreak havoc on various piles of shop inventory.

"Don't they ever get tired of it? Aren't children supposed to have short attention spans?" Koujaku asks, sounding slightly awed.

"Hello, Master!"

The shop door opens, adding a tall, gas-mask attired visitor to the general chaos taking place.

Aoba looks torn between being pleased to see Clear and infinitely frustrated by the slapstick comedy routine that is his life. "Hi, Clear. Please ignore all the useless idiots who think the shop is a public meeting spot. What can I help you with?"

"I need some parts. Here." Clear passes Aoba a slip of paper.

Ren recognises some of the items on the short list as being elements of his old body. He remembers that they'd been difficult to find, as time went on and they became increasingly obsolete. He wonders what Clear needs them for.

"I don't think we have any of this here. But that particular kind of process booster still gets used by rhymers sometimes," Aoba says, tapping one of the entries with his finger. "There's a store that Ruff Rabbit buy a lot of their stuff from. That'd be your best bet for finding one in good condition."

Koujaku makes a small noise of disgust, which causes Aoba and Ren to grin at one another, and then try to tamp down on the smiles so that they won't put Koujaku in an even grumpier mood.

Unfortunately, the rudimentary level of social grace that Aoba and Ren can usually manage isn't shared by Clear.

"We might see Noiz! It's been a long time!" he offers brightly. Koujaku's grumbles get louder.

"Oh!" Mio dashes out of the shop. Her brothers look at one another, baffled, then go back to chasing Bonjin.

"I'll write down the address for you," Aoba tells Clear.

"I remember the way," Ren offers. "I can show him. The walk will do me good."

"Then I'm coming too," Koujaku volunteers. "Those rhymers are shift."y."

Aoba makes a disgruntled face. "That's right, leave me alone with the brats. What good friends you are."

"And if we spent all day here, you'd keep complaining that we never let you get any work done," Ren points out. "So we can't win."

The door opens again, Mio reappearing. She's holding a small envelope in her hands, her fingers pressing into the paper tight enough to crinkle it.

She gives the four of them an appraising, frankly dissatisfied look, then sighs and approaches Ren. She beckons for him to bend down close to her, so she can speak quietly.

"Give this to the pierced guy," she whispers, her cheeks going bright red as she hands over the envelope. Ren accepts the message, tucking it into the pocket of his jeans.

"I'll deliver it directly into his hands," he promises. Mio nods.

"You're all weird. But I guess you're okay," she declares grudgingly.

"All right, if you're going, get out then," Aoba says, shooing them all to the door. "Enjoy the fresh air! Remember fondly those of us stuck inside."

Clear puts one gloved hand over his heart. "We will remember you fondly, Master," he says, sounding so fervent that Ren's half-afraid he's about to start weeping and clutching at Aoba's ankles.

Eventually they make it away from the junk shop and set off in search of the electronics Clear needs.

The weather's nice, which puts Ren in a good mood. He's noticed lately that when it gets damp or cold, some of the places where his bones had to knit get sore. It's nothing too bad -- he can still move without stiffness when it happens -- but, given a choice between feeling the discomfort or being free of it, Ren's happy to take a sunny, painless day over the alternative.

As they take a shortcut down one of the narrow side-streets lined with local businesses, their path is blocked by a noisy scuffle between a group of people wearing the colours of several different Rib gangs.

Koujaku swears under his breath. "I think that's Mizuki in the middle again. He's been getting into fights with everyone."

"Go," Ren urges, nodding towards the commotion. "Sort it out. Don't worry about us."

Koujaku nods, breaking off from them and joining the fray.

Clear and Ren double-back onto the main street, taking the longer way around instead.

"You know, you don't need to call Aoba 'Master'. I don't."

"Yes, but that's different! You're a human now!"

Ren tilts his head to the side, puzzled. Clear's mask stares back at him, unreadable as ever.

"Aren't you?" Ren asks finally.

Clear doesn't say anything.

After a long silence, Ren ventures, "Even when I wasn't, I didn't call him Master. He's... Aoba."

Ren doesn't know how to explain that being Aoba is the best and most important thing that anyone could ever be. He's pretty sure Clear agrees with him on that point, and just has a different way of expressing it, but it's still strange to Ren to hear Clear call Aoba 'Master'.

Maybe if Aoba himself has a chat about it with Clear, that'll convince him.

Soon enough, they arrive at the store. It's smaller than Ren remembers it, like everywhere that he hasn't visited since he was an allmate.

They go inside, and -

"Noiz!" Clear exclaims excitedly.

Ren is suddenly grateful that Koujaku got pulled away to help Mizuki. Any rhymers being present in the store would have been bad enough, but Noiz and Koujaku's rivalry goes above and beyond the ordinary simmering animosity Koujaku radiates around other rhymers.

Noiz is dressed in the same kind of getup that Ren remembers seeing him in previously, but with a noteworthy addition -- one of his legs is in a rocker brace boot, over his pants and shoe.

"Fracture?" Ren asks. Noiz grunts affirmation, turning back to the shelf of circuit pieces he'd been looking at.

Feeling slightly more sympathetic towards Koujaku's irritation with the guy, Ren leaves Noiz alone and looks around the store for the sales clerk. There doesn't seem to be anyone in the shop except the three of them, however.

"Is the owner here?" Ren asks, turning back to Noiz.

"No. He went to lunch," Noiz answers.

"And just left you alone in the store?"

"He knows I always pay."

"Do you know where we'll be able to find these parts, then?" Ren asks, handing over Clear's list.

Noiz gives him an inscrutable look. "Fine." He glances down at the list, then points at the end of the aisle. "Down there for the first two."

Clear heads in the direction of Noiz's gesture, rummaging through the machinery and humming to himself.

"Oh, wait, I have mail for you," Ren grins, fishing Mio's letter out of his pocket. When he looks back up, Noiz is staring at his mouth. Ren closes his lips self-consciously, hiding the small fangs that have grown in over the months since he woke up. "A letter from the little girl who plays in Aoba's shop."

Noiz opens the envelope, scanning the contents quicking and then folding it, putting it in his pocket.

"A romantic declaration?" Ren guesses. Noiz nods.

"It's my own fault. I gave her a kiss when I met her."

That's so unexpected that Ren laughs out loud, forgetting to be self-conscious of his teeth. "That's one way to make friends, I guess."

Noiz smirks, an arch note in his voice as he replies, "Not so different from your own tactics."

Ren's not even sure why he's surprised by that. He feels like he should be offended -- Koujaku would be absolutely furious, and Aoba would probably decide to get in a kick or two of his own as well -- but instead he's just kind of annoyed and amused at once.

"I'm sure Usagimodoki is thrilled to be employed as a peeping tom," he says dryly. Noiz shrugs, clearly not caring one way or the other.

"Actually," Ren goes on, thinking back to the first time he'd seen Noiz's allmate used for eavesdropping. "There's something I need to ask you about. Was there any..." He searches for a diplomatic way to phrase it, then gives up. "Lasting effect on you, from Aoba using his voice? Mizuki's been acting oddly. Anything you can tell me might help us help him."

Noiz frowns. He shakes his head, turning away from Ren and walking towards the front of the store. The fracture cast doesn't slow down his gait. In fact, it doesn't seem to affect it at all.

"You can't feel pain, can you?" Ren asks.

Noiz turns and looks at Ren sharply, surprise visible in his expression for a moment before the shutters come back down. He doesn't answer.

"That must be terrible. I'm sorry you have to deal with that."

Noiz still doesn't bother to answer, not at first, and enough time passes that Ren's surprised when Noiz asks, voice so flat that it's barely a question, "What makes you think that?"

"For all intents and purposes, this body clawed its way back from being dead," Ren replies with a crooked smile. "I've spent more hours than I care to think about lying in hospital beds or working myself to the point of tears in physical therapy. I know what it looks like when something hurts, and what it looks like when something doesn't. I've had a crash course in pretty much every kind of pain a body can feel."

Now Noiz is openly staring at Ren. His eyes, as always, are unreadable.

"Lucky you," he says, and it's not as sarcastic as he probably means it to be.

"I found them all!"

The moment shatters as Clear comes over, his hands full of tiny, intricate pieces of gadgetry.

"Are you sure you'll be all right, doing the work yourself?" Ren asks. "It'd go faster if you had help, I'm sure."

"Well..." Clear concedes, hesitant.

"Noiz, you should help," Ren goes on, earning matching splutters of outrage from Clear and Noiz both.

"Hang on, why should I do that?" Noiz objects.

"Cost-benefit ratios on everything you do for other people is a pathetic way to live," Ren replies.
"Doing good things for others is what makes us part of the human race."

Noiz gives another smirk. "None of us are really in a position to decide on that subject, are we?"

"I... I don't know what you're insinuating!" Clear blusters. "But you should--"

Noiz makes an irritated sound and rolls his eyes. "Come on, drop it. Even if there was nothing else strange about you, there's your song in the Oval Tower to account for."

"Don't feel bad," Ren chimes in. "You have noticed the company you keep, right? When it comes to normalcy, it's not like any of us have a leg to stand on."

"Oh come on, that was tacky as hell," Noiz snipes. Ren smiles, unrepentant.

-

Noiz's home is close by -- it would have to be, Ren thinks, with Noiz's leg in the condition it's in. Even if he doesn't feel pain, there would be limits to how far his body would physically be capable of moving.

The furnishings inside are utilitarian, with soft corners and textures. It's not designed for comfort, exactly, but rather for the elimination of anything that might cause inadvertent injury. Ren wonders how long it's been since anyone but Noiz was inside.

"So where do these go?" Noiz asks, holding up the bag of components.

Clear hesitates. "My shoulder," he answers quietly.

"Okay. Sit." Noiz points to a chair beside a workbench running the length of one wall. "Coat and shirt off."

Clear complies.

"Take the mask off, too."

"Wait..." Clear holds his hands up in protest. "That isn't necessary, you can --"

"Clear," Ren coaxes as gently as he can. "It's all right."

Clear's shoulders slump in defeat, and he removes his gas mask. His face underneath looks perfectly human, and quite sweet natured, but his expression is terribly nervous and unsure.

He reaches up behind his ear and triggers some kind of release mechanism, peeling a section of his skin away as if he's removing another garment, exposing the metal workings of his throat and shoulder.

"How did you intend to do repairs on your own, when they're in that position?" Ren asks, as Noiz leans over from behind Clear and starts tinkering.

"I'm getting quite good at it," Clear answers. "I've had to do it myself for a while now."

"I hope you haven't made a mess of it in here, then," Noiz says, tilting Clear's head to the side to get a better look.

Absorbed in his work, Noiz is beautiful. It's easy to forget that when he's talking, or even just when he's conscious of being observed. His prickly vibe is too strong to get past, most of the time.

But now, distracted by repairing Clear's shoulder, his face is laid bare, and it's lovely. Ren likes the way Noiz's piercings look, like he was trying to make himself partly metal, as if he could will himself into being what Clear is.

Clear winces as Noiz disconnects something.

"You're distracting me," Noiz says to Ren without looking up. "Go do something useful. Make coffee."

The kitchen barely looks lived-in at all. There's a fridge, but all that's inside is a take-out container with something which might have once been pasta and is now well on its way to being an effective treatment against disease and infection.

There's instant coffee in the cupboard, and a couple of mugs with cartoon characters on them sitting in the sink, with yet more home-made penicillin in evidence on MokonaModoki's smiling face.

Against all odds, the hot water tap works, so Ren fills the sink and adds detergent, then sets about doing the washing up.

He's not sure how much time has passed -- every time it seems like he's got to the end of the dirty crockery, he spots another plate lurking -- when Noiz comes into the kitchen.

"Done," he tells Ren.

Ren picks up a mostly-clean tea towel and dries his hands. "Everything back in good working order?"

"Yes. He's in shutdown for the time being, so the nanoprocessors can configure and defrag. There's some sweet tech in there. Premium stuff."

"Thank you for helping him."

Noiz makes a dismissive sound. Then, as if it's a natural part of their conversation, he steps into Ren's space and kisses him, hard. Ren kisses back, opening his mouth when Noiz licks at the seam of his lips. There's metal in his tongue, too, and it makes Ren's breath catch to feel the press of it.

Noiz licks at the points of Ren's teeth, so Ren kisses back more forcefully, nipping and biting at Noiz's mouth. Noiz moans, pressing Ren back against the edge of the countertop, one leg between Ren's.

Working on a hunch, Ren reaches down and squeezes Noiz's crotch, being none too gentle about it. The guess pays off as Noiz arches into the touch, a soft cry falling out of his mouth into Ren's own.

"Harder," he says, licking at Ren's incisors again.

Instead of following the order, Ren moves them, until Noiz is the one with his back against the countertop. Ren drops to his knees, grateful again for the mild weather of the day that makes the movement painless for him.

Like the rest of his clothes, Noiz's fly is excessively complicated, but Ren's a quick study and gets it open fast enough. Noiz is half-hard already, and extensively pierced. The feel of the metal on Ren's tongue as he slides his mouth over Noiz's thickening length is new and strange, but Ren likes it.

After a few experimental bobs of his head, Ren pulls back and looks up at Noiz's face. "Do you want me to use my teeth?"

Noiz closes his eyes, biting his own lip as he nods. "Yes."

So Ren does, dragging the point of one fang over the head of Noiz's dick before taking him in again. Ren closes his jaw enough that the edge of both his bottom and top teeth push against the resistance of Noiz's skin.

He holds Noiz's hips in place with his hands when Noiz tries to buck forward, setting a slow pace as he tries various levels of pressure and sharpness with his bite to see what elicits the best reaction.

It doesn't take long before Noiz is frantic, his hands clutching at Ren's hair and shoulders, his body bent over as if he can brace himself against the intensity of the sensation. Ren can only imagine what it must be like for Noiz to feel pleasure, after feeling almost nothing for so much of the rest of the time. Ren feels honoured to have the chance to give Noiz this.

When he can feel Noiz getting close to climax, Ren sinks his teeth in as hard as he dares, almost breaking the skin. Noiz comes with a shout, muffling the sound with his own hand as his knees give out.

Ren holds him steady, stopping him from falling and hurting his leg even more, and stands as well. Still breathless, his cheeks hectic with colour, Noiz pulls Ren in for a deep, filthy kiss, licking at the semen that Ren hadn't managed to swallow and moaning a little as he does.

It makes Ren feel pleased, that Noiz likes the taste. Ren does, but he wasn't sure if he was strange for doing so, since Aoba seems to think that it's an odd thing to like.

But it's like Ren told Clear, earlier: all of them are strange. So it's all right.

They're still kissing when Ren's coil beeps loudly with an incoming call. It's Koujaku.

"Get to Heibon as soon as you can. Mizuki's back in the hospital."

Chapter 3

"I should have remembered how much I hate hospital food, at least," Mizuki says mournfully, prodding at a jellied substance of dubious origin on his plate.

"You would have stopped yourself having a seizure through sheer willpower, just to avoid the food?" Aoba asks, in his most unimpressed tones. Mizuki nods fervently.

"Yes!"

"I can go get food!" Clear offers. Unmasked, his face is as expressive as a child's, showing every thought and impulse without guile.

"Yeah, I'm hungry too," Noiz adds. "I'll come to the cafeteria." His features have the opposite problem to Clear's: where Clear offers his feelings all too obviously, Noiz is forever held back, unreadable.

Ren tries to envisage what kind of haul the pair of them would bring back from the cafeteria, and shakes his head. "No, you two wait here, I'll go. I need to stretch my legs."

"I'll help," Koujaku chimes in.

"Good luck," Aoba says, tone one of defeat already.

"Your bedside manner is *amazing*," Mizuki tells him dryly.

"Sorry. I hate hospitals. I have ever since I was young." Aoba shudders. "Needles used to make me cry, every time."

"That explains why you don't have any tattoos," Mizuki observes. "But doesn't offer us any insight to the years of getting into street brawls. A kick to the face is more painful than a booster shot."

"That's an exaggeration!" objects Aoba. "You make it sound like I'm always in a fight."

Everyone coughs pointedly and looks away. Even Clear.

"Koujaku?" Ren prompts, trying not to grin. "Shall we?"

In contrast to the overcrowded room, the corridor outside is practically deserted.

"We make for a noisy visiting hour," Ren says. Koujaku chuckles quietly.

"That's putting it mildly."

"Do you think he'll be all right?"

That makes Koujaku sigh. He sounds weary. "I don't know. It hasn't been long enough for us to really know anything about how scrap affects people in the long term, has it? He was doing fine for a while, but then he just seemed angry all the time, and now this."

"Maybe Tae will have suggestions," says Ren. "She managed to keep Aoba's scrap at bay for years."

"Mm." Koujaku doesn't look encouraged by the words. "That was the other side of it though. There's the problems that come from *doing* scrap, and then there's the problems of having scrap *done* to you. They might be completely different."

Ren doesn't know where his own experiences would fall on that spectrum, considering his unique connections with Aoba and Sei. They wait for the elevator without speaking, and get off on the level with the cafeteria and gift shop.

"When... before you woke up," Koujaku says, breaking the silence in a hesitant voice. "In the hospital here. Could you hear people? Did you know they were there?"

Ren considers the question, then nods. "There was no way for me to show them that I could, but yes. I did."

Koujaku lets out a long, quiet breath, staring down at the scars that mark his knuckles. "Good. That's good."

Ren doesn't press for him to say more. They stare at the limp, colourless food for sale. It's exactly as uninspiring as Aoba gloomily predicted.

"My mother," Koujaku says finally. "She was comatose before she died."

Ren butts his head lightly against Koujaku's shoulder, trying to comfort him. The gesture makes Koujaku give a small smile, and reach up to scrunch at Ren's hair for a moment.

"This food is as bad as what Mizuki's already got," Ren notes. "Maybe we should try the gift shop? There might be some passable sweets or chocolates for sale there, at least."

Ren has a simple appetite. He likes Tae's food, and Aoba's, but not anything too processed or artificial. He sometimes wonders what Sei liked to eat.

The gift shop is full of flowers, both real and fake varieties, and foil balloons, and teddy bears, and a few gentle varieties of allmate on display. One is a tiny fuzzy duckling, and as Koujaku heads off in the direction of the chocolates and candied fruit, Ren stares at the baby bird and wonders who buys things like this, what their lives are like.

Another of the display allmates, a miniature deer-like creature no bigger than a small cat, nuzzles at Ren's ankles. He crouches down, petting it lightly. It's so fragile looking, on its thin spindly legs.

"That's odd. It's a display model; it's not programmed to directly interact," the store clerk notes. "Probably yet another dud. There's no quality control anymore, not since the company changed hands."

Ren decides to keep his own opinions on the former manufacturer of allmates to himself. He pets the little deer again, getting another nuzzle in return.

“That’s a dik-dik,” another customer tells him. “Their bones are often used in jewellery. Real ones, that is. Not allmates.”

Ren looks up. The man who spoke has light-coloured hair and is wearing a blue kimono. Also skulls. Skulls are the dominant style feature present throughout his ensemble. There are skulls at his waist, his wrists, and around his neck.

“I can’t imagine someone like you knowing anything about bone jewellery,” Ren says, because the person he talks to most often is Aoba and that fact is having a very bad influence on his sarcasm levels.

He’s standing up again as Koujaku rounds the corner of the aisle and then freezes, his eyes fixed on the man Ren was just talking to. The acrid scent of fear and anger chokes the air around them, making the hair on the back of Ren’s neck stand up.

Koujaku’s face contorts in a snarl, and something in Ren that remembers being small and furred cowers at the sight, at the threatening growl that rumbles in Koujaku’s throat.

Ren grabs at Koujaku’s arm, trying to ground him, to bring him out of the strange daze he seems to have sunk into. His muscles are corded tight, hard under Ren’s hand, and Koujaku shrugs him off without acknowledgement.

The lunge comes so fast that Ren’s only half-prepared for it as Koujaku springs forward. He doesn’t even have his sword in his hands, or any other weapon – it’s like he expects to do damage with the strength of his hate alone. Ren’s not sure that Koujaku’s aware enough of himself right now to have even thought that far ahead.

Anyone but Ren would have moved too late to stop him, but Ren is a being born out of a single fundamental duty: to restrain his charge from destructive impulses. His arms lock around Koujaku instinctively, dragging him back as much as possible as he struggles to move forward.

“Koujaku!”

The man in the blue kimono looks at them both, his head cocked to the side as if he’s observing something interesting. His mouth widens in a smile, and then he laughs.

“I love how small this island is. I’m always running into old friends.”

Koujaku lunges again, his arm knocking the shelves behind them to the ground in a loud crash. Ren hears a whistling animal cry, as one of the display allmates is damaged, and the crack of broken glass. Koujaku is much stronger than he should be, and it’s more determination than anything else that’s keeping Ren’s arms around him.

He hears the pounding of running feet under the din of the store’s burglar alarm, and risks a glance over at the door. It’s Aoba, Noiz, and Clear.

“Help me hold him back!” Ren shouts. Aoba’s the first to reach them.

“Mizuki’s right,” Ren manages to say, breathless with the effort of working against Koujaku’s struggles. “You really are constantly drawn to fights.”

“We heard an alarm and somehow knew it was your fault,” Aoba snipes back. Ren’s not fooled, though: no matter how cranky Aoba tries to make his words, Ren can see the fierce energy in his face, hear the vitality in his voice.

The part of Aoba that used to play, and play dirty, under the name Sly Blue, may have been absorbed back into his dominant consciousness, but that doesn’t mean it’s gone away. On the contrary, it means that Aoba’s wilder side is never far away, especially not in a situation like this.

A soft, calm sound cuts through the cacophony of the fight, like a gentle hand soothing a wild animal. Koujaku sags against Ren, and since Aoba’s weight is braced against Koujaku the three of them fall into an undignified heap in the middle of the gift-store debris.

Clear stops singing, and the only noises left are the alarm’s drone and the shrill whistle of the broken allmate.

Koujaku gasps for breath, choking on the exhales as if trying not to sob. Ren stays absolutely still, hoping his physical presence will help calm Koujaku down.

Noiz appears, stepping into the ruined mess of the store beside Clear. “I lost him,” he says, shaking his head. Koujaku makes an abortive movement to stand, but Ren and Aoba keep him down in the awkward sprawl.

“Easy, easy,” Ren says. “We’ll get Dry Juice and Benishigure on it. It’s fine.” At a louder volume, addressing the rest of them, Ren adds, “Can someone please put that allmate into sleep mode?”

Clear does so, lifting the little dik-dik out of the rubble it was buried under. One of its legs is clearly broken.

“You have to pay for that!” the store clerk says, apparently addressing all five of them. “And all the rest of this damage.”

“It’s a display model. You didn’t lose a sale on it,” Noiz argues flatly.

“Noiz,” Aoba says in a tone that reminds everyone that while his scrap powers may be dormant, he still has years of being brought up by Tae to put behind an order. “Give him your coil details. We can fight about repayment later.”

Tuning out the bickering, Ren starts to sit up. “Can you stand?” he asks Koujaku, who gives a nod. He won’t look Ren in the face. “Okay, come on.”

Ren and Aoba help Koujaku to his feet. Aoba gestures to his own coil. “I’ll call Mizuki, tell him we’ll be back later. You get started walking, I can catch up.”

Koujaku clearly doesn’t want to lean on Ren, but also clearly needs to. They set off towards Aoba’s home, Clear beside them with the sleep-mode allmate in his arms. Noiz catches up with them a minute later, and Aoba a minute after that.

“Four bodyguards. I’m not sure whether to be flattered or offended,” Koujaku says, and only people who didn’t know him at all would be fooled by his careless tone of voice.

"We're not guarding you, we're trying to help you, half-wit," Aoba retorts, bumping his shoulder against Koujaku's.

They stay quiet for the rest of the way back to the house, where they all settle into the small living-room as best they can, Clear and Ren opting for the floor when the chairs run out.

Koujaku tells them about the man in the blue kimono, Ryuuhou, and the origin of Koujaku's tattoos, and the death of his mother. His voice is even, factual, as he speaks, but Ren can see the way he keeps his hands pressed against his legs to hide their shaking.

Tae comes home at the end of the tale, and Koujaku repeats an abbreviated version of it for her sake.

"At least we know what's wrong with Mizuki," Aoba says with as much brightness as he can muster, when Koujaku's done speaking. Clear and Noiz give him confused looks.

"After everything that's happened," Aoba explains patiently. "There's no way that Mizuki *hasn't* gone and gotten himself a few new tattoos to mark it. And who better to go to than one of the greats?"

Tae gives a loud sigh. "There are still a few local specialists who've done work in brain plasticity. I'll call them all together for a meeting. It's more than overdue for some kind of protocol to be made about dealing with these kinds of incidents."

Koujaku gives a wavery, humourless laugh at the thought. His hands are visibly shaking now, impossible to conceal. Ren leans against Koujaku's side, putting his head in range for petting. Koujaku's hand finds Ren's hair without further prompting.

"I'll speak to some of Benishigure, and Mizuki," Koujaku says. "Make sure there's someone with him at all times, until the rest of his team and mine can track down Ryuuhou and keep him contained. We'll work out with the police what's the best charge to hold him with."

Aoba nods. "You can stay in my parents' old room. We'll make sure that you'll have someone with you at all times, as well."

Koujaku gives him a grateful smile. "Thank you." He looks around at all of them, from Noiz's apparent total disinterest to Clear's idle petting of the deactivated allmate. "Is that fixable?"

That makes Aoba cluck his tongue, unimpressed. "Please. A break like that won't take me fifteen minutes."

"It's a display model, though," Ren reminds him. "It can't be programmed like an ordinary allmate."

"Well, it can just be in stasis then, like the puppy-Ren," Aoba suggests. "Sleep mode all the time. I'll fix it first, though, since it won't be any trouble to do so."

Noiz gives an irritated sigh. "Just because it made a sad noise doesn't mean it was actually *hurt*. It's just a machine."

Ren's exhausted and bruised and has run out of patience for Noiz. "Fuck you," he snaps.

The room goes silent, everyone staring at Ren.

“What?”

Koujaku starts laughing, a genuine laugh this time. “We’ve never heard you swear before, that’s all.”

Ren blinks, and then starts laughing too.

Tae and Aoba make dinner, and things feel surprisingly ordinary to Ren. Or maybe it’s just that he’s so used to things being strange that he hardly notices it anymore. As they finish eating, Koujaku asks Clear about his voice.

Clear, obviously still not used to being without his mask when other people are around, let alone being the centre of attention, takes a little prodding before he’ll answer, but eventually does.

“It was designed to control people. All of Toue’s designs were for that. It can change their thoughts, or help them sleep, or cause them pain.”

Noiz gives Clear a sharp, unreadable look at that. Ren remembers what happened in Noiz’s kitchen -- *“Do you want me to use my teeth?”* -- and has to stop himself from smiling. Maybe Noiz will change his mind about the worth of machines more easily than Ren thought.

“My voice hurt people,” Aoba says. He sounds unhappy, but the deep biting regret that Ren’s heard in his voice the other times he’s talked about this seems to have faded, at least a little. “When I was younger. I think that’s why Virus and Trip took an interest, though who can say for sure with those two.”

“I hate them,” Koujaku says. “I always did, but now that we know what they did to Dry Juice, and so many others, I think I hate them enough to kill them.”

“Don’t.” Aoba shakes his head. “The rumour about teams being spirited away started a decade ago. Long before they were responsible for it, they were in the first wave of its victims. That’s right, isn’t it, Clear?”

Clear nods. “Yes. All the experiments Toue did needed test subjects. Sometimes they used prisoners, but for other things he wanted children.”

All of them fall quiet at that, sickened by the thought of what they’d been caught up in, what they’d been lucky enough to escape. How many others hadn’t been that lucky.

“That doesn’t excuse that they became monsters,” Koujaku insists, perhaps reminding himself of the fact as much as anyone.

“No,” Aoba agrees. “But it does explain it.”

“After Oval Tower fell, most of the people who’d been used by Toue needed hospitalisation, but they recovered in the end, came back to themselves,” Ren muses. “I wonder why that wasn’t true for those two?”

"I think..." Clear looks thoughtful, like a child deliberating over difficult homework. "What they'd been before, whatever it was, had been burned away a long time ago. There wasn't anything left to recover."

"Like Sei," Aoba says sadly.

Ren frowns at that. "Yes, I suppose." He hates thinking about what happened to Sei, who had willingly given his second chance at life to Ren, as a gift to him and Aoba.

"Prisoners?" Koujaku asks Clear. "Like Mink?"

This time it's Noiz who nods. "Yeah. I did some digging about Scratch, after he disappeared. Wanted to make sure that nobody was rubbing out anyone stupid enough to have broken into the tower that night. But it looks like he left by his own volition. There wasn't much trail to follow."

Aoba frowns. "I hope he's all right." He looks worried about something all of a sudden, his frown deepening. "If Scratch was prisoners who had been experimented on... there was one, he... I thought I'd... hurt him. With my voice. Made him obsessed with me. Maybe it was a combination of too many kinds of control being used on him."

Ren tries not to worry about what that might mean for Mizuki. No, Mizuki is strong. He'll survive this. They'll all get through it.

Restless, Ren stands up from the table and stands against the counter instead.



"Obsessed?" Tae looks concerned now. Ren sternly reminds himself that she is probably more equipped to deal with these revelations than any of them, but his natural protective inclination still wants to push her out of the room so she doesn't have to hear this stuff anymore.

“That man, Mink... if my hunch is right, then he had an extremely dangerous form of scrap at his disposal,” Tae goes on. “I’m not saying that it’s a certainty that he used it on his group. But it’s possible he had the power to coerce people through scent. It was a medicine Toue was researching, right around the time I left for good. If Mink had access to the original version, rather than whatever Toue was trying to recreate in a lab... I can only imagine what the potency might have been.”

“What do you mean, grandma?” Aoba asks.

“It turned the user’s body into an addictive substance. Just the smell of them could make those around them pliant to suggestion, especially if use with the burning of the right herbs to bolster the power of it. In a more concentrated form – blood, bodily fluids – it was capable of inducing euphoria. Ecstasy. Even if it was administered without consent, it immediately caused the recipient to become absolutely obsessed with the originator. A predator could have put one drop of his blood into someone’s food, and they’d have followed him to the ends of the earth as his willing slave.”

They all sit in horrified silence, trying to comprehend the scope of what Tae is describing.

Scent, sex, taste. Ren values these things so highly that he feels almost reverent about them: they are what being human *means*, for him. The thought of someone corrupting them to manipulate people clouds his vision with fury.

His knuckles hit the frypan resting on the counter, remnants of the last meal cooked still clinging to the sides of it. He growls without knowing he’s going to until he does.

“Maybe we should check you for new tattoos,” Noiz offers in his usual flat tones.

“No, sorry, I’m fine,” Ren says, flexing his hand to make sure he didn’t hurt it badly. Aoba would not be amused if Ren managed to undo months of careful rehabilitation in a moment of anger.

“Why the frypan?”

“It was the thing least likely to be damaged by a punch,” Ren answers, feeling embarrassed at the outburst already. Noiz makes a scoffing sound.

“Unrestrained rage is never going to be your thing, I guess.”

His tone is sardonic, almost nasty, but he’s here at the table and that, what he does, is more important than what he says, Ren thinks.

“I hope Mink’s all right,” Aoba says again. “And... I hope he hasn’t done anything that he’ll have to live with for the rest of his life.”

“Everyone does things they have to live with forever. Every day. That’s what being alive *is*,” Koujaku points out. He doesn’t sound critical of Aoba. He just sounds sad.

“Well then,” Aoba amends. “We’re all just-”

Blinding agony daggers through Ren’s head, fast and deadly. He’s on his hands and knees, vomiting, before he’s registered anything but *pain painpainpainPAIN*.

He's dimly aware of people moving, chairs scraping on the floor, a hand on his back, but all of that is distant. He can't think, can't process the sensory input. All there is to know is that it *hurts*.

Dimly, Ren realises he's screaming. Then Aoba shouts something, a name that's more like a plea, and another sound -- cold water on a burn, a friendly touch in a lonely place -- pushes the pain away and there's nothing but the dark and quiet.

When he wakes, it's to the thin daylight of very early morning. Ren's in bed, curled against Aoba's back. Someone must have made him sit up and rinse his mouth out at some point in the night, though he can't remember it, because thankfully all he can taste is the faint fake-strawberry flavour of the mouthwash they keep in the bathroom. Ren's never been fond of it, but it's certainly better to wake up with than the alternative would have been.

Aoba rolls over, facing Ren. "How do you feel?"

"My head hurts," Ren answers, taking stock. "But not badly."

"We were worried."

Ren can't stop himself from giving a crooked smile. "There's something we don't have nearly enough experience with. Worrying."

"Granny took your temperature and checked your heart-rate and pupil dilation," Aoba says, ignoring Ren's remark. "She says it looks like it was just an ordinary bad migraine. A cluster headache. It might have been triggered by one of the strange things we went through yesterday, but it was just an ordinary migraine."

The absurdity of that, of something so simple and irritating and normal being the heart of the situation, makes Ren laugh out loud and kiss Aoba.

Aoba gives one of his bright, blinding smiles, the kind that make Ren's heart catch. "I don't think that's most people's reactions to a migraine."

"It's just nice to have something be solved easily, for a change." Ren explains, knowing that it's silly to be pleased over something like that but not caring.

Aoba doesn't seem to mind the silliness, though, resting his forehead against Ren's and closing his eyes. Their fingers lace together and they simply exist for a while, breathing in sync, two parts of a whole.

"I love you," Ren says quietly. He knows it doesn't need to be said, but he likes saying it anyway.

"I love you," Aoba answers, and even the sensation of his breath against Ren's skin feels like a precious gift.

Ren's headache is still there, the faintest echo of the earlier pain, but it's not enough to stop him reaching down between their bodies to take Aoba's length in his hand.

Aoba shivers at the touch, smiling another of his brilliant beautiful smiles at Ren. He mirrors Ren's movement, curling his own palm around Ren's morning hardness, smearing the fluid at the tip with a brush of his thumb that makes Ren draw in a sharp, half-laughing breath.

“You’re lucky Koujaku learned from late nights out with Mizuki,” Aoba teases. “Because there’s no way I’d do this if you still smelled like vomit.”

“You’re so good at romantic talk,” Ren fires back, twisting his wrist to make Aoba gasp and jerk against him. Ren smiles in victory.

Aoba retaliates immediately, licking the thumb of his free hand and then rubbing it over Ren’s nipple in light, teasing circles. Ren pushes his mouth against Aoba’s until they open for each other, kissing slow and languid in the rising light of the morning.

Aoba stops stroking Ren’s nipple and pinches it lightly instead, laughing at his own playfulness. Ren bites at his lip, moving his wrist faster, and Aoba’s laugh dissolves into a broken groan.

The sound makes Ren buck into Aoba’s hand, and it takes Aoba less than a second to recognise the advantage he’s just gained. He moans quietly again, and Ren’s body responds instinctively despite himself.

Conceding the battle, Ren curls into Aoba’s touch and buries his face in Aoba’s hair, breathing in the smell of him, the warm closeness of his skin. Aoba’s making soft sounds continuously now, no longer part of their game but an unstoppable reaction to Ren’s touch, to the pace they’ve set together.

They can’t stop touching, can’t stop pressing kisses against each other, throats and shoulders and chins and cheeks and mouths, wherever they find themselves connecting. Shuddering and gasping, Ren comes first, his eyes open and locked on Aoba’s own as pleasure washes over him.

Aoba smiles, somehow tender and heated at the same time, and wraps his hand around Ren’s own as they stroke him to completion too.

They lie together another few minutes, skin melded to skin with sweat, mouths swollen and red from kissing.

“We should get up,” Ren says finally. Aoba makes a face.

“Do we have to?”

“Yes, probably.”

“All right.” With a sigh, Aoba climbs out of bed, offering a hand down to help Ren up.

They take turns to shower and dress, and eventually make their way downstairs. Koujaku is eating breakfast at the table, Tae standing at the stovetop.

“We all hung out in my room, after you passed out. So I could keep an eye on you,” Aoba explains. Ren nods. He’s not embarrassed at the thought; he spent far too long in hospital and physical therapy to be body conscious.

Also, he’s seen both Koujaku and Noiz at very compromising moments, and Clear with his skin unzipped, so. It’s hard to muster up any feelings of shyness towards them.

"Then, when we all wanted to sleep, Noiz went home, and since Clear doesn't need sleep, he stayed awake in Koujaku's room to make sure he was all right, and I was in with you in case anything happened."

Ren nods again. "I told you so," he says to Koujaku. "Nobody needs to face things alone."

"It's too early for Ren-level earnestness," Koujaku replies without malice, sipping his tea.

"Clear went to see Noiz this morning?" Ren guesses, sitting down at the table too. Koujaku looks surprised.

"How did you know?"

"Lucky guess," Ren says, smiling to himself. It's nice to think that not all of the entanglements between them have to be motivated by dire circumstances.

Aoba's coil chimes halfway through the meal, and the easy mood is broken the moment that they all hear the voice coming from the device.

"We heard you were looking for an old yakuza acquaintance of ours," Virus says cheerfully, as if it's only a few hours since he and Aoba last spoke.

Aoba bares his teeth in an angry frown. "What's it to you?"

"It's so sad to hear you so aggressive, Aoba. I just thought you might like to know he's dead. Since I doubt the culprit is taking the credit or making a fuss, you needed to hear it from someone else. I must say I'm surprised, I didn't think any of your little party had it in them."

"No." Aoba shakes his head, still frowning. "I know that isn't true. We've been keeping watch on K-"

"You've mistaken my meaning. Ryuuhou died a completely bloodless death. No violence at all. He was pulled into a Rhyme game and his brain was fatally damaged."

Aoba, Koujaku and Ren all stare at one another across the table, mystified and disturbed by Virus's words.

"It's actually all over the news," Virus goes on. "Since it was the first sighting of Usui since the Oval Tower fell."

Chapter 4

By early afternoon of the third day since Virus's call, Ren has reached the absolute maximum level of Aoba and Koujaku's concerned hovering that he can tolerate. He loves them dearly, but if he has to bear witness to any more concerned pacing, clandestine hand-wringing, or troubled looks, then he is going to go mad.

"You should both visit Mizuki. At once, not on this shift schedule you have going so one of you is always keeping an eye on me," he tells them firmly. "I'll go see what Clear and Noiz have been up to. I'm sure they're more than capable of... whatever it is you expect to accomplish by being extremely worried in my vicinity for 24 hours a day."

Not waiting for what will doubtlessly be perfectly reasonable reasons why this is a terrible plan, Ren gives Aoba a kiss goodbye, waves to Koujaku, and bolts out the door before they can stop him. He's so grateful to be out and moving without a chaperone – even if his destination is another set of minders – that he runs most of the way to Noiz's home.

Ren's not at all surprised when Clear's the one to open the door.

"Ren! Noiz is out, but he'll be back very soon. It's good to see you. Come in. There's something that I wanted to talk to you about."

Clear sits down in a chair beside Noiz's work bench. Ren settles himself in an armchair against one of the corners of the room, sitting with his knees drawn up on the seat. He's still not entirely used to having limbs that stretch out so much when he sits down, and tends to curl up into more compact postures out of habit.

"After you got sick and I had to help you sleep, I had a conversation with M-... with Aoba and Koujaku," Clear explains, a very human frown furrowing his eyebrows. "They answered a lot of questions that I had about life and death."

Red nods, waiting for Clear to continue.

"But there are still some things I don't understand. I thought you might know."

"I'll try my best," Ren promises. "What's troubling you?"

"I used to think it was easy, with humans, to know when life starts. Babies are born and then they're alive. But Tae said that Aoba died and came back. You're in Sei's body, but Sei's gone. So where did those lives start? Where do they end?"

Ren considers the question before answering. "A lot of people have a lot of different ideas about it. When life starts, and what counts as still being alive. I think it's something everyone needs to decide on their personal answer for on their own, since there's so much disagreement. As for my own opinion, I think... a soul can be something that grows."

Clear smiles. "I agree with that."

"Well, good, because even I'm not sure I completely understand what I said," Ren admits with a laugh. "I think it's all right not to know, so long as we keep wondering and trying to understand."

"There's something else I wanted to ask, too." Clear looks away, clearly troubled. "I... like Noiz very much. I like Aoba, of course. And Koujaku is very brave and loyal and good-natured, so I like him. Tae makes food and makes everyone feel safe, so I like her. And Ren wants to help everyone and protect everyone, so I like you as well."

"Thank you."

"But is that all right? To like so many different people at once?"

Ren smiles, trying to dampen his sudden desire to lick Clear's face and wag his tail. He doesn't have a tail to wag anymore, and Aoba's told him off more than once for face-licking.

"It's all right, Clear. It's good. It's-"

The door opens and Noiz steps inside. He looks very different from the last time Ren saw him, just a few days ago. He's wearing the same kind of long-sleeved undershirt as usual, but without the shirt and tie he's always had layered on top in the past. Clear's scarf is knotted loosely around his neck, against the chill of the day. He's wearing his usual hat as he enters the room, then takes it off and tosses it aside once he's in the warmth.

The most marked change is in his demeanour, the posture of his body and the loose, carefree air he's gained in how he moves. Noiz has been a shuttered, tightly wound person for as long as Ren's known him, and now it's as if something has helped him uncoil a little. It's the difference between a rosebud and a bloom.

Maybe Ren was even more correct than he knew in what he's just told Clear. Maybe souls really are things that can grow.

"Hey," Noiz says to Ren, raising his hand in a brief wave of greeting more turning his full attention to Clear. "I got everything we needed, plus a bunch of extras to keep on stand-by for the future."

He holds up a large canvas sack, which clinks a little as it moves.

"The electronics black market is flooded with dismantled Toue security tech," Noiz explains to Ren, unwinding his scarf and tossing it atop the discarded hat. "Since Clear's got a lot of prototype systems, he's parts-compatible with nearly all the other makes and models at least a bit, since nothing was made specifically to create him." He turns to Clear. "No wonder you're so existential; you're as generic as the rest of us. Okay, let's look at that metacarpus. I got a new screw to replace the one that you said keeps going loose."

Clear pushes the sleeve of his shirt up to the crook of his elbow, and performs the same invisible-catch trick that Ren saw him do to his shoulder once before. This time, it's Clear's hand that sheds its skin, which Clear folds out of the way as if it's another sleeve.

Noiz positions the light of his worktable lamp over Clear's palm, and leans down over it with a watchmaker's screwdriver in one hand and a pair of needle-nose pliers in the other. Ren stays quiet as he observes them, not wanting to break Noiz's concentration or disturb the moment.

After a few minutes, Noiz lifts the instruments away.

"All done?" Clear asks.

Noiz nods, but instead of speaking he bows his head again. Ren hears the quiet click of metal on metal as the snake bite piercings in Noiz's lip brush against the metal of Clear's exposed palm.

Clear is watching Noiz, enraptured, hardly moving. Noiz looks at him with a look that's tender and intense at once, nothing hidden away in his eyes now, climbing onto Clear's lap with his own legs either side of Clear's, their faces on a height with one another.

Since he can see them both in profile from where he sits, Ren is in a perfect position to see how open their body language is as they stare at each other. How full of trust.

Noiz turns, looking at Ren with a smile that has that same old laconic sharp laziness in it, a fundamental Noiz-ness that won't ever change. "You might want to cover your ears."

Ren presses his fingers to his ears, blocking off all sound except his own heartbeat. Clear and Noiz are both watching him now, Noiz still wearing that anticipatory smug smile, Clear with careful concern. Ren gives them a nod, to let them know he's ready, and Clear nods in reply before bending his head and whispering something in Noiz's ear.

Noiz jerks as if struck, shifting a little in Clear's lap. He lifts Clear's hand, the one still wearing skin and flesh, to his mouth and nips at the fingertips as Clear kisses his jaw and throat. Clear's other hand, the exposed one, cradles the back of Noiz's head. Ren is momentarily mesmerised by the sight of the way the machinery in Clear's hand and wrist moves as he brushes his little finger up and down over the short hair at the nape of Noiz's neck.

Then Clear stops kissing Noiz and begins whispering again. Noiz jerks harder this time, his hands spasming open as the current of pain daggers through his nervous system. As his fingers open around Clear's wrist, releasing the hand he'd been biting at, Clear moves inhumanly fast and catches Noiz's wrist in a tight grip instead, pinning it against Noiz's side. Ren can see Noiz shiver at the hold.

Clear kisses Noiz again and then speaks against Noiz's lips. From the way Noiz's mouth falls open and his chin tips up, Ren can tell that these quiet words from Clear have made Noiz cry out, or maybe moan. Noiz grabs at Clear's sleeve, clutching just above the exposed machinery, as Clear keeps his other hand trapped in place and keeps a steady touch on the back of Noiz's head with a grip that, though very gentle, is obviously also not something Noiz would ever have the strength to fight against.

Noiz speaks to Clear through gritted teeth. Ren thinks he's saying 'do it', or 'come on'. Clear smiles, metal fingers stroking softly at Noiz's hair, the human-looking fingers of his other hand clasping tightly around Noiz's wrist as he leans in close to Noiz's ear and opens his mouth, beginning to sing.

Noiz's eyes go glassy, lids slipping halfway closed as his lips begin to darken with a flush of blood. He's panting for breath, spine arching as his body tries to get closer and pull away at the same time, unable to do more than the smallest movement in either direction as Clear holds him captive in place.

Though he can't hear anything, Ren can tell easily when the song's intensity increases. Noiz screws his eyes shut, the frantic rise and fall of his breaths interrupted by more and more groans or shouts. Clear

guides Noiz's face down against Clear's shoulder, to give him something to muffle the cries against, and continues to sing as Noiz shudders against him.



Noiz can't seem to stop moving, his trapped arm trying to wrench away, as if there's any possibility at all that he could break Clear's implacable grip on his wrist. Clear presses his mouth to the side of Noiz's throat, singing transformed momentarily into a hum against Noiz's skin. Ren watches the muscles in Noiz's back and chest tense up as he screams against Clear's shoulder, fingers splaying open as if to spread the agony as thinly as possible throughout his body.

Noiz is writhing in Clear's lap, grinding down and pushing himself away by turns, logical reactions abandoning him completely as he's overwhelmed with sensation. Clear eases his grip on the back of Noiz's head, allowing Noiz a small amount of movement as Clear lifts his face away from Noiz's throat.

Their expressions are both so raw, so *awed*, that Ren feels a deep jolt of protective impulse just looking at them. Anything this vulnerable must be guarded at all costs.

Clear looks so happy, so pleased to be useful, to use a skill made for violence as a way of being kind.

Noiz looks wrecked. His eyelashes are dark and spiky from tears, his skin blotchy in mottled red and white, his mouth open and kiss-red from pressing into Clear's shoulder.

For a moment they press close, forehead to forehead, the familiarity of the gesture making Ren's heart jolt with feeling. Then Clear fits his still-singing mouth to Noiz's slack one.

Noiz sobs through his orgasm, straining against Clear's hold on him until suddenly, as if a switch has been flipped, he collapses against Clear, boneless and pliant as he gasps for breath. Clear gently lets go of Noiz's wrist, revealing a bracelet of finger-shaped bruises where Noiz struggled against the hold.

Clear lifts the now-unresisting arm, kissing the injury gently as Noiz simply stares at him, wonderstruck.

Ren eases his fingers away from his ears, letting the sounds of the world rush back in. Watching the pair of them has left him hard, but he ignores it.

Noiz, draped against Clear as if every drop of energy has been wrung out of him, gives Ren a satisfied smile.

"Jealous?"

Ren returns the grin. "No," he answers honestly. "Glad."

Later, after Noiz has cleaned himself up and Clear's hand is back to its usual covered form, Ren helps Noiz sort and store all the different parts he's purchased.

Ren can recognise some of them from years of watching Aoba repair him, and some are similar enough that he can guess their function. Noiz has bought up big; there's enough to keep Clear in good repair for many years to come.

"These are from Toue models, you said?"

"Yeah. The stuff's everywhere right now. I think most of the other androids have been portioned out for parts. I'm gonna make Clear do regular fighting practice, just in case any genius tries to mess with him."

"That's a good idea," Ren agrees. "Let me know if I can be any help."

"I will. Have there been any more of your... incidents?"

"If you mean, have I puked and passed out and unleashed a Rhyme allmate that doesn't exist anymore? No. So far, so good. You'd never know if from how worried everyone is all the time around me, though."

"I think it's a crock."

"Hmm?"

"The Usui sighting," Noiz explains. "It's an urban legend, I'm sure. I learned the way Usui operated well enough to know this is a major pattern-break, even with the disappearance of more than a year factored in."

Part of Ren wants to argue, but it's so refreshing to talk to someone who isn't scared that he's about to channel a weapon of death that he lets it go.

"What do you do now, without being able to collect and sell Rhyme information?"

"There's always information to find and sell. It just changes as the island changes," Noiz answers with a shrug. "And I have an allowance from a trust, which I'll get full access to in a few months when I turn 21. Won't have to even think about money after that."

Ren feels a momentary sadness that Aoba isn't here to say anything about what a youngster Noiz is. Even though Ren technically isn't any older than Aoba, he's spent so many years being a protector and guardian that it always makes him smile when Aoba acts like he's wise and ancient at his ripe old age when he's barely hit 25.

"Aoba and his parents and Tae, they... forgive each other, when they're disappointed in each other, don't they?" Noiz's expression reminds Ren of Clear, despite the two often being polar opposites in the way they look when they're pondering a problem. Right now Noiz looks as lost at sea about the way the world works as Clear often does.

"They try to," Ren confirms. "I think it can be complicated."

That makes Noiz's face slip back into its more usual smirk. "My family have the 'complicated' part down, that's for sure. I don't know if I'm ready to try to mend things with my parents yet. But... I have a brother, and I miss him sometimes. I think about showing him Midorijimasome day. Visiting him in Germany."

"That sounds good." Ren thinks of Aoba and Sei, brothers kept apart for the entirety of Sei's life. "You should try to mend it with him. Make up for lost time."

Noiz shrugs again, not giving away how he feels about that idea. The conversation hits a lull, and Ren takes the opportunity to raise something that he can't bring up with Aoba or Koujaku, something that's preyed on his nightmares these past few nights.

"I can't stop thinking about what Tae said, about that scrap that... that could make someone the centre of your world."

"Interesting, isn't it?" Noiz agrees, pursing his lips. "Frightening. Thought one thing that's not so bad about it, comparatively, is that it's not as terrible as the thought of being broken through force and brutality."

"Isn't it? I'm not sure I see a difference."

"Imagine that you never picked up that allmate bug that Toue put out, or had been cured before it kicked in. You'd never have known you weren't an allmate, and so you'd have thought that you were happy as you are, wouldn't you? Is thinking that you're happy really any different to being happy?"

Ren imagines them, himself and Aoba. Aoba, passive and doped on a drug he didn't know he was addicted to, attached to someone whose intentions and treatment of him were irrelevant, and Ren thinking himself complete in the form and role he had. Each of them genuinely convinced that they were happy and content.

He feels sick.

At first he thinks that's just a result of the imaginary scenario's horrors, but the nausea builds and a headache pounds along with it. Everything goes dim and dark and Ren remembers a phrase in French, one he's never heard and knows by heart. *Tudeviensresponsable pour toujours de cequetu as apprivoisé.*

He remembers a bird in a cage, fluttering wings in jewel colours.

"It's incredibly expensive, so be very careful."

A bitter wave of sadness as he looks at the bird, because isn't he even more expensive? Isn't he a caged valuable thing? Why doesn't anyone ever tell the researchers to be very careful? Why isn't he as precious as the bird?

"Ren, Ren, can you hear me?"

He's on his hands and knees again, but at least he hasn't thrown up this time. Noiz is rubbing his back.

Ren rocks back into a sitting position, trying to even out his breathing. "I'm all right, I'm all right. Just another headache."

"A headache that makes you speak French?" Noiz asks, completely deadpan.

Ren gives him a weak, hopeful smile. "Yes?"

Noiz snorts, and offers Ren a hand to help him to his feet.

"I think it's time for us to walk you home."

Clear and Noiz stay at Tae's for dinner, but don't tell Aoba, Koujaku or Tae about Ren's collapse. Nobody gets any calls from Virus this time, thank goodness.

After dinner, Ren sits out on the balcony of Aoba's room, his thoughts a worried mess. Beni comes out and joins him, perching on top of his head like in old times.

"How come you're not down watching Koujaku and Aoba get offended when Noiz and Clear beat them at shogi?"

"I'm feeling frustrated," Ren answers. He's used to holding conversations with Beni when Beni's out of his line of sight. "Even though I'm from the mind of one and in the body of the other, I don't have Aoba or Sei's powers."

"Talk about greedy. You get to walk around being human, and you're annoyed that you're not super-human."

"It's not like that." Ren would shake his head, if it wasn't being used as a nesting spot. "I think I need to... to activate scrap on myself." And there it is, the half-formed plan in his head, said out in the open. He bites his lip. "But I don't have the eyes or the voice to trigger it. I want to protect everyone from whatever's going on. That's what I'm *for*."

"I've never seen having a destiny do anyone any good," Beni says. "You don't have to be *for* anything. But if you're adamant, what about those clubs in Platinum Jail?"

"We're not supposed to call it that anymore. It's supposed to all just be part of the same island, remember?"

"Yeah, yeah. You know the clubs I'm talking about, though. The ones people say get you high with just lights. If that's not based on some kind of scrap I'll eat my hat."

"You don't wear a hat." Ren smiles.

"You can buy me a hat, and I'll eat it. You won't be able to do it alone, though. Take that dik-dik."

That makes Ren laugh. "I *am* an allmate. I don't need an allmate of my own."

"Suck it up, puppy, you do. Program it with a trigger phrase that you need to repeat every hour, or it sends a message to Aoba and Koujaku. That way you'll have back-up if the plan goes bad."

"You're not going to try to talk me out of it?"

Beni scoffs. "I know better than to waste my time. But I have faith in you."

They go back into Aoba's room and plug the dik-dik into Aoba's computer. The little allmate has no onscreen persona, the way most allmates do, because it's a display model, but it can carry applications. Ren and Beni design a simple one, embedding a message that will send to Aoba and Koujaku's coils if a code isn't recited once an hour.

Ren waits until late in the night, when the house has settled down to sleep. The shogi battle ran long, and now the house is full of impromptu houseguests. Tae grumbled about it, but Ren's pretty sure that she likes so many people around from time to time, evidence of the healthy adult life Aoba's building for himself.

When everyone's asleep, he slips out from underneath Aoba's arm and scoops up the shoulder bag that, once upon a time, Aoba had carried him everywhere in. Ren slips the dik-dik into the bag, and sets off in the direction of the former Platinum Jail.

The closer he gets to the centre of it, the more alive the city becomes around him. The innermost area seems to be on a full 24-hour timetable, with stores and night life in full swing despite the very late hour. He walks past a shop selling electronic parts, with the window display showing off a full stripped-down leg from a robot model that looks exactly like Clear's. It makes him shiver.

It's one thing to hear Noiz talk about the black market, another to see evidence of once-conscious machines stripped down for parts. Ren keeps walking, a little faster now.

There are bouncers at the door to the club but Ren has been human for long enough -- and, more specifically, been friends with Noiz for long enough -- to know that the easiest way to get in to somewhere that you shouldn't be is just to look like you think the whole world should be grateful that you're even bothering to breathe its air, and that you know exactly where you're going and why you deserve to be there.

Another of Toue's security robots, this with its humanoid casing still intact, is being used as decoration on one side of the dance floor, posed into Rodin's *The Thinker* and draped with flashing fibre-optic garlands. It looks so much like Clear that Ren almost does a double-take, the sick shiver of wrongness at its lifeless open eyes and motionless face making the hair on the back of Ren's neck stand up.

Wanting to get away from the macabre decor, Ren walks up to the second level of the club, the balcony overlooking the dance floor. There are dark corners here, hopefully out-of-the-way enough that he won't be disturbed. He settles down into one of them, making himself as comfortable as possible while his heart's pounding and his palms are sweating.

He recites the halt phrase that he and Beni programmed into the dik-dik. Okay, that means he has an hour to get this done, whatever it is that 'this' ends up entailing.

Ren takes a deep breath, and stares at the lights.

The next thing he's aware of, through the thick haze of altered senses, is being back on the beach. Aoba's beach, the place Ren had been able to meet him inside their thoughts just before that painful, endless year they'd spent separated from each other.

He looks down at himself. It's his old allmate self, stronger and more muscled than his current body. Ren curls and uncurls his familiar fingers, staring at his hands as the last of the dregs of the light drugs fade from wherever his consciousness is now.

Concentrating, he closes his eyes, and after a few seconds he feels his body *shift*. When he looks again, he's in the form he sees in the mirror each morning. This is who he is now.

"What are you doing here?"

Ren looks over. It's Usui at her most predatory, the wild grin of attack on her face, all her arms posed ready to strike. She looks at Ren like he's a stranger.

"Hello, Sei," Ren says, unafraid. Usui's competitive smile slips, losing its fierce rivalry and turning to a frown. At first she looks angry and confused, and then her face shifts and she's just sad, yearning.

She closes her eyes, appearing to concentrate just as Ren did. She blurs out of focus and, just for a moment, Ren can see long golden hair and a pink silk dress, the glitter of a crown and wide blue eyes. Then the image settles again, the colours paling and darkening to monochrome, first almost all white and little black, a ghostly figure, and then shifting balance as Sei comes into view.

"We don't look like twins," Sei notes, tipping the brim of his hat back as he looks Ren up and down. He sounds amused. "You're much taller and broader."

"Aoba complains about that, too," Ren answers with a small smile of his own.

"From his mind, in my body, and you're completely yourself." Sei sounds almost like a proud parent.

"Is anyone?" Ren asks, thinking of all the things he's learned from those around him, all the ways in which he's adapted who he is in order to fit best into what they need.

Sei sighs, and turns his gaze out over the water. "This is a good, calm place. I'm glad to know you have this inside you."

"I thought you were gone," Ren says, and can't stop himself from reaching out to touch Sei's shoulder. As if assuring himself that Sei is real and solid means anything, here in the no-place inside his head.

Ignoring Ren's comment, Sei sits down and stretches his legs out on the sand, brushing stray grains off the skeleton pattern woven into the fabric of his pants.

"Virus bought me these," he says, as Ren sits down beside him. "It started as a bad joke, when I was younger. Trip got a Frankenstein costume somehow, and they decided it would be hilarious to give it to me."

Sei's mouth twists into a sad smile. Ren growls in the back of his throat. Sei raises his eyebrows. "I did say it was a *bad* joke. And they pointed out that really, they were just as manufactured as I was."

"They called themselves my brides for a while, until they got bored of it. The brides of Frankenstein. They thought it was very funny." Sei looks like the memory is a fond one. "They got bored of the nickname, but my new taste in fashion lingered. I liked dressing up as something frightening. It made some of the procedures easier to bear, if I could pretend that I my secret, terrible powers really did make me powerful, instead of just being a curse."

"Even if you found something good in it, that was still a cruel thing for them to do," Ren says.

Sei shrugs. "They don't care enough about anyone to be cruel – whether someone is hurt or not by what they do is completely irrelevant. They aren't cruel, and they don't love. To survive, you and Aoba became separate people. I think that they became one person for the same reason. So they don't even love each other. That that would be like loving your leg for being a leg. You can't love something that's a part of yourself."

Ren, who very much does love his legs for being legs, decides not to say anything. Sei's experiences of what it means to love and be loved are, after all, as stunted in their own way as Trip and Virus's.

Sei gives a quiet laugh at a memory. "Once, not long after Usui started being in charge of official Rhyme matches, a new kind of security allmate was invented. It was a weaponised dog, and I thought they were absolutely beautiful. I begged Toue for one of my own. Trip saw me pleading once, and how unhappy I was when Toue said 'no' again. Trip tried to make me feel better by saying 'but Sei, you *are* an allmate, you don't need an allmate'. So they weren't all bad, not really."

Ren flinches, hearing the echo of his own earlier words to Beni in the platitude. He doesn't want anything in common with Trip.

"I designed Usui, you know," Sei goes on. Ren wonders if he ever had the chance to talk to anyone about himself like this, while he was alive. Ren suspects not. "In Hinduism, all the different goddesses are different aspects of the one divine energy. That's why Usui has ten arms – it's stolen from Durga, from Kali. I wanted one of *my* aspects to at least *look* like someone who triumphed over her foes, even if it wasn't really true."

He stares out at the ocean, perpetually trapped in an imaginary dusk.

Sei's voice, when he speaks again, is very soft. "I died happily, you know. I was so tired. It was such a relief to just let go. I was ready. Anything that might have happened after doesn't change that. I was happy. But then, when a tiny sliver of me had to stay behind, to give that last message to Aoba, and to watch over you until you woke up... you were so *sad*."

"Aoba was as well. And Tae, who never even met me except when I was a newborn, even she mourned me. Nobody had ever been sad about me before. It was so strange. And by the time you woke up, and I could finally let go completely, I.... I realised that my desire for none of you to be sad was stronger than my desire to be dead."

He sounds genuinely baffled by this, like it's a twist in a mystery story that nobody saw coming.

"I never really had the opportunity to grow up, to become an adult," Sei says. "I could have if I'd had my heart set on it, but by then I was just... tired. It was easier to give up, to not care about anything, to not think or feel, to just exist and hope to stop existing soon.

"So when prompted, I asked for the same presents I'd asked for when I was very young. When I'd still wanted things, you know? I read the same books over and over. I'm sure I could recite all of Yoshiya's *Yaneura no nishojoo* off by heart if I thought about it.

"I stayed static.

"It's funny, isn't it, that finally dying was the first thing to push me forward in years."

Ren gives Sei a long look. "No," he says. "Not really."

"No, I guess not," Sei agrees with a rueful sigh.

"Was there a book you read that was French? I said something earlier, *tudeviens responsable...*"

"*Pour toujours de ce que tu as apprivoisé*," Sei finishes. "Yes, it's from *Le Petit Prince*. 'You become responsible, forever, for what you have tamed'."

Ren thinks of all the people altered and scarred by scrap, left vulnerable by its effects. He understands why his mind dredged that quote up, from whatever whorl of memory it still inhabits inside the structure of his brain.

"If you don't want to die anymore, what do you want to do instead?" Ren asks, though an idea of what might be done is forming in his head. In this place, he suspects that means that Sei can think of it, too, if he wants.

"Yes," Sei says, answering Ren's thought rather than his spoken question. Then he ducks his head, an embarrassed blush pinkening his pale face. "I've been talking so much about useless things because I'm scared. Isn't that stupid?"

Every tender, protective feeling in Ren's heart yearns to drive away that fear, to comfort Sei. His words fail him, though, and all that's left to him is action. He shifts closer on the sand, gently cupping Sei's face in his palms. Sei's breath catches, his eyes going wide.

Ren presses his mouth to Sei's softly, the lightest brushing of lip to lip, and pushes a lock of his hair back behind his ear.

Sei breaks the kiss with a surprised gasp, reaching up to touch the same lock of hair that Ren just moved. "My hair!" He looks at Ren, eyes huge with shock. "It's been years since I felt anything. I thought it had gone completely numb."

Then he laughs, self-consciously, hand dropping away from beside his head. "Sorry. I forgot that none of this is real. I shouldn't really be startled by anything that happens, should I?"

"Being startled is good. Feeling things is good," Ren says. "And both strike me as being very real indeed, if that matters to you."

Sei's gaze is fixed on the horizon. "Being alive means being afraid, doesn't it? If I want one, I have to handle the other," he murmurs, as if speaking to himself.

"Being alive is one of those things that mean something different to everyone. You have to decide your own answer for yourself," Ren tells him. "But there are things that make the fear worthwhile, I know that much."

Sei nods, a look of resolve on his face. He stands up, and offers a hand down to help Ren. "All right then. Let's go."

When Ren opens his eyes, he's back in the club, and every muscle in his body is sore from sitting in the same position for so long. Feeling dizzy, he rubs at his face, trying to reorient himself within the real world, where the music is loud and everything smells like smoke and sweat, rather than the quiet timelessness of... wherever it was that he just was.

He checks the dik-dik quickly, but it's less than an hour since he gave the stalling code and so things are fine. Ren climbs to his feet, feeling shaky, and descends the stairs down to the main dancefloor level.

Nobody pays him any attention as he skirts the edge of the room, approaching the garland-draped decoration that used to be a security robot for Toue. Since Ren last saw it, less than hour ago, its posture has changed, hunching forward in over itself, and its eyes have closed.

Ren touches the android's cheek, the twin of Clear's, with his palm. "I'm here. It's all right."

The android opens its eyes. They're not the light crystal pink of Clear's but a dark inky garnet now, almost completely black.

Sei gives him a tremulous, hopeful smile. "Hello, again."

They find the lost and found room at the back of the club easily – it's late enough by now that most of the patrons are gone, and the few remaining staff don't seem to be paying much attention to anything going on. It must be quite difficult, Ren thinks, for the residents of Platinum Jail to adjust to mixing with the rest of the island, to reorganising their life along the lines of a natural cycle of day and night. He doesn't have a lot of pity for them, really, but he can see that it wouldn't be easy.

Ren helps Sei get dressed in a pair of black pants with a small skirt on the hip, a set of boots, and a long soft shirt in a saffron yellow colour. It brings out the hue of Sei's eyes, making them brighter. Ren feels as if he's drawing Sei forward into the world.

There's a trilby hat, rather like Sei's old one, so Ren gives him that as well from the pile of clothes that people have somehow managed to lose on their nights out.

"It'll help hide your hair, which means it won't be so easy for people to recognise you as one of the Toue designs," Ren notes. "Not that I think anyone's going to be paying that much attention, really. Koujaku can help you cut it and dye it however you like, later."

They walk from Platinum Jail towards the Eastern district as the night fades into early morning. It's like the opposite of the endless sunset on the nowhere-beach, the in-between that never changed. Here, in the real world, the light comes up slowly, the monochrome of the darker hours filling with colour.

Their pace is slow, because Sei's not steady on his new feet yet, and Ren still feels woozy from the lights in the club. But that's all right. They aren't in any hurry.

When they're finally in front of Tae and Aoba's house, however, Sei stops, looking afraid. Ren holds his hand, looking at the little house and feeling a wave of deep, warm love for the people he knows are inside, still sleeping in this hushed time before their day begins.

"It's all right," Ren says to Sei. If he says it often enough, Sei might begin to believe it. "Come and meet your family."



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