

## Crying Man

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# Crying Man

by [Reichu](#)

## Summary

Crying Man / 泣いてる男 (ヒト)

Dr. Akira Katsuragi is a brilliant, but sensitive to a fault, man who for years has evaded his emotional obligations to his wife and daughter, escaping into the controversial physics research that has maintained an obsessive hold on his mind. After a decade of grueling work, he has finally published his magnum opus, a massive paper forwarding the Super Solenoid Theory, a potential final solution to humanity's energy crisis. Despite a frustrating initial reception, financial backers eventually emerge, forcing Akira to take a stand on where his priorities truly lie.

While this story is based on the world and characters of the anime *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, previous knowledge is **not** required for understanding or enjoyment.

## Notes

Despite the long period of time since last update, I have not forgotten about this. The next chapter will eventually come. While I didn't want to stop, it was forced by the fact that I simply wasn't ready. At the point where I left off, the story's scope expands dramatically, and it overwhelmed me as a writer. I needed some time to ripen. Hopefully as soon as my current distractions simmer down, I can return to Akira's story. (2020/12/8)

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

# Dreaming in Spirals

## Chapter Summary

At a technology conference in Aachen, Germany, Akira finds kindred spirits in addition to the usual frustrations.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

## Chapter 1: Dreaming in Spirals

Deutsches Technologisch Neuerungen Institut Annual Symposium  
Aachen, Germany  
July 17, 1999

The dark, still presentation room is completely packed — not a seat left empty, not a bit of side or back wall left bare. A thousand eyes rest upon the man at the podium, the theoretical physicist Dr. Akira Katsuragi from Kyoto University.

Lecturing is nothing new to him, nothing to wrack the nerves. Over the years, he's lectured to peers and students, whether in his native Japanese or in nearly accent-free German. He's even had the benefit of having given this particular presentation two times previous. Delivering it has never been the problem. Being taken seriously — *that* always was.

He refuses to give them anything but his deepest confidences. He will not be broken. Akira offers a smile, and continues. “And it's taken seven years — seven long, grueling years — but this conundrum turned out to have a solution after all.” From his terminal, he changes the projected image, revealing a computer-generated model of a double helix in a ring configuration, not unlike a bacterial plasmid. With an inhumanly steady hand, he indicates it with the red dot of a laser pointer, and with whimsical excitement announces, “Ladies and gentlemen... the 'Super Solenoid'.”

Stifled murmurs ripple through those in attendance, as if on cue.

The tall, spare man seems to relish the reaction. Once it dies down, after a handful of seconds, he goes on. “It's perhaps deceptively simple — so much more than a toroidal double helix enclosed by a vacuum, when it comes down to it. But this is the key to unlocking the FIP equation... and to tapping the energy reservoirs of the Dirac Sea. *This* is the answer to the problem that has eluded physics for so long... *This* is the key to what is, for all intents and purposes, unlimited energy.”

Another wave of incredulous murmurs cascades forth from these unruly claims. Akira is entirely impervious, however; and he proceeds undeterred. The computer model launches into a simulation, perfectly timed to his vocal accompaniment. “The Super Solenoid, or  $S^2$ , forms the basis and bulk of a theoretical construct I've called the  $S^2$  engine. A new breed of reactor.” A hypothetical rendition of the entire device, with all major components labeled, is displayed. “The  $S^2$  itself works on the grounds of supersymmetry, as you have probably deduced, along with the principle of spiral super-strings, established in Amagiri 1991.”

He proceeds at a hectic pace through many more screens of calculations and intricate-looking simulations — the product of so much hardship and toil, reduced to mere fleeting images. But even so, Akira can sense the audience grow increasingly edgy. Many shift in their places and fidget constantly as though bursting with questions. He knows that he's being provocative, and that much is deeply satisfying.

“The super solenoid satisfies what has long been sought by perpetual motion enthusiasts. But no First Law is being broken here! The energy *does* come from somewhere — a place where our own needs couldn't hope to make a dent, and so, from our perspective, it would be an essentially infinite supply.” While the words themselves sound dry as can be, he unfailingly delivers them with child-like, borderline manic enthusiasm. “However, the greatest challenge we face is pushing technology to the point where it can, in fact, interact with the higher dimensions wherein Dirac Seas exist, and this is largely a matter of overcoming our own perceptual limitations...”

The physicist had been so embroiled in his dissertation that the coordinator's tap on his shoulder comes as a surprise. “I'm sorry, Dr. Katsuragi,” she says, “but you need to wrap it up. There won't be time for questions.”

“Ah...” He nods. “I'd better make this quick, then.” *Quickly... How to conclude this in the couple minutes remaining?* He skips through the remaining slides, all the way to the concluding statements. “Unfortunately, all that currently exists are the mathematical models, which I have perfected over the past decade, and some preliminary thoughts on the direction technology must go if we are to embrace an  $S^2$  paradigm. The  $S^2$  theory stands ready to take energy research and the entire physics world where they have never gone before. There may yet be an end to the energy crisis. The future is right here before us, and we need only to follow the path that's been laid.”

Akira proceeds to the final slide, which provides acknowledgments to his institution along with everyone without whom the  $S^2$  theory could never have reached a publishable state. “Thank all of you for taking the time to listen. I'm afraid I don't have the time to take any questions. However, most should be answered in my paper, which is available at the publisher's table. Enjoy the rest of the symposium.” As the lights come on for a brief preparatory interlude, Akira takes a shallow bow, gathers his things, and departs the podium.

The hallways of the hotel's convention floors begin to fill with people moving to change lecture rooms, go out for lunch, or other assorted business. Akira Katsuragi doesn't get very far from the site of his own lecture before he is engulfed by a crowd, the pathogen to their phagocyte. He immediately closes up his schedule and straightens up with a resigned look on his tall, thin face. Security will break up the crowd soon enough, but until then he's trapped.



“Dr. Katsuragi!” innumerable voices clamor, all taking the liberty of launching their questions in one great cacophonous tumult.

He puts a hand out and makes a gesture indicating he wishes to speak. “I can only take one question at a time.” Akira quickly scans the crowd and picks out someone as arbitrarily as he can. “You there! The young woman in the aqua shirt.”

“Dr. Katsuragi, what distinguishes your work from those of prior individuals claiming they have found the perfect energy source? How do we know *you're* just not another esteemed scientist turned crackpot?”

It is painful how much he hears variations upon this. But, at least, it means his answer is well-rehearsed. With a playful grin, he responds, “All covered at length in the paper. There is probably no substitute for seeing the gritty details of how I came to my conclusions all laid out. If it’s too pricy, there is always the library. I understand it’s available electronically, as well.”

A new person jumps in. “Dr. Katsuragi, how many people do you think will actually have that sort of patience? I mean — there is quite a huge stigma on the type of proposals you are making.”

“And it’s unfortunate, too,” Akira says. “The classical notion of perpetual motion *is* flawed; we can’t expect to get something from nothing. What I am proposing is *not* actually perpetual motion, and never was. That this error continues to be made, and continues to require correction, is a waste of everyone’s time, wouldn’t you agree?” A couple of attempts are made to interrupt, but he waves them off and continues. “I studied the history of ‘perpetual motion’ and ‘free energy’ advocates in quite a level of depth, and those who care to look should find that the Super Solenoid Theory avoids *all* of their mistakes.”

“That’s well and good,” another member of the mob says, “but what real utility does this have beyond your native field, Dr. Katsuragi? As theoretical physics, it’s fascinating. As a proposal for applied physics, it leaves... much to be desired.”

“Mere theories aren’t going to solve the world’s problems,” adds another. “Real, material solutions do.”

“And?” responds Akira. “Where do real, material solutions begin? Much of the time... in theory.”

“People have every right to be skeptical,” a new person interjects. “Even if this reactor is as feasible as you say, it is also, by your own admission, completely beyond current technological capabilities!”

He smiles impishly, undeterred. “I have quite a bit of work ahead of me, don’t I?”

“What, you plan on advancing technology as required to achieve this solenoid of yours? Don’t be foolish!”

“It’s far too late for that,” he replies. “And, with that...” Akira sees security up the corridor dissolving the traffic and decides to make his move. “I won’t be responsible for clogging the hall any longer. Any further questions will require ‘incentive’. Feel free to make me an offer if you catch me at one of the local bars, eh?” He excuses himself as charmingly as possible, and despite multiple protests they’ve no choice but to let him go.

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Akira hides in a low-traffic alcove, casually sitting against the wall, cross-referencing between the conference’s booklet of abstracts and his heavily-highlighted copy of the schedule. The presentation *he* had most anticipated had been scheduled shortly after the conclusion of his own, on the opposite end of the hotel, and there was no way to reach it in time. Looking over the remaining highlights, there is little he cannot do without. Especially given the fact that his height and physical distinctiveness make it difficult to move around without being stopped by the wrong kind of people.

Just thinking back to the previous two conferences he presented at this summer fills him with an overbearing weariness. He replaces the materials into his handbag and decides to retreat to his room while the halls are still quiet. Overhearing some passers-by discuss their midday meal plans, Akira contemplates pursuing nourishment himself, then quickly dismisses the idea. He doesn’t actually feel hungry, despite eating almost nothing for breakfast.

On the elevator ride up to the sixth floor of the west tower, he hunkers in one corner, hands pocketed, hoping the one other passenger doesn’t pay him any mind. The young European male looks intently in Akira’s direction, like he’s trying to make out the other’s name tag. But before he manages to conjure any irritating questions, the doors open to the fourth floor and the European departs — taking one last look at Akira as he does. A close call... There will be many more before this trip is over, he is certain.

Room 602. After a couple of minutes of fumbling with the key card, Akira gets the lock to yield, and he escapes into his tiny, three-day sanctuary. The darkness is immediately soothing. The shoes come off and he sets them along with his handbag neatly near the doorway. Stretching creaky joints and releasing a delicate yawn, he wanders into the bathroom to heed nature’s call.

Afterward, he washes his hands, and then his face. As he brings the drying cloth down, his eyes — solemn, and a deep, rich brown — meet their counterparts in the mirror’s reflection, and ensnare them. Akira’s countenance is all too familiar to him, as it’s remained largely impervious to the ravages of time. This face has been with him since teenage growth spurts molded it into its final long, angular shape, while leaving him with an overall delicate — some would say effeminate — grace. Were it not for the white hairs sneaking in amongst the purples, and a few faint lines etched about the eyes and mouth, he could easily be mistaken for someone at least ten years younger.

He runs long, bony fingers through his mop of dark purple hair. Trimmed days before he departed for Aachen, but, somehow, no less unruly than it had been before. Akira seems to

prefer it that way, though. As if, without the scruffy bangs and haphazard cowlicks, he wouldn't look appropriately eccentric.

It occurs to him that, even if he doesn't look his age, the sense of fatigue emanating from his eyes more than makes up for this. Without another thought, he lets himself collapse onto the room's single bed, and immediately feels his whole body go limp. Eyes wide open, he stares up at the wallpaper-covered ceiling and soon finds himself adrift in hypnagogia, neither asleep nor awake. But even *this* would be the nearest thing to sleep he's experienced in days.

The hours go by.

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Countless tiny bubbles form a layer of white froth atop the pinkish alcoholic beverage. Sunken brown eyes gaze emptily down into the bowl-like glass, strangely absorbed. The transformations of matter — physical, chemical, or atomic — are all so transient. Even something as complicated as a multicellular eukaryotic organism is, ultimately, no different from one bubble in the froth. Whatever circumstances caused matter to take that form, eventually they will come to an end. The bubble *will* pop...

Akira raises the straw to his lips and takes a dainty sip. The saga of assimilation continues.

Afterward, he finds himself drawn into the reflections on the table's surface. Artificial lights, warped shapes beyond recognition. He has always found himself entranced by such mundane details, the kinds of sensory information that most people filter out once they've reached a certain age. For a mind constantly seeking temporary escape from itself, all these little things — cracks in a wall, the patterns of wood grain, the movements of city birds, dust floating on a cornea — provide tiny mental sanctuaries. Others call it “daydreaming” and “zoning out”, and maybe it is, but... labels render these things no less invaluable to him.

As his mind drifts in the meaningless array of photons, his left hand absentmindedly fidgets with something dangling from his neck, while the right cradles and massages his head.

Eventually, a couple of unfamiliar voices pop out from the low-level multilingual din of the bar. They're speaking English, for which his own fluency is mostly confined to reading and writing... but he understands enough to know that it concerns him. He simply listens, motionless as a prey animal trying to evade detection.

“Adrian, look!” A woman's voice. “Isn't that the Kyoto University professor we saw earlier? ...Dr. Kisaragi?”

A man. “Ah, yes, the solenoids guy. I think it was 'Katsuragi', actually.”

“Just testing you.”

“Yes, yes, of course you were.” Sardonic, but still playful. “I... uh... don't think you should get any ideas. I doubt the man's in any mood for further haranguing.”

“And what makes you think I intend to harangue him?”

“Because it would be suspicious if your intentions were anything *but*.”

“Oh, you. Always putting a negative spin on everything. I'm just going to say hi, that's all.”

As two sets of footsteps approach, Akira suddenly feels prompted to take another sip from his drink.

About a meter away from Akira's table, the woman bows, her nearly shoulder-length ash-brown hair draping the sides of her face. In perfect Japanese, she announces, “Good evening. I'm Kyoko Soryu-Zeppelin. Do I have the pleasure of meeting Dr. Katsuragi?” She slowly straightens, hair bobbing.

He sets his drink down and apprehends her with a weary, but not unfriendly, look. Ms. — or, rather, Dr., as a glance at her badge confirms — Soryu-Zeppelin appears quite young, mid-twenties at the most, and in all likelihood completed her doctorate recently. Her eyes are a vibrant, intelligent hazel; her proportions modest and attractive; and she's dressed well, with a very distinctive sense of style. Responding with Japanese in turn, he says, “I'm the only Dr. Katsuragi that I'm aware of.” Even in the dim lighting, it's clear she's of mixed ancestry. He supposes that the compound surname immediately answers all questions on that count. Japanese-German, and looks the part. Akira notes that she's quite tall for a woman, at least 5 cm taller than her average height partner — a blessing from the Zeppelin genes, to be sure.

The man makes a little throat-clearing sound to get both their attentions. In German, he says “I'm afraid I don't know the mother tongue well enough to not look like a fool trying to speak it. We can all speak German well enough, yes?”

Practically in unison, Akira and Kyoko reply, “Yes, of course.” They share a weird glance for about a full second.

Kyoko's other half quickly intervenes. He extends a hand to Akira. “The name's Langley. Adrian Langley.” Akira reflexively offers his dominant hand, the left, which he quickly realizes won't work so well. Langley immediately takes stock of the situation and offers his own left instead. An accommodating man, it would seem. Akira quickly notes the ring on Langley's fourth finger, all but confirming the obvious. The two men share a brief shake, firm and sincere.

Langley looks very Anglo-Saxon, and has rather refined, one might say “well-bred”, features, the most distinguished among them being his fiery red hair (neatly combed back, though hardly tamed) and piercing blue eyes. His personal grooming and attire are immaculate, in stark contrast to the devil-may-care attitude that Kyoko gives off. He can't be much older than her, but there's something about his manner... He's very dour and resigned, with the sense of someone who has left the spirit of youth far behind him.

“Pleasure to meet you, Herr Langley. Pleasure to meet you both.” The couple seem friendly, and half of the fun of these conventions has always been the people, so Akira gestures to the chairs opposite him. “Won’t you two join me?” Kyoko accepts the offer instantly; Adrian, only after a moment’s contemplation, as though still self-conscious about being a nuisance. “By the way,” Akira says, “please call me ‘Akira’.”

“Oh?” says Kyoko, pleasantly surprised.

“Well, then, if we’re all going to be on a first-name basis,” Langley says, “you may as well call me ‘Adrian’.” He indicates Kyoko. “She’s just like you, always telling people to call her ‘Kyoko’. Are you two in cahoots, with this whole ‘usurping the backbone of Japanese society’ thing? I thought formality was everything over there.”

“Ugh,” Kyoko spits. “*Japan*... Adrian knows I won’t go there any more than I humanly have to. Terrible place to be a woman.”

Akira nods. “It’s slowly getting better, but... I agree.” A sense of deep melancholy momentarily appears in his eyes. “It’s not a great place to be either sex, really.” Before anyone can respond to that, he adds, “I spent part of my formative years right here in Germany. I guess it was enough to make a significant impact.”

“Ohhhhh,” Kyoko says. “I was wondering how you spoke German so well. That definitely explains it. You have one rare talent among *Nihonjin*. Cherish it well.”

Akira’s face flushes ever so slightly. “Oh, I certainly do. I wish I had more occasion to use it. Beautiful language. So much more... textured than Japanese. But, really, my only opportunities are at conferences like this. Back in college I would do impersonations, like of Hitler or Freud, but... you know. Eventually that sort of thing just becomes stupid instead of fun.”

Langley offers a sympathetic nod. “I understand, completely.”

Kyoko... not so much. “Now I kind of want to see you do the ‘just a cigar’ thing.”

“Luckily for me,” Akira grins, “Freud never actually said that.”

“Seriously? Huh.”

Langley abruptly claps his hands together and stands up. “Right! I *knew* we’d come to this bar for a reason! After all the nonsense we had to sit through tonight, I really need to get mildly intoxicated. You’ll have the usual, right, Kyoko?” She nods. “You want anything, Akira, or are you okay with—” He struggles to identify the pink stuff in the bowl-glass.

“Berliner Weisse. I’m fine, thank you.”

“All right. I’ll be right back. Don’t cause too much mischief, Kyoko. I know how you are.”

Akira watches Langley amble over to the counter and initiate the barkeep in conversation. He turns back to Kyoko. “What kind of mischief might that be?”

Kyoko's chin rests upon bridged fingers, and her hazel eyes bore into him with all-too-transparent meaning. "You're much better-looking up close, Doctor." A sly smile. "But I'm sure you get that all the time."

Akira would be uncomfortable, if this weren't so typical that he'd learned long, long ago to shrug it off as one of life's cruel running gags. Mostly, he feels bad for Adrian. He takes another sip from his drink, and casually replies, "You have no idea."

"So how do you do it, Akira? Stay so beautiful at your age. You must be in your... what, early forties?"

"You have a good eye," he says. "I'll be forty-one later this year. And to answer the first question: inadvertently."

That gets a laugh out of Kyoko. Her eyes continue to creep over him a short time more, then they suddenly stop, distracted, below his face. "You're Christian?"

At first he's confused, but his own eyes quickly dart down at his chest, where his pendant hangs: a Greek cross made of white metal alloy, with a chain attached to either side of the upper stipes. He's worn it so long that it's come to feel an intrinsic part of him, its presence taken for granted. "Ah, this?" He shakes his head. "No, I'm not Christian."

"Oh?" Kyoko probes. Only now does Akira notice that Kyoko wears a little metal crucifix around her own neck — a common fixture on Westerners, it seems.

"This..." Akira nervously rubs the cross between thumb and index fingers. "I suppose you could call it a family heirloom." His distant tone of voice and evasive body language all but say, "I don't want to talk about this."

"I see," she says, apparently getting the hint. A glass is then set in front of her, and she looks up at Langley, who sits down next to her with his own. "Thank you, dear."

Langley nods in affirmation, then turns to Akira. "So, did my wife behave herself? Be honest."

Somehow, Langley's casualness about the whole thing brings a smile to Akira's face. "I deal with far worse on a regular basis. Part of my job is interacting with college students, after all."

Kyoko puts her hands up in a display of innocence. "Am I not allowed to admire the beauty of the natural world? Is a beautiful human any less worthy of awe than an exquisite sunset, or a most delightfully intricate protein?"

Langley sighs. "When I start seeing you make eyes at protein conformations, I'll believe that's all it is."

"*You* can ogle Dr. Katsuragi, dear. I don't mind."

While their banter is entertaining in its way, Akira decides that it's become a bit too revealing for his tastes. "...So! What's brought you two to DTNI '99?"

“I'm not here to present, sadly,” Kyoko says. “Sons of bitches turned me down!”

Akira shrinks slightly at her profanity, then elaborates. “Well, what I mean is... What do you two do?”

“Ah! In that event,” she replies, “one could crudely describe me as a genetic engineer.”

“I'm just a humble prosthetician,” Langley says.

Akira smiles. “Interesting combination.”

“They actually go together, in a way,” Kyoko says. “Both fields seek to augment the natural living form.”

“She makes mutants. I make cyborgs.” Langley takes a big swig of his drink, then drolly adds, “Perhaps, one day, we can unite our powers and create mutant cyborgs.” Kyoko chuckles at that.

“Is that what you two are after?” Akira asks. “Improving upon nature?”

Langley eyes Kyoko as if he knows what's coming.

“There are plenty of flaws to fix. And what's going to do it now that humans aren't even evolving anymore? Natural selection doesn't affect us one iota these days.”

“I'm not completely sure that's—” Akira begins, but sees Langley start to shake his head at him, communicating a sense of futility. Akira quickly changes course in response. “Well... uh, this is probably true...”

Kyoko, having been effectively activated, continues on her spiel. “I'm not actually interested in eugenics or anything like that. Giving your kid the 'perfect' genes? There's no such thing, so why bother? And even if it were, it's boring. Old hat.” She takes a nice, long drink. “I don't just want to shuffle around what's already there. I want to make new things. So, to that end...” Another drink. “...I've been custom-designing new and better proteins. From there, it's a simple matter of reverse-engineering the CDS and inserting it into a genome.”

Akira, both impressed and perplexed, raises an eyebrow. “Have you... been having much success?”

Langley clicks his tongue. “It has a tendency to weird people out. Kyoko's first 'success' is something that's carried in the blood and makes it look dark purple or indigo when it's fully oxygenated.”

“Sssshh, Adrian! It hasn't been published yet!” Her tone shifts from admonishing to mischievous. “You must admit, though. The rats are rather impressive.”

“Well, yes. I'm sure any one of them could kill a small dog,” Langley quips dryly. “Truly the stuff of B movie horror. *Dr. Zeppelin & the Blue-blooded Rats of Terror*.”

“I would pay good money to see that,” Kyoko counters.

Akira wonders if talking to these people was a good idea after all.

Langley glances back at Akira. “Kyoko here is quite the eccentric researcher. But brilliant. I give her a hard time, but if she focuses her mind, she can do anything, really.”

“And now you're going to tell me that I need you to keep me in line and realize my full potential.” She kisses him on the cheek.

“Eccentric, eh?” Akira says. “I don't suppose you two have an easier time with funding than I do?”

Langley scratches his chin. “I was lucky enough to get into a commercial research group right out of school, so this isn't a problem I have much experience with.”

“I've been fairly blessed so far, myself,” Kyoko adds, “but I don't expect my current situation to last. I've been shopping around quite a bit and found a number of opportunities that could be promising. Not all of them are specifically for the biosciences, either. Who knows, Akira — some of them might be useful to you. I'd be happy to e-mail you what I know.”

Akira's face beams a little. “I probably have some leads that would be useful to *you*, for that matter. A swap sounds delightful.” He retrieves his handbag — a leather construction that looks quite old and weathered, but is holding up nonetheless — from under the table, unclasps it, and retrieves a copy of his card from a little pocket within to present to Kyoko. In exchange, she gives him her own, gracefully embossed with her personal information.

Langley digs into his inner jacket pocket. “That's not a bad idea.” He offers his business card, as well. Akira starts to fetch another copy to give Langley, but he dismisses the gesture. “No need. I can just get your info off Kyoko.” Akira nods and accepts the token of camaraderie. Langley continues, “You seem like a kindred spirit, Akira. We'd love to see more of you. Let us know if you're ever in Germany again, eh?”

“Ah, you two live here?” Akira asks. “Very nice.”

Langley shrugs. “It's decent enough. I'd rather be back in the Northeast, but... gotta follow life where it takes you.”

“He's American, if you haven't noticed,” Kyoko interjects. “Of course no country can hope to hold a torch to his own.”

“Oh, ease off, Kyo,” Langley says with a roll of the eyes. “You knew what you were getting yourself into when you married a Yankee.”

“I know.” She kisses him again.

Akira starts to feel a tad awkward again and tries to get the conversation back on track.

“Well, anyway. Next time I'm in the Fatherland, I'll take you up on your offer. If you two ever find yourselves in Japan, don't be afraid to give me a call, either.”

“Trying to give me an excuse to pay my grandmother a visit, are you?” Kyoko winks at him. “I'll be sure to take you up on that.”



Akira finally notices that both of them have finished their drinks, while he's still not more than halfway through his. He gets the definite sense that the encounter is winding down, and decides to help it along. "Early morning for you two?"

"Actually, it is," Langley affirms, standing up. "So we'd probably best be going. Meeting you was quite a pleasant surprise, I must say."

"See?" Kyoko says. "My ideas aren't all terrible." She tips her head to Akira and smiles at him. "Best of luck with everything. Don't let the doubters drag you down too much."

Langley nods. "We like to romanticize the sciences, but what are scientists but people? They aren't impervious to the pressure to conform, or the resistance to radical change. Taking the wrong side too soon can blemish one's reputation. Trail-blazers like you and Kyoko will never have it easy."

"I know..." Akira looks down forlornly. "I know all about the way it is."

"Keep your chin up," Kyoko says. "If your ideas have merit, people *will* catch on sooner or later."

"Hopefully sooner rather than later," Akira says. "Hope for the best... Expect the worst."

"With any luck, we'll be able to help each other out," Kyoko says. "Expect an e-mail from me no later than Monday."

Akira nods with resolve. "For mine, Tuesday."

"Excellent," Kyoko responds, grinning.

"Best of luck with everything," Langley says, issuing a little wave. Kyoko provides one of her own, along with a final piercing look.

Akira doesn't return her look, but he does wave back. "And best of luck to you two, as well."

"Give that drink the love it deserves, now!" Langley calls as he and Kyoko walk off.

Akira watches them until they're out of sight. He isn't quite sure what he should think about what just happened. Maybe it's not important that he immediately know.

He stows their cards away safely, and sets about finishing his drink.

## Chapter End Notes

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Dr. Katsuragi's given name "Akira" is borrowed from Akira Ishida (Kaworu's VA). I could endeavor to explain why, but if you don't already know the reason for this it's just as well.

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For Langley's given name “Adrian”, along with his profession and basic characterization, I am indebted to BobBQ at EvaGeeks Forum. Due to his influence, I began to depict Langley as a unique and nuanced human being, and not as a villainous caricature owing far too much to Gendo.

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I'm quite satisfied with Kyoko and Langley's characterizations — behind the scenes, they've been developed enough to star in a sordid tale all their own — though certain aspects of their interchange with Akira are cringe-inducing at this point. The “first name basis” conceit is one thing that will definitely go bye-bye in subsequent rewrites.

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Physics, least of all the theoretical kind, are not a strong suite of mine. Because of this fact and the helpful adage "know the rules before you break them", fabricating convincing, internally consistent gobbledygook for super solenoid physics has been daunting. What's here will surely be further tweaked in time. Suggestions on the matter are enthusiastically welcomed.

# A Story That Repeats

## Chapter Summary

Return to Kyoto. The tense, somber Katsuragi household. Kyoto University's Yukawa Institute for Theoretical Physics. Stern reminders from a cherished friend. A message carrying the burden of Akira's hope. Time goes on, but nothing seems to truly change.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Kyoto, Japan  
Sakyo-ku  
Monday, July 19, 1999

The summer sun rises on the Yamashiro Basin: the beginning of another hot, humid day in Sakyo-ku, Kyoto. As the streets of Jodoji stir to life, the air thickens with the buzzing of cicadas and the voices of birds.

One of the homes on Shigagoe St. has its view obscured by what at first appears to be a concrete wall, but follow its length enough and one comes to a black metal gate. The far right section of the wall is missing, knocked down by the looks of it, and replaced with a lonely stretch of white wooden fencing. Long since weathered, too — a sad relic of an abandoned home improvement project.

Enclosed by all this is a small yard. A flat stone path leads to the front door of a single-story house, framed on either side by summer blooms: purple and white patches of bellflowers, morning glory vines growing on trellises, and poppy anemones huddled under shade. The pipe of a bamboo fountain finishes filling and hits the basin with a thud, scaring off the white-eye and the brown-eared bulbul who had come to quench their thirst. There is a rack holding three bicycles altogether: one quite large and the other two a good deal smaller.

The interior of the house is bright and open. The entrance way — with closet space on one side for shoes, jackets, and bags — yields to a nearly wall-free common area: family room, kitchen, and dining space all seamlessly blended. The décor is sparse and tasteful: photographic prints showcasing Japan's natural wonders, ceramic knickknacks of stylized animals, potted plants, small flower arrangements. On the far wall separating the common area from the bedrooms is a colorful *kamidana*, an *ofuda* hanging from the shelf's edge.

Akira Katsuragi sleeps on the spare futon set up on the family room floor, wearing light summer PJs. His open suitcase is partly shoved beneath the reading table. Lying on the table are a couple of stacks of technical-looking journals, some bookmarked with loose scraps of

paper, and a little pocket alarm with about an hour left until it goes off. Akira seems to be sound asleep for a change, impervious to the activity in the house.

“Misato!” A woman's voice. “Practice tonight, right? Do you have the dinner I packed for you, too?” The voice has a subdued and gentle manner.

“Yeah, Mom, right here.” A much younger and more energetic female voice. “Thanks.”

“Okay. I hope everything goes well today. Ace that history test!” She's trying to sound upbeat, but there's something kind of forced about it.

“I will! Have a good day at work. Bye!”

“Bye!”

Misato, the owner of the younger voice, departs the kitchen and starts heading for the door. She looks to be in her early teens, a thin and athletic girl with wavy, shoulder-length purple hair. She wears a typical girl's school uniform, and there's a heavy-looking school bag slung over one shoulder. Her alert brown eyes abruptly glance over toward the futon on the floor, and she makes a slight detour.

She quietly creeps up on the sleeping man, only stopping when her feet are less than a half meter away from his face. And she just stands there and stares, face empty of all emotion, her hand tight on the strap of her bag. Akira is completely oblivious to her presence, breathing quietly and, if the twitching under his eyelids is any indication, deep in dreamland. His expression is wholly peaceful.

Then, suddenly, he starts to snore. A snore that might be described as dainty, but a snore nonetheless. Misato's daze is broken and her eyes narrow. Without even thinking about it, she advances the alarm so that it unleashes a terrible buzzing sound. It takes mere seconds for her to jump into her shoes and disappear out the door. Gone... fast and elusive as a breeze on a blisteringly hot day.

After nearly a minute of unrepentant buzzing, Akira's hand springs to life and starts to grope blindly for the device. Thirty seconds more, and the sound is vanquished. He emits a low groan, his brows scrunching down with the discomfort of his rude awakening. He clutches his face and palpates the puffy flesh in his orbits. Visible between the gaps of his fingers, rheumy eyes slowly open.

He lurches to his feet and, before anything else, sluggishly rolls up the futon and replaces it into a closet. He turns an absent gaze toward the kitchen, where his wife stands at the counter busy with something. Oh so slowly, he zips his suitcase shut, and quietly he takes it with him to the hallway in the back, hunching forward as if it will help him avoid detection. Once he's out of sight, he deposits the case in the bedroom, grabs a change of clothes, and vanishes into the bathroom.

Life's simple, sensual pleasures. The voiding of the bladder. The removal of a day or so's accumulation of dead skin cells and various dermal secretions under the hot blast of the shower head. Toweling off. All very invigorating.

Shaving he enjoys quite a bit less. There is something unbecoming about dragging a sharp object over something as soft as human skin, and Akira has had his fair share of accidents over the years. But, alas, a necessary evil, as he couldn't grow anything even if he wanted to, and an unkempt-looking face seems to be frowned upon even more than somewhat unruly cranial hair. Electrolytic follicle disruption would be nice, if he didn't have his daughter's future to worry about.

Akira dresses himself in a short-sleeved green polo and khakis. He threads his belt through the loops and soberly observes that he's almost reached the innermost buckle hole. *Again*. He knows it's not good, but motivating himself to do something about it is... difficult. May as well try, though.

Apprehension in each footstep, he enters the kitchen and quietly takes a seat at the table.

His wife slowly looks over her shoulder at him, and timidly says, "Good morning."

He forces himself to return her look, if only briefly. "Good morning, Sayaka," he reciprocates. Akira's eyes soon stray away, wandering until they arrive at Sayaka's old wall clock with its carved wood border of birds and blooms. She didn't make the frame — one of her sister's friends did — but she *had* painted and sealed it by hand, and to Akira's eyes it had seemed very professional. Not that Sayaka would accept a compliment of that caliber. His attention turns to the clock's hands. Almost eight-thirty. He doesn't need to be up this early — did he make a mistake when he set his alarm?

Akira looks back at Sayaka. Her back is turned, and she is hard at work on her bento. For work today, he assumes. He can never remember what her schedule is; he can barely keep track of his own. His eyes become absorbed in the highlights of Sayaka's raven-black hair: pulled back into a finely woven braid that goes down, down, all the way to her hips. Akira's brown orbs linger, unfocused, and he swallows.

*Wrong kind of appetite*, he thinks, not expecting his body to listen.

"Akira," she says, back still to him, "I can make *you* a lunch to take, too."

He shakes his head. "No, thank you. I only ever waste it." Then he remembers why he came here. "Sayaka, are there any leftovers I can scavenge for breakfast?"

"There's the okayu in the fridge," Sayaka replies. "I can heat some up for you."

Akira rises from his chair. "That's fine. I can do it."

A minute or so later, he sits back down to a small bowl of microwaved porridge. Not long after, Sayaka silently takes a seat opposite him, letting her arms rest in her skirted lap. With large charcoal eyes, she watches him, her emotions veiled. Akira tries to focus on the difficult task of filling his stomach... but so many unspoken words hang in the air. It is only a matter of time before they reveal themselves.

The worst kind of anticipation.

At length, she says, “Akira... I didn't hear you get in last night.”

He swallows his half-spoonful and warily glances at her. “It was around 2. Both of you were asleep.”

Sayaka shifts a little in her chair. “You don't have to use the spare futon. You know that. It doesn't bother me at all if you come to bed a little late.”

Akira's mouth hangs open slightly, the words he would *like* to say on the tip of his tongue... but he thinks better of it and stares into his okayu instead.

“So... how did it go?” she asks.

He takes to nervously stirring his porridge. “The presentation was rushed. Same time-wasting questions afterward. Almost no one cared to understand what I'm actually doing. It was all just spectacle to them.” Akira releases a little sigh. “There were some interesting folks, but for the most part it was a disappointment. As usual.”

“So then... no backers came forward?”

The slightest hint of distress creeps over Akira's face. “...No.” A cheek twitches. “No backers... Not even one collaborator.”

“I see.” Sayaka twiddles her fingers. “So what will you do now?”

Akira sighs. “I'm expecting to hear from a contact soon about some additional grant opportunities, but beyond that...” He shakes his head. “I... I really don't know.”

He feels the situation twisting his stomach into knots. Looking into his bowl now, he sees he's only gotten about halfway through. It's clear to him that nothing else is going to happen for hours, so he declares a strategic retreat. He stretches plastic wrap over the dish and places it back into the refrigerator, Sayaka watching with barely disguised disapproval. While he's up, he sees an opportunity to escape, and starts leaving the discomfort of that table and Sayaka's stare behind.

She calls after him. “When do you have work today?”

Lying never became Akira. “I...” He checks the clock again. “I don't have to leave for over an hour.”

“Please come back,” she says, hues of plaintive desperation in her voice. “...Please.”

Unable to think up a convincing excuse to get himself out of this, Akira reluctantly goes back to his chair. He stoops forward and brings his elbows down onto the table, folding his arms in front. A makeshift defensive ward. Without looking at her, he whispers hoarsely, “What is it?” Fearing that question might be too vague, he elaborates, “What's on your mind?”

Sayaka fidgets a little more, then begins. “I know how important it is to you... Advocating your research, I mean. It's important work and I understand. I really do. But, Akira...” She

looks at him, so pointedly that he's forced to look back. "I miss you. When you're absorbed like this... I really miss you."

At length, he replies, but only after averting his gaze back down to the table. ".....I know." Not only that: he knows where this is probably going, and he feels himself being seized by a storm of both coldest dread and hottest anticipation.

He hears Sayaka rise from her chair and, in his peripheral vision, watches her approach. With a gentle assertiveness, she says, "Akira, please look at me." Hesitantly, he does. She makes her move, tenderly embracing his face between her hands and holding him there for a span of seconds that feels so much longer. Akira wishes he could be impervious to the sadness and longing in her dark eyes, but, now, it is too late to escape their gravity. Sympathetically, his own eyes start to water, and a thick lump forms in his throat.

Sayaka leans in to take what's hers. Akira wants to shrink back, but something stops him. He lets his eyes close, and his lips part to receive Sayaka's kiss, intense with pent-up desire. His body can't help but begin to burst with animalistic impulse, surging through him from top to bottom, and pooling up in... the usual places.

When she breaks free, he feels his lips tingle and salivation thicken. Their eyes meet, half-shut, pupils agape. A voice in his head still craves escape from this... escape from all the exposure and vulnerability, wherein everything he *is* is placed at the mercies of the situation, at the mercies of this woman whom he has known for over two decades, and yet never *truly* —

Recalling old wounds, he involuntarily gasps, eyes threatening to flood over. Sayaka makes a soothing sound, like a mother might comfort a child, and hugs him, strokes his hair, kisses him on the forehead. Akira feels more and more trapped in this maelstrom of emotion and sensation, helpless to whatever happens. Perhaps... it would be less trouble for them both were he to simply surrender himself, and briefly suffer the terrible, wonderful vulnerability.

And so, Akira initiates Sayaka into a kiss, the kind he knows she likes, long and deep and sensuous. She quickly gets over her surprise and responds in a spirited manner, climbing up onto his lap and wrapping herself around him. Upper garments quickly come off, and they continue to kiss, and embrace, losing themselves in the warmth of bared skin, in their dimorphic contours, in the satisfaction of stroking each others' hair. Akira tries to pull out Sayaka's braid, but she playfully swats him off; there won't be enough time to redo it before work.

To make up for that, Sayaka undoes his belt and helps him squirm out of his slacks and boxer briefs, exposing Akira's rather heightened state of arousal. She kneels between his legs and enthusiastically imparts her affections, eliciting a series of low moans from her husband. As tension builds in his hips, Akira's face cringes in acute, awkward pleasure, and soon he can no longer restrain himself.

In a wholly atypical display of strength, Akira abruptly gathers Sayaka into his arms and lifts her onto the kitchen table. She gasps at first in surprise, then in gaiety; it's clear she did not expect this level of participation from him, but not a bone in her body seems to mind it. With all due eagerness, she hikes her skirt up and discards her panties onto the floor. She checks

herself, and there's no doubt she's ready. Sayaka draws her knees toward her chest and beckons Akira forward with a breathy whisper.

Akira is completely exposed to her now, entirely nude save for his pendant. His body has become, for the moment, the dominant voice, overriding the fear gripping his heart. Soon, it will be over, he tells himself. A few familiar motions, and it will all be over. Until the next time.

He wraps his arms around her thighs and slowly leans in, following the curves of her body deeper and deeper. Both of them emit short, graceless gasps and grunts as he goes, until he has reached the comfortable limit. Akira and Sayaka share one more prolonged, yearning look, and he finally begins.

The table thuds and creaks, but holds its own against the fierce motions of a frenzied coitus. They are *loud*, woman and man both. Beyond noises of passion, Akira says very little, but Sayaka manages to grunt out quick instructions and curt reactions. After several minutes of this, they seem to find a sweet spot... a *very* sweet spot. Sayaka bids him on: *do what you're doing, only do it more. Faster, harder, deeper.* Their cries escalate, reach a cacophonous height, and subside into labored breathing.

Akira remains inside her, his upper torso slouched over her body, supported on quavering arms. The pendant sways in midair beneath him, and he drips with sweat, his mouth agape.

Sayaka, bearing an expression of deepest satisfaction, smiles at him and strokes his face. "Thank you, Akira," she whispers.

He swallows and looks meekly at her, simply nodding. Slowly, he withdraws, making a mess despite his best efforts. He frowns and, as if by reflex, murmurs, "I'm sorry."

"Don't worry," she replies. "I'll clean everything up."

Akira nods again, then, with sudden realization, looks at the clock. "Still good on time, but... I should probably shower again and get on out of here."

Sayaka rights herself and hums in agreement with his plan. Akira helps her to the floor, collects his clothes, and heads to the bathroom. She stares after him and, already, a melancholy is once more apparent in her eyes. Something is welling up inside her, but she grits her teeth and forces it back down. A detached stoicism is imposed from within.

With that, she puts her clothes back on and sets about erasing all evidence that the kitchen had not been used for its intended purpose.

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Yukawa Institute for Theoretical Physics (YTD)  
Kyoto University  
Sakyo-ku



On the north campus of Kyoto University stands an unassuming, heavily fenestrated white building: Yukawa Hall. It is so unassuming that few would guess that the greater mysteries of the universe were being pursued within its walls. A row of locust yearlings in front stand watch over the bust of Professor Hideki Yukawa and the small amounts of human traffic milling in and out of the entrance.

North wing, first floor. Sunlight from the courtyard pours into a corridor granting access to staff offices. On one of the south-facing doors is the name plate “KATSURAGI”. Footsteps. A long shadow falls onto the door, which opens to the jingling of keys.

Akira walks in, executing a perfectly timed stoop to avoid hitting his head against the top of the door frame. A foot moves a rubber stopper in place to keep the door propped open, and he proceeds within. The dimensions of his office seem, on the whole, a shade too small for him, and it is perhaps for this reason that the space is kept incredibly sparse — containing nothing more than what's necessary — and fastidiously neat.

Even so, there's a fair amount of stuff here: writing desk, swiveling chair, a couple of folding chairs for visitors stacked against the wall, a two-drawer filing cabinet, waste basket, a smaller second desk shoved in the back left corner with a computer terminal, and a couple of installed wall shelves. Tellingly, both desks are elevated a substantial amount using old, thick hardcover books. The main desk, which roughly occupies the center of the space and faces the door, is bare save for a phone, jar of writing implements and similar practicalities, a few framed photographs, and an “IN/OUT” paper tray. A double-paneled whiteboard occupies the left wall, and certifications and accolades acquired in years long past hang on the others.

Akira is glad to see to see that the place is just as he left it... *almost*. He wearily regards a couple of envelopes that were slid beneath the door in his absence, each addressed “To Mr. Akira Katsuragi” in a different hand. He sets his beat-up leather handbag next to his desk, then grabs the letters and walks them down to the common area, where such useful utilities as the shredder and coffee machine can be found. Akira runs the letters through the shredder with all the ease of a well-programmed automaton.

“What was *that*, Katsuragi-sempai?” One of the junior staff members in Akira's department, Hiroshi Tanikoshi, is filling his coffee mug. “More fan mail?”

Akira gives his kouhai a sideways glance. “You know about that?”

Tanikoshi shrugs. “Who doesn't?”

Akira sighs. “It would be nice if my 'fan mail' came from deep-pocketed institutions instead of misguided young women.”

“I'd be happy to get either.” Tanikoshi's hand juts up in a little wave as he departs. “I'll see you around, sempai.”

“See you, Hiroshi-kun.”

Akira heats up some water with the electric pot and makes himself a mug of herbal tea. Afterward, he heads to the office directly to the right of his, a door with the name plate “YAKUMO”. There's instrumental music playing inside. Akira lightly knocks a couple of times. “Hey, Haru? You in there?”

A muffled male voice emerges from within. “Oh, Akira. Don't open that door. I am in the process of biohazard containment. A hazmat suit is required for entry.”

Akira can't stifle a grin. “Ah. Finally cleaning up, are you?”

“You've caught me red-handed! I'll be out in a couple of minutes.”

“Alright, then.” Akira turns back into his office and takes a seat at his desk. He sips from his mug — one of the many made available free to the staff, emblazoned with YTD's international logo — and starts pulling articles of mail from his handbag. A couple immediately go in the trash; the next one is opened, then goes in the trash; and the one after that actually requires attention. His focus soon wanders, though, gazing beyond what's immediately before him and latching onto the small assortment of photographs.

Four altogether, each in a miniature standing frame, they occupy the middle of the desk's south-facing edge. They're arranged by date: newest on left, oldest on right. The left three depict Akira and Sayaka at various points in their lives. In the oldest, they seem to be in their early 20s and posed together on a mountain overlook, most of Kyoto visible in the basin below. In the next, they're aged mid-to-late 20s and in the midst of their Shinto wedding ceremony. In the newest, they're both 30 or close to it, at a cherry blossom festival with a very young and joyous Misato, whom Akira carries piggy-back on his shoulders, along with a thin but lively Akita puppy tethered to a leash in Sayaka's hand.

The photos bear out the observation that Akira physically hasn't changed much over the years. He looks very slightly younger and, while still quite thin, luminously healthy. Beyond that, the most obvious difference is his longer hair — a flowing mass of dark purple filaments that nearly reach his shoulder —, which he wears rather well. But on a very fundamental level, he seems like a different person. Sayaka, as well. They not only beam with youthful exuberance, they seem... *happy*.

The fourth photograph stands apart from the others: an old hand-tinted portrait of a frail-looking young woman with a long, narrow face and wavy black hair. She wears traditional formal attire, and around her neck hangs a white cross pendant that looks quite similar to Akira's. For that matter... her facial structure bears a rather close resemblance to his, as well. Or perhaps it is the other way around.

Akira's eyes pass his small collection over, from newest to oldest, and latch onto the mysterious woman's portrait. He picks it up and stares into it, at first intently, then vacantly. ....Lost in thought.

“Engaged in communion with your muse, I see.” It's Haru Yakumo in the flesh, leaning against the frame of Akira's door with a “#1 Dad” mug in one hand. A man of about Akira's age, though unlike Akira so plain-looking few would give him a second glance. His thick horn-rimmed glasses are possibly the most notable thing about him.

Akira returns the photo to the precise spot it had been standing before. "I suppose she was more interesting than my mail."

Haru sidles up to the Akira's desk. "More interesting than your tea, too. But I suppose almost anything would be."

"Oh, knock that off," Akira chides playfully. "If I'm never seen with a steaming mug, it's considered suspicious. But you know what caffeination does to me. I can never join the legion of the undead like the rest of you. This is the best compromise I can make." He downs the mug's contents in a single long gulp. "There, see? Good stuff."

"Hmm. You're in a better mood than usual," Haru observes.

Akira scratches the back of his head. "You think so?"

"My friend, I am professionally certified in observational Katsuragiology. I *know* so. And surely it can't be on account of how the weekend went..."

"Impeccable detective skills," Akira jibes.

"...so... I'd say Sayaka-san managed to corner you recently. Probably this morning. I'm right, aren't I?" Haru winks.

Akira's normally pallid face immediately gains a touch of rose.

"I'm right." Haru takes a self-satisfied swig.

Akira shoots a very mildly irked look at his friend. "Haru, I'm not quite sure what to think of the interest you take in... *that*."

"My dear Akira-kun," Haru says, "you know that my interest is only in your well-being. Watching you all this time, it's easy to see that the less you avoid your wife, the less miserable you are. Furthermore, if you want your sex life to be less transparent, have sex more often. Simple!"

"I'll... keep that in mind." Akira nervously eyes the open door. "And... I think we should change the topic. This isn't terribly work-safe."

Haru smirks. "How very convenient. Alright, then. Next awkward subject!" He casually leans against the right edge of the desk. "How was Aachen?"

Akira lifts an eyebrow. "You had to ask, didn't you?"

The other man crosses his arms and performs an exaggerated nod. "Yes. Yes, I did."

Akira leans back in his chair and wraps his hands behind his head. "There's not much to say, really. Well, before anything else, I suppose I'm forced to admit that you were right about my presentation. All those last-minute changes I made didn't help at all. I only ended up not being able to get through all of the material on time. It was awful."

“Back to the previous version, then?”

Akira shrugs. “I suppose so. If there's ever a next time. I know I won't be able to lecture outside the country until next year, for a certainty.”

Haru takes one more sip then sets the empty mug on Akira's desk. “Well, that gives you plenty of time to make revisions, at least. Though... As much as Okadome hates your guts, he *will* probably want you to do 'your thing' in September.”

“I forgot about that.” Akira leans forward again and rests his head on his left hand thoughtfully. “Anyway... Since there wasn't time for a Q&A, I was mobbed in the hallway. I don't think I need to tell you the rest.”

“That bad, huh?”

Akira considers his response. “Well... immediately after the lecture, yes. I suppose the rest of my stay wasn't that bad, though. I wasn't stalked down and harassed anywhere near as much as the first two times. Most of the individuals who stopped me in the halls were bright-eyed college students lugging around copies of my paper for me to sign, regaling me with tales of how my I somehow inspired them to pursue the field. How surreal is that?”

Haru chuckles. “So you have true-blue fans. Is it hard to accept?”

“It's... surreal.” Akira absentmindedly plays with his hair. “And I hate to say this, but... how do 'fans' help me? It's just not enough. With what I'm up against...” He suddenly drops both elbows onto the desk and seizes his head between his palms. “It doesn't really matter if the next generation is more receptive to my ideas than this one. Nothing will change in time to make any difference.” His voice becomes very quiet. “Not for me.”

Haru looks surprised — albeit not truly shocked — at the abrupt turnaround. His voice drops its air of nonchalant joviality in favor of calming repose. “Hey, hey. Akira-kun... Come on.” He gently pats the man on the back. “You can get through this. Tell me all about it later, okay? But right now, you need to pull yourself together.”

Akira sighs deeply and leans all the way back in his chair, staring up at the ceiling now. Looking up so his tears won't fall, as the song goes. After a minute or so, he has calmed enough to sit straight again, and he wipes his eyes with the back of his hand. “I'm sorry, Haru,” he says. “I guess I'm a little touchy today.”

“You need to catch up on your sleep, boy,” Haru says. “Get a good meal into yourself, too. You're running yourself ragged.”

Akira smiles weakly. “Persistent bad habit.” He spins around in his chair and turns on the power to the computer's CPU, and it starts noisily booting up. “I guess both of us should try looking industrious before Okadome comes snooping around.”

“Hey, that's my line!” Haru teases, retrieving his mug, “So, see you in a couple of hours.” He waves and proceeds toward his office.

“See you, Haru.” Akira scoots over to the computer, turns on the monitor, and, when prompted, logs into the campus network. First things first: e-mail. He signs into the client and watches as the new messages start flooding in... some three days' worth. He can't help but release an exasperated sigh and take to kneading his scalp.

Scrolling through the list to check for priorities, one of today's messages quickly pops out. He registers little more than the front end of the sender's e-mail address, “kyokosz”, before deciding to open it.

What greets him is a quirky blend of German and Japanese, and all quite exuberant. Akira gets the distinct sense that Kyoko is enjoying the opportunity to express herself bilingually. It takes a bit of getting used to, but it's coherent enough. Kyoko doesn't get right down to business — instead, she begins by offering up some select personal “getting to know you better” tidbits, which come across as a bid to stimulate long-term correspondence. Naturally, she also can't resist the opportunity to slip some flirtatious language in there, as well. Something about it feels more frivolous than anything. That's the same sense he got from her in person, come to think of it.

In terms of what she had promised, Kyoko pulls through in spades. Her list of organizations is quite long and meticulous: carefully divided into commercial and non-commercial entities, describing the goals and mission of each entity in detail, and providing in many cases multiple methods of contact. Sometimes specific grant opportunities are listed, as well, and these are all up-to-date. This woman does indeed seem to be quite formidable when she puts her mind to something.

Some of the names are ones that Akira has already attempted to court, but many more are either completely new to him or ones that he'd have never considered applying to. Acting on this information will keep him busy for quite some time, if it doesn't completely burn him out. He has a sinking feeling that the message he promised Kyoko tomorrow is going to look very meager in comparison.

Feeling his spirits lifted somewhat, he sets Kyoko's message aside for later when he can give it the attention it deserves. He performs a quick series of stretches to loosen up, then sits back down to start the long slog through the weekend's e-mail.

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The north wing's smoking area is a couple of benches situated in the shade of the building. Haru takes a seat on the empty bench and lights up, while Akira leans against the building's outer wall, hands snug in pockets, one leg crossed over the other. The shade provides a slight reprieve from the heat, but it can only do so much.

“Akira-kun,” Haru says, “remind me, why the hell did we decide that staying in Kyoto after graduation was a good idea?”

Akira gazes distantly at the courtyard's pond, where several species of duck have assembled. “This is a rhetorical question, isn't it?”

“Probably.” Haru takes a long drag.

Akira switches legs and eyes the cigarette. “Risa's campaign not going so well, I take it.”

“Well, could be better, could be worse. Addiction is a bitch, Akira. You were the smart one.” Haru gives the stick a light tap, then adds, “...in this particular respect, at least.”

The tall man chuckles. “Yes, well.” He idly scratches the back of one shin with a foot. “Speaking of Risa, I haven't seen her in a while.” Anticipating Haru's response, he says, “Yes, yes, I know, it's my own fault... But that aside, how is she doing?”

Haru lets the cigarette hang between his fingers. “Pretty awesome, actually. Work's been really exciting for her. Cuts into her time with me and the kids, but it's worth it, you know? It took all these years, but she finally has her dream job. She's really happy about it. So am I, for that matter.”

“I'm glad it worked out for her,” Akira says, a warm smile on his face. “Guess we really need to organize a get-together and catch up, huh? This year has just been...” — the smile fades and he casts his gaze downward — “...such a blur.”

“Don't worry about us, Akira-kun,” Haru says. “A get-together isn't crucial. It can wait until your birthday. If you have the time to spare *now*, you already know what to do with it.”

Akira continues to look down. He says nothing, but his face contorts in subtle ways that betray an inner turmoil. At length, something nearly escapes his lips, but he bites down and swallows the words instead.

Haru looks over his shoulder at his friend, frowning; whether it's in pity, frustration, or both is ambiguous. He turns away and exhales a thick gray cloud of smoke. “So, in your office earlier... Do you know what that was all about?”

“Hmm?” Akira asks, jerking out of a daze. “What do you mean?”

“Nothing will change fast enough to make any difference for me,” Haru paraphrases. “Akira-kun, you're being cryptic again. Whatever you were thinking about, it got you upset in record time.”

Akira shuffles a foot against the ground. “It... doesn't take much to upset me.”

“You're evading,” Haru notes.

Prolonged silence.

At length, Haru breaks it with a sigh, then looks at the stub of his cigarette. “Well, I'm forced to admit that you've made a very salient point without saying a thing. Indulging in my own bad habits while trying to help you with yours can only result in an awkward situation for both parties.” He snuffs his cigarette out and discards it in the provided receptacle, then rises from the bench. “I won't pester you any more today. I'm sure we both have other things to do, besides.”

Akira doesn't move from his spot on the wall. "I suppose that's true," he mumbles. The two men ritualistically tip their heads at each other, and Haru proceeds back inside. Akira remains.

It's mid-afternoon, and quite hot even in the shade, but Akira doesn't seem to mind. Extremes of temperature never bothered him much. Akira leaves the smoking area to the smokers and closes in on the pond, stopping a few meters away under a shade tree. He leans against the trunk and replaces his hands into his pockets. For a time, he simply stays there, watching the aquatic birds swim, bathe, preen, and dabble. And, gradually, his mind is released from the worries of the heart, instead possessed by the soothing empiricism of numbers. Numbers that can explain everything, on scales both infinitesimal and unimaginably grand.

Akira has given a great deal of thought to where his personal research needs to go if it is to ever graduate from theory and take actual form. Without substantial funding to pursue some rather high-level experiments, however, he is at an impasse; all he can really do is poke and prod at the vast body of equations, proofs, and simulations that he has accumulated over all these years. Fortunately, he does have those new leads to pursue, all those institutional bodies to attempt to woo with grant proposals. He wish he didn't have to look beyond YTD for the financial backing, but, ever since Dr. Amagiri retired several years before, there has been a definite emphasis upon collaborative research over quirky pet projects.

As a tenured professor and researcher, Akira does have substantial obligations to his institution. But there are so many distractions, so many things standing in the way of what he wishes to pursue. His work on  $S^2$  theory was always relegated to the side — due to the lack of willing collaborators and Okadome's low regard for resource-sucking solo research — and very little time ever remained for thinking about spirals weaving Dirac Sea energy into the lower dimensions. That was the real reason it took so long to build his ideas into their ideal publishable form... wasn't it?

With the summer interlude here, now until September, the distractions won't be going anywhere. There is still too much to do. Akira needs to finish his contributions to the latest collaboration on spiral super-string behavior, as it will be sent off for publication in one month. His grad students Domyoji and Nishikado will be hard at work on their own project and requiring Akira's assistance. And there will be meetings, and keeping up with the flood of published research, and revising the curricula for his two classes accordingly, and...

Akira wonders for a moment if he should envy the life of a duck. They probably don't have the liberty of contemplating the cosmos, but they don't have to go to dull meetings, beg organizations for grant money, or deal with insufferable superiors, either. Well, strike that: they probably aren't spared from the latter, but, overall, a much less complicated life. Or perhaps if he were a duck capable of similar contemplations, he would have reason to be envying humans instead. These kinds of thoughts were never Akira's specialty.

He feels himself longing for a go at the whiteboard, but it occurs to him that bio-functions should probably take priority. Time to go dabbling, as it were.

At that very moment, two individuals approach the pond from the opposite side. Young women, dressed in casual summer wear, wearing backpacks that look heavy with books. One of them carries a paper bag. They crouch down near the pond's edge and start pulling rolls of

bread out, which they rip apart and toss to the ducks. Of all people, it's Hanako Domyoji and Suomi Nishikado.

They don't seem to notice Akira — rather unlike them... — so he projects an attention-getting “Hey!” in their direction. The two immediately respond with waves, finish up with their current rolls, and run on over.

“Katsuragi-sensei!” Suomi greets. “We weren't expecting to see you here today!”

“For some reason, we thought you'd taken the day off,” Hanako adds. “To recover from jet lag, I guess.”

Akira smiles. “The trip didn't deprive me of sleep any more than the typical day. So what are you two up to? You're not just here to feed waterfowl, I take it?”

Hanako looks at the bag, still containing several rolls, and idly shakes it. “Oh, this? We stopped at a bakery on the way here, and they had all these rolls from the previous day that they couldn't sell, so we figured we'd take them and feed the ducks.”

“Honestly, I haven't done it since I was ten or something. Brings back memories,” Suomi says.

Akira seems to have no such childhood nostalgia of his own to share, but the day-old rolls *are* making his body's need for food feel slightly more substantial. “So I take it you two have already had lunch?”

They glance at each other, then back at him. “Oh, we made that stop early this morning,” Hanako says. “We've actually been in the library all day.” She jostles her backpack for effect.

Akira looks impressed. “So you've been looking into those things I mentioned, eh? Everything starting to come together?”

“Well,” Suomi says, “we still have tons of stuff to dig through, but we were going to do that at my place after grabbing a late lunch. Since you're here, though, we might as well ask our questions now...”

“Questions, eh?” Akira smiles warmly. “I'm game. I was about to head down to the noodle shop in Tanaka Mozencho. We could multitask. And that's on the way home anyway, isn't it, Nishikado-kun?”

The two young women, ever in synch, give each other excited looks that make it clear they like Akira's plan. “That sounds lovely, Katsuragi-sensei,” Hanako replies. “Though, would it be okay if we finish feeding the ducks first?”

He bobs his head. “Absolutely. Take your time.”

Watching them is strangely calming. While clearly adults, Hanako and Suomi are still brimming with child-like enthusiasm for all things. If they can hold onto that, it will serve them well in the years to come. Akira finds a certain sadness in the fact that, of all the female students his presence has managed to draw to Yukawa Institute — an above-average amount,



to be sure — so few of them commit to the field. He has seen perhaps four women off in the fifteen or so years that he's been teaching here. Frequently he feels tempted to blame himself for failing all the others in some way, but the overall numbers suggest that something much, much greater is failing them.

His two students' gentle laughter and ability to find so much joy in something so small and mundane, along with the unspoken bond they share... It makes Akira feel deeply nostalgic in his own way. For something long lost to the past, impossibly far away. A distant sun taunting him with the warmth it could provide if only he were closer. Memories that shine so brightly, compared to the darkness he dwells in now, that simply looking at them hurts. Memories of how things once were... proof of how things *could* be, instead of what they have become.

“Katsuragi-sensei? Are you okay?”

Akira twitches out of his daze. His pupils returned and he didn't even notice. “Oh, forgive me, Nishikado-kun,” he tells Suomi. “I'm fine. Just lost in thought.”

“You do look terribly tired,” Hanako says with an air of concern. “We don't have to bother you today. It's not *that* pressing.”

“No, no,” Akira insists. “I won't squirm my way out of this one.” He certainly needs the distraction, lest he fall deeper into the mires of introspection. “Let us disembark.”

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Lunch is a fun affair. The trio partake in savory noodle bowls as they go over the technical concepts giving one or both women difficulty, complete with live mathematical demonstrations on notebook paper in Akira's elegant hand. Afterward, they treat themselves to bubble tea at a nearby establishment and trade banter about their respective peer groups. A successful teacher-student venture, Akira would say.

With their questions addressed and minds focused, Suomi and Hanako go off to resume their studies and preparations. Akira, meanwhile, returns to a certain north wing corridor in Yukawa Hall.

Unsurprisingly, Haru has already left — ever the diligent husband and father. With the dawning of his wife Risa's dream to pursue pharmacology on a professional, full-time basis, Haru has, gradually and quite willingly, decreased his obligations at YTD in order to help shoulder the burdens of home and family. What the Yakumos are doing seems to be exceptionally rare in this country, though Akira has only ever provided his moral support. And at the same time... he deeply covets what they have.

Akira pushes in the switch to his computer's monitor and he takes a seat as it crackles back to life. Alas, the simulation he had set to run earlier, after completing that e-mail marathon, still needs more time to finish. He spins around in his chair and returns to his feet to take a gander

at his whiteboard. It remains covered in multicolor dry erase marker scrawl from the previous week. Akira picks up the eraser and lets it hover precariously as he performs a quick critical assessment of his work. He pulls a memo pad out of one of his desk drawers and jot down a couple of things, then returns all to nothing.

He turns on the little fan sitting on a shelf for the sole purpose of dispelling those awful marker fumes, and, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, he begins weaving a dense tapestry of calculus. Although intensely focused, Akira also seems remarkably at peace. It is only here, alone with his work, that he ever seems to find serenity.

The hallway beyond his open door reddens as the sun begins its descent.

Hours later, the corridor windows are dark, and both panels of the whiteboard have been filled. Akira clicks the fan off and steps as far back as his office space will allow. After of a couple minutes' contemplation, he makes some more notes in the memo pad. Then he takes a seat again and checks on the computer. The simulation has finished running, but the results are clearly gibberish. Very disappointing. He must have made a coding mistake somewhere, but he's not in the mood to hunt it down right now.

Akira glances at the time displayed in the corner of the computer screen. 21:37. If he knew what was good for him, he would close shop and head home now. But just thinking about it fills him with dread. "Home"... It's supposed to be a safe place to drop anchor, a warm and welcoming roost, but it never worked out that way for him. In the end, home is little more than a cage of guilt, regret, and sorrow.

And already, he knows that this will be another late, lonely night.

His mind resolved, he retrieves Kyoko's e-mail and begins to scroll through the list of organizations again. The specific grant opportunities seem like the lowest-hanging fruit, so he considers those first. Kyoko helpfully put an asterisk next to one, a call for alternative energy research proposals from a non-profit called the Hajime Ikari Foundation. Sounds vaguely familiar — must be one of those names he's heard on a regular basis but just never thought were relevant to him.

He follows the web link provided and the information checks out. Deadline for submission is pretty tight, though. Looking over the requirements, Akira determines that he can't merely cannibalize previous proposals for this one. It'll probably take about two nights to put everything together. If he can get Haru or somebody else to look it over the next day, fine; if not, he'll make do.

Akira gives his arms a good stretch and gets to work.

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The front door of the Katsuragi residence slowly opens. It's past midnight, and the house is dark and quiet. Akira steps through, stooping his head, and locks the door behind him. Shoes come off. He flips on a kitchen light — the one illuminating just the countertop, versus the more invasive overhead — and sets his handbag down on the floor near the table. Inspecting the fridge interior, the bowl of porridge is still there. Recalling Sayaka's unapproving half-scowl from earlier, he retrieves it and goes about emptying it of all remaining contents. It's the least he can do for her, he supposes.

He pulls a bookmarked journal out of the bag to continue reading while he eats in his overbearingly slow way. *The least I can do for her*, he thinks again, staring oddly at the object propped up in his right hand. And then the thought comes to him. With all the chaos this morning, Akira forgot to give Sayaka her customary post-convention present. They must still be in his suitcase. He *knew* he should have set them out on the reading table as soon as he got home from the airport. So stupid of him.

If he doesn't take care of it now, while it's on his mind, he knows that he'll forget again. And Sayaka won't say anything about it, but her day will be slightly worse regardless, because that one little gesture of meaningfulness her otherwise neglectful husband could manage to provide was suddenly missing. But his suitcase is in the bedroom, and Sayaka is in there waiting for him. Anything could happen if he entered. Something terrible, something wonderful, or... or... both at once.

He claws at his hair, strung between these terrible choices, and feels an overwhelming urge to just do nothing at all. But that never helps, either, so it's not much of an option. To shake one anxiety off his back, Akira forces himself to finish the okayu. It doesn't help — he ate too quickly, and now he just feels sick. Downing a tall glass of water helps settle the stomach, somewhat. But all he wants to do now is lay down on the spare futon and try to pass out.

*Don't*, he thinks. *She told you not to. Just go to her, you idiot. 'The less you avoid her, the less miserable you are.'* Akira wants to think Haru is right, but he's not entirely sure. In the past, it's never seemed to work out the way it should if everything Haru says is true. Of course, his friend always has some explanation for *why* that is... usually involving the implication that Akira thinks too much and acts too little.

Well... on that particular count, Haru probably *is* correct.

Akira takes a deep breath, forcefully purging all the useless thoughts from his mind, and he makes his way to the hallway in the back. He stands in front of Sayaka's, no, *their* bedroom door, gathering all his courage into his limbs as he prepares to slide the fusuma open and step over the threshold.

Down the left end of the hall, he hears the sounds of a flush and running water. If the light was on in the bathroom this whole time, he'd managed to not notice. Akira freezes in place like an animal hypnotized by approaching high beams. In the dim illumination provided by the hallway nightlight, he sees Misato emerge, donned in lavender pajamas, shuffling toward her room with a zombie-like gait.

Right as his daughter slides her own fusuma open, she finally seems to notice Akira standing there. She shoots a sharp look in his direction before disappearing into her room. It was hard

to discern in the darkness, but, based on previous experience, Akira suspects a glower. What could Misato be giving him a dirty look about *this* time, though? Coming home late? That's too standard for her to bother. He suspects that he'll find out soon enough.

As quietly as can be, he slides the bedroom door open and steps through. By the dim light, he sees that Sayaka is fast asleep, curled up on the right side of their futon, her long silky hair loose. Seeing her tresses in their unbound condition makes him smile, and he feels a definite urge to take his place on the bed's left side, and spoon her, and bury his face in her hair... But first things first.

He changes into the same PJs from the previous night. Then, he crouches on the floor and carefully unzips his suitcase, watching Sayaka over his shoulder the whole time. Akira manages to get it open without disturbing her, as far as he can tell. In the upper shell's inner storage sleeve, he finds the four publications stowed away just where he'd left them. He takes them out and delicately places them on Sayaka's reading chair in the back left corner. This way, she can discover them tomorrow at her leisure and be spared the trouble of thanking him for something so meager.

And then, for a time, Akira simply stands there and watches her sleep. He wants to do what he ought to, what should be so simple, but something doesn't feel right. Misato doesn't give him the evil eye for absolutely no reason. Something happened; he's sure of it.

At long last, the rods of his retina register the rectangular prism lying on the floor within Sayaka's reach, along with the collection of little pale wads scattered in its proximity. He feels stupid for taking so long to figure it out. Of all the things Misato hates most, Sayaka crying on account of Akira's domestic absences probably ranks highest. And after what happened this morning, of course his staying out late would make Sayaka feel terrible. *Of course* it would. He knows it all, and yet...

And yet nothing ever changes.

Akira banishes himself to the spare futon once more.

## Chapter End Notes

- Chapter title is *extremely* tentative. Either it will grow on me or I'll think of something better.
- Blessed be the Internet for enabling easy research of far-off places I have no chance of visiting anytime soon. Google, Wikipedia, the blogosphere... all incalculably valuable. To all the sources I've consulted: while I cannot possibly list you individually, you all have my deepest thanks.
- The kitchen scene is an interesting one... When I wrote it up, I honestly had no idea how it would end. There were at least two equally plausible possibilities and my brain couldn't decide between them. I delegated the difficult choice to my boyfriend (honsou) and proceeded from there. A sense of unease has continued to

linger, and I am not precisely sure why. Perhaps I feel as exposed by the scene as Akira does within it.

- Being a fan of the Japanese wrestling scene (“puroresu”), honsou assured me that Japanese tables are quite sturdy and would be able to resist the rigors of copulation. The more you know...!
- I wasn't able to find an interior map of the YTD campus, but I suppose it doesn't really matter all that much. The physics in NGE's world don't seem to be identical to those in real life, so this version of YTD is bound to have endured a somewhat divergent history from its real life counterpart. On a slightly related note, locusts being the specific tree in front of Yukawa Hall is an educated guess based on the visible leaf morphology in photographs of the campus.
- “Haru” probably comes from Hal Laboratories, one of Nintendo's software developers. (“Hal” converts into Japanese syllables as “Haru”, a given name that *can* mean “spring” or “warm”.) “Yakumo” comes from an armored cruiser of the Imperial Japanese Navy. (Naming original *Eva* characters after ships is not terribly original, I know.) I can't remember if it was by design or accident, but his name has a cute repetition when you write it out: 八雲ハル (八 and ハ aren't identical, of course, but they look very similar).
- Risa's name comes from Risa Ohki, a vocalist who did some very exquisite work for a couple of *Final Fantasy* arrange albums (and some other things here and there).
- “Suomi” is from Finland's name for itself, of all things. I thought it sounded like a Japanese girl's name, and, lo and behold, it was. “Hanako” I'm less sure about; it's probably just supposed to be as boring and standard a female name as I could imagine. Their surnames derive from two of the “Flowery Four” of *Hana yori Dango*. (I assume the fact that *hana* means “flower” is somehow responsible.)
- “Hajime Ikari” is, you might have deduced, intended to represent a male ancestor of Yui. The name derives from the first kanji of 初号機 (*Shogouki* = *Eva-01*), meaning “first”, “start”, or “beginning”.

# Enter the Dragon

## Chapter Summary

A recruiter for a mysterious new alliance of scientists within the United Nations appears at YTD's September conference and makes a proposition to Akira. Is he *really* as ready to take his super solenoid research to the next step as he thinks he is...?

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

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Saturday, September 11, 1999

“Seriously? Dr. Amagiri isn't coming this year?!”

It's early Saturday morning in Yukawa Hall's biggest lecture theater. Akira and Haru sit side by side on the front lines, identical university-issued laptops resting atop their thighs, doing last-minute consultations on their respective slide presentations. Both men look over their shoulders at Tanikoshi, hovering behind them the next step up.

“The schedule didn't make it obvious?” Haru replies. “He's not listed as a special guest this time, so...”

“There was an earlier version of the plan that had him listed,” Tanikoshi says. “Any idea what happened? Both of you were pretty close to him, so I figured if anyone knew, you would.”

Akira frowns slightly. “Amagiri-sensei really didn't tell us much. His e-mail said he wouldn't be able to come, but he didn't provide a reason. Unless telling us 'Don't get old' qualifies.” He scratches the back of his head. “I suppose that means his age is catching up to him, one way or another. I'm disappointed, too, Hiroshi. And a little worried.”

“*Still?*” Haru says. “Listen, until we manage to extract additional information out of his wife, there's no point in worrying. Sensei is even more stubborn than you, Akira-kun. He'll be evasive even when there isn't really anything all that wrong. If you haven't figured that out by now...”

Akira sighs. “Well, as you say, I am stubborn.” To Tanikoshi, “I suppose Yamagiri must feel a little relieved that Amagiri-sensei isn't here this year.”

Tanikoshi responds with a mild shrug. “Sei-Sei's used to the name jokes by now. He was looking forward to the lecture, too, actually. We were both bummed out by the new schedule.” He lowers his voice to a whisper. “I mean, it's nice of Okadome-san to fill in the slot at the last minute like that, but if I wanted a sleep aid I'd just take a pill.”

“Will you listen to that, Dr. Katsuragi?” Haru emotes. “Our kouhai isn't showing the proper respect for his elders. I'm pretty sure Japanese society will collapse any moment now. When the riots and looting begin, it's all on you, Tanikoshi-kun.” He gives Tanikoshi an obviously exaggerated evil eye before quietly returning to his slides.

Tanikoshi stares quietly for a couple of seconds. “Katsuragi-sempai... Was Dr. Yakumo always this strange?”

Both men answer simultaneously. “Always.”

“Just thought I'd ask. And I see that I'm gobbling up your precious time, so I won't bother you any more. For now.” Tanikoshi smirks and frolics off to bother someone else.

Akira and Haru quickly return to their last-minute checks. Haru seems engrossed in something, so Akira opts not to bother him, and continues to idly scan his slides over. He feels quite accomplished when he discovers as little as a single kanji to fix. There's not a whole lot to do at this hour, at least on his solo presentation. He's been revising it on and off since July, after all. Okadome forced some major changes about two weeks ago when Akira thought he was finished, but even then he did just about everything left doing during the “crunch time office party” on Thursday night. He, Haru, and quite a few others scheduled to present from Friday to Sunday stayed in Yukawa Hall to the wee hours: sustaining themselves on barely edible takeout and truly awful non-alcoholic canned beverages, refining their presentations, and practicing their oration on one another. As social functions go, it was geeky enough for Akira to fully partake, as opposed to secluding himself in his “cave” as he is prone to do.

Afterward, they assembled at one of the bars that was still open to chat and unwind. Akira usually avoids large gatherings over alcohol — he has to be in a very specific mood to get any enjoyment from it — but Haru convinced him to go for camaraderie's sake. He ended up mostly keeping to himself, doodling in a pocket memo pad, and indulging in no more than a slight buzz while everyone else got quite drunk. Waste of time, really.

Yesterday was the first day of the three-day convention YTP had scheduled for that year, *New Frontiers in Theoretical High Energy Physics*, intended to allow Akira, his peers, and the department's advanced students the opportunity to showcase their latest findings. Dr. Amagiri, the former department head — and mentor to Akira and Haru both — was supposed to fly in from Melbourne and deliver a guest presentation, as had become a customary annual tradition, but that clearly didn't work out. There remain a small handful of other guest speakers extant, but it does little in Akira's mind to offset the loss.

He can't stop worrying about the old man, either. Why did Amagiri-sensei have to be so vague? So much stubborn Japanese fortitude that no amount of time out of the country could hope to put a dent in it. *I won't be a burden on anyone. Therefore, there's nothing wrong!*

It passingly occurs to Akira that his feelings are a bit ironic... No use in turning a critical eye on them right now, though. He needs to finish preparing. It's an entirely inappropriate time to get stuck in a slog of introspection.

“Making a lot of progress over there, I see,” Haru notes, voice dripping with sarcasm.

Akira exhales heavily. “There's... not a whole lot to do. Even with Okadome's last-minute impositions.” He scrolls through the slides with understated frustration. “All of my revised material on the S<sup>2</sup>'s practical applications and suggestions for technological development, gone with a wave of his hand. The lecture will be so barren without it.” He's silent for a moment. “You remember, don't you, Haru? The reason I set out on this path in the first place?”

Haru removes his hands from the keyboard and looks at Akira. “Of course I remember, Akira-kun. And I sympathize with your position. I always have. But... I understand where people like Okadome-san are coming from, are well.” In an attempt at levity, he pitches his voice down and performs an impression. “This is YTD, not the Institute for Advanced Energy! If you can't accept that, Katsuragi-kun, beef up your qualifications and change departments!”

“Your Okadome remains unsettling to this day. You could probably fool his wife over the phone,” Akira says drolly.

“I doubt either of them would appreciate that,” Haru replies.

“I agree.” Akira starts kneading his scalp. “All that stuff about certifications, and being properly stationed... I wish it were as simple as Okadome thinks it is.”

Haru shrugs. “Nothing's as simple as he thinks it is.”

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The lecture goes better than Akira anticipated. With so much material excised, he's able to go into the theoretical aspects at length at a relatively leisurely pace, and still have time for questions afterward. And without the “reactor nonsense” — in Okadome's words — there to distract the audience, Akira's ideas seem to be taken much more seriously. Most of the inquiries are targeted at very specific theoretical and mathematical concerns, which is incredibly refreshing. Perhaps Okadome is onto something after all. Only one person mentions the absence of the “S<sup>2</sup> engine”, to which Akira provides his rehearsed reply, “It was beyond the topical scope of this symposium and deemed more prudent to leave it out.”

Afterward, Akira sits through some of his peers' presentations, keeping a legal pad in his lap just in case he feels the urge to scribble something down. There are three more before the recess for lunch. Junior researchers Tanikoshi and Yamagiri present some *very* interesting research on a possible link between Dirac Sea energy and dark energy — these two clearly



have promising futures ahead of them. Kosaka presents the current results of his solo research on black holes. Haru closes the programming block out by delivering the results of the five-man spiral super-string collab. The contributions were fairly even, so they decided who would present via janken, and luck wasn't with poor Haru that day. He's always been a great lecturer, though, so it's just as well that the job landed in his lap; Akira couldn't have done it better himself.

As soon as the recess begins, Akira along with collaborators Yoshida, Ando, and Iso swarm Haru and shower him with praise and appreciation.

“Ease off, ease off!” Haru rebukes, smiling. “You guys are just glad you didn't have to do it!”

“That may be so,” Ando replies, “but we're also allowed to think you did a bang-up job, aren't we?”

“Dinner is on me,” Yoshida says. “You pick the place, Yakumo-kun.”

“I like that idea,” Haru says as he stashes his laptop into its bag. “Akira-kun, I don't care how hungry you don't feel later on. You'd better be coming, too.”

Akira idly pockets his hands and stares at his feet as he contemplates a way to get out of this. No good excuses come to mind, though.

Iso laughs. “That's the look of a man who knows he's been defeated.”

“I suppose that's one way to put it,” Akira grumbles.

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After the requisite quantities of banter are vented from everyone's systems, they scatter to do their separate things for the remaining duration of the recess.

The anteroom and adjoining areas are bustling with activity... at least, “bustling” by the standards of Yukawa Hall, which is typically a rather quiet and laidback place. Akira mixes and mingles, getting a feel for the guests who have appeared today. Various notables from Japan's other centers of academia, an odd mixture of foreigners originating mostly from the Anglosphere, and even some folks representing non-profits who seem to be actively assessing possible ways to spend their money. Akira, knowing the limits of his spoken English — phonetically adequate, but otherwise awkward — avoids the foreigners as much as he can.

He is quite pleased to see that many of his pre-grad students are committed to attending the whole conference. The enrollment for his current two classes are well-represented here so far. Attendance understandably dropped off from yesterday, but not by much. And, of course, all of the grad and post-grad students are here, getting everything they possibly can from this opportunity. He spots Suomi and Hanako — rarely ever seen apart, in his experience —

chatting it up with a guest in their surprisingly good English. They notice Akira and wave, and he waves back.

It's then that he notices a woman on the far side of the room. She's so distinctive that he's sure he's never seen her before, but she seems to be looking straight at him. A Japanese no older than early 30s, emanating “professional but feminine” from every pore on her body. She's wrapped in a well-tailored navy blue dress suit and dark pantyhose, and precariously perched atop painful-looking stiletto heels. Between her attire and her impeccably done-up hair, tastefully applied makeup, and minimal jewelry, it's all but clear that she means business. The woman quickly turns away, returning to her conversation with head of department Dr. Senzo Okadome and a couple of Akira's other colleagues.

Something about her mien quite bothers him. Far from the usual looks Akira gets from ladies, hers feel predatory in a more literal way... like an eagle keeping watch on a rabbit from its perch and waiting for the perfect opportunity to strike. As if confirming this feeling, she briefly looks in his direction again — making sure he's still there? He swallows down the lump in his throat. Who is she, and what does she want? Akira's not sure he wants to know.

He quietly shuffles out of the woman's field of vision and spots Haru near a vending machine, enjoying a canned coffee. As soon as Haru's done swallowing, Akira gently elbows him in the side, then whispers, “Haru... Do you know anything about the woman in the blue dress suit with the excessively tall heels?”

Haru lowers the can from his face. “Ah, I think I know the one you're talking about. Don't know anything, I'm afraid. Today's the first I've ever seen her. You could just look at her badge, you know.”

“I'm trying to avoid her. She's giving me weirder looks than I've come to expect from the opposite sex.”

“Hmm,” Haru murmurs. “Maybe she's meaning to ask you some awkward questions about what was conspicuously missing from your presentation earlier.”

Akira frowns. “I suppose... but that's not the feeling I get.”

Haru pats him on the back. “Go. Converse. What's the worst that could happen?” He throws the empty can into a bin and wanders off, leaving Akira feeling quite foolish. Taking a quick peek, the woman is still talking to Okadome and the others. She must be someone of some importance, otherwise Okadome wouldn't be giving her his time like this. Surely being a two-faced sycophant about it, too. In any case, Akira definitely knows better than to approach the raptorial woman as long as his boss is also in the immediate vicinity. Perhaps if he waits, she'll just come to him.

The sense of anticipation is not much to his taste, though, and he escapes into the men's room for a brief respite. It's not as quiet within as he would have liked, what with other members of his sex clustering around the urinals and exchanging washroom gossip like the proverbial clucking hens. Akira thanks his physiological functions for choosing this time of day to require use of a toilet. He shuts himself into the stall with the western-style appliance and savors the relative solitude, filtering all the noise out and staring at the imperfections in the

tile underfoot. And there he remains, indifferent to the passage of time. It's only once his feet start going numb that he finishes his business.

Akira washes and casually strolls out, feeling a bit refreshed, and proceeds to the water cooler to rehydrate. He squats down and fills up one of the disposable paper cups provided, drinks it, fills it again, and straightens up. As he turns from the cooler, he sees those stiletto heels standing not a meter away, and finds that the one wearing them has him effectively cornered. She's so close now that Akira's eyes immediately dart to the name tag on her left breast.

*Chiyoe Tatsuta. United Nations Commission for the Sciences.*

...United Nations?

"Dr. Katsuragi," she says. "I'm Chiyoe Tatsuta from the United Nations." She bows to him. "I've been meaning to speak with you. May I have a moment of your time?" Her manner of speech is refined and polite, but it has a sort of edge to it that Akira can't put a finger on.

Already, he feels a bit nervous and put on the spot, but he forces his inhibitions as far down as they'll go. He knows he can get through this. Akira gives himself a moment to finish his drink and replies, "I don't suppose I'll be getting lunch, so... you may."

They settle in a corner somewhat isolated from the social din. "How can I help you, Tatsuta-san?" he asks.

"Well, first things first," Tatsuta says. "Do you know much about the United Nations, Dr. Katsuragi?"

"Beyond the very basics?" Akira shakes his head. "I'm afraid I don't. Geopolitics were never really my thing."

"I see." Tatsuta crosses her arms over her chest. "Well, to preface matters, there is some exciting reorganization going on within the UN as we speak. Most of this has no direct impact on the daily life of ordinary citizens in first-world countries such as yourself. As for what I do, that is another matter."

"So, what *does* the Commission for the Sciences do?" Akira asks.

Tatsuta shifts her weight from one foot to another. "Earlier this year, it was decided that an international coalition of the greatest talents in the scientific world would be formed. I am one of many recruiters for this embryonic organization." She allows one second's pause. "The reason I came here today, Dr. Katsuragi, was to assess your own eligibility."

"My...?" Akira sputters out. That couldn't be right. Akira has a reputation for many things, but being one of the greatest minds in modern science is *far* from one of them. His fingers crawl beneath his forelocks and cradle the front of his skull. "I'm sorry, Tatsuta-san. I must have zoned out and misheard something you said."

She smiles... in an uncomfortable, not entirely genuine way. "I doubt it, Dr. Katsuragi. You're surprised. It's understandable." As soon as Akira establishes eye contact again, she continues.

“I have a proposition for you, and I would like to schedule a time to properly discuss it. Preferably within the next two weeks. Does that sound feasible to you?”

Tatsuta's words were quite clear, but Akira's brain is scurrying just to keep up. This is the last thing he expected to happen today. “A proposition? To... hire me for this new organization of yours?”

“This is really not the best time or place to explain things in detail, I'm afraid,” Tatsuta says. “If I have your interest, however, would you be willing to commit to a meet-up?”

“Of course, of course...” His schedule book is in his office, but he is truly feeling the pressure to commit to a time right here and now. He quickly visualizes in his head what the next two weeks look like, and finally blurts out, “Friday... Next Friday. Any time after 6:00 PM. That should work for me.”

“Friday the 17th at 6:30 then,” she affirms. “There is a very nice hostess club that isn't far from here...”

Akira isn't able to restrain his disgust. “No. Please, no. I don't like those kinds of establishments.”

Tatsuta raises an eyebrow, seeming a little surprised by his reaction. She quickly adjusts. “If that is not to your taste, Dr. Katsuragi, we can easily convene at an alternative venue. I happen to know of a very charming and reputable—”

Akira, following her meaning to the syllable, is quite adamant. “No. I think just dinner will quite suffice, Tatsuta-san. Thank you.”

“Do you have any preferences, then?” Noticing that Akira is still stuck on the previous topic, she elaborates. “Local, Chinese, American, European...”

“Food is food,” Akira says. “If it's nutritious and edible, I will eat it. Given the choice, however, I prefer to eat in seclusion from tobacco smoke.”

“I can work with that,” Tatsuta replies. She retrieves her business card and a pen from her inner breast pocket, scribbles some things on the back, and hands it to Akira. “No need to reciprocate. I already have all of your information.”

Akira looks over what she wrote. 9/17, 18:30, Guren no Fukuryū, followed by the address. Still in Sakyo-ku and easily accessible by bicycle. He's been meaning to take the poor neglected thing for a spin anyhow. “Local cuisine?” he asks.

“A little bit of everything,” Tatsuta clarifies. “Albeit with an emphasis on east Asia. If you are more discerning about the quality of the atmosphere than that of the food, Dr. Katsuragi, I think it should be more than adequate.”

He nods. “Fine, then.”

Tatsuta begins to make motions to leave. “So, can I plan on seeing you there, Dr. Katsuragi?”

“There may be a schedule conflict on account of failing memory,” Akira says, stowing the card away, “but in that case, I'll leave you a message before the day is over. If I don't, plan on me being there.”

“Excellent. It was a pleasure to meet you. I look forward to our next meeting.” She bows again.

He bows slightly. “Same.”

Tatsuta mysteriously departs, heels clicking the floor with each step. Akira feels incredibly relieved that his business with her today is finished. And, at the same time, incredibly anxious that he's promised to deal with her again, and must wait nearly a week to get it over with.

Today's programming resumes before Akira has a chance to hunt down Haru and tell him what happened. Hanako and Suomi spy him and drag him into an adjacent seat in the lecture room. Akira systematically scans the room before the lights dim down, but he sees no trace of Tatsuta. Was he the only reason she came to YTD today? Or was he just the last item on her list? He still can't believe that the UN would want anything to do with him. He's so accommodated to rejection that this... he doesn't know how to process it.

The remaining presentations fly by. Ando and Iso do branes. Yoshida does gauge theory. Yamashita and Kio have supergravity. Okadome himself tops things off with a lecture on Kaluza-Klein theory. Akira only manages to pay the scantest attention to any of it. His brain keeps replaying his encounter with Tatsuta again and again, trying to make sense of it. Trying to anticipate what she wants to tell him in private that couldn't be said here. What is this global organization? What does it have to do with him? What might it mean for his work? He doesn't know. He desperately wants to talk to someone, but Haru's really the only one. Will he even have a chance alone with Haru tonight, what with the outing that's been planned?

So much excitement and anxiety, all squashed together into an unnavigable mess.

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As soon as the programming block is over, Akira feels in absolutely no mood to go out drinking again. Using the tall foreigners as a kind of cover, he's able to evade his colleagues long enough to reach his office and lock himself within. In part, he just wants to get away from everything and deal with the maelstrom of his mind, alone. At the same time, he's fairly confident that Haru will eventually pursue, giving them at least a moment to talk one-on-one.

He sits down and simply stares at his locked door for a few minutes. Maybe Haru won't come. Maybe he convinced the others to leave Akira to his own devices this time. Well, no way to know until later, so no sense in further dawdling. Might as well take advantage of the office while he's here.

Akira retrieves Tatsuta's card and flips open his personal schedule to the week in question. Thank goodness — his memory served him well earlier, and there are no conflicts. He blocks off two hours or so starting at 18:30 next Friday and transfers all the relevant information. As he starts fidgeting with the business card, he figures he may as well add Tatsuta to his contacts while he's at it.

He retrieves his card file from a drawer and places it on his desk, then thumbs the stack open slightly past the “TA” guide. As soon as his eyes register the card that he opened up to, Akira stiffens, and abruptly pulls the card out for closer inspection. *Taro Takanashi*, he mouths. It's not an actual business card, just a piece of thin white board cut to fit in the file, and its appearance betrays its age. The card is beat-up, reinforced with tape in several places; much of the once-black ink is now a putrid yellow from pigment degradation; and the handwriting style is inconsistent with Akira's contemporary script. Whatever was originally put down for the address has a smooth layer of white-out on top, with a P.O. Box number in San Francisco, California written over that. There's a phone number and e-mail address, as well; the latter is still jet black, signifying that it's a more recent addition.

Turning the card over reveals a drawing of a cartoon octopus, signed “TAKO” in blocky Roman script. A warm, nostalgic smile takes Akira's face.

With that, he tenderly replaces the “Takanashi” card into the file, then flips forward a couple of spots and inserts Tatsuta's. The device goes back into its drawer, and Akira releases a wistful sigh. He lets his head lean on his right knuckles as his dominant hand fidgets with his pendant. His eyes once again wander over to the young woman in the old photograph, with the face and pendant so much like his. And he smiles again.

Just then, the knocking comes.

“Trying to get out of another one, are you?” Haru's voice says from the other side of the door. “I'm afraid I can't let you do that, Dr. Katsuragi.”

Akira gets to his feet and lets his friend in. “Sorry, Haru,” he says. “I needed to get away from everything. If just for a few minutes.”

Haru cocks his head and analyzes Akira's composure. “Something happened,” he concludes. Then, in a partly joking tone, he adds, “Did that lady do something *uncouth* to you?”

Akira waves his hands as if dissipating the merest thought. “N-no, not as such... I guess she came to some conclusions about me that weren't exactly classy, but that's not the part I'm bothered by.”

His friend sighs. “I see I won't be able to get you anywhere until you get this off your chest.” Haru pulls one of the folding chairs off the wall and sits on it, his belly to the chair's back. Akira follows his cue and sits back in his office chair. “So,” Haru starts, “what's the low-down?”

A cut and dry summary of the events from earlier follows.

“Interesting,” Haru says. “Very interesting.”

“Which part?” Akira asks.

“All of it, really. Think maybe your luck is changing after all, Akira-kun?”

Akira frowns. “Tatsuta was so vague that I don't know what to make of it. A new organization in the UN dedicated in some way to cutting edge science? Assessing *me* for the talent pool?”

“You don't think your ideas are cutting edge?” Haru asks.

Another sigh. “I want to think so. But... popular reception forces me to feel skeptical about this sudden interest. I mean, I'm assuming it's pertaining in some way to last April's paper. That's a fairly safe bet, isn't it?”

“Skeptical?” Haru repeats. “Like, you think there's something shady about this?”

Akira fidgets with his pendant. “Is the United Nations known for its shady dealings?”

“Well, it *is*... but not with research. So unless you're being asked to run the Oil-For-Food Programme, you should be okay.” He winks. “But there was also that bit about 'reorganization', right?”

“Yeah. Whatever that means.”

Haru pops his knuckles. “Would you mind giving me her info, Akira-kun? I've got a hankering to sniff around a little. Get a better idea of what exactly you're getting yourself into. I doubt it's anything to worry about, but you never know. You know?”

“Ah, yes,” Akira says. “You always did have a talent for that sort of thing. If you're willfully volunteering, I suppose it's none of my business to refuse.” He pulls out his card file again and copies Tatsuta's data onto a sticky note, which Haru stows in his wallet. “Keep me posted on whatever you find. The countdown to next Friday is going to be... torturous.”

“Quite understandable,” Haru replies, getting to his feet. “This must be pretty exciting for you.”

“I wish I could *just* be excited.” Akira sighs. “But I feel like there's nothing left for me but to be disappointed. And to be a disappointment to everyone else.”

Haru tut-tuts. “Now, now, old boy. No feeling sorry for yourself.” He replaces the folding chair against the wall. “We'd best be moving. I'd be surprised if the others haven't left us behind by now. Yes, I'm sure you'd like that, but... Even if they *have* left, I'm still taking you out myself.”

Akira sulks. “Must you?”

“I must.” Haru suddenly remembers something. “Ah! But not before you call the wife and tell her what you're up to. I'm going to stand here and watch until it happens.” He takes the liberty of dialing out on Akira's office line and shoving the receiver in the other man's face. “Go on.”

Akira tentatively takes the receiver in hand. "It won't make any difference, Haru. It never does."

"Stop thinking and do it."

A man once again cornered, Akira shoots a pitiful look in his friend's direction, swallows the lump in his throat, and dials home. With every ring that transpires, he feels his grip on the receiver grow tighter. "No one's answering..." he whispers, but Haru provides no acknowledgment. A couple of terrible, resounding rings later, someone finally picks up.

"Hello?" It's Misato.

Akira feels his hand start to tremble. "M-Misato... Hi, it's D—"

"Yeah, I know." Preempting her father, she says, "Mom ran out to the store. I'm not sure when she'll be back." Typically blunt of Misato, but her mood seems more elevated than usual. Maybe this won't go terribly.

His hand relaxes and he lets himself open up a bit. "The convention is over for the day, but there's a dinner outing planned. It shouldn't take any longer than an hour and a half. Haru will be there, so he'll make sure I come straight home after that." The last part was intended to provide levity, but as soon as he says it Akira wonders if it was a good idea to even try.

"Haru-san, huh? I guess that means it's legitimate."

"Yeah, he's here right now, actually." On cue, Haru barks out a greeting to Misato loud enough for the receiver to pick up, and the girl chuckles. Akira goes on. "So, Misato... As soon as your mother gets home, can you tell her that for me?"

"I will."

"Please don't forge—" But before he can even finish, he hears a click, followed eventually by dial tone. Akira replaces the receiver in its holder and scoots out of his chair.

"That wasn't so bad," Haru says, "was it?"

Akira runs his fingers through his bangs. "Happenstance, is all it was. It could have been worse. A lot worse."

"Well, that time, it wasn't," Haru says, "and that's what matters." He opens the door back up. "Let's get going before the others give up on us, eh?"

Akira nods and follows his friend, leaving the dark, cramped office behind.



- Apparently this is where my pacing woes really begin and much tearful fat-scraping will be undertaken later on. (Though depending on the reader, CM can be a slog from the very start. Encouraging, innit?)
- Originally, the stuff about Akira's sensei being absent for the conference was going to go somewhere. However, as all follow-up met an unfortunate fate, the entire thread requires eventual excision. If Amagiri's absence remains an issue, it can be easily explained without resorting to intrigue.
- The bit about tying dark energy into Dirac Seas was just a passing whimsy on my part that seemed feasible in a sci-fi sort of way, but according to Google this connection has been made by people far more proficient in physics technobabble than I. Super nifty.
- Colleague Names: Kosaka, Yoshida, Ando, and Iso come from Studio Ghibli people. Yamashita and Kio are from two of Eva's concept designers. Okadome, Tanikoshi, and Yamagiri are three names I managed to find after experimentally constraining myself to the parameters "geographical feature" + "verb kanji". (So, IIRC, "Yamagiri" sounding almost the same as "Amagiri" is just a weird coincidence. Which I only managed to notice, and lampshade, while writing this chapter.)
- "Tatsuta" is a WWII ship. The tatsu part means "dragon", hence the silly chapter title.
- Haru's line about the "Oil-For-Food Programme" contributed by honsou to help patch a now-omitted factual boo-boo. Help steering the ending in the right direction also provided by honsou.

# Temptation

## Chapter Summary

At the dinner meeting with UN representative Tatsuta, Akira is beset with an offer that seems too good to be true. As his mind struggles to make sense of what's happening, something within him begins to change.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Friday, September 17, 1999

The autumn sun yet hangs in the sky, only starting to get thoughts about yielding to dusk. The trees interspersed among all the municipal grays are becoming vivid with reds, oranges, and yellows as the plants prepare for colder times to come. With the dreadful summer heat behind it, Kyoto has become, for now, a pleasant place to spend outside.

Akira turns into the Aoyama Plaza off Shirakawa Dōri, seated on his sleek, iridescent green behemoth of a bicycle. Further in, he sees a building with a statue of a red dragon perched on top. Must be the place. He navigates through the early evening pedestrian traffic, his height attracting the usual share of looks from locals who expect a foreigner... and are then quite surprised to find a fellow Japanese. It always happens whenever he strays from within a certain radius of YTD, and much like the ogling of women he's long since learned to disregard it. Akira proceeds until he finds the next bicycle rack with an empty slot. He quickly glances at his wristwatch, and he's doing good — a full ten minutes before the appointed time.

The rack fortunately has a coil-shaped design, so he's spared the usual annoyance of the frame not fitting. He retrieves the lock from his handbag and secures his bicycle in place. Just a precaution. Akira doesn't like to assume the worst of people, but being a tall Japanese is costly. Things like clothes and bicycle frames have to be imported from countries where the males typically *do* run tall. It's an incredible nuisance and a significant contributing factor to Akira's limited wardrobe. At least with clothes, he usually has a few conventions overseas he goes to every year, so he can just ship out with a mostly empty suitcase and come home with it filled with new purchases from the local stores. The bike frame... is quite a bit less practical to replace, so the less often he needs to do that, definitely the better.

And speaking of new clothes... He pats off his current outfit and makes adjustments here and there. Just a silk dress shirt, slacks, and tie, all picked up in Germany this past July. This must be the first time he's gotten around to wearing them, as he typically eschews formality as

much as his job lets him. Some of his peers go so far as to wear full suits every day, even during the summer, which only makes him think, *How?! But dressing up for a special occasion like this is fine.*

As he fixes up his tie, Akira can't help but think back on Sayaka's expressed appreciation for "a well-dressed man". There were times when he would put on a suit for the sole purpose of... spicing things up for her. Draw out the process of undressing, for instance. And while he normally detests ties, Sayaka always did manage to find interesting and fun uses for them. Perhaps he can hold onto these thoughts and use them to surprise her later. They certainly won't do him any good right now.

Handbag in tow, Akira approaches the establishment. Perched across the front of the roof is an impressively sized statue of the eponymous lucky dragon, an unsettling crimson red. There are red paper lanterns hanging from the eaves below it, and the entrance is framed by replica temple lions. He walks inside, and the décor is very festive, possibly to excess, but it's a welcoming enough atmosphere. There's a sign in the front, depicting a cartoon version of the dragon snuffing its pipe and saying, "Please, no smoking inside the restaurant!" Quite a refreshing sight; he didn't expect a place like this to be so close to home.

A woman greets him with a low bow. "Welcome to the Guren no Fukuryū, sir. How many?"

"Two," Akira replies. "The one I'm with may already be here."

"One moment, please." The woman scoots over to the front podium and peers at a scheduling book of some kind. "Mr. Akira Katsuragi?" she asks. Akira affirms. "Ms. Tatsuta is waiting for you, sir. Please follow me."

He is led down a red-carpeted path that bisects the main dining area, through a beautifully-decorated fusuma and into what must be the far back of the restaurant, apparently reserved for special clientele. The atmosphere is a bit duskier, less flamboyant and much more business-like, lending the impression that many shady dealings happen back here. Akira starts to wonder once again if this was really such a good idea; he half expects a yakuza mobster to be waiting for him next to Tatsuta. But when he reaches the booth — no, she's there all alone, accompanied by nothing but a briefcase and a woman's handbag. He sighs in relief.

"Good evening, Dr. Katsuragi," Tatsuta greets, then checks her watch. "Excellent sense of time." Gesturing across the table, she adds, "Please, sit."

His sense of time is actually quite awful, but he doesn't bother correcting her. Tipping his head, he says, "Evening, Tatsuta-san. Thank you." He takes the seat opposite her; the limited leg space makes it mildly uncomfortable, but he'll survive.

The greeting woman distributes the menus and says, "Your server will be with you shortly. Please enjoy your stay." She bows and takes off. Akira and Tatsuta watch her disappear through the fusuma, then turn to one another.

"Before anything else," Tatsuta begins, "we should probably take a moment to select food and drink. I'm paying, so don't feel any need to hold back." She unfolds her menu and begins

to look.

Ever to the point. No small talk or anything. Tatsuta must always be like this. Akira is partly glad for her straightforward demeanor... *and* a little disconcerted by it. “Right,” he replies, following in kind. Taking a quick perusal, he doesn't see anything that especially catches his eye. This in spite of intentionally fasting all day to improve the chances of him having an appetite now. Still, it would be good for both him and the situation if he were to eat *something*, and he silently makes his choice entirely on the basis of nutritional value. Of course, social lubricant will be expected, as well. Looking over the sake choices, he sees far too many fancy brands he's never heard of, so he lets the allure of a name make his choice for him. He sets the menu down and quietly waits while Tatsuta continues browsing.

Soon enough, their server appears, a well-groomed young man probably college-aged. “Good evening, madam and sir. I'm Shimomura and I'll be serving you tonight. Have you two made your choices?”

Tatsuta lowers her menu. “Yes, Shimomura-san. I'll have the mabodofu. To drink, Seigan no Hakuryū, warm.”

Akira takes his turn. “Chicken happosai. And I'd like to try the Kaoru Houeki, chilled please.”

Shimomura reiterates their selections for final approval, collects their menus, and departs.

“You prefer your liquor light, Dr. Katsuragi?” Tatsuta asks.

“That's all I can process anymore,” Akira replies. “I lost the ability to imbibe large quantities of alcohol in my mid-twenties. So I play it safe and I don't have to worry about getting sick.”

“That sounds like a medical problem,” Tatsuta observes.

“It does, but no one could find anything obviously wrong.” He shrugs. “Living around it is no problem, really. I don't miss getting drunk.” Maybe he was wrong about the small talk thing after all. Hoping to get the topic away from his personal quirks, he prompts, “So...”

Tatsuta rests her chin on steepled fingers. “I apologize for keeping you in suspense, Dr. Katsuragi. My job requires a certain amount of discretion. On that note...” She opens up her brief case and presents a document to Akira. “Before we can begin, you will have to stamp this.”

He picks it up and quickly scans it. A nondisclosure form with some very dense legalese. Sayaka would be able to decipher it easily, and Haru would get the gist as well, but Akira... He feels his brain curdle and his spirit sink. “I'm sorry, Tatsuta-san, but... what is this?” He puts the document down. “I won't be able to tell anyone about what we discuss?”

“Not at all,” she says. “This is fairly standard procedure, Dr. Katsuragi. It's much more simple than the paperwork makes it look. Once you know the context, it will be easier to explain.”

Akira bites his lip and frets. He doesn't know what to do. He wants to skulk off and use the restaurant's phone, ask for advice about this... but they'd probably need to see the form to be able to give Akira any real advice, anyway.

“You're not signing your life away, Dr. Katsuragi,” Tatsuta says. “There are specifics that must remain confidential for the time being. What I'm helping to create is very hush hush at the moment. Behind the scenes. I need a commitment from you and every other potential recruit to keep it that way.”

If he doesn't provide his seal, he'll never know what Tatsuta's proposal is. And if he *does*... Well, Haru might say, “What's the worst that could happen?” He retrieves the jitsuin case from his bag, takes the hanko into his visibly shaking left hand, repeating in his head the mantra *Don't think; act*, and rapidly scans the text for anything particularly alarming.

And then, before he loses his nerve, he presses the end of his hanko into the ink pad, and carefully leaves a scarlet impression within the form's provided circle.

Tatsuta retrieves the paper from him. “Thank you, Dr. Katsuragi.” It disappears back into her briefcase. “Now then...” She pulls out a tan accordion folder and lays it on top of the case. “I suppose before anything else, you would like to know why you're here.”

“An understatement,” Akira replies, putting his jitsuin away.

Tatsuta replaces her steepled hands on the table, but she continues to sit straight. “Well, if you had not guessed, I have an employment opportunity for you. I realize that you're already employed, but I assume you would not be averse to advancement.”

Of course it had occurred to him that whatever this was, it would require leaving the university behind. But without knowing anything about the job, Akira didn't bother to think about it all that deeply. Even now, it doesn't register as a genuine possible future. “You want me to leave the university?” he says in disbelief.

At that moment, Shimomura brings their drinks. They thank him, say the requisite “*Kampai*”, and begin the process of getting liquored up.

Tatsuta continues, leaving Akira's question untouched. “To reiterate what I previously told you: the United Nations is currently undergoing extensive reorganization to help give it... a bit more clout.” She smiles. “As part of this ongoing motion, the Commission for the Sciences decided that its own mission needed a significant boost, which would require creating a new entity altogether.” From her accordion folder, she produces an A4-sized glossy booklet that she places in front of Akira. “An international organization collecting the greatest minds in modern science, and setting them against the most pressing issues facing humanity.”

Akira reflexively picks the booklet up for a closer look. The front cover is emblazoned with an unfamiliar logo, a tree stylized to resemble a brain, apparently for something called “ISTAA”, its expanded form provided as “The International Science and Technology Advancement Agency”. Running from the front cover to the back across the left text block is an unbroken seal. “For the eyes of Dr. Akira Katsuragi only” is inscribed within a box on the

back cover. He starts working on the seal with a fingernail, but it's no good; the thing is tough.

Frowning, he looks to Tatsuta. "ISTAA... This is what you couldn't tell me about before?"

"Yes. To start with." Tatsuta produces an X-ACTO blade and opens the booklet for Akira. As he starts to absentmindedly flip through it, she continues. "ISTAA is being backed by some very deep-pocketed institutions and independent patrons from around the world. For those within ISTAA's employ, this means access to top-of-the-line research facilities and much greater ease securing funds."

Off hand, the booklet seems like standard promotional nonsense with absolutely no informative value. He closes it back up. "That sounds nice. Very nice. But what in the world would the UN want with me?"

"Don't short-change yourself, Dr. Katsuragi," Tatsuta says. "You've devoted a full quarter of your life to one of the greatest problems facing our species today." When he only furnishes a dumbfounded stare rather than follow her lead, she specifies. "The energy crisis."

His body language immediately betrays a bashfulness on the subject. "You flatter me... but all of that is nothing but—"

She throws a bound sheaf of paper with an acetate cover in front of him. "You caught the eye of someone in the commission, and this analysis was ordered. A compilation of multiple third-party independent assessments of your April monograph on  $S^2$  theory along with other notable works."

Akira flips through the report. It certainly seems genuine. Having not yet seen any rigorous analysis or even proper criticism done on his infamous monograph, he wishes he could take an hour or so to properly peruse this tome's contents; he won't absorb much just scanning it like this. "May I keep this copy?" he asks.

"I'm afraid not," Tatsuta says, "but I can have another one made and sent to you by mail."

"Please do. I'd much appreciate it." He closes the report up. "So, what was the consensus?"

Tatsuta smiles. "Surprisingly unanimous. You were 'recommended for immediate recruitment'." Seeing his immediate disbelief, she adds, "It's right there in the report, toward the back."

He quickly finds the section she's speaking of. An overview of the disparate analyses compiled by someone at the science commission's review board, along with the overall assessment of the review board itself. There, at the end: *Taking these data into account, the members of the board unanimously recommend Dr. Akira Katsuragi of Kyoto University's Yukawa Institute of Theoretical Physics for immediate recruitment into the ISTAA.* Twelve names representing about as many nationalities follow.

Who are these people? What are their qualifications? What do they know about science, let alone high energy theoretical physics? Akira's brain can't accept this, and it will take any

reason to reject it. Yes, it's true that all this time, he's wanted nothing more than acceptance. Acknowledgment. From his stubborn same-aged peers keeping the current paradigm from shifting too much, from his own institution, from *any* institution that would fund him. But he's grown so accommodated to rejection that, now, it's near impossible to believe that anything else could exist. His mind wants to justify all of this away as an elaborate prank which, at any moment, will be revealed for what it really is. Tatsuta's only purpose all along was to taunt and torture him. His fingers tighten and curl with the sentiment, making the report's paper creak and plastic crinkle.

As soon as he realizes what he's doing, he forces himself to relax. *Control that breathing... No need for melodrama.* He casually hands the report back to Tatsuta. "So... There are actually people who want the super solenoid engine developed?" His mouth distorts into something that isn't quite a smile. "Don't they know it's impossible?"

Tatsuta looks at him knowingly. "If it's impossible, Dr. Katsuragi, why have you been applying for grants?"

Akira gives her a discerning squint. "You're not just guessing. You actually know, don't you?"

"I know about one of your applications, anyway." And Tatsuta produces *that* from her briefcase, as well. Akira recognizes the face page immediately. "Sent to the Hajime Ikari Foundation a couple of months ago. They're one of the commission's many patron organizations. Apparently someone over there thought you were a better fit for ISTAA, as well, and they forwarded it to my office."

He feels a certain amount of relief from knowing exactly what became of that application... and, at the same time, mildly surly that they refused him what he actually asked for. "So, no grants," Akira notes. "Then what?"

"Dr. Katsuragi," Tatsuta says, "your ideas have the potential to free humanity from the yoke of finite energy resources forever. But, as you've written, technology must first advance to accommodate your vision. And who better to direct that research than you?"

Akira's voice emerges as but a whisper. "Me...?"

"You have been chosen to provide ISTAA with cutting-edge research, with the intended goal of technological advancement, on the alternate energy front. You will have access to a state-of-the-art facility. You will be in charge of your own team, which you will personally select from hundreds of highly qualified applicants." Tatsuta takes a sip of her sake. "And you will never have to worry about funding again."

Akira isn't sure what he expected Tatsuta's proposal to be, but this? He never expected anything like this. Once again, he feels as though his ears must be deceiving him, that her words are nothing more than an aural mirage brought on by his own desperation. Tatsuta is real, he knows that much, but he can't believe what she says. It would be unbecoming to say that, though. He tries to think of something, *anything*, to say, and comes up empty.

Realizing his throat is dry from tension, he takes a long, slow drink from his cup. As he does, the food arrives. Good — buys him a little time to process all this information and find his

bearings. He and Tatsuta exchange pleasantries with Shimomura and say “*Itadakimasu*” together. Tatsuta casually helps herself to dinner, while Akira ineffectually stirs and pokes at his food instead. She notices and shoots a look in his direction.

Akira immediately puts his chopsticks down. “Please forgive me, Tatsuta-san,” he says. “I was just thinking about what you said before, and... well...” His fingers nervously dig beneath his locks and rub his scalp. “This just... all sounds far too good to be true.”

She finishes chewing, dabs at the sides of her mouth with a napkin, and takes a sip of her drink. “That’s a natural reaction, but it is not my business to deceive, Dr. Katsuragi.” She gestures at his food. “Please, eat.” Akira starts picking at his food again — only this time making sure some of it actually goes toward his craw — as Tatsuta continues. “Of course things go two ways, and the perks of the job do not come free. In exchange for all that I mentioned, the UN expects extensive documentation showing exactly how the money is being spent and what was demonstrated in its spending. All results, good and bad, will be submitted. That kind of protocol should be nothing new to you in general, but believe me when I say our patrons will want every yen accounted for.”

“Left to my own devices, I’m a finicky record-keeper anyway,” Akira says. “So no problem there.”

Tatsuta nods, then goes on. “And beyond that... Well, I don’t know the exact specifics of what your research would entail, so I’ll have to be general.” She takes another sip of her sake. “This may be a dream job, but it will be very hard work. Much will be demanded of you — you’ll have not only the research to supervise, but your team. Needless to say, it will be a full time affair, and require retiring from your current station.” She pauses to grab a piece of tofu between her chopsticks. “So, to answer your question from earlier: yes, you will have to leave the university.”

Akira feels a discomfiting sensation in the pit of his stomach.

Tatsuta finishes eating the morsel. “Furthermore, there is no guarantee that you will end up stationed close to your current residence. If, indeed, you are kept in the country at all.”

He gazes at her with a nearly plaintive expression.

“In other words,” she says, “you will go where ISTAA needs you to be.”

He doesn’t know how to feel about that. He would go from being an intermittent presence at the home to, potentially, not being one at all. Assuming he wouldn’t take the option of dragging Sayaka and Misato from place to place. No... he could never do that to them. But would Sayaka forgive him if his work took him not only emotionally away from her, but *physically* away, by hundreds or thousands of kilometers?

She wouldn’t. She wouldn’t possibly.

“I understand,” Tatsuta says, “that it is a difficult choice. But this is the offer I have. Freed of the bondage of academia and the need to get by on the rare grants that come your way...



Working for us, on our terms, you'll finally get to do the research you've long dreamed of doing.”

Akira finds himself staring pensively into his food, impulsively grabbing for his cross. It's inside his shirt, of course, so he makes do fumbling with his tie instead.

“You've made so many sacrifices to get this far,” Tatsuta says. “Would you truly stop now?”

There is a long silence. Tatsuta cleans her dishes with ease, while Akira makes little progress on his. Shimomura returns and collects Tatsuta's used wares. The server asks Akira of his own meal, “Will you be taking that home, sir?”

“May as well,” he murmurs. Akira tips his head back and finishes his drink, passing the empty cup to Shimomura.

The server turns back to Tatsuta. “Are you ready to pay, ma'am?”

“I'll pay up front,” she replies. “Thank you, Shimomura-san.” The server bows at the waist and departs. Tatsuta reorients her attention to Akira. “Now then, to start wrapping things up... How much does a tenured professor and researcher like yourself make? ¥6,500K a year?”

Akira's brows furrow slightly. “I'm sorry, Tatsuta-san, but... that's a private matter.”

Tatsuta remains unfazed. “No more than what I quoted, I'm willing to bet. Whatever you are making, Dr. Katsuragi, I want to make sure you know that ISTAA will top it. A family man like yourself—”

Anticipating needless manipulative rhetoric, he cuts her off. “How much?” Akira asks, a certain amount of wariness in his voice.

“Your base salary would be around ¥8,500K.” Tatsuta sits perfectly straight, her hands resting on the table with fingers entwined, looking quite pleased with herself.

In truth, Akira is making slightly less than Tatsuta's first quote, and the supplemental income from Sayaka's part-time job at the clinic doesn't add much. They were never a family that spent much, but that was partly of necessity. After college loans and the ridiculous cost of housing and food, they are left with enough to make do, especially with Sayaka's ability to manage finances — her sister Yura, so good at handling money she makes her living from it, taught Sayaka well —, but hardly enough to indulge. Sayaka's family brings a certain amount of stability to the equation, since her parents or sister will help (and, indeed, have) if things get too unwieldy. Akira always wanted financial independence, though. That big boost to his yearly income might actually make that possible. Relying on others is such an unsure thing. Not to mention, while impressing Sayaka's parents is one of the furthest things from his mind, he certainly wouldn't *mind* if there were one less thing for them to harass him about.

The money issue is just a distraction, though. He knows his mind is just looking for some way, any way, to make this work. And even though the meeting has yet to end, already Akira

feels up to his neck in doubt. He peers over at Tatsuta, and she has been nonchalantly eating during the long silence. Akira takes up his chopsticks and attempts to catch up.

Tatsuta seems to at last take stock of the fact that he's not eating with the socially appropriate hand, but she says nothing of it, instead continuing her tract. "You probably wish to know what's covered by the nondisclosure form. It's probably simplest to say that ISTAA itself is what you need to keep quiet about. The organization's existence is scheduled to be made public sometime next year."

"Ah," Akira says. "So if anyone asks, who should I say the job offer is from?"

"UN Commission for the Sciences' is fine."

"I see." He grabs a chunk of chicken with the chopsticks. "Is there anything else I need to know?"

Tatsuta places her briefcase on the table in front of her. "Indeed. We need your decision in exactly two months."

"Two months..." he repeats, averting his eyes down.

"Preferably sooner." She starts sifting through papers, looking for something. "Your next term starts at the beginning of October, doesn't it? It would certainly be much simpler for you and your institution if you made your decision sooner rather than later."

Akira finishes chewing a morsel. "It would," he agrees, somewhat absentmindedly. He looks back at Tatsuta. "I... There's no way I can make a decision right now, Tatsuta-san. I need at least a week to think it over."

She smiles. "And that's perfectly fine." She passes him a manilla folder with a fresh copy of her business card clipped to the outside. "Your copy of the nondisclosure form, along with everything you need should you decide to say yes."

Akira opens it up. Inside, he finds his copy of the form, indeed, along with little more than a piece of paper vaguely indicating the job offer, when it expires, and how to secure a time and place to sign the necessary bundle of paperwork, should he decide to take it. Naturally there's no chance of him getting to review all of *that* legalese before the fact, either...

"Getting in touch with me by phone or e-mail anytime before 6:30 PM on November 19 should suffice," Tatsuta says. "Any of the personnel at my office should be able to accommodate you, in fact." She closes her briefcase and rises. "Unfortunately, my schedule demands that I be somewhere else presently, so I must depart. It was a pleasure to meet you again, Dr. Katsuragi." She bows.

He scrambles to stand and then returns the bow, making sure it's properly low this time. "Same to you, Tatsuta-san." And with that, she disappears through the fusuma. No high heels today, he notices, just flat dress shoes. For whatever reason, he finds himself thinking a little better of her.

Returning to his seat, he collects his copy of the ISTAA booklet into the manilla folder and situates the folder safely in his handbag. Shimomura returns with a takeout container, apologizing for the delay, and herds the remnants of Akira's happosai inside. With that, Akira makes his way outside, thanking the staff on the way. Tatsuta is, once again, nowhere to be found, and, once again, he's thankful for it.

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On the way back to the bike rack, Akira looks around for a pay phone and quickly spots a gaudy green one that's not being used. He gets a phone card from his wallet and inserts it into the provided slot, then dials the number for Haru's office line. Nothing. He tries again, this time Haru's house phone. Nothing. Belatedly, he remembers that the Yakumos are spending the weekend in Osaka, visiting Risa's parents. They must already be en route. While he does have the number for the Etajima residence somewhere, he's certainly not going to bother Haru there with anything short of an emergency. It can wait until Monday.

Akira briefly contemplates calling home as a courtesy. But he's not going back to the office, and he'll be home in mere minutes, so there doesn't seem to be much point.

He races the dusk home and parks his bike outside in the tiny yard, attached to the rack. Goes through the door. Shoes comes off. Akira spots Misato parked in front of the TV doing homework, which bothers him a little more than it probably should, but he refrains from comment. "I'm home," he announces.

Misato — sitting on the floor in evening casuals, legs crossed and a workbook in her lap — shoots a brief sideways glance at him. "Welcome back, Dad." There's no real feeling behind the words, and as soon as she's done saying it, all her attention returns to whatever she's doing.

Akira knows better than to argue. Even aloof teenage acknowledgment is better than none at all. He puts his leftovers in the fridge, makes a toilet stop, then peeks into the bedroom. No Sayaka. Come to think of it, her shoes weren't in the entranceway, were they? Akira wanders back into the living room and settles on the Western-style love seat. "Misato..." he prompts.

Without looking at him, she murmurs, "Hmm?"

"Have you heard anything from your mother?" Akira fidgets, lacing his fingers together.

"She called from work and said she needed to grab some groceries on the way home." She looks over her shoulder at him. "Will be back soon, I guess."

Akira tries to muster a smile. "I hope so. Thank you."

Misato simply nods and turns away again.

He sits there for a time, staring at his long, bony, intertwined fingers so he doesn't have to look at Misato's back and whatever it is that's airing on television. Computers he's fine with, but he never saw much value in TVs, and he tried to keep one out of the house as long as he could. Lost that battle to Sayaka, of course. She barely uses the device herself, but Misato? Addicted from birth. Watching her study habits makes Akira's spirit cringe. Maybe some paper will eventually be released proving that sensory bombardment helps the current generation concentrate, but in the meantime Akira will stick to his hypothesis that people Misato's age lack a true appreciation for the meaning of "concentration". This must be a sign that he's getting old.

It occurs to him that maybe Misato's program does have value, which he just can't see because he's so accustomed to his own perspective of things. Experimentally, he tries watching it. A live-action sitcom, clearly targeted toward the teenage female demographic. Akira doesn't need to see much to know that the show's only value is as a brainwashing medium, preparing impressionable young minds for their "proper" future role in Japanese society, while superficially pretending to be "hip" and modern. Sayaka lets Misato watch this stuff? A terrible thought... but he's long since lacked the sort of domestic involvement that would make it appropriate for him to say anything.

Driven by impulse normally suppressed, Akira drops down onto the floor and scuttles over to Misato. "What are you working on?" he asks.

Misato looks at him, one eyebrow raised in befuddlement. "Kanji," she says.

"Anything giving you a problem?"

She turns back to her workbook. "Nope."

Figures. "Okay. But if you ever need help, there's a lot of things I--"

"Alright, Dad. Thanks."

Akira peers at his daughter's expression for a moment, but Misato is blank. He can't make out what she's thinking at all. Maybe it's better that way. He rises up on his gangly legs and, hearing the door open, looks toward the entranceway.

Sayaka struggles through the door with both arms holding bags of groceries and her satchel over a shoulder. "I'm home," she says, voice weary. Misato and Akira greet her in near unison. Misato immediately puts her books aside and starts to get up, but Akira motions for her to stay.

"It's okay," he tells her. "I'll help. You keep working." He goes over to Sayaka and receives the bags from her, placing them on a kitchen countertop and quickly returning to the entranceway. "Got home before you," Akira teases. "Surprised?"

She slides her shoes off and smiles at him. "A little. But it's the best kind of surprise." Sayaka straightens up and gives him a look over. "I didn't get to see you before you left. You look good." She starts playing with his tie and teasing the buttons of his dress shirt.

Akira gulps. “Th-Thank you, Sayaka.” He stills her hands with his own. “So, how were things today?”

“Nothing special. I'm glad you asked, though.” Sayaka kisses him lightly below the knuckles. “How about you? After your meeting with the recruiter today, *you* must have a story to tell.”

“Ah... Yes, I suppose I do.” There's a palpable tension in the air, just as he anticipated, and he can feel himself getting sucked in this time. Not just his body — everything. It's an exhilarating sensation. His mouth curves into a broad smile, and he whispers, “Do you want to know it now... or a little bit later?”

Sayaka laughs, and quickly glances down to confirm what she already knows. “Well, we can't have you walking around the house like this,” she whispers back. “Wait for me and I'll be there in a couple of minutes. But leave your clothes on.” Grinning, she adds, “And don't let Misato see that!”

He winks back at her. “One step ahead of you”, he says, indicating he's already stowed the unseemly bulge beneath his belt. As he casually strolls to the bedroom, Misato stares at him over her shoulder, no doubt wondering what all those whispers were about. Akira's sure she has a pretty good idea... and, if she doesn't, the failure of that fusuma to absorb sound waves means she'll know soon enough. Normally, he might let himself care about the relative lack of privacy, but right now? Not one wit.

Akira stretches himself across the futon, prostrate. Leave his clothes on and wait, eh? Is she trying to torture him? He opens his fly, at least, and that relieves some of the worst tension. Too little, though. The engorged tissues are desperate for sensory input and won't let him think about anything else. He hastily unbuckles his belt and frees himself up, and idle hands go to work with zeal. It's more sensitive than he anticipated, and he winces with discomfort.

*Easy does it. Don't overdo it. ...There.* Akira finds his rhythm. His neck cranes back and his breaths start to escape in short, ragged bursts. He could end this in mere seconds, but what a disappointment that would be. Instead, he stops, and stares at the ceiling. Meditative. Afloat in his own body, drifting on the currents of his pulsating blood.

Then comes the sound of the fusuma opening and closing. He tilts his head onto its side and sees Sayaka standing there, smiling at him. She kneels beside him on the futon. “Sorry about the wait,” she says. “Had to put the groceries away and ask Misato about school.”

“That's okay,” he replies, smiling back. “I kept myself occupied.”

“Oh, did you?” Sayaka gets a puckish look in her eyes. “Show me.”

And so he does, looking into Sayaka's eyes all the while. Everything indicates she likes what she sees, but instead of getting directly involved just yet, she teases him... Slowly removing her garments one by one. He starts to rise to provide assistance, but she playfully rebukes him — “I didn't say you could stop, Akira” — and pushes him back down. The energy is contagious this evening, it seems, and seeing Sayaka like this... It makes him want her so badly. He could burst from the anticipation.

Sayaka exposes herself little by little. Her smooth, swarthy skin. Her delicate curves. Her perfectly petite breasts. The triangle of dark, neatly trimmed hair guarding the entrance to paradise. His motions get increasingly rigorous, until he's audibly grunting. Sayaka straddles his waist, fully nude, and restrains his arm. "I didn't say you could finish, either," she gently jibes, pulling his head up by his tie and leaning in for a kiss.

And he gives it to her, without inhibition. It's deep and wonderful and feels so real. Akira feels like he's really here with her... his Sayaka. He doesn't understand it, but *she's* not questioning his sudden sexual zeal, and didn't question it for even a moment back at the entranceway... so why should he? Why, indeed?

He leans up and reaches for her braid, and she lets him pull it out. As he begins to separate the strands, she starts unbuttoning his shirt, top to bottom. Akira feels self-conscious — he's so skinny, *too* skinny — but he forces himself to trust that Sayaka wouldn't open his shirt if she didn't want to see what was beneath it. He feels her kiss upon his breast, and he reciprocates, quite zealously. Sayaka holds his head there and softly moans. Akira involves a hand, as well, and the moans grow deeper.

"Remember... Misato's here," Sayaka breathes, eyebrows arced down. "We can't get too carried away..." As Akira's fingers slide beneath her, she issues a low grunt. Her voice wispy, she murmurs, "The day's not over... Need to make it quick..."

"I'm fine with that," Akira says, sitting up and kissing her deeply. Sayaka wraps one arm around his head and holds him by the tie with the other, and she leans into him, infusing him with her passions. Akira's hands run over her pelvic crests and down her buttocks, squeezing gently. As soon as their lips part and they catch their breaths, he looks deeply into her polished charcoal eyes, smiling. "If you're ready... I know I am."

Sayaka licks the tip of his pointy, slightly upturned nose. "I don't know how I'll be able to keep quiet." She starts to push him flat down on the futon.

"Misato has a good set of headphones. She'll survive."

Sayaka grins, eyes twinkling, and takes one more kiss from him. Then, he feels her shift her weight back and her hand delicately guide him inside, and his whole body stiffens as the warm wave of pleasure hits. He managed to forget how wonderful this could be, being taken from above. And it's a beautiful sight to behold, Sayaka in control of the situation, losing herself to the pursuit of ecstasy. She's struggling to subdue her noises, and failing. Akira lets his hands wander over her rhythmically bobbing and swaying body, giving tender attention to where it's needed most. Her head tilts back with a euphoric gasp.

It's too much for Akira to resist. He sits up, hands braced on her hips, and sensually kisses the crook of her neck. The air is thick with the smell of her hair, sweat, and ardors. They trade breathy whispers of love, lust, and desire and say each other's names longingly, then smother their voices beneath urgently clasped lips. Sayaka straddling him below the waist, and their upper torsos parallel, both sets of hips gyrate and grind, more and more fiercely. Neither can keep their passion bottled up anymore — they're simply in no state to care — and they, once again, become quite loud.

Just as he starts to feel a dull ache emerge, Sayaka announces her imminent release. Akira takes that as permission to let himself go, as well. Forget pacing — he goes wild. Within moments he experiences that deeply familiar yet always queer, always sublime, climactic sensation. Like a cosmic spark, a vast abyss of nothing rapidly overtaken by an explosion of energy. Holding the ecstatically quavering Sayaka in his arms, Akira feels, for a brief moment, like he can see the universe in perfect relief.

Once it's over, they collapse onto the futon, and Sayaka wraps herself around him. His large, bony hand seeks out her small, dainty one, and their fingers intertwine — Akira's pallid skin contrasted against Sayaka's darker tones. They stare into each other's eyes, pulses overlapping, breathing in sync. Akira feels so... young, and alive. And in love.

It doesn't make any sense to him. Earlier this week, he was avoiding Sayaka like usual. Feeling that intangible fear deep down in his heart and obeying it, few questions asked. What's come over him? It's like today, he was suddenly reborn. He feels strange. Very strange indeed.

But he knows this strangeness. He knows it very well. Something dwelling within, that, time and again, breaks free of its bonds, and infuses him with boundless energy, like a super solenoid. And he also remembers... So many years ago now, it was this very nameless specter that appeared out of the ether to rescue him from his despair, and plant the seed of the  $S^2$  theory within his mind.

He hopes "it" stays as long this time as it did back then.

"So, tell me..." Sayaka says. "Tell me about what happened."

"I can't just lie here and stare at you forever?" Akira replies.

She squeezes his hand. "Silly... Come on. Out with it."

He sighs. "I suppose we'd best get comfortable for long, boring tales, then." He reclaims his hand and pulls his pants back on. "May I take the tie off now?"

Sayaka laughs and nods. "You may. Dress however you prefer, dear."

He snorts, more playfully than derisively, as his fingers work to free his neck. "Dear'..." Sayaka knows how much he hates that Japanese affectation. From the time he was a small child, he could never understand why his mom was always 'dear this' and 'dear that', seemingly allergic to calling her husband by his name. But anyway, if Sayaka's teasing him about this, it's probably a good sign. He hears Sayaka get up, and he looks over at her. Still in the nude, and resplendently beautiful. He can't help but smile.

"Do you need help with that, Akira?" she asks.

He nods. "If you don't mind. I cut my nails this morning, so I can't get this knot loose."

"Well, it's my fault it's that tight, anyway." She works at it for several seconds, and off it comes. Sayaka flashes a smile at him, then turns to her dresser. Both of them put on their

evening clothes, and Sayaka ties her hair back.

They make their way to the living room. Misato is done using it — in her room now listening to music, from the sound of things —, so Akira and Sayaka take their places at the love seat.

“Have you eaten anything?” he asks her.

“I can eat after this,” Sayaka assures him.

“Okay.” Akira inhales deeply. “I’m... not quite sure where to start. It was indeed a job offer from the UN. They want to hire me as a researcher. Full time.”

Sayaka tilts her head. “You don’t sound very excited.”

“I want to be, I really do, but...” He starts futzing with his hair. “It’s a mess, Sayaka. It’s such a mess.”

“Tell me.”

Akira looks at her warily. “The United Nations wants me to continue my S<sup>2</sup> research for them.” Noticing her surprise, he agrees, “That’s how I felt! The recruiter said that if I accept this job, I get to keep doing my work. Fully funded. My own facilities. My own team, even! That I’d pick myself!”

“Th-that sounds wonderful,” she says. “That’s what you’ve always wanted.” The words are supportive, but the way she speaks is tinged with her own inhibitions.

“I guess...” Of course, he’s far from convinced, himself. “It sounds good as a fantasy, doesn’t it?”

“Well... Are there any downsides?” Sayaka’s playing devil’s advocate, looks like. Typical of her, in these sorts of situations. Provide a sounding board instead of just flat-out saying what she actually thinks. It can be useful, but she also has a bad habit of doing it when Akira *wants* her to be straightforward.

In considering the question, Akira averts his gaze and thoughtfully grasps his chin. “I’d miss teaching, but... a small price to pay, I suppose. Except for my current grad students. Those two young women especially. I’d have to leave them before they finish the program.” His brow furrows. “I’m none too fond of that idea.”

“Oh,” Sayaka says, recalling. “Suomi and Hanako. What do you mean, you’d have to leave them?”

Akira looks back at her. “The UN is in a hurry, for some reason. They need my decision in two months. No more. I’m not sure when they intend to put me to work — I forgot to ask — but I’d assume more or less immediately.”

“So, really,” Sayaka says, “you have to decide by the end of the month.”

“If I want to make this as hassle-free as possible, yeah.”



“That's not much time,” she laments.

Akira starts playing with his cross, nervously rubbing the white metal with his left thumb. “It gets worse, Sayaka. If I agree to this, I...” The impending tears begin to well within his eyes, and he bites his lip firmly. There's no sure way to stop it, though — not without escaping this situation entirely. Sayaka's started to look at him in that concerned, maternal way she always does when he gets like this. Akira still has it under control, though, so he can keep talking... for now. “I wouldn't just have to leave Yukawa. I'd... probably have to leave the country.”

Her eyes grow wide. “Why?”

“I go wherever they need me to be. Wherever they've located the appropriate facilities, I guess. International organization. Can't plan things around what's convenient for a single recruit.” Akira wipes the tears from the corner of one eye and laughs oddly. “But there's a dark irony there. You see it, don't you?”

Sayaka thinks for a moment. “You never really felt at ease in this country. I guess that's what you mean?”

Akira nods. “Yeah. If I were single, this wouldn't be any imposition at all. Being forced to leave would be a perk! But...” Any traces of a smile vanish, and he snuffles. “...my feelings about Japan have been irrelevant for half my life. Since it's your home, and without you, I... I don't have any place in this world at all.” He wipes his eyes with the back of his hand and forces himself to look directly at her. “Wherever you are, Sayaka... I have to be there, too.”

She clutches his hand. “Akira... Are you saying you aren't going to take it, because of me?”

“It's not fair to you. I...” He shakes his head. “I can't do it. I can't do this to you and Misato anymore.”

Sayaka gazes into her lap. “It would be very hard,” she admits. “On all of us. But I can't pretend I can make the decision for you, Akira. I've never had to face a dilemma like this. I wouldn't know what to do, if I were in your place.”

“You don't need to do this, Sayaka,” Akira says. “The situation really isn't that complex.”

“How is it *not* complex? In the past, you've told me again and again how your ideas can help the entire world.” Passion gradually creeps into her voice, and she clutches his hand more and more tightly. “I've had trouble completely believing it, but that was always my own fault... my own ongoing failure to grasp the kind of work you do.”

He merely stares at her with wary, unsteady eyes.

“And if something as big as the United Nations is recognizing your efforts, that's clear proof of their value. This is the ultimate validation that your feelings back then were true. Isn't it?” Sayaka is starting to cry a little, too. “How can I selfishly keep you to myself when a chance like this... It could easily be one in a lifetime, something that never happens again. If you don't do this, the past ten years don't mean anything, do they?”

He glances away, considering her words thoughtfully. “And if I *do* say yes...” The brown eyes dart back. “...what of the past twenty?” Akira gets her to ease her grip. “I appreciate what you're saying, Sayaka. I really do. But...” The tears start coming again. “I don't deserve this much consideration from you. Not after everything I've put you through.”

Sayaka suddenly wraps her arms around him and presses her face against his shoulder. “Akira, please don't say things like that. It doesn't matter what you *think* you 'deserve', only what others choose to give you.”

“So, why?” Thin rivulets slowly streak down his cheeks. “Why be so generous with someone like me?”

“Stop asking such silly things.” She squeezes him tightly.

They sit there in the dim silence for a time, neither knowing what to say anymore. Perhaps there's no need for words now. Just being close, feeling the other's warmth, lingering in the other's scent, listening to each other breathe... That's enough.

It occurs to Akira that if, after all this time, Sayaka can still love him, can be so willing to understand and forgive him... and that if he, in turn, can still feel some degree of trust and a healthy heaping of attraction for her... It could just be a passing whimsy, but maybe, just maybe, there is still hope for them after all.

## Chapter End Notes

- All the stuff about *jitsuin*, *hanko*, and *inkan* involves what Japanese people do instead of signing their names. Google if you want to know more, since I would do a terrible job explaining it.
- Yes, *happosai* is a real dish. (And one of the few names I recognized that wasn't a *Dragonball* character. Still a manga/anime character, though!) The two drinks, however, are invented. Tatsuta's choice is the lamest of lame jokes (if you know what a *Seigan no Hakuryuu* is), and Akira's choice is... well, all you have to know is that he picked it because he liked the name.
- If you're wondering what the heck this thing called “ISTAA” that I've clearly made up has to do with anything, eh, just wait.
- Once I think of a direction to take, I hope to go all NGE with Misato's TV show and have Akira listen in on some character dialogue that's actually making indirect commentary on what's happening in the story.
- Akira's comments about “dear” are a reference to *anata* — one of the words roughly equivalent to “you”, but also what traditional wives call their husbands, making it also roughly equivalent to “dear”. We can probably assume, from Akira's distaste for *anata*, that he won't be calling Sayaka “*kimi*” much either.

# The Crossroads

## Chapter Summary

Akira's transformation continues undeterred, and Sayaka has no complaints whatsoever. Who is this vibrant, charismatic, amorous fellow, and what did he do with Misato's dad? Pay close attention, kid -- this is the perfect time to get that nagging question "What does Mom *see* in that man?" answered.

Hey, Dr. Katsuragi... don't go and leave the UN hanging!

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Saturday, September 18, 1999

Morning light streams through the two windows, undeterred by the translucent white blinds. This corner of the house, one of three rooms partitioned off by shoji, clearly belongs to the youngest member of the household. It's in a fair amount of disarray, with clothes, magazines, empty cans, and the remnants of packaging strewn everywhere — most of it herded into piles and corners to provide at least some clear walking space. On the walls, there's a jumbo-sized calendar of European luxury sports cars, along with posters of idols, Sailor Moon, and a favorite movie or two. The futon occupies the middle of the floor, and not far from it lie a schoolbag and pile of books, plus a combination CD/cassette player with a sturdy-looking set of headphones attached.

And upon the futon, barricaded from the mess by the thick cover drawn up over her head, is Misato. She tosses and turns, turns and tosses. It's Saturday morning, and she wants to sleep in, but it's not quite working. She had a good thing going a couple of hours earlier, but then she was hit by local seismic disturbances. The epicenter was Mom and Dad's bedroom, of course. *Again?*, she thought. She'd nearly managed to forget her parents did that icky adult stuff, but, naturally, it's when her guard is down that they suddenly start making the house bump and shake with whatever gross, weird things they're up to. Months and months of nothing, and, now, twice in less than twelve hours. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad if it weren't for the noises... They sound like they're killing each other, slowly and painfully. Adults are weird. And gross.

Why don't they get a room? Like, a *real* room? That's *not* in the same house where their 12-year-old child is trying to do homework and get sleep? Ugh.

Anyway, activities in the adjacent room woke Misato right up, and she managed to drown out the mating calls with some TM Revolution. The tremors subsided over an hour ago, but she

hasn't been able to fall back asleep. She turns over in her futon again and lies there for a while. Misato just can't get comfortable. It's hopeless. She'll have to be a zombie all morning. She rolls onto her back, pulls the cover down, and opens her eyes, staring at the light fixture on the ceiling. Eventually, the smells of breakfast rouse her out of bed. Whatever Mom's making, Misato can't lie back and let it go uneaten.

Still wearing her Totoro PJs, Misato navigates the messy floor — she'll clean it today, she promised Mom that much — and slides open the fusuma, wandering into the hallway. The partitions separating the back hallway from the main open area are decorated with old photographs, showing the family as it had once been in the 'good old days'. Misato can't really remember those days — though, from what she's gathered, they ended suddenly when she was three or so. The supply of photographs depicting them as an actually normal and functional family dried up in 1990. Misato's been through the family archives and, starting in '91, it's like Dad disappeared. Of course, he didn't, not really, since he's been here all along, although he's so elusive sometimes it can feel like her chances of spotting a tsuchinoko are higher.

She usually walks by the hanging photos without paying them much mind. Misato has seen them so many times that they just blend into the shoji; and, besides, none of them are recent enough to have any real relevance to her. She's often wondered why her mom leaves them up, as they seem like nothing more than an unpleasant reminder of what's gone forever. Maybe this altar of shattered memories is all she has left anymore. Misato feels so bad for her mom.

Just then, she hears feminine laughter coming from the direction of the kitchen. It's an unfamiliar, uncanny sound, seldom ever heard in this household anymore. Did Mom invite Eri-san from work over? Is Aunt Yura visiting? Misato proceeds round the bend and finds something she didn't expect.

Crowded against the kitchen range with only their backs visible are her parents. *Both* of them. She'd assumed it was Mom who was making breakfast, but, getting a look at the scene from a better angle — nope, Dad's actually helping.

...helping?! He does that?? Misato rubs her eyes and lightly slaps herself across the cheek, but there's no illusion that shatters. The tall, gangly man is still there, kneeling on a chair in front of the range, confidently wielding a tamagoyaki pan. Mom stands beside him, apparently tending to soup and rice. And the two are constantly looking at each other, talking, smiling, and laughing. The atmosphere feels nauseatingly flirtatious.

It reminds Misato of... well, not how her parents *normally* act. It's more like... Misato has vague memories of a VHS cassette Haru-san played once, which showed her parents drinking together at some party, long before they were her parents. The feeling they gave off in that tape... Misato is seeing it again, right now. This is so sudden. So weirdly sudden. Misato isn't used to seeing her parents act happy together. She doesn't intend to get used to it, either. Nothing like this ever lasts. She wishes, for Mom's sake, that it did, but it just doesn't. That's not the way Dad works.

Misato's father finally notices her standing there and, looking over his broad, bony shoulders, extends an exuberant greeting. "Good morning, Misato! Did you sleep well?"

Did that just happen? Stunned, all she can manage in response is, “G-good morning.” When her brain catches up a moment later, she decides to be tactfully polite and simply says, “I slept okay, I guess.” A lie, of course, but not saying anything about what she knows they do (without regard for whether their daughter is in the house or not...) is far less gross than the alternative.

Thankfully oblivious, her dad goes on. “Your mother and I are making breakfast. Smells good, doesn't it? It should be ready in a few minutes.” He pours more of the egg mixture onto the pan and promptly starts attacking the air bubbles with his chopsticks. “It's been forever since I've done this, but don't worry, Misato. Your mother approved me for duty.” He winks and deftly rolls the omelet up in its sizzling new layer.

Misato has heard legends of her father having some competencies in the kitchen, but seldom has she had opportunity to confirm it. Domestic involvement in general just never seemed to be his strong suite. If this were any other household, his lack of participation would be perfectly acceptable, but, for better or worse, Misato's family *isn't* any other household. Her parents are... um... *different*, and there actually seems to be the expectation — spoken or not — that Dad do *more* than work, come home late, work, come home late... Even though Misato's never known Dad to consistently be anyone else, Mom clearly requires more from him, and is miserable when he doesn't provide it.

Which is, regrettably, most of the time. In the remarkable instance that Dad is actually around, he's typically too ineffectual to do anything besides wring his hands and stare at his feet; ask too much of him, and he'll disable himself completely with a good cry. Pretty pathetic. And on his *good* days, he's too full of himself to do anything but take his wife, daughter, and everything else for granted. Make everyone sit there and pretend to be interested while he babbles on for thirty minutes at a stretch, gladly! Actually contribute? ... Never!

Apparently, her dad still has the ability to surprise her, which she wouldn't have expected. He actually seems really into what he's doing, too. There are a full three omelets already rolled and sitting on a dish to the side. Even more bizarrely, they look more adept than Mom's. Will they have taste to match, though?

Mom takes the rice off the heat. “Your father is full of surprises, Misato. When we were living at that apartment together, before you came around, he prepared at least half of our meals. He's better than me at some things.” She looks over at her husband. “I'm a bit jealous, you know!” The two of them laugh in that deadly saccharine kind of way.

Misato wants to ask, 'So, why did Dad ever stop?', but... her mom's in a good mood. No point in souring things.

The soup comes off the range, as well. “Why don't you sit down, Misato?” her mom suggests. “It's been a long time since we've had breakfast together, hasn't it?”

Misato can't refuse a request from her mother. She intones in assent and takes a seat. Through still-bleary eyes, she quietly watches her parents. Her mom sets the table and returns to Dad's side. He's still there, rolling eggs, but he briefly frees a hand and lets the full length of Mom's hair run through his palm. Mom's hair isn't braided, not even crudely; just a ponytail. Weird.

They whisper to each other under their breath and Misato can't quite hear what they're saying. Probably for the best, really. They start leaning into each other and Misato quickly averts her eyes. *Not* what she wants to see. Mom and Dad broadcast their kissing regardless; it's sickeningly audible. Misato quickly looks back, wondering what in the world they could be doing to make so much noise, but as soon as she sees her mom grabbing her dad's scrawny butt, she looks the other way again. Too much. Just... too much.

Fortunately, it's over almost as soon as it began. Mom serves out portions of soup and rice. Dad delicately divides the omelets and brings two serving dishes over. "Sweet or spicy, Misato?" he asks.

Misato considers this briefly. "Can I try both?"

"But of course! Here you go." With the cooking chopsticks, he places four wedges onto Misato's dish, positioned such that they look like a couple of hearts. It's almost too adorable, and she murmurs out a bashful thank-you. "And what about you, Sayaka? Just the sweet, right?"

Mom takes her seat at the usual place. "Yes. Thank you." And she gets a couple of hearts, as well.

Dad piles several pieces onto his plate, sets the serving dishes aside, and starts to take his seat, but promptly stops. "Oh! Tea! I forgot the tea!" He puts the water on and returns, immediately taking up his chopsticks and saying, "*Itadakimasu*". Misato and her mom echo him in unison, and breakfast begins.

The food is good. Really good. And Misato says as much. Her dad definitely knows how to make an omelet, and even Mom's cooking tastes better than usual. Being in a good mood makes a difference, it would seem. Why *is* Mom in such a good mood, though? Misato's afraid the answer will be something like, "Because Dad is". No, not just afraid... She *knows* that's the reason. Thinking about her mom's emotional dependency on that man makes her feel so bitter even her taste buds are affected. Misato frowns, suspends a piece of egg in her chopsticks, and glances around the table, looking for something to get her mind off it.

Mom is eating in her refined, dainty way — slowly savoring every bite and every sip, her handling of the chopsticks immaculate. She briefly looks up from her meal and across the table at her husband, dark eyes glimmering, and extends a hand to him. He reciprocates, laying his hand upon hers for a moment, and they both smile deeply at one another. Mom looks so pretty when she smiles, and it's difficult not to feel heart-warmed by the sight. Even *if* Dad is responsible.

*Dad...* Misato has always wondered what Mom sees in him — and whether or not her guesses are remotely accurate. Is it his pretty face? His height? His intellect? His... "sensitivity"? All of the above? Taking a small bite of omelet, Misato silently scrutinizes him.

Dad's attentions are back to his breakfast now, though he keeps looking back at Mom and smiling a broad, goofy smile here and there. The way he's eating is far from his usual habit of poking and prodding but not actually consuming much at all; the food is actually

disappearing, and fast. Each piece of egg vanishes in one or two bites. He scrapes his rice bowl clean into his gullet and immediately fills it up again. As he proceeds to drain the soup bowl, the kettle goes off.

“I’ll do it,” Misato’s mom says, rising up. “You keep eating, Akira.”

Dad puts the bowl down. “Are you sure, Sayaka? Making my tea is so much trouble... You really don’t have to.”

“Green, right?” Mom asks. “I know the way you do it. It’s no problem. Don’t worry.”

“Th-Thank you, Sayaka,” he says, and reluctantly returns to his meal. He seems to zone out for a moment, and one of his bony hands clutches the white cross that hangs beneath the junction of his collar bones. None of the buttons on Dad’s polo are done up, providing an unwelcome window to his borderline emaciated body. Even with the limited view, he looks worse than Misato remembers. Odd that he’d leave his collar open like that at all, too. Dad’s usually too modest, even for that.

Well, probably not “modest” per se — more like ashamed. Not like hiding his body ever fooled anyone, either, considering how gaunt his face and hands are. And Mom, well, there’s obviously *no* fooling her. She used to actually get on Dad’s case about it, hard core, though not so much since that blow up a few years back. If Misato remembers rightly, Dad flunked a physical exam and his doctor prescribed appetite stimulants. But, go figure, Dad threw them out after taking just a couple of doses. Something about them ‘clouding the mind’. Mom got mad. Like, really mad. She actually yelled at him, that’s how much she cared. It was kind of impressive, in a freaky sort of way.

Too bad it didn’t achieve anything aside from making him bawl like a kid with a skinned knee. Oh, and naturally Dad added his doctor to his long list of “people to habitually avoid”. Mom seemed to just give up about the weight thing after that. For the best, really. Dad’s gonna do what Dad’s gonna do, and this particular quirk seems to always self-correct, given enough time.

Right now would seem to mark one of those turnarounds. Dad finishes his soup and, of course, helps himself to seconds there, as well. Making up for so many skipped meals. He manages to finally notice Misato’s persistent gaze, and she quickly pretends to be more interested in her rice. *Please don’t talk to me. Please don’t talk to me...*

“So, which one did you like better?” Dad asks. “Sweet, or spicy?”

Misato hopes she can get this over with quickly. “Uh... They’re both pretty good. I think... spicy, maybe?”

He smiles, idly playing with his necklace. “I remember when you didn’t like spicy things. I love hot stuff, but I can’t indulge too much. Hopefully you didn’t inherit my metabolic sensitivities.”

Mom brings the teapot over and starts pouring for each of them. “Your body is such a finicky thing, Akira!” she exclaims. “It can survive the most inhumane feeding and sleeping

schedules imaginable, but even green tea at full strength is too much for it. You really are sensitive.” She’s talking to him like a lovingly chiding mother. Mom does that a lot with him, come to think of it. Treats him as much as her offspring as she does her husband. While Misato can certainly understand why — her father is nothing if not a man-child — it’s not something she wants to put too much thought into. The implications are kind of gross. She wishes Mom would realize just how gross it is and stop talking to Dad like that, at least while Misato is around.

“Of course,” he replies, “and I know you love me for it.” Another flirtatious smile.

Misato blows on her tea. The sooner she can drink it, the sooner she can escape this unmitigated awfulness.

Her mother returns to her seat and, looking at her husband’s plate, a realization seems to come to her. “How much have you eaten so far, Akira?”

“Well, I took second helpings of rice and soup.” He absentmindedly ruffles his bangs. They’re noticeably less scraggly than usual; he must have gotten a trim this week. “Is that okay?”

“Of course it’s okay. And you finished all of your omelet already?” Mom takes a tiny little bite out of hers.

Dad nods, and lifts the soup bowl to his lips again.

Mom finishes the morsel. “That’s wonderful. It’s great to see you with your appetite back.” Her eyes crinkle at the edges with joy. “Just don’t push yourself too much, okay? Give your body a chance to get back in the swing of things.”

“That’s a very good point you make, Sayaka,” he says, setting the bowl down. “I’m sure that *is* more than enough, for now.” Dad goes for the tea instead and carefully tests the temperature. Still too hot. Misato could’ve told him that. She continues to bide the time by picking individual rice kernels off the bottom of her bowl. Dad takes note. “Are you done, Misato? You can leave if you are.” His tone dipping up, “No need to humor us old folks, you know.”

The question vaguely irritates her. Of course she’s not done. She’d formally announce it if she were. Maybe *his* manners are haphazard — she swears the man avoids using polite forms unless his life depends on it; no wonder his boss hates him — but Mom definitely taught Misato the right way to act. And it’s for that very reason that she won’t let herself get snippy with him, as much as she would love to... and as much as he deserves it. “Not yet. I’m waiting for the tea to cool.”

“Oh, right.” Dad settles onto his elbows, pendant breaking free of his chest and hanging in midair. “I’m sorry about that, by the way. I got so caught up in what I was doing that I forgot to put the kettle on at the right time. I should’ve set a timer or something to help me remember...”

Gods, he’s getting chatty. She can see it in his eyes, just in his overall bearing, that something is bubbling up and out. Misato really hopes he doesn’t start blathering on about his boring,



inscrutable projects. Solenoids this, vacuums that, negative energy oceans the other thing. After all these years, Misato's no closer to understanding what any of it means, aside from the very basics. Whatever it is he's thinking about, please let it not be *that*.

Dad looks back over at Mom. "You know, Sayaka? I think I'm feeling ambitious."

"Hmm?" she intones while chewing.

"I really want to get back to a good weight."

Wow... It's not physics, *and* it's something Mom's been waiting to hear. Dad's going for some kind of record in "surprising moments" today.

"I mean it," Dad says. "Eat three big meals a day. Maybe do some training while I'm at it. I can definitely look better for you than *this*." He raps against a protruding clavicle with his knuckles.

"Looking good isn't a problem for you, Akira," Mom teases. "Just eat what your body needs and you'll be fine. Don't have to go crazy about it."

"I wonder if it's inevitable for me to be scrawny, though?" Dad muses. "I'm kind of curious how much muscle I could build if I tried..."

She lets out a tiny sigh. "First things first, okay? Don't worry about anything else until you're back at the baseline. Trying too much right now would do more harm than good."

"*You're* the doctor," he says with a wink.

Mom blushes slightly. "Oh, Akira, you flatter me. But you know I'm no doctor. I'm not even close."

"You *could* be, though."

He's actually mentioning the doctor thing, and so casually, at that? Misato's not sure if he's being gutsy or just plain crazy. Most likely, the latter. This is one of those weirdly sensitive topics that nobody is ever supposed to talk about, as Misato's learned the hard way. About the most she does know is that Mom *started* to study medicine in college, apparently with great ambition... but, well, the fact that she's now a part-time assistant at a clinic, and a housewife the rest of the time, speaks volumes for what happened there. The particulars, however, are kept securely locked up in the great vault of Katsuragi family drama.

Misato's accepted that it's none of her business, though it's hard not to be curious what everyone is so sore about. She starts sipping her tea. Never know, this *could* get ugly.

Mom clutches one of Dad's hands. "Please, Akira. Not here." Her voice can't sound much more earnest than that. Dad opens his mouth, as though to protest, but Mom maneuvers quickly. "So, Misato! What are your plans for the day?"

"Hmmm..." Misato considers, setting the tea down. (Mom averted more drama, it seems.) "Well, I'll be cleaning my room like you asked, then doing some math and reading." Dad's

eyes noticeably light up at the mention of 'math', but she promptly debars him. "It's okay, Dad. It's easy stuff. I've got it covered, but thanks." Back at Mom, "At 1 or so, I'm meeting up with Kei and everyone. Lunch, arcade, maybe some shopping."

"You're watching your allowance, right?" Mom asks. So like her. Well, she does manage the household's finances entirely by herself, so it's to be expected.

Misato nods. "Yep, I'm still doing good. Don't worry, Mom."

"Shopping, eh?" Dad says. "What are you planning to get?"

The question takes Misato off guard. "Oh... Er, I dunno. The latest Kotori-san single, I guess."

"You enjoy her work?" he asks.

"Um... She's okay. I like most of her songs." The heck? Why is Dad suddenly asking her about this stuff? Misato feels weirdly defensive and she's not sure why. Hesitantly, she adds, "Though, you probably wouldn't enjoy them much, Dad."

"Heh." Her father smiles, somewhat mischievously. "Probably', you say? You know the kinds of music I like?"

*Of course I don't. You're barely around, and when you ARE, you don't listen to anything.* She knows her mom sometimes puts on an assortment of tunes from the 70s and 80s — everything she grew up listening to — but her dad's always seemed kind of indifferent. "You got me there, Dad."

Dad's smile broadens. "The answer is: anything your mother sings," he says, sending a blatantly amorous look across the table.

Mom's face skips over the "slightly flushed" stage and goes straight to deep red. "Akira!" she squeaks in embarrassment.

Misato feels a story lingering in the air. Even her now-empty tea cup won't be enough to save her. Should she brace herself for an impending sugar rush? Well, maybe it won't be that bad...

Still maintaining his fawning, bedroom-eyed gaze, her father proceeds as anticipated. "You may not know it, Misato, but your mother has the voice of a goddess. Did you know that's how we met?"

This is starting to ring some bells. "I think...?" Misato twists up her face and digs deep into her memory for the select other instances that her parents have both been in high enough spirits to subject her to old family stories. "Something about a choir?"

"Yes," Mom affirms with a tiny nod. "It was a choir elective back in our second year of college. Your father was the poor tone deaf tenor towering over everyone else." She laughs.

"Hey, now," Dad says. "I *did* get better!"

“Only because I tutored you!” she playfully snaps back. “And by the end of the semester you still couldn't consistently hit notes if your life depended on it.” She releases an exaggerated sigh. “Honestly, Akira, what were you doing in choir to begin with?”

Even though it was a rhetorical question, Dad responds to it. “Well, people told me, 'hey, you're great at math, so you ought to try music'.” With a theatrical gesture, he voices, “Little did they know of the horror they were unleashing upon this Earth!”

Misato raises an eyebrow. “Is your singing really THAT bad, Dad?”

He scratches the back of his head. “I'm not sure. It's been a while since I tried.”

Sayaka looks mildly apprehensive.

“Let's find out.” Dad takes a deep breath... and starts belting out something rather operatic. Definitely not in Japanese. Considering this is Dad and all, German is a safe bet.

He has impressive volume, which most wouldn't expect given his reedy build and the understated way he normally talks. But Misato immediately hears what her mom was talking about, and it's cringe-worthy. The tune is so distorted it takes several seconds for her to identify it at all. Misato can't remember the exact name, but it's that thing that gets played every New Year's. “Um, okay, Dad. Thanks. I get the idea.”

But, no, he keeps on going! And he's smiling about it, too. Misato looks over at her mom, her eyes beseeching, *Please, make this man stop!* Mom mouths something and starts counting down from five on her fingers. Her intent registers just in the nick of time. At the count of zero, both of them spring from their chairs and tackle Dad, struggling to silence him however they can. And he fights back, nibbling at them, sputtering on them, and tonguing them until finally Misato frees up a sleeve to serve as a makeshift gag.

By the time it's over, all three of them are in giggling fits. Misato got absorbed into the morning's playfulness after all. It doesn't feel bad, but it also feels silly. Too silly. She's going to be thirteen in a couple of months. She's too old for this nonsense. Plus, now she has Dad drool all over her. Talk about gross.

And that voice in the back of her head keeps telling her that this is all fake, besides. This isn't the way her family is. This isn't a house where people laugh and have fun. The false reality will soon be peeled back and exposed for what it really is. Even if it takes weeks, maybe even months... everything will return to the status quo.

They all say *Gochisousama* together, and Misato excuses herself, taking an empty trash bag with her. Even more so than usual, she can't wait to get out of the house.

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Sayaka finishes stowing the leftovers into the refrigerator and goes to help Akira finish the dishes. Once again, he's kneeling on a chair to bring the all too low countertop a bit closer. She wishes there were a better way, short of the expensive kitchen renovations that never quite happened. The chair solution looks dreadfully uncomfortable. She's always felt bad for him. Although he rarely ever complains of pain, she's never been sure if that's because of self-imposed stoicism or not. "Are you okay doing that, Akira?"

He gives her a slightly baffled look. "Of course, Sayaka. Why do you ask?"

"I just... don't want you to hurt yourself."

"Pruned fingers won't kill me," he says with a smirk.

For apparently needed emphasis, Sayaka pats Akira's lumbar area. "Your back, dear. I'm talking about your back." Calling him something he hates is usually a good way to make him pay attention, she's found.

"Oh, you," Akira sputters. "Again with the 'dear'..." He thinks for a moment. "My back, eh? You're never going to stop fretting over that, are you?"

Sayaka starts drying and stacking dishes. "Well, if being tall in this country isn't killing your back, it must be getting to your knees, at least."

Akira shrugs. "Being tall is inconvenient, sure. I get backaches once in a while, sure. But it's nothing to fuss over." He glances down at the chair. "Although, if I plan on significantly upping my kitchen time, I probably should find something a bit more ergonomic to use."

"That's a wonderful idea," Sayaka says, working on the bowls. "There's enough left in this month's budget that I'm sure we could find something. Shop around tomorrow, maybe?"

"Hmm," Akira muses, delicately cleaning the reusable chopsticks one by one. There's something alarmingly sensual about it, and Sayaka can't help but stare. "Online, probably. I don't trust the stores around here to have taken my dimensions into consideration. Overseas shipping, but... necessary evil. I'll consult with you before I make any purchases, of course." He gives her a peripheral glance, then pivots his head. "That's okay, right?"

Sayaka jolts out of her daze. "Oh, yes, of course."

Akira, finished, lets the dirty water drain and helps towel off the remaining damp dishes. "Was I doing something wrong?" he asks. "You seemed... fixated."

Sayaka feels a slight flush come on. She tries to distract herself by putting the dishes back in their designated places. "No, it's..." The tactic isn't working very well, and she senses the lewdness creep over her, bit by bit. "You just have a way with your hands, is all..." As soon as she closes the cabinet, her task completed, Akira's arms wrap around her from behind and she faintly feels his breath on her nape.

"So do you," Akira whispers in his most sultry voice, planting a tender kiss onto her neck. His arms settle, crossing over her chest, and he pushes his face into her locks, inhaling

deeply. He's warm, so incredibly warm, his touch electric. Contagious.

They made love just this morning after waking up, and it was wonderful: a beautiful affirmation of what began last night. And all through the cooking and eating, her appetite for him quickly returned, if it ever diminished at all. These are the times that she lives for, when the man she fell in love with — or the nearest extant equivalent — returns to her out of the blue, and fills her with all the affection and affirmation that had gone missing for months, maybe even longer. Part of her feels a fool for always being so taken with him, every single time this happens, because in the end she's always left hurting and wanting more. But it would also be foolish to resist. Something so ephemeral must be enjoyed while it is present, for as long as it lasts.

Just a couple of words, a kiss, an embrace — so fiercely intoxicating. She lays her hands over his, finger upon corresponding finger, and soon they adjust to comfortably interlock digits. Akira plants another kiss, this one slow and luscious, behind her ear, which causes a little sigh of delight to escape Sayaka's lips. As his hands slide into her blouse, she feels the seeds of resistance sprout. “Akira...” Her voice is small and light. “Not here. Misato—”

His great height draped over her like a cloak, and slender, dexterous fingers slithering up her torso, he whispers back. “Don't worry. She's in the shower. We have time.”

Sayaka attempts to suppress her quickening respiration for just long enough to hear it. The characteristic sound of running water. The tub is already full, so Misato must be showering off prior to taking a soak herself. So, while Akira isn't wrong, “We don't need to take the risk.”

“Who cares if she catches us?” Akira says, disarmingly nonchalant. He kisses her again, this time on the cheekbone, giving her the slightest nudge with his tongue. His hands find their targets, as well, and with a few gentle, rhythmic motions, he has Sayaka melting in his arms. Her neck jerks backwards and she gasps, and Akira leans down further, covering her mouth with his.

Sayaka reaches up to grasp his face tenderly, and their eyes meet. His long, thick lashes sweep her right into the glimmering, deep brown pools beyond, where she has lost herself so many times before. The pupils are gaping open, vulnerable, inviting her within to glimpse his beautiful yet fragile soul. Even as she is overcome with pleasure and lets her lids fall, he becomes no less visible to her. People have a radiance, and, when she is this close to someone, she can sense it. The light from them both is beginning to mix and meld once more.

They kiss deep and long, and when they break apart they're gasping for air, chests heaving and pulses quickened. Sayaka immediately feels a void. She needs to connect again. But she needs more than a kiss, much more. Pushing herself back against him, she feels something solid and thick poke back — he's as excited as she is. Anticipation overflowing, she sends a yearning smile up at him. Akira returns the look, and it's a wholly reflexive, genuine smile, one that exposes his endearingly crooked teeth and makes his eyes nearly vanish in a jovial squint. She wishes he would furnish them more often; he never looks as handsome.

Suddenly, Sayaka is overtaken by the queasy feeling that they're being watched, and her head reflexively spins toward the back of the house. The instant she visually registers her daughter

standing on the verge between the family room and the back corridor, the girl's expressive brown eyes directed straight at her parents and brows furrowed deeply in disapproval, Sayaka practically rips herself from Akira's embrace. Staring down in shame, Sayaka wraps herself tightly in her own arms, as if doing so will conceal her own indecent behavior. Akira has turned away from her, as well, and taken a couple of steps away. The moment has been utterly shattered.

She knew this was a bad idea... But it's her fault as much as his. If she'd laid down the law, he would have backed off, but she didn't want him to stop. Not really. His sense of spontaneity, sexual or otherwise, has been sorely missed, and it's near impossible for Sayaka to stop drinking once she's had a taste. Even if it might lead to compromising situations.

Perhaps in an attempt to break the deadlock of awkwardness, Akira starts acting as if nothing is amiss. He simply wanders into the family room, takes a seat on the couch, and picks up a bookmarked journal to peruse. Misato — hair clearly wet, already dressed for the day in jeans and a hoodie, and holding a tied-off bag of garbage — sends a glare in her father's direction, but it seems to be deflected by his turned shoulder.

Sayaka tries to pull herself together as Misato approaches the kitchen, looking for something, anything, to look busy with. Since they already cleaned up from the morning meal, there's not much, and she finally settles for picking obsolete notes off the front of the refrigerator. It's a pitiful attempt at saving face and Sayaka knows she's fooling no one, Misato least of all, but at least it takes her mind off her own unscrupulous behavior, even if it's only by the slightest amount.

Misato drops her trash bag — surprisingly full and hefty — next to the main bin. “Clean-up's done, Mom. I'll take the garbage out when I leave.”

Sayaka finally brings herself to make eye contact with her daughter. While Misato spares her the ugly, knowing glare — those are almost exclusively reserved for Akira — she cannot keep *all* traces of disapproval from her face. Nothing more need be said on the matter than the quiet fury embedded deep in Misato's eyes, which unflinchingly speaks, “*You're* the adults here, so act like it.”

Discomfort squirms in the pit of Sayaka's stomach. She wants to apologize, but that won't really help. All there is to do is keep moving until the tension dissipates, and make sure this never happens again. “That's wonderful. So you have about...” She glances at the wall clock with the birds and flowers frame Takkun had carved for her, so long ago. “...an hour before you need to leave to do the schoolwork you mentioned.”

“Yep,” Misato affirms. “You and Dad will be gone by then, right?” It's hard not to interpret the question as a hope rather than something more innocuous.

“Most likely. By the way,” — Sayaka takes a moment to smooth out her skirt — “do you have any idea when you'll be home? We'll be making dinner and it would be nice to have you there.”

Misato's eyes roll around a bit as she contemplates this. “Hmmm... I'll try to be home by 6:00, I guess. I'll give the house a call if I'm delayed for some reason.”

“Alright,” Sayaka says. “I’ll hope it doesn’t come to that.” Her eyes grow slightly somber and she lowers her voice. “I know you don’t like being around him, Misato. I really do.”

Her daughter purses her lips and turns away, giving off a bit of impetuosity. Ever as stubborn as her father...

Sayaka gently directs Misato’s face back and attempts to dissolve the girl’s surly expression with a smile. “But it would mean the world to me for you to keep joining us. However long this lasts.”

Misato paws Sayaka’s hand away. “Okay, Mom, okay. Don’t worry.” She forces herself to smile back. “I’ll be there.”

Sayaka doesn’t force her to promise; that might be asking too much. For now, this is enough. She hugs Misato and pats her on the back. “You go hit the books. We’ll let you know when we leave.”

“I can’t guarantee I’ll hear you,” Misato says, smirking.

She gives her daughter a playful shove. “Well, then, don’t put the volume on so high *until* we’re gone. You should be taking better care of your ears anyway.”

“...Seriously, Mom?” It’s that borderline condescending tone of voice that people Misato’s age can’t seem to help but lapse into now and then. She means no harm by it, of course, and it’s actually kind of cute, in its way. Sayaka knows that Misato is comfortable enough with her to drop the veneer of absolute politeness here and there. With Akira, it’s very different: strained deference all the way. Though if it’s a choice between that and how Misato probably *wishes* she could talk to him, forced manners are surely the less destructive option...

“Think about it, anyway,” Sayaka says, waving Misato off.

Misato gives a little wave in return and drifts back in the direction of her room, making sure to quietly glare at her father again as she passes him by. If he notices, he gives no indication of it whatsoever.

Sayaka wanders over to him and lets herself hang over the back of the love seat. “You did good back there, Akira. A much more elegant recovery than mine.”

He replaces the bookmark, closes up the journal, and returns it to one of the stacks on the table. Then he simply sits there for a moment. Leaving his back turned to her, he finally says, “I’m really sorry, Sayaka. I... I don’t know what I was thinking.”

She tenderly strokes his hair, prompting him to hesitantly look her way. “It’s not your fault, Akira,” she says, keeping her tone as bright as possible. “I was quite into it, myself.” As scraggly as Akira’s hair looks, it’s actually quite soft, almost feathery. Sayaka misses the days when he kept it long and unruly — a visual and tactile delight — but those ended of necessity due to his rising position within the YTD faculty. The university placed increasing pressure on him to pursue more traditional grooming options, and, while Akira obviously didn’t agree

with it, he had more important battles to fight at the time. Even like this, though, she understands there is considerable tension between him and his supervisor.

“I suppose it's too late to try resuming things behind closed doors.” He sighs. “Perhaps it's for the best. I don't want to wear you out.”

“What a thing to say!” Sayaka scolds playfully, ruffling his hair up. “You know I'm perfectly capable of letting you know if I need a break, no guesswork required.” Effortlessly switching off the vaguely maternal tone, she continues, “But, yes, it's not a wholly bad thing. The sooner we get out, the sooner we can return to a potentially empty house.” She leans in and kisses him on the temple.

“I like the sound of that.” Akira rises to his feet, towering over Sayaka once more. “So, what's first? Shrine visit, right?”

“Yes,” Sayaka says with a slight nod of her head. “And you're *absolutely* sure you want to go, Akira? The last thing I want to do is bore you...”

“Silly question.” He grins. “Of course I'm sure.”

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It's a queer feeling, walking in public alongside her lanky, towering husband. So much time has passed since the last time they did this, they've once again become an unusual sight, one that elicits curious looks from people. Sayaka and Akira's muscle memories have faded, as well, and they have to remember the hard way how to keep step with each other. But the shrine isn't far, so there's no rush. It's a simple thing to take it nice, slow, and casual.

The walk is mostly quiet. It's nice, just being there with him, and he's been so emotionally present today that the current silence isn't remotely uncomfortable. She feels no anxiety over whatever he might be withholding, no pressure to fill the void with empty words. This is how it should always be.

Here and there, he shows her that she is on *his* mind, as well, by brushing his hand against hers or stroking one of her fingers. Each time, Sayaka acknowledges him, covertly poking or squeezing back. But as a simple matter of public decorum, she can't bring herself to take his hand outright. Not when they're so exposed; it would be unbecoming. And she's felt quite inappropriately exposed enough for one day. She'll make it up to him, later.

Their destination, Yoshida Jinja, is very close to the Kyoto University campus — rather conveniently placed for the students and faculty. Akira clearly wouldn't be among those taking advantage of its proximity, however. The sight of a torii means little to him, even *less* than to the average person for whom Shinto practices are typically seen as quaint and not taken particularly seriously. As Sayaka first discovered not long after she started dating “Katsuragi-kun”, Akira's early childhood years were either incredibly sheltered or spent



overseas, with the result that he has little to no intuitive grasp of Japan's native spirituality. To this day, spiritual custom — of this kind, or of any other for that matter — remains “a thing that *other* people do”.

It was quite the unique situation for Sayaka. She grew up in Tamba — a quick jaunt west of Kyoto within Hyogo Prefecture —, with its veritable cornucopia of shrines, and raised by very traditional parents who impressed upon her the importance of custom and ritual. Even despite the best efforts of Sayaka's older sister Yura, a socially progressive rebel, to trump Mom and Dad's influence, Sayaka matured into a deeply spiritual person. For her, life is simply incomplete without a little extra something to tie the daily grind together into a more meaningful tapestry. It is only through existential awe and submission that she can ever find her peace of mind.

Because shrine ritual was so integral to the identity of Sayaka Katori — she wouldn't become Katsuragi for a few years yet! —, Akira naturally took an interest and made it a point to tag along with her and learn. His curiosity was largely detached and scholarly... or, at least, that was the impression he was *trying* to give off. Sayaka wasn't fully convinced. There was a nuance in his manner that implied there was more going on than some cold, empirical drive for knowledge.

They continue walking, and the red-orange gate of the shrine soon comes into view. In the corner of her left eye, Sayaka sees Akira button up his polo, concealing his Greek cross. She expected as much, as he showed the same impulsive urge to conceal it every other time she took him to a shrine, all those years ago. Truth to tell, the iconography of the cross has no spiritual clout in Japan; the scant minority of the population who do take it seriously are no match for, say, trends in fashion that popularize the “exotic”. No one thinks twice about someone walking through a torii wearing a cross or a crucifix. Sayaka had thus initially assumed that Akira wore one simply for aesthetic purposes, but, the first time she saw him hesitate and hide it, she knew he had inadvertently revealed a sensitive personal truth. The necklace actually meant something to him.

When the moment had seemed opportune, Sayaka gently prodded him about it. His immediate response, blurted out in a somewhat self-defensive tone of voice, was to insist, “No, I'm not Christian; it's just a family heirloom”. Very curious. With gradual probing and encouragement that took place over the next week or so, Sayaka finally discovered the interesting truth: Akira was born in Sapporo to an Orthodox Christian family. Both paternal and maternal sides belonged to the community of practitioners clustered up in Hokkaido, and he was raised with the intent of continuing this tradition of belief. However, for reasons he's never fully divulged, his parents' efforts utterly failed, leaving with a deep-seated contempt for Christianity that he made little attempt to disguise. Naturally, this provoked Sayaka to ask him, “If that's so, why do you choose to wear a cross?”

In response, Akira told her, “It's a fair question. I see nothing of myself anywhere in my family. I don't relate to them; I don't understand them; I don't even look all that much like them. That is, with the exception of a single person, who, in a cruel irony, died long before I could ever meet her.”

“Is this the one who originally owned that cross?” Sayaka asked.

Akira started absentmindedly fiddling with the pendant, a habit he's of course maintained to this day. "Yes. Her name was Kaworu Igara. My mother's aunt. She died of an unknown illness when she was only nineteen."

"Oh... That's terrible." Sayaka hadn't known how else to respond.

"Everyone loved her, so I heard a lot of stories, growing up. My grandparents told me that she was a prodigy, a genius, maybe even a polymath. Anything she attempted, she excelled at. I thought that perhaps they were embellishing a bit — you know, some misguided attempt to respect the memory of the deceased. But when I got old enough, they let me look at the huge collection of illustrated journals she'd left behind, and..." He started tearing up a little at that point. "I'm not sure their stories even did Aunt Kaworu justice. There was nothing there but brilliance. I couldn't stop crying, knowing that such a gentle and inquisitive mind had been taken from the world before she'd had a chance to truly make a mark." Akira seemed as though he wanted to weep for her once more, but he restrained himself. Back in those days, he didn't lose himself to tears so easily.

Akira went on to explain that Igara-san was, like him, a person whose temple was the natural world; she worshiped the universe and all its mysteries. "When I read her prose and poetry, and saw her sketches and paintings," he told Sayaka, "I knew that I wasn't so alone after all. Perhaps she didn't have any formal training, but the skills and the aptitudes were all there. There *was* scientist's blood in the family. I might not be her direct descendent, but I feel like I'm her... spiritual legacy. That's the only way I can describe it."

Sayaka eventually saw those journals for herself, and the ample self-portraits Igara-san produced made her honestly wonder how Akira could be anything *but* the woman's grandson. The resemblance is so uncanny that they'd probably be facially indistinguishable if they were both aged down to 10 or younger. Small wonder he felt such a strong affinity to her.

Even so, "spiritual legacy" seemed to Sayaka like a somewhat confused description of Akira's perceived relationship with his great-aunt, being as Igara-san had been a Christian, at least nominally. For her, that cross had most certainly been a display of faith. Considering Akira's attitude toward his family and their monotheism, why would he give Igara-san a pardon? Sayaka was left to puzzle this apparent conflict out herself, with only the old journals as her guide. And it quickly became apparent that the way the woman wrote about her belief was so beautiful and profound that it transcended boundaries. Her spirituality was unbound by dogma and bereft of alienating, judgmental doctrine. Sayaka found it incredibly moving, and perhaps something in Akira had been stirred, as well.

Sayaka has tried many times to ask Akira about his relationship with the spiritual — if, despite his antipathy toward *certain* ideologies, he actually does feel something, *anything*, within his heart. To the last, he's played himself up as a straight-laced man of science, avoiding the actual content of her inquiries in lieu of digressions on meme theory, advancements within metaphysical biology, or whatever else. "The gods are within ourselves," he once told her. "That's all there is." Superficially, this comment came across as demeaning and insensitive — Akira has full knowledge of Sayaka's own proclivities, after all — but, as far as she was concerned, he sounded as though he was trying to convince *himself* with those words more than anyone else.

What if the simple fact is that Akira doesn't know? He doesn't know *what* he feels, but he wishes he did? In lieu of a solid, unambiguous answer, it might be easier for him to pretend that he's empty inside — as unlike his family as unlike can be. Perhaps, in truth, Igara-san's cross hangs there as more than a mere emblem of kinship: rather, it's a reminder of where Akira came from, and where he would, in his heart of hearts, like to eventually find himself.

...All mere whimsy on Sayaka's part, as she doubts she'll ever know for certain. Some things about Akira are doomed to remain mysteries.

“You don't need to hide it, you know,” Sayaka reminds him. “The gods won't judge you for keeping her memory close.”

He grimaces ever so slightly. “I know, but... it just makes me feel better.”

“Some things never change,” she titters. “It's kind of reassuring, in a way.”

“I suppose so.” His neck tilts back as he regards the gateway that towers over even him. “I'm just trying to remember what I do now... This shouldn't be so hard, I know.”

Sayaka laughs again. “Okay, first you bow. Come on, you forgot *that*?”

Akira scratches the back of his head. “Well, there are many ways to bow, you know...”

“Don't worry so much, Akira. Come on, bow with me.” And they do. “You remember where on the sando we can't walk, right?”

“It's... the very middle, I think?”

“See, it's coming back to you.” She smiles. “We'll take the left side of the path, which means left foot first, okay?”

He nods, and, together, they proceed to a place that still belongs to the gods.

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The brilliant reds and oranges of the shrine grounds' trees are a perfect complement to the orange-red paint coating the scattered torii along with many of the shrines' structures. Autumn truly is a wonderful time to visit sacred places. Sayaka intends on making many other such trips before the leaves have all fallen, and it would be lovely if she doesn't have to make them alone.

“It's beautiful here, isn't it?” she remarks.

Akira hums in agreement. “Definitely has a calming effect. I wish I realized this was here all this time. Especially during the summer months.”

Sayaka leads the way to their first destination, the purification pavilion. “Why summer specifically?”

“The cooling effect of foliage.” He indicates the semi-canopy formed by the branches aloft. Rather blunt and... scientific of him, but of course he's not wrong. Sayaka's noticed that even the garden she maintains in their tiny yard makes a difference during the grueling hot months. She never gave it much conscious thought, but maybe that's part of the reason she hasn't given up on it.

“Yes, of course,” Sayaka agrees. “Well, you know you're welcome here, whenever you wish to come.”

“I'll certainly keep it in mind.”

They approach the chozuya, and Akira once again gets that tentative and nervous look to him. Sayaka ushers him toward the basin beneath the pavilion, where dozens of ladles await.

“Remember,” Sayaka instructs, “before we can proceed, we must purify ourselves. I know you won't like this, but” — she extends her right hand to grasp the wooden handle of the hishaku, and turns the end into the basin to fill it with water retrieve — “you have to start with your right, and use that to wash your left.”

Akira motions to begin, but he's clearly preoccupied: looking all around, probably checking for the presence of other, better-versed visitors who might give him a scrutinizing glare or two. Fortunately the shrine isn't incredibly busy right now, but it isn't empty, either. Oh, her husband can be all too self-conscious at times... and all that worrying makes him absentminded and inattentive. Despite Sayaka's instruction, he follows his instinct and goes for the hishaku with his dominant hand.

“Right hand, Akira,” Sayaka gently reminds him.

“Sorry, sorry.” And he corrects this.

Sayaka guides him the rest of the way through the purification process. His memory is indeed quite dusty, but she supposes it can't be helped. As she anticipated, Akira shows hesitation when it comes to cleansing his mouth.

“You want me to—?” he blurts. “Is this really the only way?”

“You're worried the chozubachi isn't sanitary?” Sayaka asks. “I've never had any problems. You're not expected to swallow, you know. Just do it like so.” She transfers water from the ladle into a cupped palm, drinks, gargles, and finally spits it out over the side of the basin. Judging from Akira's reaction, he doesn't like this idea one bit. ...How *did* they resolve this last time? It really has been too long. She makes an assumption for the sake of expedience. “You've done this before, haven't you?”

His face twists in apprehension, like a sullen child who doesn't want to do something. Sayaka can't help but laugh at how silly he looks. “What? What's so funny?” he protests.

Sayaka tries to keep her bearings, but his tone of voice only adds to the effect. "It's just that face you're making... It's too much!" Despite her best efforts, her laughs only get more uncontrolled.

Akira can't help but crack a grin. "Well, isn't this unseemly?"

Sayaka catches her breath. "A bit, a bit. Okay." She straightens up, throws her braid over her shoulder, and tries to reclaim her sense of decorum. "Let's see you wash your mouth. Even if you *do* get sick, how bad could it be? You know I'll take care of you." That came out a bit more flirtatious than she'd intended...

...and he notices. Clapping a hand to his chin and cocking his head at her, he smoothly replies, "Is that so? Should I feel disappointed if I *don't* get sick, then?"

If they were anywhere else, she would have dashed him with water right then and there. But she restrains herself, barely. "Oh, you. Just hurry up, will you?"

"Fine, fine." He finally rinses, gargles, and spits. Sayaka then shows him how to purify the handle of the hishaku, and they restore their ladles to their original places and proceed further in.

They pass beneath another torii and reach a large open area straddled by various structures large and small along with stone stairways leading up the forested slopes to various minor enshrinements. A number of people are clustered around the kiosk, purchasing charms, fortunes, and plaques. Akira looks over at the activity curiously, but Sayaka assures him, "We'll worry about all that on the way out. There's still a way to go yet before we get to the Daigengu."

"Daigengu?" he repeats.

"It's a bit of a super-shrine, you could say."

"Is that the proper nomenclature?" he teases.

"I don't think the proper term would mean much to you," Sayaka ribs back. She grabs one of his arms and starts pulling him along, toward a continuation of the main path that goes uphill to places unseen.

"True, that," Akira concedes, walking in step with her. Once his arm has been freed, he makes a fresh attempt for Sayaka's hand. This time, she lets him have it, for a brief time. There aren't so many prying eyes here right now.

They pass the small shrine to Yamakage on the path's right side. Further up, on the left, is their destination, the Daigengu Saijoshō, an octagonal building topped by a thatched roof. Normally, it's closed save for special occasions, but, in these final few months before the turn of the new millennium, worshipers are being afforded many additional opportunities to ask the myriad gods enshrined here for their favor. When they reach the wooden coin box, Sayaka gestures Akira to stop.

He blinks at the box. “Ah, I think I remember this part.” Hands go into pockets and start rummaging. “Not sure I have any change in the appropriate amounts, though.”

Sayaka chortles a little — he's too cute. “Not to worry. I came prepared.” She reaches into one of the side pockets of her small shoulder bag and produces two 50 yen pieces. With a nod, Akira receives them and deposits them into the box. They proceed toward the Daigengu, where the small line means they must quietly wait their turn.

Akira as usual can't escape a couple of curious and surprised looks, but he provides no reciprocal eye contact, nor any visible reaction at all; he just stands there, unmoved, his farther hand casually pocketed. After the crowd has shrunk down to just the two of them and those currently praying, he asks, “So, why are we visiting this one in particular?”

“The Daigengu Saijoshō is interesting. It was constructed to enshrine every god mentioned in the *Engishiki*.” Sayaka notes that he looks confused already. “There's no way you don't know what the *Engishiki* is!”

Akira shifts his weight a little and cracks a grin. “Okay, I admit it. I *did* pay attention in class.”

“So why the baffled look?” she asks.

“It's just... from what I recall, that's a lot of kami, isn't it? On the order of thousands, right?”

“3,132, to be precise,” Sayaka says.

Akira scratches his chin. “Isn't having all of them in one place like this sort of like cheating?”

“Well, I suppose that's one way to look at it,” Sayaka says. “It's said that one can be conferred all their blessings simply by praying here, instead of taking a pilgrimage across Japan. But that seems to require so little work on my part, I'm not sure I really accept it. So... I'm only going to pray to a select few.”

He nods. “Makes sense to me.”

Sayaka gives him a gentle smile. “You're prepared to join me, right? Don't be afraid of doing it wrong. Even if you can't think of any particular kami to call to, simply open your pure heart to them and make your wishes known.”

Akira is looking visibly more nervous, but he nods again.

“*Do* you remember how to pray?” Sayaka asks. “I'll be preoccupied, so I won't be able to walk you through it when we get up there...”

He thinks for a moment, then attempts to perform the ritual from memory. Two complete bows of the head — good. He then claps twice — good, but his form is off. Sayaka adjusts his hands so the left is a bit higher. “Left side is kami, right side is you, so keep your left hand higher. Bring your palms further apart when you clap, too.” Akira tentatively widens the gap until Sayaka approves. “There, that does it. You clap twice like that, and then” — she places her palms together the usual way — “you offer your prayer.”

Akira tries again according to her instruction, without issue this time. “And then I let my arms drop and I bow again, correct?”

“Perfect!” Sayaka says. “But as I said, don't worry about getting it 100%. You're out of practice, after all.”

Akira starts straightening out his windbreaker and patting his pants off, as if such minutiae make any difference to the gods. “I'll do my best.”

The couple ahead of them finishes and departs, giving Sayaka and Akira a curious look as they go. Doubtless they're wondering how a man Akira's age can be not only so tall, but so clueless. No matter. Together they approach the Daigengu and stand on the appointed platform. Not remotely in synchronization, they bow and clap, then begin their prayers.

Sayaka briefly lets herself forget that she has company, as all her attention and energy is, for this moment, channeled toward the spirit realm. She calls to the great mother Amaterasu Ōmikami and to the Lucky Gods Hotei, Jurojin, Fukurokuju, and Benten-sama for their blessings. Now, more than ever, she needs good fortune to shine upon her and her family. Whether Akira accepts the UN's offer or not... Depending on the choice Akira makes, possibly even *regardless* of his choice, Sayaka has little doubt that new hardships will soon be upon them. All of them. His mood, and hers, may be brightened right now, but day always yields to night. Whatever happens, whenever it happens, she needs the power to shelter it and come through intact. She needs Akira to not lose sight of who he is and what's most important. She needs Misato to show as much tolerance and forgiveness as she can, for without her cooperation... Akira can never hope to repent.

*Please... Give all of us the strength we require , to do what must be done and to survive whatever ordeals await us.*

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On the way back to the entrance, Sayaka's curiosity overwhelms her. “Did you end up asking the gods for anything, Akira?”

He offers a wry smile. “Perhaps. But that's between me and them.”

She laughs. “I can respect that.” Certainly, she has no intention of making public what *she* wished for.

Before they leave, she insists on stopping by the kiosk to draw lots. Akira can't help but roll his eyes a bit. “*Fortune-telling*, Sayaka? It's just a game of numbers, you know...”

“Oh, don't be such a stick in the mud,” Sayaka reproves. “Be a little adventurous. Have a little fun, won't you?”

“Are you implying that I'm *not* those things?” he asks, nearly pouting. Sayaka, yet again, can't take the expression seriously. Perhaps Misato can still pull off that face, but her father, not so much, and Sayaka succumbs once more to barely constrained guffawing. Fortunately, Akira finds the humor in it and breaks out his adorable toothy grin.

After they've received their omikuji, they step away to a convenient spot to unroll the slips and see what awaits them. Sayaka looks at her overall fortune first, which says, “Uncertain, but a little luck” — one step away from crossing into outright misfortune. A tad discomfoting, and she frowns in spite of herself. Glancing over the various subcategories, most don't feel especially relevant to her right now, if at all. For instance, *Now is a good time to start renovating your home*. It's a nice thought, but with their ever-looming financial issues, wouldn't it be needless, indulgent risk? Then again, all it says is “*start*”, so...

Current preoccupations cause her eyes to gravitate to “Love”, which tells her, *Love will continue to flow your way, as long as you receive it with an open heart*. Far more encouraging than she anticipated. However, “The One You Wait For” bothers her far more than something on a silly, randomly drawn roll of paper ought to: *Will never come*, is all it says.

The ambiguity is irksome, since it could mean almost anything. The first person who comes to mind is Yura, as Sayaka's been waiting a couple of weeks now for her to call. Getting worried over that feels foolhardy, though; Yura's just been overbooked from expanding her company, nothing more. Another possibility is Akira, in a more metaphoric sense, as it's certainly true that her life with him involves a good deal of waiting for things that might never come. But Sayaka struggles to make this interpretation fit their current circumstances. There *is* a fair chance that the person in question could be neither Yura nor Akira — but, if so, then who could it possibly be?

“Sayaka?” Akira asks. “Are you okay?”

She quickly rolls the slip up. “I'm probably taking it too seriously...”

“Not so good?” he asks.

Sayaka sighs. “Ambiguous. You know how these things are.”

He smiles. “Naturally. Keeping them ambiguous means they're more likely to turn out 'correct'.”

“Of course,” she agrees, just for argument's sake. Sayaka goes to the nearby rack and adds her omikuji to the countless others tied there. Looking at Akira, she clarifies, “Here, the bad luck can slowly be turned to good. Well... I can only hope.”

He simply nods.

Sayaka starts to lead the way out. “So, what did you get? Something better than me, I hope?” She gives him a careful look-over, but the slip is nowhere to be seen.



Akira pats the side of his windbreaker, indicating he already stowed the omikuji away. "Can't complain. To be honest, though, I only looked at the luck rating."

"Oh?"

"Yeah." He shrugs. "Figure I'll check out the rest in a month or so and see how accurate the thing actually is."

She chuckles. That's such an Akira kind of thing to do...

He slips his hands into the pockets of his jacket. "So after this it's just some food shopping, right?"

"Just for the couple of things I forgot yesterday," Sayaka says. "Unless there's something you're interested in making yourself."

"Hmm," he considers. "We'll see."

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On the way to the store, they both realize that they're actually a bit hungry. Shopping on an empty stomach is always a mistake, so Akira suggests a burger place. That kind of indulgence is unusual for him, but Sayaka hardly sees it as a bad thing and happily obliges. It's nice to see Akira act as famished as he looks: he orders two deluxe burgers as if it's the most natural thing in the world. Sayaka goes for something small and simple.

While a cool enough day to necessitate wearing jackets, as the shrine visit demonstrated it's lovely outside and they opt to eat on a bench beneath a tree, on the outskirts of a small park. Sayaka wonders if the temperature will hold up long enough to have dinner while admiring the autumn blooms in the yard. She neatly unwraps her own sandwich and takes a first tiny nibble. Meantime, Akira is assaulting his: huge bites, barely chewed before he takes another.

"Remember, Akira," she says. "Pace yourself."

There's nothing left of the first burger by the time he acknowledges her. "I just feel so hungry. Like I could eat five of these things!" In haste, he starts unwrapping the next one... then abruptly stops. His gaze is somewhat distant, and not a little fixated.

Sayaka looks out into the crowd and she soon sees what must be the target of Akira's attentions: a young family. The parents have a fresh and energetic look to them and must be early 30s at the latest. There's a young daughter, no more than four, and an Akita puppy as well. They huddle on the edge of the walkway, sharing drinks from a water bottle attached to a lanyard. The little girl tries to grab for the leash, but her father playfully rebukes her. He crouches down and pats her head, then the slightly jealous dog's, while telling her something. A moment later, he rises, and they all proceed into the park and quickly vanish from sight.

Akira, without breaking his now-vacant stare, prompts, “That was us, once.” His eyes narrow slightly. “Kimiko would probably still be alive if it weren't for...” He doesn't finish, instead taking a more reasonable bite of his second burger.

Sayaka wonders if she should dare instigate. Things have been going so well today, the last thing she wants is for Akira to be twisting himself in knots over something from a decade ago. Then again, he might actually want to talk about it, and denying him that opportunity while he's so emotionally open... Providing encouragement right here, in public, is a terrible idea, but she worries that if she doesn't ask him now, she'll never know. In her experience, nothing is certain within the first few days of an Akira mood shift...

She swallows her apprehensions and forces the question out. “...If it weren't for Misato?”

Akira gently shakes his head. “No. The car.” He takes another bite and chews it slowly and thoughtfully. “I can't blame Misato. She didn't know any better.”

Sayaka isn't sure what to say, so all she provides is an understanding nod. Did she actually expect him to blame Misato, or did she only say that for rhetorical purposes? It slightly troubles her that she doesn't actually know.

She's a bit surprised to hear Akira bring up the dog. He hasn't mentioned her in... Sayaka honestly can't remember the last time. There's so much pain associated with that one meek creature. Not just Akira's, either.

When Misato was still very young, only two or so, Akira found a half-starved Akita puppy on his walk home from the campus. After allowing a vet's ministrations, Akira nursed the puppy back to health himself, eventually naming her “Kimiko” after a dear childhood friend. He told Sayaka that he'd actually always wanted a dog, but life had never granted him that luxury. Sayaka was perhaps a little iffy on dogs — more of a bird person herself — but it was hard for her to say no.

As a father, Akira had been a little shy and inhibited before Kimiko entered his life — but, somehow, that dog changed everything. Misato naturally showed an interest in the puppy and what was required to win her trust, maintain her, and so on, providing Akira a perfect way to have meaningful one-on-one interactions with his daughter. Sayaka watched in delight as Akira involved Misato: letting her accompany him on dog walks and help with feeding, training, grooming, and so on. Kimiko came to love Misato nearly as much as she did her master. And Akira came to understand Misato much better, and feel much greater confidence in his abilities as a parent.

One day, Misato — at three-something, still so very young — attempted to emulate Akira and walk Kimiko on her own, only to lose control of the leash. Sayaka, at work when she received word of what had happened, quickly found someone to cover for her and rushed home. As she consoled the distraught Misato, Akira swept the neighborhood as best he could before nightfall. He turned up empty. The next day, they received a call: someone had discovered poor little Kimiko on the side of the road.

Akira was heartbroken. He was already under considerable stress at the time: Dr. Amagiri had recently retired and moved to Australia, leaving the department in a state of flux and

Akira without his beloved mentor; and Haru was all but unavailable, dealing with the dangerous complications of Risa's second pregnancy. The ability to bond with Misato through Kimiko had been one of the few things keeping Akira tethered. Once that was gone, Sayaka helplessly watched him drift further and further into deepest despair, until the loving, devoted husband and father she'd known was all but gone.

He was too wrapped up in his own dark shroud of pain to be able to feel or care about anyone else's. Akira could no longer love, nor even respond to love. And as he missed day after day of work, Sayaka feared for what might happen if he never shook out of it. At Yura's behest, Sayaka sought out part-time work: "Get your foot in that door *now*, girl, before it's too late." When she was home, it was outright painful to watch Misato attempt to reach her father again and again, only to meet an unresponsive wall of sadness. When Akira cried — frequently, and at length — the poor girl assumed it was all because of what happened to Kimiko, and Misato kept trying to make it up to him. She'd been a "bad girl" and "hurt Daddy", so if only she became good, she could make everything better.

Only... things didn't get better. Not really.

One day, with stunning abruptness, it seemed as though Akira had been completely freed of everything burdening him. In his own words, he felt light as a feather and radiant as a star. The man was talkative and outgoing again, pulsing with so much vital energy it was hard to believe he'd so recently been withdrawn and desolate. Akira returned to work, intent on compensating for his absence with all due diligence and industriousness. His appetite for love-making also returned — with a vengeance, one might say.

While all that was encouraging in its way, quickly it became apparent that Akira had not actually returned to himself. He had once been dedicated to balancing his time between work and family, but such concerns seemed to have evaporated. Akira became guided by whimsy rather than responsibility, staying at work to all hours, apparently doing nothing but documenting the myriad ideas pouring into his head. "I can't stop," he claimed. "If I do, something incredible might be lost forever." Keeping that channel between his brain and otherworldly inspiration open was all he could think about. During the rare moments Akira was home, Sayaka would try to interest him in the world outside his head, but he was wholly oblivious to the lives of his wife and daughter. Unless he had an immediate use for them — people to listen, people to feed him, people to love him — it was as if she and Misato didn't exist at all.

Before these events commenced, Sayaka would never have considered herself one predisposed to melancholy. However, being a powerless spectator to not only Akira's perverse transformation, but to the toll taken on young, innocent Misato, so abruptly deprived of the gentle father she'd loved... Sayaka found herself following Akira's lead and surrendering to tears again and again. Misato assumed that this, too, was somehow her fault, and nothing Sayaka said could make her daughter understand. A once joyful and energetic girl, Misato quickly became solemn, aged beyond her years, and completely devoted to being a well-behaved, helpful child.

As time passed, the nature of Akira's affliction revealed itself with greater and greater clarity. His inner harmony had been hopelessly disturbed, cleaving him in two, into his respective yin

and yang: the hopelessly crippled melancholic and the charismatic but self-absorbed workaholic. Rather than reconcile, they continued to fight bitterly for control of Akira's body, leaving nothing but ruin in their wake. Of his original self — the level-headed, good-humored, gentle and generous man Sayaka had fallen in love with — there was seemingly nothing left.

Misato was a perceptive girl. As it became evident that her father was completely unreliable and could not provide what she needed, she slowly but surely adjusted her expectations. Her sad, desperate desire for paternal love and recognition eventually faded to resigned hopelessness... and even that, in time, was replaced by aloof rage. Sayaka may not share Misato's sentiments exactly, but she certainly understands them. She's never tried to tell Misato that her feelings are wrong, because they're not. From Misato's perspective, she was cruelly deprived of the father she was promised. Whatever Akira's reasons were, however out of his control the situation may have been... no one can shoulder the burden of that failure but him.

Akira crumbles up the wrapping of his second burger and deposits it into the paper take-out bag. "I wonder... Does Misato still feel guilty about that?"

Sayaka considers. "I'm not sure she remembers it at all, to be honest."

His head hangs for a moment. "I see," he says. From the look on his face, there is a tumult of troubling thoughts bubbling beneath the surface, but he seems to be suppressing them for now. Sayaka longs to know what they are, but she already feels as though she's tempted fate enough on this bench. As much as she likes to worry, it actually *is* quite unlikely that Akira will regress to a withdrawn state in a matter of mere hours. Once they do their shopping and get home, they can discuss everything that's on their minds without issue. If he doesn't bring it up himself, Sayaka will be sure to ask, though she doubts she'll need to.

Akira collects their garbage and disposes it into the nearest trash receptacle, and they try to leave the gloom of that moment behind.

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At the grocery, Sayaka quickly finds what she needs: tamari, a cucumber, and a kilogram of beef. Aside from a bottle of ginjo sake, Akira contributes nothing to the basket. "You already planned tonight's meal out," he says. "No need for me to mess things up. I'm fine just helping."

Sayaka feels slightly disappointed. When she made the suggestion to him earlier, about him contributing his own ideas to dinner, she'd actually hoped for him to show some more of his old gung-ho kitchen spirit and mix things up. Perhaps she just needs to ease him back into it, though. "I haven't made any plans for tomorrow. That's something we could do together, later on today."

Sending a gentle smile her way, he replies, "I like that idea. Count me in."

Akira carries the groceries of his own volition and without complaint. Conversation during the remaining walk home is light and casual, nothing terribly deep. The atmosphere seems to have lifted for the time being. Sayaka feels the energy they had this morning return, and it fills her with a reassuring warmth. It's surreal to think about it, but this very day she woke up to a man who, somehow, felt like *her* — the singular and true — Akira. She has hazy memories of what might have been Akira's previous flirtations with mental unification, but none were so overt nor saw him so keenly interested in sharing himself. This morning, she was truly taken back to their twenties. Making love, standing by his side and cooking, holding his hand at breakfast, and all the flirting! It was enough to make her very nearly believe that everything had gone back to the way it ought to be.

Is she being rewarded in some way, for all her suffering and fortitude? Even after everything that's happened in their lives, all the terrible forces that have attempted to tear their love to shreds and keep them at odds, she and Akira are still together. There are still wounds, some of them formidably deep, and there are current complications like Misato's antipathy toward her father and that job offer that could potentially lead to even greater ruin... But, for now, they are still together. If, somehow, Akira were to remain like this, perhaps she'd never have to cry again. Perhaps they could even remain husband and wife until the end of their days.

She wants it to be true. Sayaka never again wants to be in a position where she must seriously contemplate leaving him. They've had some very close calls, but the most hellish situations always seemed to subside into more manageable ones before Sayaka's hand could be forced. If Akira's affliction maintained the intensity it possessed during its first five years, surely they would be separated by now. But, relatively speaking, he *did* mellow out — as though his two halves had exhausted themselves from all the fighting. Although there was still no reconciliation, at least the respective volumes on his gloom and obsession were cranked down enough for him to function. Sayaka doesn't *prefer* to live like that, but, unlike what had fomented before, she *could*.

Even if he is to never truly recover, so long as the hardship of those first five years never returns, she *can* continue to stay with him. And, as far as she's concerned, she *will*. In Sayaka's heart, there's no question about it: leaving him feels so much more terrible an option than staying. Try as she might, she can't imagine a world without Akira. Yura would gently imply that Sayaka is weak and needs to find herself, and maybe she's right, but... it is what it is.

That job offer... What will Yura think of it? Sayaka longs for the clarity her older sister effortlessly brings — but she also fears it. Unlike their parents, Yura has always liked Akira, but she also puts the well-being of kin first. Surely, Yura will take one look at the UN's proposal and see nothing but the icing on the home-wrecking cake. Sayaka feels tempted to call her sister up as soon as they get home: make sure Yura is okay, maybe even get that gut-wrenching conversation about the job out of the way... But, no, she doesn't want to be a fuss. If Sayaka doesn't hear back by tomorrow night, then maybe she'll succumb to the urge.

Between herself and Akira, almost nothing has been spoken about the job offer since last night. She attempted to broach the subject this morning, but he established that — as always

— he needed to discuss the matter with Haru before he could solidify his own thoughts. And with Haru being away for the weekend, Sayaka simply has to let the matter rest at least until Monday evening. There's no use thinking about it until then.

Even admitting that, it haunts her like a looming specter. As she mentally conceded at the shrine earlier, there is no way that this can end without hardship. If Akira accepts the offer, the uneasy equilibrium that has let their marriage survive this long will be broken. She'll be forced to either let him go to pursue his professional destiny in a far-away land, or uproot both herself and Misato in order to follow Akira wherever he goes. This corner of Kyoto is the only home Misato has ever known, and even Sayaka has not wandered terribly far from Tamba. Akira, on the other hand, is quite accommodated to a life on the move, as just his first eighteen years took him from Sapporo to Düsseldorf to Nagoya to Kyoto. Had he gotten through university without committing himself to someone, Sayaka has little doubt he would have left the country long ago. She and Misato are the only things truly tying him here.

The choice that's right for him is obvious, but unfortunately it's the wrong one for Sayaka in every sense. She can't see any way to make it work. A long-distance relationship is clearly not a viable option, since she wants Akira right here, in her everyday life. Yes, she *could* relocate, but she already knows she could never be happy living like that. Sayaka needs her family and her friends and a shrine to pray at. Akira's happiness matters to her, *intensely*, but it could never be enough, nor should it have to be. She doesn't want Akira's happiness to be contingent on her lack thereof, or vice versa, either.

The United Nations has forced a deplorable dilemma upon her family, and already she resents them for it. If she knew it wouldn't hurt Akira, she would do everything in her power to deny them what they want, simply in spite. No one should force a man to choose between a job and his loved ones. No one.

As they approach the front door to their home of over ten years, Sayaka seizes his hand and squeezes it tightly. *For as long as the gods grant me the strength to keep fighting, Akira... I won't let you go.*

He turns to look at her — twinned circles of deep ruddy-brown, warm and resplendent — and, with a tender smile, gently squeezes back.

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*[While the meaning of most Japanese terms should be evident from context, they are in such abundance this chapter that mitigating the possible confusion with a glossary can't hurt. In addition to crude definitions, I will also, further down, provide links to some of the sources that helped me put this chapter together. -Reichu]*

## Glossary

**Shinto:** Ancient Japanese form of spirituality. Approximately means "the way of the gods/spirits".

**Kami:** Very, *very* roughly equivalent to the concept of "spirit", as in a living spiritual force associated with an aspect of nature (forest, mountains) or culture (business, war). Even normal people can be elevated to kami and enshrined. In accordance with typical translation conventions, I typically just go with "gods". Don't conflate kami too heavily with western concepts of deities, *especially* monotheistic ones, and you should be fine. (We're going to ignore the fact that the Japanese language itself calls the Abrahamic God "kami".)

**Jinja:** One of the many Shinto words denoting the concept of "shrine". This can refer both to the larger shrine complex (e.g. Yoshida Jinja) and the small constructions within the complex that enshrine one or more kami (e.g. Yamakage Jinja).

**Torii:** Large gates with characteristic cross-beams at the top, marking the entrance to the shrine and placed at various junctions further within the complex. Ones constructed from wood are painted a striking deep red-orange color with black trim.

**Hokkaido:** Japan's northernmost island. An attempt to establish Orthodox Christianity was made here, and major historical churches can be found in cities such as Sapporo and Hakodate. Hokkaido is also the last bastion of Japan's indigenous people, the Ainu. (If you've seen *Princess Mononoke*, the concept should feel familiar. Think "Ashitaka".) And, yes, Sapporo is the home of Sapporo Beer.

**Sando:** The path approaching either a Shinto shrine or Buddhist temple. When approaching the former at least (don't know about the latter), you are not to walk the middle of the path, as that section is reserved for the kami.

**Chozuya & Chozubachi:** Chozuya is a pavilion where purification via water must be undertaken before entering the shrine. The chozubachi is the basin containing the water.

**Hishaku:** Ladles provided at the chozuya for retrieving and dispensing water. They have wooden handles and the cup portion may be metal. When purifying one's mouth, drinking directly from the hishaku is a big no-no.

**Daigengu Saijoshō:** Described in the story, but the name and title roughly means, "Ceremonial Site and Shrine of the Great Origin".

**Engishiki:** A 10th century 50-volume book about Japanese law and custom. The first 10 volumes pertain to worship.

**Amaterasu Oomikami:** Also known as just Amaterasu, or by various extremely long titles of respect. The goddess of the sun (her name means "Heavenly Brilliance") and perhaps the most important Shinto kami, sometimes worshiped to the exclusion of all others.

**Lucky Gods:** Only Hotei, Jurojin, Fukurokuju, and Ben(zai)ten are mentioned, but there are seven kami of good fortune altogether. (I did see some lists with eight kami instead, so color me confused.) [Wikipedia article](#), if you're curious what their individual attributes are.

**Omikuji:** A "divine lot". A fortune presented via a small rolled-up slip of paper which may be purchased at a Shinto shrine for a tiny stipend. Traditionally, you draw a number via

lottery and receive a specific omikuji that way, but it's also common for the slips to just be laying out, allowing one to be chosen at random. They provide an overall fortune via a luck rating, on a graded scale ranging from excellent luck to curse-tier bad luck. Small written fortunes are also provided in various categories like love, business, home, and travel. A "bad" omikuji can be tied to a rack or trees provided at the shrine in the hopes that the gods will turn the bad luck to good.

## Links

- [Perspectives towards understanding the concept of kami](#): Long and technical, if you're into that.
- [Japanagos: Visiting a shinto shrine \(how to pray, what to do\)](#): YT video presented by an adorable bilingual lady. Must see!
- [Fuji Travel Guide: How to Pray in a Japanese Shrine or Temple](#): English is a bit broken, but I found the page useful.
- [Yoshida Shrine's home page](#): In Japanese.
- Green Shinto: [Yoshida Shrine](#) & [Daigengu Saijoshō](#)
- [Japan Religions: Yoshida Jinja](#): Background plus lots of photos.
- [Next Stop - Japan: Omikuji](#)
- [The Kyoto Project: Omikuji](#): Also describes omamori and ema.
- [Inside the Shrine - Shintō Concepts, What's What](#): Far more detail than I delve into, but a great source if you wish to explore further.

## Chapter End Notes

- Yes, Akira is taking a short vacation from being a perspective character. Other perspectives will become increasingly important as we go on, and this seemed like an ideal time to perform a trial run... step away from him and see what things are like behind someone else's eyes.. It probably makes his personality shift all the more jarring, but I'm not sure if that's a bad thing.
- The idea to make Misato a Sailor Moon fan came from Sailor Stardust. (As obvious as it is, I admit it didn't immediately occur to me.)
- I hope I'm not being too "weeaboo" by including things like "Itadakimasu" intact. I guess my general policy on Japanese terms and phrases is: when it refers to something REALLY Japanese, just leave it alone.
- Quite a lot of backstory dump here. Despite rewriting these portions multiple times, I'm still apprehensive about whether I went overboard with some things. I suspect this chapter will go back under the knife eventually, but that won't be for a while yet.
- Attempting to wrap my head around Shinto and its concepts is an incredibly difficult undertaking, and I'm sure I got a lot wrong with Sayaka's POV. I honestly have NO IDEA how someone like her, who takes Shinto practice seriously, would approach the matter of spirituality with Akira, whose practical experience is with



the radically different concepts embodied by Christianity. Doesn't help that I haven't yet dived into the available English language literature on Christianity in Japan to establish whether or not the forms it takes over there are appreciably different from what we're used to... Anyway, I'm trying, and adjustments will almost certainly be made as I learn more.

- I've tried to at least stress that Sayaka is interested in SPIRITUALITY, not FAITH. When she does mention faith, it's with regard to "Igara-san", for whom the concept of "faith" might have actually meant something. Hence, when it comes to Akira, Sayaka is curious about how he positions himself with regard to the life energies and their flow, and so forth. Methinks that's going to be a tough nut to crack, Sayachan...
- The "great mother Amaterasu" thing is admittedly an *Ōkami* reference. There's a small chance it's not completely gratuitous, though.
- The bit about Daigengu being open more often during the countdown to the new millennium is totally made up and I have no idea if a Shinto shrine would do something like that. In real life, Yoshida Shrine's Daigengu is only open on the first of every month, plus for New Year's and a couple of festival days. This didn't work with the in-story calendar, though, so... meh.
- At the time of writing, I noted that being out of Akira's head for so long was an odd sensation. Heh.

# The Wall

## Chapter Summary

Misato obstinately refuses her father's good intentions, prompting Akira to take a good, hard look at himself and what it will take to demolish the barrier between them.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Saturday, September 18, 1999  
Katsuragi Household, Early Evening

Sayaka flips through her collection of old records, about eighteen albums standing together on a shelf in the common room. All still neatly ordered as she had left them: the Red Birds, Mari Amachi, Ikue Sakakibara, Kiyoko Suizenji, Tulip, Miyuki Nakajima, Keiko Fuji, and many others. So many memories attached to each album — overwhelmingly good ones. Everything is from the 70s and 80s, when her life was still so bright. “Akira?” she calls to the kitchen.

He sits at the table, studiously chopping vegetables, but stops a moment to turn and regard her.

“Are you in the mood for anything specific?” she asks. “I'm having a hard time picking one.”

Akira hums in thought. “Hmmm. How about something with a bit of pep to it? ... That ought to narrow down the choices, right?” He winks.

About half of her collection is enka — there's just something about slow, traditionally orchestrated ballads that pulls on Sayaka's heartstrings — so, indeed, that does narrow things down. She flips back to the front of the stack and pulls out her copy of *Yuming Brand*. “You always liked Yumi Arai, didn't you?”

“Yumi Matsutoya, you mean?” Akira says with a smirk. “Yes, she's fine. You'll always be my favorite, but Yuming will serve the purpose.”

Sayaka emphatically points to the album's obi. “Arai, see? She wasn't married when she recorded this one.”

“Yes, yes,” he concedes, digging the eyes out of a potato. “Never should have changed her name. It made no professional sense.”

The cover of the record player has acquired a thick layer of dust since the last time it was used. Sayaka knows her housecleaning could stand to be more thorough, but she simply doesn't have the time. She retrieves a clean cotton rag from a drawer in the kitchen and moistens it at the sink. "Well, Akira... You know that's a decision that every woman has to make for herself."

"I know." He carves another eye out. "It seems to be pretty common overseas nowadays, for the woman to keep her name. At least in the scientific community." And another.

As Sayaka wipes the gray film right off the glass, she worries about where Akira intends to take this line of thought. He *did* bring up "that" earlier today... And now, same as then, she has little interest in discussing the ins and outs of her decision not to pursue that M.D. No good can come of it. She sets up the record player and privately hopes he doesn't go there.

Akira continues his tract. "You know I don't think it's just a choice women should have to make. You remember, don't you? I would've been happy to take up 'Katori'." The first song begins to play on their stereo speakers — large, sturdy old things set in wooden cases, spaced on opposite sides of the common room. Sayaka adjusts the volume to a suitable ambient level and returns to the kitchen, pausing behind Akira. He turns to look at her again, and there is a nervous-looking smirk on his face. "What was wrong with 'Akira Katori', really?"

Sayaka kneads the curve of his trapezius a little. "Nothing. It's just... this way seemed to make more sense."

Akira grimaces slightly. "That's not just your parents talking?"

Sayaka tuts. "Oh, don't be a cynic. It doesn't suit you." She ruffles his hair and seats herself in the chair adjacent to his.

"I suppose so." His face turns contemplative. "What *did* your folks consider the less terrible option, though? Their daughter being contaminated with the name of 'that pathetic excuse for a man', or their family name being sullied instead?"

Sayaka lets out a short laugh. "As far as they were concerned, the former was only slightly more to taste. They're quite traditional, you know."

Akira rolls his eyes for effect. "Tell me about it."

She takes up a paring knife and starts to help Akira with the potatoes. "Anyway... You know why I made the choice I did."

"Indeed," he concedes. "Because I'm an only child. But the assumption that Yura would bring 'Katori' forward a generation doesn't seem to have panned out. Tell me if I'm wrong, but I don't think she's ever going to have kids."

Sayaka's hands work swiftly and precisely. "I don't imagine she will, no. But fourteen years ago, that was still up in the air." She takes the potato's skin off with a single unbroken peel.

Akira looks surprised. “Was it really? I can't imagine Yura ever even considering it. She never once seemed like the type.”

Sayaka shrugs, helping herself to another potato. “She kept pretty quiet about it. I think Yura liked the idea in theory, but she realized it would never work. A child would've compromised her business, her activism...”

“I can't see Tatsuya being too interested, either,” Akira says. “Then again, I could never really read him, so I might be completely wrong.” He sips delicately from his mug of tea.

“I'm not sure either, to be honest,” she admits. “Takkun was always really quiet around me, too.”

“They always seemed well suited to each other, though. It's not just me, right?” Another sip.

She nods. “No, I agree. I always thought they were cute together.” Sayaka continues until all the potatoes — except the one Akira's still working on — are peeled and de-eyed. She collects them into a pile near Akira's cutting board. “Okay! Soon as you're done, each of those needs to be divided into a few big chunks. Let me put on water for the rice and snow peas.”

Akira dips his head in assent, issuing a low hum.

They continue to work in perfect harmony against the backdrop of classic J-pop tunes. Sayaka is quite used to the grind entailed in preparing meals, and she's taken it in stride all these years. Misato used to be able to help more often, but the increasing burden of studies and after-school activities — and her heightening preoccupation with friends — has put the kibosh on that. Having Akira helping again so suddenly... It feels so natural that it's easy for Sayaka to go along with it. And, at the same time...

As she eyes the cooking pan for the snow peas, with its thin layer of water starting to bubble and pop, she feels that sense of dread already start to seize her again. Today Akira has been presenting a fairly placid surface, but she knows that he's over a hot coil. He's been trying to conceal the bubbles — let them rise so intermittently that Sayaka won't have cause to worry — but she knows him better than that. What can she do? Is there anything she can do to keep things from boiling over in two months' time, if not less?

“Sayaka?” he says, voice thick with concern.

To her surprise, she's been staring at him without even realizing it. She shakes her head and quickly returns to her work. The pan is boiling now, so Sayaka grabs the cooking chopsticks and dish of snow peas and carefully pushes them into the water. She checks on the rice water, but it's still heating up.

Then comes that voice again. “Sayaka? What was wrong?”

It's sweet of him to ask over something so small. Misato would scoff at the gesture — she's been betrayed so many times that it's impossible for her to take him seriously when he does ask after someone. But Sayaka knows when Akira is taking heartfelt interest in another's

inner world and when he's just saying the words because he feels that he should. This is decidedly the former; it's obvious from looking in his eyes. Akira has always been an open book, one wholly unable to conceal his feelings even as he refuses to verbalize them.

“Oh...” Sayaka mumbles, “I’m just... thinking about things.”

Akira raises an eyebrow. “‘Things’?”

“Just... everything.” This evasiveness isn't fair to him; he's trying to participate and she's keeping him at arm's length. “I don't know... I shouldn't be thinking about this now. It's not a good time.” She takes the peas off the heat and sets them aside to cool.

Akira — his vegetable-slicing duties apparently completed — rises to his feet and goes to the refrigerator. “Well... You don't have to talk about it, if you don't want to.” He pulls out the beef, removes the plastic wrap, and sets it on the cutting board, then goes to work cutting that into 4cm-thick pieces. “But, as you'd always tell me, ignoring something doesn't make it go away.”

“I was... trying to save it for after dinner,” Sayaka admits as she assembles all the oils and spices she'll need for the nikujaga. She turns to look at him. “I suppose I'm not doing a very good job, though.”

Her husband glances over at the clock. “We still have plenty of time. I don't see why you should have to put it off, if it's bothering you so much.” He offers a warm smile and pats the chair where Sayaka had been sitting mere moments before.

“I—” Sayaka starts, when, out of the blue, the phone begins to ring.

Akira practically jumps to his feet. “I'll get it,” he says, taking a couple of long strides to the receiver and picking it up before it can get a third ring off. “Hello?” Then, in a friendly and familiar tone, “Oh! Hi! How are things?”

Sayaka checks on the rice water and starts to heat up some oil in a saucepan — all the meantime watching Akira in the corner of her eye and trying to figure out who he's talking to.

Akira leans against the wall. “...Oh. That's too bad.” He sounds rather less enthusiastic now. Disappointed, even. “We understand, Misato. Stay safe, okay? ... Alright. See you later tonight.” The click of the receiver, put gently back in place. Then, a heavy thud as he returns to his seat.

The oil sizzles and steams as Sayaka scrapes the cuts of beef into the pan. “What was that all about?” She glances back over at Akira.

He's slumped forward with his elbows on the table, cradling his head. “Our daughter won't be joining us.”

“I figured as much but... did she give any indication as to why?”

There's an uneasy waver in Akira's voice. “I guess a bunch of them are studying for an exam together, or something. That's what she said, anyway.” A long pause. “I know the real

reason.”

Sayaka feels a frown take her face. “Akira, please come here by me. And bring all the vegetables; I’ll need to add them in a moment or so.”

He murmurs in assent. A moment later, he joins her at the range, all of the cut vegetables assembled on the portable cutting board, ready to be deposited into the pan. One glance at his face confirms that he isn’t taking the phone call too well. It’s not unusual to see him looking hurt over little things, but Misato’s rejections — or perceived ones — are so typical it’s not like him to get visibly bent out of shape like this.

“You were looking forward to dinner together?” Sayaka guesses, keeping the little chunks of meat in motion with the cooking chopsticks.

Akira takes a deep breath, then releases a long sigh. At length, he says, “I suppose that was foolish of me.”

“No, not at all,” Sayaka responds gently. “It’s wonderful, actually. That you’d want to spend time with her.”

He cracks a weak smile. Eyes darting down to the pan, he asks, “Ready for the vegetables?”

Sayaka realizes with a start that the meat has already browned. She never was an accomplished multitasker. “Oh! Thanks for noticing. Yes, please.” They exchange places and Akira takes over, freeing Sayaka to check on the rice water again. Just about boiling. She measures out a couple of cups’ worth of brown rice, and gets a cup of water ready for the stew as well. Soon enough, both the stew and rice are covered and cooking, and the timer is set.

Following Akira’s suggestion from before the call, they decide to take a break and convene on the love seat. Akira doesn’t look especially in the mood for talking, though — everything from his eyes to his body language indicates he’d prefer to brood in silence. Well, perhaps “prefer” isn’t the right word, but doubtless he finds it more comfortable to avoid talking about what ails him. At least in that respect, the man is more Japanese than he’d ever be willing to admit. The impulse to quietly weather internal storms is built deeply into Sayaka as well. Fighting it, and confronting emotion head-on, is a choice that must be made regardless.

“I saw you watching that family at the park earlier,” Sayaka says, attempting to get the ball rolling again. “I didn’t want to say too much right there. It wasn’t a good place. But… it wasn’t hard to guess what you were thinking about.”

Akira slouches over his lap, fingers interlaced. “Ah… yeah.” His face twitches. “Is… that what you’ve been worrying about?”

Sayaka adjusts herself and smooths out her skirt. “In part. It’s mostly been the job offer, though…” And, as they established early this morning, there’s no use talking about that further — not until Akira has consulted with Haru and Sayaka with Yura.

"I'm sorry, Sayaka," he says. "My burden... It shouldn't have to be yours. That's not fair to you."

*That's the way it's always been, though.* "I worry about you, Akira. I worry about this family. You know that."

He grimaces. "I know... I need to do more of that. Worry about the family, I mean."

Sayaka pats him on the knee. "I think you already do plenty of worrying!"

"Well, you know what I mean." He caresses her hand in turn. "It's not the right kind of worrying." Akira's torso straightens up and he looks her in the eye. "And I want to change that. I really do."

She lets herself smile. "What is it that Haru is always telling you? 'Stop thinking and just do something'?"

Akira scratches the back of his head. "Yeah, more or less. He's not wrong, but... a lot of times, I really don't know what to do. Well, I mean..." As he fumbles over his words, he brings his hand down and starts idly tapping his cross. "At least with us... after everything that's happened, we can still talk like this. But with Misato... the most I can consistently get is begrudging acknowledgment that I exist." His fingers wrap around the cross tightly. "I wonder... is it too late, Sayaka? For me, as a..."

"As a... father?"

Akira nods sharply.

As she considers how she could possibly reply, Sayaka soon finds herself fidgeting. It's promising to hear that Akira wants things with Misato to improve, but the matter is truly daunting, possibly even more than he realizes. Akira wasn't quite "all there" when the bulk of the damage was done, so Sayaka wouldn't be surprised if he doesn't intuitively understand just how deep the disconnect with Misato goes. There's a lack of understanding on both sides, and, so long as that remains, any attempt to bridge the gap is predestined to fail. Misato certainly has no interest in understanding why her father let her down — all that matters is that he *did* — but Akira, in his current state, just might be open to whatever he needs to do.

However, Sayaka has to be very careful with her words. She doesn't want to discourage him — that would be the entirely wrong thing to do right now. As long as he's feeling like this, she has to urge him onward, no matter how hopeless it seems. "In my honest opinion..." she starts, "...yes, I think it is possible to turn things around."

The merest hint of a smile appears on Akira's lips.

"*But,*" Sayaka says, "that comes with many caveats."

"Well, I wouldn't expect any less," Akira admits. "I'm all ears. Please go on."

She sighs. "Akira, before anything else, you have to realize that Misato doesn't really trust you. She doesn't respect you. She hasn't for a very long time."

As she anticipated, he receives the words like a sting of shame and casts his eyes down — escaping any perceived judgment in Sayaka's own gaze. His thumb starts rubbing against the front of the white cross with nervous vigor. “I suppose that much should be obvious, shouldn't it?”

Sayaka holds his unoccupied hand, hoping to give her next words due emphasis. “Please don't take it the wrong way. I just don't want to make any assumptions about what you do and don't know.”

Akira offers a weak nod. “I understand, Sayaka.”

“I'm glad.” She takes another deep breath and goes on. “You may not remember, but when Misato was much younger, she really adored you.”

“No,” he says. “I do remember that. I remember it very well.” He's being calm, but the emotional pain in his voice is quite evident.

Sayaka frowns in sympathy. “Akira... What do you remember about what happened ten years ago, when everything started to change?”

Akira's left hand releases the pendant and cradles the front of his skull. “I... remember what happened to Kimiko, and Misato being very upset about it. Blaming herself, trying to make things better.” Even with most of his face obscured, Sayaka can see his eyes starting to water. The loss of control is obvious in his voice, too. “But I couldn't do anything for her, Sayaka. Not for her, you, or even myself. I wasn't there. I felt like I was dead inside, and I couldn't do anything.”

She squeezes his hand. “Akira...” But she can't think of any words to console him.

He lets his head lean against the back of the couch and stares up at the ceiling. Although he's trying to conceal what's happening on his face, the little crystalline droplets start to roll down his cheeks, voiding his efforts. “Everything after that is just a huge blur, really. You know I don't always feel like myself, Sayaka. Sometimes I'm not sure who I am at all. It's like somebody else lived out all those years while I was sleeping.” A ragged gasp, followed by his face tilting forward again and a fresh outpouring of tears spilling down. “Sleeping, and having a terrible dream that felt all too real.”

Sayaka brings Akira's bony knuckles to her lips. “It must hurt to talk about this,” she says. “But that kind of release is good, too. You've kept these feelings bottled up for so long.”

“I suppose... until last night, I wasn't fully aware of them,” Akira says. He wipes his face dry with the cuff of his sleeve.

“Last night?” Sayaka repeats.

He bites his lip, gathering his strength, and proceeds. “It was when we were... making love. We came together and, in that moment, I suddenly felt as though I could see everything with perfect clarity.”



Sayaka can't help but look confused.

Akira visibly struggles to better articulate. "Well, I mean... It's as though, normally, I'm in a fog. There isn't very much I can see clearly. About myself, about anyone else, about the world in general. But that moment I had with you, it was like looking up at the night sky in a city and suddenly being able to see all the stars." He glances away. "I guess it doesn't really make much sense, does it?"

Sayaka takes his hand back into her lap and wraps both of hers around it. "I suppose all that really matters is what you do with this feeling. It doesn't mean anything if you don't act upon it, after all."

He looks back at her again, and offers a meek nod. "I know. Haru's advice... it finally makes sense. I feel like I can actually start to *act*, finally start to take care of everything I've been neglecting." His Adam's Apple bobs. "I can't... I *won't*... take you and Misato for granted anymore. There's just no way."

She smiles warmly. "I hope you can do it. I really do." Her fingers trace the delicate veins on the back of his hand.

"Thanks. So do I..." Akira's expression is weary, but there's a vague sense of determination behind his eyes. "So, Sayaka... What would you suggest? For... turning things around with Misato?"

"Hmm..." she considers. "Well, what you were doing this morning seemed fine. You were being friendly and trying to engage her on her own terms. Right now, that's all you can really do."

One corner of his mouth jerks up. "Huh. It's so easy to feel discouraged, though."

"Of course, Akira. That's perfectly natural." Sayaka looks him deeply in the eyes. "But you have to roll with the punches and be resilient. Consider things from Misato's perspective, after all."

Akira frowns. "It's hard, Sayaka. I... I don't know much about her anymore. Except that she doesn't like me. That's not much to work with."

"No, it's not," she allows. "But just think about it a little. Put yourself in her place. What reason could your daughter have to not believe in you?" Sayaka offers an encouraging smile.

He twists his face up as he ponders what she said. Sayaka strongly suspects he has a good feel for the answer — he's just terrified of saying the words aloud. Akira's mouth opens and closes wordlessly for a moment before, finally, something forces its way out. "Because... because..." He grits his teeth, squeezing out more tears. "...I haven't been her father since Kimiko died."

And just like that, his emotional downpour starts up again with renewed intensity. Akira's pain takes over his entire body, causing him to involuntarily curve inward as he seizes his head between his hands. His breathing grows more and more erratic, and his sobbing louder

and louder, the sounds of anguish in all too harsh contrast to the peppy song playing in the background. This outburst came on so fast, Sayaka doesn't know what to do. To make matters worse, one of the alarms starts going off, as well.

“I'll be right back, Akira,” she says, giving him a reassuring squeeze on the shoulder. He barely seems to notice her, though. She rushes to the range, mixing the seasonings into the stew and setting the timer again. While she's there, she gives the rice a stir as well and sets the heat down even lower. On the way back to the couch, she turns the record player off; it just doesn't feel appropriate anymore.

Her husband hasn't moved at all — he's still locked in the same position, still sobbing quietly. Sayaka stands in front of him momentarily, considering the best way to bring him back. She *must* keep him in homeostasis, prevent him from dipping too far up or down. Rationally, she knows it's apt to be completely out of her control, but if she can influence his mood toward stability, even a little, she has to try.

She sits down next to him again and, slowly, crawls close to him on her knees. Still, he doesn't move. She scoops his face between her palms from below, and he releases his claw-like grip on his head so he can finally look back at her with wobbly, watery eyes. Sayaka leans in and plants a gentle kiss on his forehead, and Akira gasps with emotional catharsis. He covers her hands with his own, and they interlace fingers. His eyes close, squeezing out more tears, and his face starts nudging toward hers.

Sayaka lets herself listen for a moment, as the quality of his breathing undergoes a subtle shift from despair to longing. Then she meets his warm, soft lips with her own — and, judging from the passion of his kiss, she knows that she did the right thing. Sayaka briefly breaks away to kiss the tears off his cheeks, but Akira soon redirects her efforts: gently seizing her head, engulfing her mouth, and offering his lithe, velvety tongue. She can't help but provide enthusiastic reciprocation.

In the dim lighting of the common room, in the quiet of the house that's all theirs for a few more hours, they continue to enjoy one another. It's a lovely reprise of what was interrupted this morning in the kitchen. Even so, they both seem to know it's an ill-fated one, and neither lets their hands wander too much. There's no point in too much escalation... not *just* yet.

After a few minutes, Sayaka at last parts from him. Rather than dive into another impassioned kiss, she simply leans her brow against his. They catch their breaths, and eventually their eyes meet again, both pairs twinkling. “Do you feel a little better now?” Sayaka asks.

Akira chuckles a little, flashing those endearingly crooked teeth. “I suppose that's one of the better uses of the distraction tactic.”

“Well,” Sayaka says, fluffing his forelocks with her fingers, “you're not of much use to anyone when you get like that, least of all yourself.”

“I know,” he admits, playing with her braid. “But it was cathartic, at the very least. And I did mean what I said.”

“About?”

“You know... Not being Misato's father.” Akira runs his index finger back and forth across the loose hairs at the end of Sayaka's braid. “I haven't seriously or consistently played the part for... a long time.”

Sayaka just strokes his hair and lets him keep talking.

“I'm kind of ashamed to admit it, Sayaka,” he says, “but I'm... I'm afraid of her.”

“Of Misato?” The information isn't surprising, but hearing him *say it* is.

Akira provides a feeble nod. “Misato... She's just a child, who's had no choice but to suffer me as her father. And the way she is now, at least toward me... It's the ultimate reminder of my failure. That coldness in her voice, that silent judgment in her eyes... She's not outwardly disrespectful, but that's only out of reverence for your wishes, Sayaka.”

Sayaka wants to deny it, but she knows that he's saying the truth. She did raise Misato to be traditionally polite, and she's worked very hard to keep those lessons intact, despite their daughter's increasingly loose tongue. Ordinarily, though, she wouldn't have guessed that Akira was aware of these efforts. He speaks so rarely about these kinds of feelings, it's little wonder Sayaka tends to underestimate what he actually knows. When, for all his seeming obliviousness, Akira can be incredibly observant.

“And I'm scared, Sayaka. Even with everything you've told me, that sense of rejection is so terrifying and absolute. Misato isn't like you, or Haru, who've both known me all this time and *chosen* to put up with me because... because...” He trails off, apparently unable to fill in the rest.

“Because, Akira,” Sayaka blurts out, “we love you. That's why.”

Her husband frowns. “I guess that means... Misato doesn't?”

Sayaka suddenly wishes she had held her tongue — only to again speak without thinking. “She's your daughter. Of course she loves you.”

Akira's voice turns deadly serious. “Sayaka... there's no guarantee in the world that a child will love its parents. None at all.”

She knows exactly what he's referring to, and it makes her heart sink. “I'm sorry, Akira. I wasn't trying to imply—”

The alarm finally goes off. Without a word, Akira excuses himself to tend to it. Sayaka doesn't protest. She feels too terrible to say anything at all.

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Misato ends the call on her cell phone, then flips the lid and pockets it. Releasing a short sigh of relief, she turns to her companion, a girl her age with a childish round face and short-cropped black hair. "It's like I told you, Kei." Adjusting the makeshift ponytail going out the back of her baseball cap, she adds, "He totally bought it."

The two lean together against a brick wall separating the sidewalk from a school's property. Both have a skateboard in tow and are dressed in tomboyish casuals, apparently taking full advantage of their time unconstrained by school-mandated sailor fuku uniforms. Misato sports washed-out jeans with heavily frayed ankles, a dark red jacket with a black shirt underneath, and American brand name sneakers. Kei is outfitted similarly, though her clothing choices show a modicum more concern for feminine stylishness.

"I don't understand you at all, Misa-chan," Kei says, her eyes glued to her own phone's tiny screen and thumbs motioning away at the key pad. "Any other girl would die for a chance to have dinner with that man."

Misato scrunches her face up. "Ugh. Don't be gross. My dad is the worst."

"Your dad is *hot*," Kei says. She closes up her own phone and gives Misato a decisive look. "That's a fact."

Misato just sticks her tongue out.

"You can't even admit that he's a little good-looking?" Kei winks. "Come on, no shame in admitting to good genes."

"Even on his better days, he's way too skinny. And... *good genes*?" Misato lifts an eyebrow for emphasis. "The guy is a head case!"

Kei laughs. "So that's where you get it from."

"Hah, hah," Misato drones. "If I ever become like my dad, I swear I'll slice my own guts out." She wraps an arm around her friend and gives her an impish look. "Kei, you can be the one to decapitate me afterward."

Another laugh. "That's pretty grisly, Misa-chan."

Misato shoots a finger up. "Hold me to it, okay?"

"*Suuuure* thing," Kei emotes. "...Wait. How are we defining 'like your father'? Irresistibly good-looking? Pretty sure you're going to be sizzling hot in a couple of years, maybe less."

Misato sputters in exasperation. "Yeah, as if. And *obviously*, I meant crazy. Nuts. Loony. Mental."

"Oh, come on. He's not that bad."

A roll of the eyes. "My dad just hides it whenever I bring friends home." Then Misato sighs. "You've never seen the real him." As soon as she's done saying it, the thought occurs to her that she's not actually sure who her father 'really' is, either. ...Not that she cares.

Kei shrugs. “Maybe.” She shifts her weight from one foot to the other. “Your dad never seemed all that crazy to me. Just kind of... sad, I guess.”

Misato can't help but scoff. “Well, that's the thing, Kei. Because he's nuts, he flip-flops between being an unmitigated cry-baby and a raving lunatic.”

“Maybe he's just sick.”

“I'm sure he'd enjoy that excuse,” Misato spits. “Anyway, can we stop talking about my dad, Kei?” When her friend's mouth opens, as if in protest, she appends, “...Please?”

Kei sighs. “Sure, okay.” Silence doesn't seem to agree with her, though, and her foot starts fidgeting with her skateboard. “Just... one thing, Misa-chan.”

Misato crosses her arms and glances over sharply. “*What*, Kei?”

“I was serious.” Kei brushes a few stray hairs out of her eyes. “There really are diseases that mess with your head. You don't hear about them much, but...” She looks away. “Remember Uncle Katsuo?”

“The one who recently got out of the hospital?” Misato asks. “What about him?”

Kei eases herself down onto her skateboard, ushering Misato to follow suit, and brings her voice to the verge of a whisper. “Don't tell anyone else about this, okay? My mom would die.” Misato just shrugs and nods, and Kei goes on. “I found out from my cousin recently, it wasn't just any hospital his dad got sent to. It was one of those places in the mountains.”

Misato furnishes an expression that just seems to say “*ouch*”. “So *you've* got one in your family, too?”

“Well, here's the thing,” Kei says. “According to the doctors, Uncle has this thing called depression. When it hits, it drains all your energy and makes you really sad and stuff. It's why he was so sullen for years and missing so much time at work.”

That only seems to describe Dad by half, but, still, interesting. “And it's a sickness? Really?”

Kei offers a shallow shrug. “Mental *illness*, right? And my cousin said that Uncle is on special pills now, which have made him a lot better.”

“Oh, come on,” Misato says. “Haven't you ever heard of the placebo effect?”

Kei snickers. “Nerd.” Then, another shrug. “I'm just sayin', Misa-chan... It might be worth looking into. Your mom's kind of a doctor, right? Maybe she'd know more about this.”

“Maybe, but...” Misato stands up and stretches out with a big yawn. “She's not *really* a doctor. She just works at a clinic sometimes, is all.”

“Oh?” Kei seems confused. “Aren't all of those fat medical texts in the study your mom's?”

“Yeah, they are,” Misato says. “There *is* a story behind those... My parents don't really talk about it, but I've heard things. Like supposedly Mom was going to go back for her degree once I was in school, and Dad would've cut down on his hours and picked up some of the slack for her.” She grimaces. “Somehow, I don't think Dad lived up to his end of the bargain.”

“It's cool that they were thinking about it, though.” Kei carefully returns to her feet, as well. “My mom hates being a housewife, but she'd never let my dad know. At least your parents actually talk to each other sometimes.”

“‘Sometimes’ being the key word there.”

Suddenly, a tone plays, and both pairs of eyes shoot toward Kei's jeans pocket.

“Hmm,” Misato says, starting to roll the skateboard back and forth under her foot. “That must be them.”

Kei opens her phone back up and quickly peruses the message. “A-yup. Kiyoko says that she and the boys are grabbing some nosh and that we should too.” She glances over at Misato with a peeved look on her face. “Meet-up delayed until 5:30.”

Misato kicks down on her board and swipes it from the air. “Figures. What the hell have they been doing? We've been waiting here for like a half hour, only a block or two from the arcade, *and* we've already eaten.”

“Snogging, probably.”

“All three of them?”

“I totally wouldn't put it past Takashi and Masaru. You know they've always dug each other as much as they dig girls.” Kei snickers, digging into one of her non-phone pockets.

Misato leans into Kei, brows furrowed and voice low. “I'm going to make you pay for putting that mental image in my head.”

Kei braces a cigarette between her lips. “Oh yeah?” She starts flicking her Sanrio lighter.

“Yeah,” Misato affirms. “Three rounds of DDR, on you.” She doesn't even blink at Kei's fledgling habit; the girl's been bumming cigarettes off older kids just long enough that it's become the new normal.

Kei shrugs. “Fine by me.” She takes a long initial drag, then glances at Misato and offers up the pack. “You sure you don't want to give them a try, Misa-chan? Might take the edge off.”

Misato declines with a shake of her hand. “You know I can't, Kei. It would break my mom's heart. Like... more than it already is.”

Kei sighs. “Fine, fine.” She taps the ash off the end. “So, you want to just hang here and trade Pokemon or something? You said you have your Game Boy in there, right?” She indicates Misato's backpack.

“I guess we could, but...” The purple-haired girl turns and looks over the brick wall at the middle school parking lot. Mostly empty of cars, with a few slightly younger kids taking advantage of the space and milling around on skateboards. From the looks of things, a couple are trying to show off to the others, but their ineptitude is so appalling that Misato can't help but cringe. “...I sense a distraction coming on.” She looks back at Kei, a twinkle in her eye. “How about it? Want to show the twerps how it's really done?”

“Good plan,” Kei agrees.

Wheels blazing, both girls take off down the sidewalk.

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Akira on the left, Sayaka to the right, they kneel together on the mat, the first course of dinner assembled before them. As Sayaka had hoped, the early evening air is cool but pleasant, allowing them to indulge themselves with an outdoor meal in the well-kept little yard.

Her husband opens the new bottle of sake, a ginjo brew with the rather flamboyant name of *Shashi na Shippō*, “The Seven Extravagant Treasures”, and pours a little out into the two ceramic cups. They lift their cups, smiling, and Akira begins the toast. “To today, this most special of days... a gleaming white crossroads to lead us out of the swirling, dark abyss.” He laughs, apparently quite aware of how flowery he sounds, then directs his gaze intently upon Sayaka. “And to you, Sayaka... the one most precious to me, without whom I am nothing.”

It's at once both sweet and off-putting, but she supposes she'll have to take the morose with the uplifting for now. Raising her cup a nonce higher, she tips her head to him and says, “Kampai.” He echoes her, and they both take a sip. She's immediately struck by the rich and subtle flavor, very pleasantly layered. Sayaka sips again, savoring every moment of it. Afterward, she comments, “This was an excellent choice, Akira.”

“I'm glad you approve,” he says. “I've never had this particular variety before, but my last experience with the brewery's ginjo was a good one, so it seemed like a worthy gamble.”

They then set into their dishes, starting with the stew and rice. Akira digs into his deluxe-sized portions with the same famished bearing as before. If he keeps this up, his body's contours ought to soften for the better in no time at all. While she's always appreciated his tall, slender physique, she's never been quite comfortable with his bones showing.

They eat together in quiet for a time. A warmth of serenity gradually spreads from her bosom on outward, swallowing up all Sayaka's little worries. The ambiance is lovely. With the array of fall blooms spread out before them on either side of the main pathway, and the off-white of the cement wall closing everything in, it feels like they're in their own little nest of color where no one can disturb them. Not the intermittently passing car, not the calls of birds, not

the distant sound of children playing. The pleasant calm here and now couldn't be more different from the uncomfortable deadlock of silence besetting them only an hour or so ago.

After her verbal faux pas, she couldn't bring herself to say anything to him, and a dour silence fell over the meal preparations that felt like they would destroy everything. But Sayaka's worries had been for nothing. Akira held nothing against her, and soon he set about lifting the mood back up. He flipped the record, turned the player back on — and started to sing along. It wasn't a repeat of his buffoonery from the morning, either: he was really flexing his diaphragm and putting all Sayaka's past tutoring into effect.

It was... nice. Of course, there is only so much one can compensate for a fundamental lack of ability, but Sayaka doesn't expect professional-grade singing from him. Something warm and heartfelt, that's more than enough — and he provided. She quickly felt herself loosen up, her own singing voice creep out line by line, a feeling of liberation taking her over. They entered an impromptu duet, and, there, she experienced an uncanny affirmation of their bond, what she can only describe as a resonance.

She wants to keep that feeling close and never forget it.

“What kinds of flowers are those?” Akira asks, gazing out over the yard with its patches of orange, white, pink, and yellow. His dishes are on the mat, already scraped clean.

Sayaka takes a moment to finish chewing, then replies, “Chrysanthemums. Lovely, aren't they?”

“Very,” he says. “I love the way you've distributed the colors. It's like you've painted a picture with petals.” Scratching the back of his head, he adds, “That probably sounds corny, but I'm not sure how else to describe it.”

Sayaka's face flushes slightly. “Much obliged. Though, I'm afraid I can't take all the credit.”

“Oh?” Akira utters. “Well, I guess it would be quite a feat if you did all this on your own. Who's your helper? Misato?”

“Here and there,” she says. “Mostly it's Eri, though. She's a much better gardener than me, so she at least helps me with the big things. Why... are you interested?” Sayaka winks.

Akira smiles awkwardly. “I can't guarantee I won't kill everything I touch, but... that could be nice. Working with the earth, making something grow...” He looks thoughtfully at his hands — so pale, soft, clean, and skinny. They're not like Sayaka's own tanned, well-worked mitts at all. “I've always wanted to try. Always wanted to help you. But I've been afraid, I guess.”

She sets her hand upon his. “Well, thankfully, the worst that can happen is that the plants die on you. And if you're just a hobbyist, it's hardly the end of the world. You just learn from it and move on.” She rests her head against his shoulder. “Believe me, when I was little and just starting out, a lot of green things turned brown on account of my ineptitude.”



They share a little chuckle over that, but Akira's face settles into a mild frown afterward. "I guess it doesn't really seem fair. For a life to be needlessly extinguished because I messed up."

Sayaka releases an exasperated sigh. "Oh, Akira! You get so morbid sometimes." She pats his arm reassuringly. Knowing her husband, he's thinking about more than just plants. In fact, she's almost certain that he's stuck on Kimiko again and blaming himself for what happened, as he tends to do. "I know death doesn't sit well with you, but... it's just part of life. An individual life might end, but, because of that, life as a whole goes on."

His frown deepens — and, to little surprise, he reaches for Igara-san's cross, his greatest source of comfort. Akira begins to stroke the object in his extremely methodical, even ritualistic, way. Watching him, Sayaka wonders if Akira feels, on some level, that the spirit of his great-aunt inhabits the pendant and is capable of providing her reassurances when the object is invoked. "I know," he says quietly. "I know it. But it's hard to really *feel* it."

"Hmm?" Sayaka inquires.

Akira provides no acknowledgment that he heard. Releasing the pendant and staggering to his feet, he says, "I'm still really hungry. Is it okay if I bring out the next course?"

"Sure, go ahead," she says.

Taking the used dishes with him, he vanishes into the house, returning a couple minutes later with soup and salad. After he takes a seat, he pours a little more sake into his cup. "Seconds for you, Sayaka?"

"No, thank you," she declines. It kind of bothers her that he's going back to the bottle, though, and she can't stay quiet about it. "Remember to watch your intake, Akira. You get sick so easily..."

"Don't worry," he says, knocking the sake back. "I know my limits. That's all I'm having tonight."

Another interim of silence passes as they eat together. Sayaka glances over at him from time to time, monitoring his expression and bearing. At a point, she notices that Akira seems to be fixated on the cement wall that encloses most of their property. He looks oddly intense about it, too. Very curious. "What's wrong?" she asks.

"Hmm?" he says, jolting out of his daze. "Nothing, really."

"You were staring at the wall." She points. "Very intently, I might add."

"Oh, that." He grabs a wad of salad with his chopsticks and shoves it down his gullet. Once he can speak again, he says, "I was just thinking. Most of the time, I don't see it. It's just been there so long, you know? But it suddenly occurred to me, *why* is it still there?"

She's sure it's just a rhetorical question, but she goes along with it. "We thought we had the money to get it knocked down and replaced, but we ended up needing the funds for

something else. So, only part of the wall got done.”

“Indeed,” Akira says. “But why wasn't the project ever revisited? Why have we just left that symbol of past failure standing?” His voice is weirdly passionate and he's starting to gesticulate.

Sayaka shrugs. “Money is tight. You know that.”

“Even so,” he counters, “there's no reason why we couldn't have rented some equipment and done it ourselves, is there?” Sayaka keeps her mouth shut, anticipating he's going *somewhere* with this. “No, there isn't. We could have even called up some friends and family to help. That sort of thing would be right up Tatsuya's alley, wouldn't it?”

“It would,” she agrees.

“We know a lot of other handy people, too,” Akira continues. “So, there's no real excuse for the fact that the wall's still standing.”

Sayaka just hums in acknowledgment and tries to enjoy her bowl of miso.

Akira straightens his back out and gives Sayaka a determined look. “And please, Sayaka... Don't think I'm blaming you or anything. Far from it. You do so much, and I have no idea how. I've taken it for granted, but, when I think about it, it really boggles my mind.” Quite the compliment, coming from someone whose livelihood would boggle all but a small handful of the Earth's current population. “You're amazing, Sayaka. Really amazing.”

She sends him a fond smile. “Thank you, Akira.” And then, she braces herself for whatever is coming next. He's clearly compensating for his crying fit earlier, with the confident chatterbox taking the reins from his baseline state. From experience, she knows that there's not much she can do once he's become fixated on some odd little thing, other than to let him talk it out to the end. If it starts going to unhealthy places, naturally she tries to redirect it. But ultimately it's like a high pressure system: the energy must be released, one way or another.

“But me? I've been useless. That wall is still there because of me, and only me. I want to crush it, Sayaka. Knock it down, and replace it with something new. Just like I want to demolish the useless, miserable person I've been and replace him with someone better.”

It's always been hard to know how to respond to these 'tracts', since they quickly escalate into the realm of the bizarre and it becomes increasingly difficult to follow Akira's thought patterns. Saying something neutral is probably best, though. “You can't rebuild yourself overnight, Akira. Helping me with meals is a great place to start. Even if it's just on the weekends. If you can keep doing that...”

He doesn't seem convinced, though. “That's not enough, Sayaka. I need to help you more than that. Much more.”

What angle to take now? “Would you have the time for that, Akira?”

“Well...” He gets an obstinate look in his eyes. “Really, what have I been doing that's so important?”

Not much to do but give him the benefit of the doubt. He's more than capable of tearing himself down without her help. Sayaka tries a more playful tone to see where that takes them. “Trying to save the world... no?”

Akira apparently doesn't want to talk about that, responding with nothing but a dismissive puff of air. He comes off as so insolently childish that Sayaka can't help but find it oddly cute. Maybe because it highlights how, in spite of everything, Misato really is her father's daughter.

Even as she laughs under her breath, she attempts to draw emphasis back to the side of prudence. “Well, that aside... Just in general, but especially until we know what's going to happen with that job offer, I don't think you should try to extend yourself too much. You'll just overwhelm yourself that way.” He looks about ready to protest, but she ignores it and goes on. “If you're going to aim for anything, Akira, try for another weekend like this one first... where we have meals together, and do housework together, and go on little trips.” With a faint blush, she adds, “And you and I spend time being close...”

Akira's eyes twinkle upon hearing the last part.

Sayaka doesn't let it distract her, though, and she finishes the thought. “If you're comfortable with all that, and eventually feel like you can take on more, you can start to look at your work schedule for openings.” She tilts her head. “Right?”

He turns his head away slightly and releases a long sigh. “Yeah, I suppose...” He runs his fingers through his hair. “Monday can't come fast enough, Sayaka. Why did Haru have to pick this weekend of all weekends to make that trip?”

“Now, now,” Sayaka gently admonishes. “Haru deserves some time to himself, doesn't he? I'm frankly astounded by how much he's done for you all these years, even with everything else on his plate.”

“I don't understand it, either,” Akira admits. “It would've been so easy for him to just walk away and never have to deal with me again.”

“Is it so hard to accept, Akira, that people care about you?”

He frowns and looks away. “Sometimes.”

Sayaka wraps her arms around him. “I know.” And she pulls herself closer, and lets her head rest against his gently heaving chest. The reassuring sound of his heartbeat pulses into her ear. She can feel it quicken, little by little.

It's not long before the warmth of her embrace truly reaches him and, with imposing abruptness, he starts to return her affections. Right there in the yard, on that mat, both of them exposed to anyone who might peer through the gate. The impassioned kisses are one thing, but the wandering hands are quite another... When he attempts to slide his fingers under her skirt on into her panties, she seizes his wrist firmly and gives him a stern look in the eyes.

“I'm gratified that you're feeling so frisky, Akira,” she says, “but you know we can't do this here.”

A weirdly determined look appears on his face, and, before Sayaka knows what's happening, he's broken from her grasp and... is lifting her into the air? It's so unexpected that she whoops with surprise. But, no, there she is, hoisted between his arms in a bridal carry! Akira isn't what she would consider a strong man, and, despite the confidence evident in his spontaneity and his ravishing, amorous expression, she can feel a slight unsteadiness in his scrawny arms.

Somehow, though, she knows he won't drop her. He would never drop her.

Sayaka wraps her arms around his shoulders and kisses him, signifying her trust. He seems to relax, the shakiness smoothing out into a more assured hold, and he kisses her tenderly back. And with that, the two of them disappear into the house to finish what they've been putting off for hours — leaving all the food and dishes outside on the mat, to be cleaned up whenever they happen to be done.

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“Gods, there's so much drifting on this course!” Kei complains from the other side of the twin cabinet, her Chum's grinding into the outside of a curve, as usual. “Why'd you have to pick this one, Misa-chan?”

Her eyes glued to the screen, Misato casually drifts out of a curve, ramming one of the CPU-controlled vehicles along the way. “Hah! Eat dirt, sucker!” With a decisive hand, she shifts gears and the speed on her red Scorpio climbs rapidly during the next straightaway. Before long, the track throws another sharp curve at her, but she goes through it effortlessly, barely slowing down. “There's drifting on all the courses, Kei. Thought you told me you were okay at this game?”

“Yeah, 'okay', meaning *not* 'expert'!” Kei crashes into another car and releases an exasperated groan, knocking her forehead against the steering wheel multiple times for dramatic effect. She glances over at Misato's monitor just in time to see the Scorpio claim 1st place and trigger the credit roll.

“Wooooo!” Misato cries, raising both fists over her head in a celebratory “V”. She turns to her friend, smirking broadly. “In your face, Kei!”

Kei spins the wheel ineffectually and sputters. “Yeah, sure. *Daytona USA 2* sucks anyway.”

“Spoken like a true sore loser!” Misato gloats.

“Keep that attitude up and I'll have to get Ryusaku over here to put you in your place.”

Misato snorts. “Just because your cousin insists on using the Phantom, it doesn't actually make him better than me. But you're right about this game sucking. Who cares about the US? I want my European cars! *F355 Challenge* can't come out soon enough.”

“Meh. All cars are the same to me.” Kei hops out of her driver's seat and starts rubbing her rump. “I think my butt is numb.”

Misato follows, practically vaulting off the machine. Beating the hardest course like it's nothing always feels good. “Well, why don't you go ask your boyfriend to massage it for you?”

Kei turns red. “Shotaro *is not* my boyfriend!!”

“That's not what Kiyoko said!” Misato provokes, her face twisting into an almost feline grin.

Kei crosses her arms and lightly stomps a foot. “Kiyo's just a skank. What the hell does she know?” After a moment's pause, she adds, “Aside from skanky things, of course.”

Misato's grin broadens. “Does your momma know you talk like that?”

“Of course,” Kei says. “But what's she gonna do about it? Spank me?”

“Bet you'd like that,” Misato retorts, playfully smacking one of her friend's butt cheeks. Kei squeals and retaliates by pulling on Misato's ponytail. No sweat, though; Misato quickly puts the other girl into a head lock, stopping the potential cat fight dead in its tracks. “Hah hah!” Misato cackles, giving Kei a noogie. “Can't get out, can you?”

Kei squirms against her friend. “*Seriously*, Misa-chan? Not fair!”

“If you were still going to practice,” Misato chides, “you'd know how to get oWWWWWW!” A flash of pain registers on her face and she lets go of Kei, grabbing the afflicted part of her arm. There's a nice, soggy wet spot on her sleeve. “Oh, gross, Kei. You bit me?!”

She shrugs. “It was through your shirt. You won't get any diseases. ...Probably.”

“That's not the point!” Misato glowers. But it doesn't really seem worth a fight. “Whatever. I guess I deserved it.”

Kei nods smugly. “You totally did. Anyway, want to grab a drink from the machine? I'll pay.”

“I can live with that.”

Kei, as usual, gets a canned coffee. Never mind that it's around eight at night — the girl needs her buzz. Misato gets a green tea, but the can's so hot that she needs to pull her sleeve up over her hand just to handle it. The temperature of the beverage itself is fine, though, so she just tries to drink it very quickly. As she's doing that, Kiyoko — who's really stood out ever since she bleached her hair white, the weirdo — shows up to excitedly announce the makeshift tournament they're starting on the SNK machines.

“S-weet!” Kei intones. “I might actually win this one!”

“Don't tell me you're going to play as Terry again?” Kiyoko sighs.

“Oh course! Terry's the man.” Kei chucks her empty can into a waste bin and turns to Misato.

“You coming?”

Misato shrugs. “I'll watch, I guess.”

“No way!” Kiyoko says. “You're better than the boys. Letting you sit this out would be such a waste!”

“But... I don't really like SNK.”

Kiyoko laughs. “Yeah, well, *Capcom* vs. *SNK* doesn't come out until next year, so deal with it.”

Misato crosses her arms. “How would that help? *All* fighting games are stupid!” Whatever — she's clearly not going to win this one.

Takashi and Masaru are busy beating each other up on the *King of Fighters* cabinet. “Alright, Misato,” Kiyoko says, “you take on whichever one of them wins, and make sure you hit him so hard he's crying for mommy, okay?” Misato just grunts in assent. Kei and Kiyo get started on the adjacent *Fatal Fury* machine — as always, pitting the Bogard brothers against each other. Misato settles against a nearby wall to wait her turn.

She sticks her hand into the pocket of her jacket and plays around with the few remaining tokens. Feeling the bulk of her cell phone, she pulls it out and pops it open to get a refresher on the current time. Almost 8:30 now, even later than she thought. She should probably head back home soon; definitely no later than quarter of. Checking in on the boys' progress, she clearly sees Takashi win, but Masaru just goes, “Best three out of five?”, and they keep on playing. So much for the 'tournament'...

Suddenly, she becomes aware of someone in her peripheral vision, silently joining her at the wall. Her head quickly pivots, and there's an older boy there who seems vaguely familiar. He's a high schooler, but really short for his age, not much taller than her. His jet black hair is slicked up into spikes with an overabundance of gel — kind of gross-looking, really. And that forehead, so huge it looks like he could break rocks with it... she's *definitely* seen that before. He nonchalantly chews on a cigarette as he gazes absently over at her.

Misato squints, trying to get her memory to cooperate. He's one of Kei's acquaintances; she remembers that much. Eventually, a name finds its way out. “...Shima-kun?” Yeah, pretty sure that's right.

“The one and only,” he replies, sliding the cigarette behind his ear. “Long time no see, Katsura.”

“Katsuragi,” Misato corrects. Trying to make conversation, she asks, “So... where've you been? I haven't seen you since...” Huh. Shima's been enough of a satellite to the main group, she honestly can't remember.

He folds his arms behind his head. “Since before you entered puberty, I'd guess. Kei didn't tell you? I was sent to live with my grandma until my parents worked their issues out. And, well, they finally did. Separated a couple of months ago.”

“‘Separated’?” Misato repeats.

“You know... divorced?”

“Oh,” she says, feeling kind of stupid. “Sorry to hear that, I guess.”

Shima shrugs. “No big deal. My folks have hated each other since before I was born, so it's about time they split, really. Getting displaced from Sakyo-ku for all those months was the worst part. And I guess my mom getting custody by default sucks, too. But whatever. I can deal with her and her shitty boyfriend for a couple more years.”

Misato stares at her feet for a moment. She hasn't met many kids whose parents have separated. Her mind is swarming with questions, but she decides to keep them to herself. Instead, she just comments, “I wish *my* parents would get divorced.”

Without moving his head, Shima's eyes roll back toward her, a skeptical look on his face. “Do they actually hate each other's guts?”

Misato twiddles her thumbs. “Well, no, not really...”

“If that's that case,” Shima says, “then no, you don't.”

“What do you know?” Misato growls.

“Nothing, I guess,” he says. “Just a feeling.”

Hoping to keep him from prying any further, Misato looks desperately for an out — and she finds it, tucked behind the older boy's ear. “Don't tell me you're one of the people giving cigarettes to Kei?”

Shima chortles. “‘Giving’? She basically steals them. Kind of a klepto, that friend of yours.”

“Yeah, I know,” Misato admits. “Nothing I can do about it, though. If she gets caught, it's not my problem.” As an afterthought, she adds, “At least she doesn't steal my stuff. Not that I've noticed, anyway...”

Another short laugh, this one a bit more derisive. “From the way Kei talks about you, I'd have thought you were more loyal than that.”

“I'm plenty loyal,” Misato insists. “I just won't let her drag me into the gutter with her, is all.”

Shima's eyes narrow. “If you're afraid of getting in trouble, I think you've picked the wrong group of friends.”

Misato sticks her nose up into the air. “My friends are perfectly fine. Who the hell do you think you are, anyway?”

“Just some punk,” Shima says, “no different from the rest of those losers.” He gestures to the SNK cabinets.

Misato doesn't like this guy's attitude, and she gets all up in his face. “Where do you get off, dissing my friends? I don't care how much older you are. I could still beat the piss out of you.”

He smirks. “Somehow, I doubt you will. You're a goody-two-shoes to the bone.”

Misato feels her teeth grit and her hands curls into fists. “Say that again!”

Shima casually puts a hand on her forehead and pushes her away, but she escapes his grasp easily. He just smirks again in that really sleazy way of his. “You've got good moves, I'll give you that. But you're a daddy's girl, Katsuragi. I can see it in your eyes. You belong with the 'A' students, not out with the trash.” He squints at her, his expression almost becoming... perverted? “Though, if you were a bit older, I'll admit... there's no way I wouldn't try to ask you out.”

With that, Misato's temper goes into the red zone. She can practically feel the smoke blow out of her ears, and she's just about to throw an open palm at the side of Shima's jaw when Kei's voice brings her back to her senses.

“Oh, Misa-chan!” Kei calls. “You found Shima-kun, huh?”

“More like he found me,” Misato says glumly, letting her arms dangle harmlessly at her sides. “He's a lot less cool than I remember. Where did you find this scumbag, Kei?”

“*Whaaaat?*” exclaims Kei. “Shima-kun is the best!”

He takes a bow. “Why, thank you, Kei-chan. It's a pity your friend doesn't feel the same way.”

“The hell?” Misato spits at him. “Only a second ago, you were saying that you and everyone else were nothing but lowlife punks!”

Kei smirks enigmatically. “Yeah, he does that. So, Shima-kun, why so late? We could've used you here hours ago!”

“I told you my job only ends at eight. Not a whole lot I can do, Kei-chan.”

“Oh, right,” Kei says. “Forgot about that. Anyway, want to compete in our SNK tournament? Masaru and Kiyoko are out, so we could use you.” She glares at Misato. “And you too, Misa-chan!”

Misato purses her lips. “The boys took their sweet time, so it's too late now. I really need to head back, Kei.”

Kei blows a puff of air up at her bangs. “Right, right. Because otherwise your mom will cry all night,” she mutters. “Pffft, fine.” With a swish of her hand, she theatrically emotes, “Go! Get out of here! Who needs you anyway?”



Misato just grins, pats her friend on the head, and slaps her leftover tokens into Kei's hand. "Later, Kei." She looks warily at Shima. "I guess... I'll see you around?"

He's chewing on the cigarette again and giving Misato a borderline creepy look. "Better believe it." If Kei weren't there, Misato would, absolutely, break his nose or make him lose some teeth. And she could totally get away with it, too — after all, who'd believe that a 12-year-old girl beat up a boy in his late teens? She glares at Shima and gladly gives him her back.

After saying her farewells to the other three, she claims her skateboard and bag at the front. Exiting into the dark, cool night, she confidently hits the pavement and makes her way home.

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Misato makes good time, turning into the front gate only a couple of minutes before the hour turns. She takes her skateboard under an arm and approaches the door. Something's covering the central walkway, looks like. When she gets close enough, there's enough illumination coming from the nearest street light to make out that it's the old picnic mat, covered in their good dishes. There's a bottle of sake and some uneaten food there, too. Very curious, and she feels a pinch of anxiety in her chest.

She walks around the mess and goes inside, setting her skateboard against its designated spot on the wall and taking her shoes off. It's hard not to notice that Dad's giant clown shoes aren't there, but Mom's are. Not an unusual sight, by any means, but she thought Dad was staying in tonight? That's why Misato made a point of staying out, after all. Huh.

The whole house is dark and quiet. Misato already feels like she knows what happened. Naturally, Dad ended up leaving, for whatever his latest stupid Dad reason was, and left Mom all alone, to do what Mom almost always does when she's left alone. Misato suddenly feels really bad about her decision to bullshit an alibi and not join her parents for dinner. She was only thinking about herself, not about Mom, not about the very real possibility that Dad would up and abandon her again like the yellow pansy he is. The shame is so overwhelming that Misato feels like she could cry, but she doesn't let a single tear fall. She can't be weak like her parents. And she especially can't be like Dad. Abandoning Mom is something Dad does, not her. Never her!

*I messed up, Misato thinks, but I can be there for her now. I can make it alright.*

She dissipates the darkness with a flick of the kitchen light switch and quietly makes her way to Mom's room. Once there, she puts an ear to the fusuma, but she hears nothing. "...Mom?" Misato whispers. Still nothing. She knocks a couple of times on the adjacent wall, but, again, nothing. Mom can be a pretty sound sleeper, so the lack of response isn't reason in and of itself to be alarmed. Still, just to be sure, Misato *does* want to get visual confirmation that Mom's in there and okay. "Mom, I'm coming in, okay?" As she anticipated, there's no response, but saying the words makes her feel better about breaching her mother's privacy.

Misato slides the door open, letting in just enough light to see by. And, as soon as she does, she slams the fusuma shut and quickly spins on her heel, hugging the wall in shock. Nauseous, violated shock.

Her mom is in there, all right. But so is Dad. And they look like a singular pile of naked flesh, curled up in a tangle of sheets on the futon, with no clear indication of where one ends and the other begins. Thank gods they just seem to be sleeping, but, even though they weren't actually doing it, they obviously *had* been. Misato feels sick to her stomach. And so angry — just like earlier today, when she walked in on her parents' inability to keep that crap behind a door. Why do grown-ups do such gross stuff?? And if Mom has to do it at all, why... just, *why*, with HIM?! That batty bag of bones that's made her cry more times than Misato can count?

All her loathing and frustration pools into her fist, which launches right into the wall. Misato's at once relieved and disappointed that it doesn't break through. But if she lingers here much longer, there's no way she'd trust herself to *not* keep trying until that happens.

Misato attempts to take her mind off things by cleaning up the mess outside and helping herself to some dinner. It almost works, but then she gets the bright idea of watching a little TV... only to discover her parents' shirts in a pile next to the couch, with Dad's shoes hiding underneath. Ugh, seriously? They were doing the nasty out here, too? So much for using *that* piece of furniture ever again. And, for that matter, so much for chilling out in front of the tube before bed. There's no way she'd be able to stay out here without her mind's eye being haunted by the image of both her folks topless and snogging.

Hoping to keep herself from dwelling upon what *other* parts of the house have inevitably been contaminated by Mom and Dad's mating rituals, Misato retreats into the sanctity of her room. (There's no way they'd screw in there... right? *Right??*) She collapses onto her futon and, the reassuring squeeze of headphones round her skull, she blasts L'Arc-en-Ciel down her ear canals. All the meanwhile, she stares at the crack in the ceiling, doing everything in her power to not think about anything gross or upsetting. But it's no use. Getting her mind off the one thing only lets that slimeball friend of Kei's take its place and taunt her with his creepy pedo stares and wild accusations. “Goody-two-shoes.” “Daddy's girl.” Maybe she can live with the first one, but the second...?

There isn't a gram of truth to it. She hates her dad. Full stop. She doesn't want him; she doesn't need him. If she could switch him out for a different one, she totally would. The gangly bastard could get hit by a train for all she cares. Sure, that would make Mom sad, probably make her cry for days on end. But Misato and Aunt Yura would help her get over it. And, without that trash around to drag her down, Mom might actually start to care about herself again. Heck, maybe she'd even start looking for a guy who's actually worthy of her. Wouldn't that be something?

Too bad it'll probably never happen. Misato just isn't that lucky. And her mom... especially isn't.

- One of my beta readers expressed concern about Akira's extended vacation from POV land. Rest assured that this is quite deliberate, and his inevitable return is already written into the scenario.
- At the time I wrote Akira's feminist tract re: Arai/Matsutoya, I wasn't aware that Japanese law (apparently *to this day*) requires that both partners in marriage have the same surname. I'll correct this eventually.
- What they're making for dinner comes from [Japanese Cooking 101](#). Originally, you got to hear a lot more about the other dishes, but that got written out... along with Akira and Sayaka singing and dancing to "Rouge no dengon" like the couple of dorks they are. Ugh, what was I thinking.
- Possibly random: it's definitely occurred to me that I make a LOT of eye-related references in CM's prose. Then I remember that the title itself is an eye reference, and I stop worrying about it.
- I swear I didn't know about [yaeba](#) when I wrote the stuff last chapter about Sayaka finding Akira's crooked teeth cute. (Though, if I had known, the result would have been the same.)
- You're not supposed to know offhand what Akira is referencing when he says "there's no guarantee that a child will love its parents", though I might have revealed enough by now for one to make an educated guess.
- My friend Muggy teased me for the inclusion of "snogging", which — unbeknownst to me at the time of writing — is actually British slang. I'm not sure I want to replace it, though. I really adore how hilarious it sounds.
- The names of Misato's friends and acquaintances taken from Katsuhiro Otomo's *Akira*. A bit of a wink wink, nudge nudge. (While "Akira" is a devastatingly common name, alas! here in the west, people's minds tend to carry very limited associations.) Kei's comment about her butt being numb is probably a subtle reference to the film version, too.
- Many of the suggestions for Misato's (almost-)teenage characterization and hobbies come from NemZ @ EGF. One of my beta readers, Seele00TextOnly, also provided a lot of encouragement and advisory for the Misato sections. She, independently from NemZ, suggested making Misato a bit rebellious and delinquent, so I contemplated a way to maybe work that in without negating Misato's ideological commitment to "being a good girl for Mom". The best compromise I see is to have Misato hang out with the kinds of kids she wants to be and live vicariously through their exploits, while being as edgy and rebellious as her conscience permits her to be.
- My other beta reader, honsou, wondered how Misato wasn't familiar with the concept of depression, so perhaps a quick cultural note is warranted. First off, we are in late 90s Japan, which is only just starting to get its shit together with regard to mental health issues (not that it isn't still struggling to this day). Second, the word for depression is *utsubyou* — unlike its English equivalent, it refers only to the mental health condition, so it's a bit clinical and not the sort of thing you'd hear people talking about casually. The obstacles to mainstream acceptance of the term actually led to pharmaceutical companies marketing anti-depressants to not *utsubyou*, but *kokoro no kaze*, literally "a cold of the heart/mind/soul". "My *kokoro* has a cold" sounds kind of childish (maybe it sounds better in Japanese?),

but the phrasing did seem to help overcome some of the stigma associated with the more clinical term. [This is a pretty interesting article](#), if you want to know more.

- “Places in the mountains” refers to Japan's notorious mental institutions. [Here's a 2001 article](#) about those. Remember, kids, this might show up on the quiz later!
- In case the thing with the canned green tea confused ya, Japan does, indeed, have vending machines that provide warmed beverages.
- The character of Shima-kun did not exist when work on this chapter commenced. He came to me in a borderline sleep state and I figured, “Why the hell not?” I'm not 100% sure what I'll be doing with him going forward, but I'm fairly certain I will have a use for him. I have so much of the story planned out, a little improvisation is kind of refreshing and fun. Like, “Wow, finally something for which I don't know the outcome yet!”

# The Dragon and the Fox

## Chapter Summary

Akira lets the clock tick down on the job offer, repeatedly refusing to give Tatsuta a straight answer. While Sayaka is probably okay with this, the mysterious individual behind ISTAA has absolutely no intention of taking anything but "yes!" as an answer.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Monday, October 18, 1999

UN Commission for the Sciences  
Human Resources Office  
Tokyo

Chiyoe Tatsuta's office is spacious and extravagant, as much a personal space as it is a professional one. Large windows both illuminate the space and provide an excellent view of a green terrace rimmed by forest. The décor is comprised mainly of classically-styled artwork of dragons and other such creatures that she's accumulated over the years: ukiyo-e woodblock prints, a gold leaf folding screen, bronze statues, and so forth. It's become a bit of a running gag in Tatsuta's social circles to gift her with dragon art. She doesn't mind, exactly, but between here and her apartment, she's running out of storage space. Besides, there's only one piece of artwork she really needs: the one she carries with her everywhere.

Within this environment of sunlight, ancient beasts, and office fixtures, Tatsuta appears very much at home: reclining in her desk chair, exposed feet on an afghan. As she eats from her boxed lunch, she works on a page in a book of number puzzles, enjoying the temporary reprieve from the unrepentant grind.

Suddenly, a light tapping starts up at her door.

"I'm not taking walk-ins right now, Anna-san," she says, an edge of impatience to her voice. "Tell them to schedule a time and come back later."

The rapping continues. Clearly, the one responsible is not the receptionist; Anna would have just buzzed Tatsuta on her phone. Or, at the very least, she would have *said* something, not just continue to make noise. Issuing a dull mutter under her breath, Tatsuta hides the puzzle book in a drawer, slips on her heels, and rises to get the door. As she opens it, she lets loose, "Didn't you hear me say, no visito—"

Standing there is a tall, silver-haired male westerner — perhaps in his early 60s, but well-preserved. He is dressed in business casuals, with one hand consigned to a pocket and the other stroking his well-groomed mustache.

Tatsuta's eyes immediately narrow in begrudging recognition.

“For all you've ascended through the ranks, Tatsuta-san,” the man cordially greets, his voice impressively sonorous, “I will always be above you. There's no telling *me* to get lost.” His Japanese is quite fluent, but there's enough of an accent for it to sound exotic.

She simply rolls her eyes and sighs. “I didn't realize you'd be in Tokyo quite so soon, Frisch-san. I apologize for my unbecoming behavior. Please, come in.” And she bows deeply.

Frisch steps into her office and closes the door behind him. Laughing lightly, he remarks, “Talk about forced! I much prefer it when you're coarse.”

Tatsuta obliges him. “In fact, I actually was warned that you'd be dropping by sometime before the year ended. And I'm glad you've chosen to get it out of the way.” With dull sarcasm, she adds, “The anticipation was killing me.”

Frisch chuckles, clearly enjoying the rude rhetoric. “As always, your blatant disregard for the hierarchy is a breath of fresh air. It was always one of the things I liked about you.” He winks.

“Oh, spare me, Lukas,” Tatsuta snarls. “What do you want?”

“I'm not intruding, am I?” He starts fishing in a pocket.

Tatsuta indicates her desk, where her bento and chopsticks still lay. “Of course you are. I was in the middle of lunch, hence the closed door. But I understand you're a very busy man, so what does my convenience matter?”

“That's my girl,” Frisch purrs. “Let it all out. By the way, do you mind if I smoke?”

Tatsuta, sensing that this will be a tedious visit, collapses back into her desk chair. “You know I don't care.”

“Just a courtesy I insist on extending.” Frisch lights up. “Well, Chiyo-chan — it *is* okay for me to still call you that, right? — you seem to be doing quite well for yourself since the last time I saw you. Did I make the right call in giving this department to you?”

“No one else is here, Lukas,” she replies dryly, joining her hands behind her head. “Call me whatever the hell you want.” Tatsuta expressionlessly regards him for a moment, then addresses the second question. “Well, as I'm sure you anticipated, there was plenty of unflattering gossip that went around when I first took over from... whoever it was.”

“Tanaka,” Frisch says.

“Sure, Tanaka.” The guy had been promoted to another department in the UN before she even arrived at the office, so she never met him; his existence is all but inconsequential to her.

“But as I’m also sure you anticipated, I quickly put all the underlings in their places through sheer force of competency. They don’t dare speak ill of me now.”

“I would expect no less of a she-dragon like yourself,” Frisch says. “Speaking of, that high collar is unbecoming.” He approaches her and, with his free hand, pulls the nape of her shirt back, revealing the top of a tattoo.

Tatsuta quickly swipes at him. “Hands off,” she snaps. “You know better.”

Frisch throws a playful grin at her, clearly admiring her spunk. “You shouldn’t have to hide that fine piece of work, you know.”

“I don’t hide anything,” she insists. “I merely respect proper professional decorum.”

“Oh?” Frisch takes a long drag, then releases a fine gray funnel toward the ceiling. “So there *is* someone who gets to see it?”

Tatsuta brings her arms forward and steeples her fingers on her lap. “I’m fairly certain that’s none of your business, Lukas,” she fires back sternly.

Frisch is undeterred. “I hope there is. A woman like you would be wasted single.”

“Like you know anything about women,” she sputters.

“Oh? You didn’t seem to feel that way all those years ago.” He takes another long, satisfying drag, after which he eyes Tatsuta somewhat uncomfortably. “We’re not having regrets now, are we?”

Tatsuta glares right back at him. “Never.” She leaves a pause for effect, then continues, acid as can be. “So, Lukas, are you stopping by for some reason other than casual sexual harassment?”

Frisch’s eyebrows shoot up. “Sexual harassment? If I wanted to do that, I would just tell you to show up at my condo later today.” His expression relaxes and his voice turns sultry, to an almost exaggerated extent. “By the way, *are* you doing anything tonight? It’s been a long time since I got a battle scar from you...” A lustful smirk. “And you know me. I don’t mind if you bring the boyfriend along. The more, the merrier.”

Tatsuta sighs in exasperation. “You never change, you filthy old fox. I don’t suppose you’re actually interested in knowing how ISTAA is coming along?”

He immediately and effortlessly shifts gears. “That is, in fact, the actual reason I’m here. But you’re so much fun to play with, my little flamelet, there was no way I could resist. Yes, how *is* the recruitment coming along?”

Tatsuta returns to her feet and goes to a group of filing cabinets against the window-side wall, where she pulls out a series of drawers. “Here are all of the files for successful recruits,” she tells him. “Take a look.” She moves aside and leans against a nearby section of wall.

Frisch snuffs his cigarette in Tatsuta's little-used ashtray, puts on a pair of reading glasses, then begins perusal. He starts at A-I-U-E-O and casually flips through the names, murmuring to himself here and there. "Hmm, Akagi, *sehr gut*... Ichijo, *vorzüglich*..." He soon reaches the next section, KA, where he seems to forgo his previous method of browsing, instead searching for someone specific.

"Who are you looking for?" Tatsuta asks.

Frisch turns to her, his expression unusually earnest. "Katsuragi. He doesn't seem to be here."

She raises an eyebrow in disbelief. "The perpetual motion guy over at Kyoto?"

"He's not technically advocating perpetual motion," Frisch corrects. "That's a common misunderstanding. But, yes, that's the one. Whose charge is he?"

"Mine," Tatsuta says without hesitation. She moves to a nearby column of filing drawers and slides one out. As she deftly flips through the folders within, she idly comments, "The evaluation guidelines really need to be tidied up, Lukas. If it were up to me, Katsuragi would never have qualified for ISTAA." She pulls out a file, much bulkier than most, labeled "KATSURAGI A." and hands it to Frisch.

He adjusts his glasses and accepts. As he shuffles through the contents, he says, "If you don't mind my asking, Chiyo-chan, what about Katsuragi did you find lacking?"

Tatsuta crosses her arms over her chest and turns her head away. "I knew going in that he had a well-established reputation as something of a deranged pariah."

"And did you see any evidence of that...?"

Her foot starts tapping restlessly. "The man wasn't quite what I expected. Very timid temperament, and extremely humble about his work. But there was an unnerving instability underlying it all. It seemed like he might burst into tears at any moment." *Or, for that matter, pull a complete 180° and start ranting madly instead.* She frowns.

Frisch seems to find her account amusing, and he merely smirks. "Katsuragi was probably just intimidated by you. One could hardly blame him. I've heard some very plausible tales about the fear you strike into the hearts of your kouhai..."

Tatsuta grunts unappreciatively. "Whatever the case, psychiatric evaluations should be mandatory for all ISTAA recruits."

"At most branches, they actually are," Frisch notes. "Japan is a glaring exception, probably because it's mostly Japanese people in charge of it, and, much as I hate to say it, your country is dragging its feet on certain issues."

She scoffs. "What a bullshit excuse. I know you. You could have it fixed with a snap of your fingers."

Frisch continues to browse, paying no heed to Tatsuta's derision. "Could' is not the same as 'should'." His index finger moves across the current page, helping to direct his eyes. "Truth to



tell, Chiyo-chan, the evaluations rule is fairly loose even where it *is* in effect. Many of these individuals are one-of-a-kind human resources. Any quirks they might have are thus worth the trouble of dealing with.” As soon as the last word leaves his mouth, his finger freezes in place, his brows promptly furrowing.

“What now?” Tatsuta grumbles.

The foreign man looks up from the document, his expression severe. “You’ve let a month pass without reeling him in?” Frisch’s voice is almost frighteningly intense. “Chiyo, you know he’s of the highest priority, correct?” For emphasis, he indicates the place on the file where it says as much in bold red print.

Tatsuta stands her ground, unintimidated. “Lukas, you’re overworking us to the bone. You and your people want too much done in too little time. So, even with a ‘high priority’ recruit, about all I can do is nag him at his office once a week.”

“Not ‘high priority’,” Frisch states firmly. “HIGHEST priority’. There is a substantial difference.” His tone easing slightly, he says, “Anyway, explain the difficulty to me.”

Tatsuta shifts her weight and sighs. “Katsuragi is clearly dodging my calls. On the rare occasion I do get him, he refuses to provide a definitive answer. Always ‘I’m still thinking about it’, or some such. The rate things are going, I fully expect him to remain noncommittal to the very end and just let the offer expire.”

Frisch closes the file up. “If he’s going to be stubborn and evasive, then we have to be more stubborn, more persistent. Do whatever you have to do, Tatsuta. I’m not letting him get away from us.”

“Seriously? What the hell is so important about him?”

“That, my dear,” Frisch says, “is classified.”

“Figures,” Tatsuta snorts.

Frisch slides his glasses back into his shirt’s front pocket. “But, yes. Give Dr. Katsuragi precedence over all other cases. I need him in our ranks within the next thirty days.”

Full-on aggravation sets in, causing Tatsuta to start kneading above the bridge of her nose. “I told you, Lukas. I don’t have the manpower to devote to Katsuragi. There are far too many targets we need to hit and acquire before the end of the year.” She lowers her hand, revealing cold, aquiline eyes. “Remember: you’re *not* the only person breathing demands down my neck. Mandates from the guys higher on the chain take priority over yours. I’m sorry.” No — she really isn’t.

The silver-haired man cups his chin in his palm for a moment, gaze distant with contemplation. Finally, he says, “Well, no matter. I’ll simply take him on myself.”

Tatsuta laughs scornfully. “I have a hard time believing you’d have the time for that...”

He provides his own icy, piercing look. "Chiyo-chan... You should know by now that if I want to do something, I don't find the time. I *make* the time. By sheer force of will."

"Oh, brother..." She rolls her eyes.

Frisch's face reverts once more. "But in all seriousness, my schedule is comparatively light during the upcoming month or so. Even people like me need pseudo-vacations so they don't burn out. Honestly wasn't my idea, but the old codger insisted." He idly flips through the file again. "Katsuragi will be leisure activity compared to what I've been up to lately. Pity his photo's not in here..."

"That's because those are taken as part of the hiring process," Tatsuta says. "But you know that, so..." She thinks for a moment, then wearily clasps her face in her palm. "Oh no... I should've figured as much."

Frisch smirks, clearly up to no good. "Figured as much, *what?*"

"Nothing," she pipes. "Nothing at all."

"Oh, no. Go on, Chiyo-chan." He lights up another cigarette. "Tell me what you're thinking."

Tatsuta returns to her chair once more, kicking off her heels, deciding precisely how to go about trash-talking the dirty old fox to his face. "I'm surprised I didn't realize it earlier. Katsuragi is just your type. A bit older than you tend to go, but it's not like you'd notice with him." After a moment's thought, she adds, "The odds might even be in your favor, Lukas. Katsuragi *does* kind of strike me as someone who's gnawed on his fair share of pillows."

"My oh my," Frisch tuts. "I have no idea what you might be implying." He places the file snugly beneath his free arm.

"Sure you don't," Tatsuta snorts.

The next time Frisch touches the cigarette to his lips, there is the quality of a kiss about it. "A jealous she-dragon is a beautiful thing." He blows a delicate puff of smoke her way.

Tatsuta waves it off, unperturbed. "Are you quite finished, Lukas?"

"Just one more thing," he says, rummaging around in a pocket. "I brought you a present." He circles around to the front of her desk and deposits a tiny metal statuette between a puzzle box and a small bronze dragon. "A little something to remember me by."

Squinting, Tatsuta leans forward and picks it up. "What's this? An Inari kitsune?" She spins it around in her hand and, in spite of herself, a smile takes her lips. "I hate to say it, but it *does* suit you." Gift accepted, she places the little fox back where Frisch had set it.

As she mentally prepares a crass thank-you that her superior would surely appreciate, Tatsuta spins her chair back in Frisch's direction. But he's gone, the door ajar, nothing but a rapidly dissipating cloud of smoke where he was standing mere moments ago.

*Busy man, indeed. Good riddance.*

## Chapter End Notes

- If you found this chapter confusing, it may help to compare its in-story date to that of “The Wall”.
- Frisch's full name is Lukas von Frisch. I wasn't able to work it into this chapter, but it will naturally appear later. I'll explain the origins of his name after he's done a bit more.
- *Kitsune* is Japanese for “fox”, while also encompassing the concept of fox *yokai* — those multi-tailed shapeshifting things you might be familiar with. Inari is a kami (sometimes multiple kami) whose shrines typically have two kitsune statues, one of each sex. Frisch's gift is styled after these statues and was possibly purchased at an Inari Shrine, assuming little yokai statuettes are something you can buy at those places; I honestly don't know.
- The animal imagery was not initially intended, but struck me quite abruptly upon realizing that the phrase “silver fox” suits Frisch on more than a superficial level. But you've only just met him, so I'll shut up about that.
- Not sure whether or not Tatsuta should lampshade how quickly Frisch leaves once he has Akira's file. Seems like something she would comment flippantly on, even if it's just in her inner monologue.
- A pity Tatsuta doesn't have much to do after this chapter. I can imagine her reaction: “So you use me to advance the story lines of two male characters, then dump me? I see how it is. \*leer\*”

# Old Pain

## Chapter Summary

For Akira Katsuragi, life seems to have taken an unexpectedly sunny turn. Exchanging single-minded dedication to the Super Solenoid Theory for concerted devotion to family, friends, and personal well-being is working so well for him, it's almost enough to make him forget about the potential path that ISTAA has provided. But anything Akira ignores has a way of eventually catching up to him. Will it be the UN's renewed efforts that get to him first, or something much closer to home?

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tuesday, October 19, 1999

Late Morning

The staff meeting seems to drag on forever. Haru attempts to pay attention but feels himself in a haze, fading in and out. Life's been crazy. Accommodating Risa's dream job hasn't been easy. He's cut out as many hours of work as possible, but reached the limit for right now. Between his obligations at work and those at home, he's spent. He hasn't been this sleep-deprived since the kids were still in diapers.

If he were another man, he might grumble about the work load and get mad at his wife. But, in fact, seeing Risa this happy and satisfied makes everything worth it. Haru knew from the first date he had with her that she was intrinsically more intelligent and competent than he — and that didn't intimidate him. Quite the opposite, really. Akira's then-frequent dissertations on gender politics must have affected him when he wasn't paying attention. Not that Haru necessarily considered this a bad thing. He ended up internalizing Akira's distaste toward the fate of most women in the country, which was either to become housewives or be restricted to dead-end jobs like “office lady”. Risa should be able to do whatever she wanted; anything else would be needless settling.

They ended up developing a long-term arrangement that would enable both of them to enjoy careers while also being able to have a family. Balancing the two has been very difficult, but Haru thinks they've pulled it off pretty well. With both kids reaching an age where they can be relatively independent and contribute their fair share to the household, Haru began to make temporary personal sacrifices that would allow Risa to start pursuing a position in her preferred field of pharmacology.

Fortunately, their eldest, Masahiro, has been entirely cool about the changes and more than willing to pitch in. Little Jun has been a bit more difficult — somewhat begrudging of the

fact that Mom isn't around much anymore... and taking the resultant frustration out on her father instead. Haru has to repeatedly force himself to remember that it's not actually personal, that she's just a kid struggling with all these changes and feeling powerless against them. But his inability to help her is frustrating. She's the one who needs extra attention, too: despite being very bright, Jun struggles with reading and writing. No professionals have been able to satisfactorily diagnose her, although recently one of Risa's oversea pen pals suggested "dyslexia". It sounds promising, although they still haven't found the time to look further into it.

Risa's parents are thinking of retiring to Kyoto and living nearby so they can help. Haru must say, he's fully on-board with that idea. He needs a vacation badly. From everything. Akira's latest relapse isn't enough.

Speaking of.

Haru feels a firm pat on his shoulder and he jerks to alertness. "Huh," he mumbles, stretching his arms, then pulling off his glasses to give his eyes a good rub. Fuzzy blocks of color gradually rise and shuffle out of the room, and his own body automatically begins to follow suit. Once out, he pulls aside to hug the wall and polish the lenses of his specs before replacing them on his face. As he looks to his right, he finds his best friend waiting for him, eyes taken in by the tiny screen of a cell phone, thumbs keying away at the number pad.

"Hmm, let me take one guess as to whom you're texting," Haru teases. "You've been addicted to that thing ever since you got it."

A coy smile forms on Akira's face and he simply shrugs. "Yeah, well. Still swept up in the novelty of it all."

Haru crosses his arms. "Irony, considering you've resisted the technology with all your might until now. Whatever happened to that guy?"

"Oh, he hasn't gone anywhere. He's just made one exception." The tall man pockets the phone and smiles. "Sayaka is worth making exceptions for, no?"

The past month has been full of bizarre exceptions. It all started with Akira pouring his heart out over drinks about the dinner meeting with Tatsuta, divulging the simultaneously depressing and exhilarating terms of the UN's job offer. From there, he seemed to turn into a new person practically overnight — not too unlike the Akira whom Haru had befriended some fifteen years ago, only a tad older-looking, maybe even a little wiser. Akira has gone through periods of relative stability before, but never anything like this: week after week of cleaning up his act with dedication, consistency, and no sign of faltering.

There have been so many changes in short order, Haru's barely been able to keep up. Akira is decidedly putting a lot of time and effort into his relationship with Sayaka, and, just from monitoring his moods, it's obvious that they're being regularly intimate. Akira's been using the phone to text her throughout the day, to maintain a sense of connection — the complete opposite of old habits, where she'd be lucky to get warning if he decided to stay at the office to all hours. He's heard the occasional word about Akira's ongoing campaign to win back

Misato's trust and affection, but, obviously, it will take a lot more time to make appreciable changes there.

Akira looks a lot different, too. He's quickly returned to a healthy baseline weight, even started exercising in hopes of gaining some tone for a change. His complexion actually has some color to it now — no longer the usual sickly pale. The man has taken things so far that he's actually wearing his hair differently, with his bangs swept to the sides and out of his eyes, and regularly dressing in a more professional manner. Today he has the full office regalia going: blazer, tie, shoes, and all. It doesn't really suit him, somehow.

“Of course,” Haru replies. “A man must be willing to do anything for those he loves. Even if it means getting a cell phone.”

Akira chortles under his breath. Then, something gets his attention, and he stiffens up and impulsively starts adjusting his garments. It takes but a quick glance into the corridor to figure out what's happening. Okadome is breaking away from his chat with Ando, and, from the way he's bearing his weight, Haru or Akira could very well be next. Haru's heart quickly takes to pounding — the boss could easily want to have a word with him about dozing during the meeting. And having Okadome talk down to him like he's still a barely pubescent nebbish would really put a damper on the rest of the day. It's inevitable; the man is *that* unpleasant.

But, no, no... Okadome walks right to Akira, and Haru might as well not even be there. From the look on their supervisor's face, he actually doesn't have something negative to say for once.

“Katsuragi-kun,” Okadome begins, his tone uncharacteristically cordial, “I wanted to let you know that your recent efforts in being a more involved member of this department have not gone unnoticed. Your participation today was most impressive. Please, keep it up.”

Akira bows deeply. “Thank you, sir.”

Okadome dips his head in turn, and goes on his merry way.

It's over as soon as it began. Haru can't quite seem to believe it. He adjusts his glasses, then whispers, “Did that actually just happen?”

Akira, his expression similarly dumbstruck, scratches the back of his head. “I'm wondering the same thing. For all intents and purposes, I'll assume it did.” And with that, he fishes out a beat-up pocket notebook and starts flipping through. There's not much in that particular memo aside from Akira's extremely long personal list of to-dos. He's been halfheartedly tending to it for years, the thing always getting more use during his intermittent periods of being either “up” or neutral. Naturally, the past month has seen Akira maintaining his checklist with almost religious fervor. Akira finishes scanning and takes a pencil to the page.

Haru cranes his neck, trying to get a look at what his friend is doing. Akira's private handwriting is notoriously difficult for anyone else to read, given his habit of writing characters horizontally left to right and employing idiosyncratic shorthands for frequently-used kanji. Haru's worked with Akira long enough to know a lot of the latter, but Akira

always seems to be inventing new ones. He makes out barely more than the kanji for “Okadome” before Akira finishes striking through the item, closing the book.

“So... what is it you just managed to accomplish?” Haru asks.

Akira stows the memo back into a pocket and smiles wryly. “Get complimented by Okadome’.”

“Whoa. That's awfully specific,” he chides. “Not to mention...” Haru was going to say something like 'so improbable as to not be worth the pursuit', but, well...

“Well, what?” Akira says. “I did it, didn't I?”

Impossible as the whole thing seems, Haru must concede, “Yes. Yes, you did.” Adjusting his tone to a warmer, more genuine one, he adds, “That's really something, Akira-kun. Congratulations. Sayaka-san will be ecstatic to hear it, I'm sure.”

“Ah, that's a good point,” Akira notes, fishing his phone out again, no doubt to tell his wife the news.

They pick up their mail and make their way back to their offices. Akira enters his while, in accordance with age-old tradition, Haru loiters around the doorway. As they simultaneously flip through the day's offerings, a thought comes to Haru. He feels a little mental resistance to saying the words, but they force their way out regardless.

“By the way, Akira-kun, regular reminder: I still have that intel on the UN sitting around, whenever... if ever... you want to hear it.”

“Huh,” Akira murmurs, clearly more interested in deciding what should go into the waste basket.

No surprise there. Already, Haru regrets bringing it up. He looked into Tatsuta and the organization she represents, just as he said he would. Since then, most of his contacts have gotten back in touch with him, and he considered waiting for the right time to tell Akira about what they'd found... but, as far as he can tell, the only “right time” for Akira is never.

“So,” Haru prods, “is that reaction because you're no longer interested in the job, or...?”

The other man jerks as if he's just come to his senses. “Sorry, Haru. I didn't catch that last part.”

Haru knows this side of Akira all too well — the master of evasion. There's always *something* he doesn't want to talk about. Always. “How long are you going to drag that Tatsuta lady along?” he asks. “If you know you don't want the job, might as well just tell her now. And if that's not the case, then—”

“What's the harm in keeping my options open?” Akira interrupts.

Haru starts kneading his brow. “I'm not sure what that's supposed to mean. Either you want the job or you don't. If you're truly dedicated to your new outlook on life, then there's no

reason to dally, right? I'm sure both Sayaka-san and Tatsuta would appreciate some decisiveness from you on the matter.” He gives Akira a pointed look in the eyes. “Are you afraid that what's happening now won't last?”

“Why would I be afraid?” Akira asks, utterly nonchalant. “Sayaka and I are doing great. It's like you always said. Just put my attentions on the important things and everything will work out.”

Haru's not sure that's exactly how he phrased it, but no matter. “All right. If that's true, then you should be able to call Tatsuta today.”

Akira throws the remaining mail on the top of his IN tray, tosses the blazer over his chair, and starts removing his tie. “No time right now. Meeting up with Hiroshi and Seito around quarter of. Weight training today.”

“Ah,” Haru intones, “and then your midday date, if I remember rightly?”

Akira nods. “Take the train to the museum district, grab lunch, meet up with Sayaka at the place...” He frees up his neck and slings the tie onto the blazer. “I'm doing a split shift today, so I'll be back later. I can't remember Tatsuta's hours, though. Might be too late by then.” He shrugs. “Oh well. I can always leave a message and try again tomorrow.”

“Well, rest assured I'll be around tomorrow morning to make sure it gets done,” Haru says. “Wait... You're not having lunch with Sayaka-san?”

Akira shakes his head. “Yura is in Higashiyama today, and they need some sister-only time to catch up.”

“Ah. Makes sense, I guess.” Haru sticks his mail under an arm. “Speaking of Yura, she's going to be there this weekend, isn't she? It's been forever since Risa and I have seen her.”

Akira thinks for a moment. “You know, you're right. It actually has been a pretty long time. Unfortunately, I'm not sure about Yura's schedule. Tatsuya will be, definitely. What about you?”

“Of course. Masahiro, too. He's really interested in seeing something get demolished first-hand.” He pushes his glasses up the bridge of his nose. “It might be too much for Jun, though. She's kind of sensitive about things like that. And she'd probably enjoy the time alone with Risa, anyway.” Upon seeing Akira grab his gym bag, he tries to wrap it up. “Well, you kids enjoy yourselves. Risa's been after me for the longest time to have a special meet-up of our own, but it's so hard to make the time...”

Akira slings the bag over his shoulder and gives Haru a mischievous look. “Special meet-up? Haru, I assure you, this outing is perfectly wholesome and family-friendly.”

“Damn,” Haru says, unable to contain a chuckle. “Every day, you're getting a little closer to making your first lewd joke.”



“Oh, ease off,” Akira grumbles, ushering Haru out of the office and pulling out his key. “I made plenty of those in college.”

“That was so long ago it doesn't count anymore,” Haru teases, opening up his own door. “Anyway, like I said, have a good time. Give my regards to Sayaka-san. And I'm sure I won't be here by the time you return, so I'll see you bright and early tomorrow.”

“Sure thing. See you, Haru.”

They wave each other off and Haru slinks into his office. He takes one look at his own “IN” tray and groans in dismay, wishing he could just throw the whole lot in the trash and be done with it. More than likely, though, doing so would have consequences even less pleasant than just gritting his teeth and processing the papers properly. The in-box of his e-mail is getting out of hand, too, isn't it? He has no idea when he'll find the time for all this nonsense.

Settling into his chair, Haru glances at the wall clock and starts attacking the tray. It's a constant battle to keep his thoughts from drifting too much. He's not sure he'll win it, so right now he settles for working on the items that require the bare minimum of concentration.

Akira Katsuragi. That stupid bastard takes up far more of Haru's mental energy than could ever be considered healthy. Even now, with Akira doing well in almost every respect, Haru's on edge. It's impossible to shake the looming feeling that it will all come crumbling down at any moment — and, as usual, it will be up to him to clean up the mess. Haru wants to be positive about this; he really does. But as promising as things look on the surface, he knows what's going on beneath.

That Monday evening at Harukiya, about a month ago now, a lightly buzzed Akira told him everything there was to know.

“So much trouble,” Akira said. “It's too much trouble, Haru.”

“Why?” Haru asked. “From what you've told me, this sounds like your dream job. Not like you would really stop teaching, either. You'd be instructing those on your team who have less knowledge and experience.”

Akira cradled his forehead in a palm. “It feels like there was so much left unsaid. In the back of my mind, I know... I *know* I wouldn't have any real freedom there.”

“You could be right.” Haru reached for his drink. “People with that much money at stake will probably be very stingy about how it's used. It's a gamble.”

“And of course, if I accepted, then I'd be acceding to the world that I'm precisely the kind of person that others suspect I am.” His lip started to quiver slightly. “A typical Japanese male for whom work is everything.”

Haru knocked back some of his junmai. “Implying that you haven't already done that?”

“I've fallen into that role quite inadvertently, Haru.” The purple mop-top shook from side to side in vigorous denial. “That's not... who I really am.”

“I dunno, Akira-kun. If it's what you *do*, and have been doing for the past decade, wouldn't you say that's who you *are*?”

“Well... it's not who I want to be.”

Akira has long been terrified of his transformation into one of the things he hates most, but, for various reasons, he's also lacked the power to escape it. This thing with the UN, though, gives him an opportunity to take a stand against that fate. He could say “yes”, and unambiguously prove where his priorities lie. Or Akira could refuse, a choice that would validate the feelings that are surely in his heart, that his wife and daughter are more important than anything else.

Haru would like to think that Akira has really changed and that his attempt to reform will continue for the foreseeable future. But the UN's offer still hovers in the background and, ever since that night at the bar, Akira has stalwartly refused to acknowledge it as a matter of any importance. He's just been letting the timer run down, apparently hoping that the whole thing will go away if only he ignores it long enough. That he doesn't simply turn Tatsuta down and get it over with is troubling, since it means a part of him *wants* to keep that possibility open. Deep down, he's not fully committed to putting family first.

In the final hour, right before the offer expires, will Akira's willpower fail? Will he be frightened back into the shelter of his research, where matters of the heart can't hurt him?

Haru swivels over to his desktop PC and goes into the e-mail server. Now, where did he put it...? He dives into the folder marked “Personal” and soon locates the e-mail. The sender, kakiwotaku59, is Haru's old high school friend Jumpei, whose life has taken him to some very interesting places. 'Jun-kun' immediately came to Haru's mind as someone who'd have an insider scoop on the UN's search for scientific talent. And, while Jumpei didn't let Haru down, none of his information is reassuring.

He reads through the message for what might be the fifteenth time. Bits and pieces jump out at him. Corruption. ISTAA. Code name “Gehirn”. Construction in Hakone. The most troubling part regards the secret formulation of a new UN military force — one with real clout — and the weapons being developed for its use. “Something to put the atomic bomb to shame,” Jumpei writes ominously.

While the e-mail makes it sound like this was something already well in the works, Haru can't help but think of the UN's interest in Akira. As absolutely terrifying as nuclear weapons are, the kind of power that Akira dreams about would be, in the wrong hands, infinitely more devastating.

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After an intense lifting session, few things feel better than the sensual satisfaction of being scoured beneath a shower head. Akira's two kouhai really know how to push him to his limits. Maybe right before a romantic liaison wasn't the *best* time to do this, but he really

doesn't want to miss a day, and he won't have Hiroshi and Seito modify their long-standing routine on his account. Hopefully it will take a few hours for the worst of the aching to set in.

As he washes off, he can't help but take stock of the muscles they've been targeting. Akira's ashamed to admit that he's still learning the names — or re-learning, as the case may be. Feeling the slight bulges that form in his upper arms and chest when he flexes, he can't detect any visible improvement. But, then, he hasn't been doing this very long. His doctor told him to take it easy and follow a special weight gain diet until he was out of the danger zone — bare minimum of 68 kg, was it? It's been hard to contain his zeal, though. The weight is returning without a hitch. What harm is there in starting his training a little early? It's only been a week and a half so far, alternating between weights and swimming, and already he can't remember the last time he felt this good.

He finishes up, wrapping the towel round his midriff. It's still unreal to him how much difference those extra kilos make. He'd gotten used to seeing the outlines of his bones sticking out here and there, and he has no idea how he let himself become so indifferent to it. Dr. Komori was so alarmed that he recommended Akira to import a special kind of canned nutritive drink from overseas. Far from inexpensive, but, seeing how much this product has simplified the normally long and grueling process of weight gain, Sayaka agrees that it's been worth every yen.

Akira knows he still has some way to go, but it's wonderful to not feel so self-conscious about his body. Sayaka can say he's attractive, and he can believe her without being mired in self-doubt. His co-workers can compliment him and he can accept it without reservations. Even the usual googly eyes from the opposite sex — mostly his students — feel less weird, though, obviously, he's no closer to accepting any solicitations.

He sets about suiting himself back up. Today's outfit is one he purchased back in the summer, but never got much use of until now. Dressing better for work was Sayaka's idea. Of course, she has a weakness for seeing him like this, but she's also well aware of the long-standing conflict between Akira and his boss. When Amagiri-sensei was in charge of the department, Akira could get away with much more. Many claimed this was due to nepotism, but Akira could never see it. Amagiri-sensei was fairly easy-going in general, but he expected nothing but the best from his proteges. To Akira and Haru, he was practically a slave-driver, albeit the best possible kind.

Dr. Amagiri's retirement was forewarned years in advance, but no less of a disaster for Akira. When the baton passed to Okadome, it was as if the department's polarity changed in a nanosecond. His expectations were very different, and Akira could never bring himself to satisfy them. Fortunately, tenure has protected the impetuous Dr. Katsuragi all these years. (Being a student favorite has probably helped, too.) And so for all these years Akira and Okadome have been at a standstill, the atmosphere unpleasantly tense, Okadome seemingly doing everything in his power to make Akira feel uneasy and unwelcome.

Even so, Okadome lacks the power to turn Akira's love for academia in on itself, and that's important. Akira has been talking to Sayaka about the future. Despite his inhibitions about giving Tatsuta a definitive answer, it's all but decided that he won't take the job. It requires

too much of a sacrifice; it will just tear the family apart and make him more miserable than ever. He can be happy without it. That's the only way to be happy, even!

“In which case,” Sayaka posed to him, “is it possible for you to be happy at your current job? Or should you be looking for a third option?”

He has been wasting years and years of his life seeking a patron for his quirkiest and most controversial ideas. If he put those interests aside and simply became a brain for hire, that might open up some interesting new possibilities. But Akira has been at Yukawa for so long that it's difficult to imagine himself anywhere else. He's not sure he wants to. He doesn't have to give up the ship, not yet.

“Why treat your antagonism with Dr. Okadome as a necessary and unchangeable condition?” Sayaka asked. It was a very edifying conversation they had, and she was full of pointed questions. “Think,” she said. “Assume he doesn't have it out for you as a person. Are there aspects of your behavior that he might find disagreeable? Are there things you can change, without compromising who you are inside?”

Akira had to admit that, yes, he probably could name a few things. He dresses too casually; his hair looks too unkempt; his polite speech forms are unrefined; he's too focused on personal projects and doesn't take enough interest in collaborative ones; he interacts too little with any senior staff besides Haru; he doesn't participate enough in staff meetings; etc. Could any of these things be changed? If he really wanted to, sure. Would it make his life easier? Probably.

So that's what he's been doing, and today yielded the first concrete sign that his efforts have been paying off. Sayaka naturally shared his enthusiasm for this development, texting him back, “Congrats, Aki-chan! ヽ(^o^ヽ)” Akira was really resistant to taking these measures at first, but he can't deny that the praise from Okadome felt good. And being less on edge all day at work is more than reward for altering his habits a little.

Akira figures he might as well put the tie back on while he has mirrors readily available. He finds one on the wall that's at least as tall as he is — not having to stoop or bend is always nice — and gets to it. As his hands work, he notices that his bangs have reverted to their feral condition, parting slightly off-center and forming uneven purple drapes over his brow. The crazy things really do resist any attempt at taming. He's considered cutting them off, but then he remembers old photos where his hair is cut *short* short... *Never again*. He'd just as soon grow his bangs out and let his hair reach a length where he can simply pull it back, but that plan probably doesn't mesh well with trying to get on Okadome's good side. Maybe later, if he really proves himself and gets the boss to loosen up a little.

He gets caught up in the way the light plays off his hair. The purple color comes from his father's side, and from Akira's observations the trait is fairly rare despite having apparently dominant behavior. Why this is, who knows; it's not his field. Akira does know, however, that this feature is one of the few things connecting him to his daughter. For Misato, it's an unambiguous reminder of where she comes from, one she has to see in the mirror every day. Akira honestly wonders why Misato hasn't started dyeing it black. Then again, he can just as well imagine her reasoning, “Why should I change? He's the one who sucks.”

Even after four weeks of relentless effort, Akira feels no closer to Misato. He has been tirelessly friendly and outgoing toward her, undeterred by the girl's aloof attitude. He's been very careful *not* to go on about himself, but to keep focus on her: ask about her interests, her friends, her academics, her inner world, her everything. It's been nerve-wracking. A single mistake, and Misato could just dismiss the entire endeavor with a simple, "I knew all along that Dad hadn't changed!" As of yet, he hasn't obviously messed up, but Misato also hasn't let him any closer than arm's length.

"Don't let it deter you," Sayaka said. "Just give her a little space, then try again later. Remember, from Misato's point of view, you're the one who betrayed her. She's not going to make it easy to get back into her heart. But if you refuse to give up, eventually she will recognize your effort and start to give back." If not for Sayaka's encouragement, Akira would have given up before he even started. The only way he can get through this at all is by not thinking about his desired end goal. He has to actively forget about how much he wants Misato's love and forgiveness. All he can do is show her kindness, warmth, and reliability — no strings attached.

This weekend might be promising. Somehow, Sayaka convinced Misato to involve Akira in her science project. It's simple enough — mostly just interview a professional in a hard sciences field. Misato could just have easily gone to Haru or Risa, and she probably wanted to. This is a big chance, obviously. It's a chance to show Misato that his work does have value. A chance to show her the importance it has to him. Well, most importantly of all, it's a chance for them to do something together. Just father and daughter, no one else. It *could* go terribly wrong, but hopefully they'll both survive the endeavor with a better understanding of each other.

Today is a big day in its own way. He and Sayaka have had intimate meet-ups outside the house before, but none held this much significance to Akira. For the first time in perhaps ever, he feels very confident about his marriage. And this feeling doesn't have any sense of being illusory or fleeting. No, it feels like the most natural thing in the world. The way things are now is the way they should always have been. Sayaka is the best partner anyone could ask for — infinitely affectionate, forgiving, accommodating. During his many dark moments, he's wondered if they were really meant to be, but now he knows the answer to be "yes".

Tonight, he hopes to expose himself to her completely. Be wholly, utterly vulnerable. Sayaka has told him many times to leave nothing hidden. And so, it is time to let a ghost from his past rise to the surface, and be vanquished with love and trust. He knows he's ready.

Akira checks his tote once more, to be absolutely certain that the parcel is with him. Good, good, there it is at the bottom, beneath his gym clothes and whatever else. An amorphous, medium-sized package, awkwardly wrapped in last Sunday's newspaper. Tacky, perhaps, but fancy gift-wrapping is so extravagantly wasteful he can't be bothered with it. He knows Sayaka doesn't care anyway. What's important is what the present is, not how it's wrapped.

Clutching his pendant to his chest, he prays that Sayaka accepts the gift... and, in so doing, accepts his very heart.

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Sayaka approaches the sushi bar, feet sore from hours of walking and shoulder aching from her over-packed canvas bag. After a satisfying morning to herself wandering the Okazaki Museum District, nothing sounds better than sitting down to lunch with kin. This is a beautiful place for it, too: a small traditional shop near the base of Daimonjiyama, embraced on all sides by ancient greenery.

Just as promised in her text, Yura is waiting outside the establishment, smoking away as she talks into her headset. Sayaka can't help but feel a warm, soothing calm take her. Yura's been working herself to the bone since earlier this year, and it's been easy to worry. They've talked on the phone here and there, but this is their first physical get-together in months. Even if it's just for lunch, Sayaka's really glad to see her big sister again.

“Oneechan!” Sayaka calls, waving.

As she probably should've expected, there's no response. Yura can't hear her. Instead, she shifts her weight, crossing one leg over the other, and tosses her chin-length angled bob. Her overall sense of style — exhibited today via crimson red leather jacket, snug stonewashed jeans, cowboy boots, and mirrored sunglasses — conveys a sense of wanton indifference, that's she above caring what anyone thinks. That's true, to an extent, but there's much more to her than that. In action, Yura effortlessly combines confidence, competence, and charisma with a fierce sense of loyalty and compassion. She's the “cool big sis” that so many want, but Sayaka actually *has*.

Sayaka has always looked up to Yura. In times long past, she's even wanted to *be* her. But they're simply too different. Despite being clearly related, the Katori sisters contrast like night and day. However, much like night and day, there's nothing that can separate them.

Nothing except for that blasted headset, anyway.

Sayaka gets much closer and passes her hand in front of Yura's face. At last, that gets her attention. Yura smiles and silently mouths, “Wait a sec”, then turns away to finish her call. “Hey, Satoshi-kun, my sister's here. Can I call you back later? ... 3:00 work for you? Okay, talk to you then!” She pushes something on her belt-mounted phone, deftly folds up her headset and stows it into a pocket, then redirects all her attention. “Sorry about that. What's up, baby sister?” She tips her head lightly. “Long time no see.”

Sayaka bows more deeply — her braid, as always, falling forward as well. “Definitely too long,” she affirms, straightening and throwing her hair back over her shoulder. “It's really good to see you, Yura.”

“I've missed you, too, Saya-chan,” Yura says, a warm grin breaking out on her slightly boyish face. “I'm also very hungry. Would you believe that I've eaten nothing today? True story.”

“Oh dear,” Sayaka says. “You need to take better care of yourself, Yura.”

“I knew it! I knew you'd worry. You always worry!” Yura teases. “It's been a hectic morning, that's all. Anyway, come on in. I know the chef pretty well, and I guarantee he won't feed you anything rancid.”

Off-kilter as always. Sayaka would have her sister no other way. “That's reassuring,” she replies drolly.

There are two empty stools front and center that may as well have been waiting for them. “Hey, Tama-kun,” Yura greets the chef on duty, so casually that it nearly makes Sayaka wince. She holds her hand up. “A platter for two. As usual, I'm trusting you with the selection.”

“You got it, Katori-san. Platter for two, coming right up.” Chef Tama glances over the counter. “No Chikuma-san today, eh?”

“Well, *someone* has to hold the fort,” Yura says. “But you remember Sayaka, don't you?”

Sayaka isn't sure if she even remembers ever being here. The past several years have been so stressful, though, it wouldn't surprise her if she simply forgot.

Chef Tama squints. “Ah, yes, Katsuragi-san. It's been a long time, but I never forget a face. Give me just a moment and I'll put together something worthy of such beautiful sisters.”

“Tama-kun,” Yura groans, “you really are an old rascal.”

The chef laughs. “That, I can't deny.” His eyes turn to the countertop and the sounds of food preparation become audible.

Yura flags down a serving girl for some cold beverages, then gets down to business. Resting her cheek on a palm, she gives Sayaka an adoring, overly intimate look and smiles. “You look really good, Saya-chan. Younger, in a strange way.”

“I swear I'm still forty, Yura,” Sayaka says, feeling a little embarrassed.

“I dunno. There's this kind of understated vibrancy to you. Almost like life's taken a break from punching you in the gut repeatedly.”

Sayaka releases a tiny sigh. Yura certainly has a way with words...

Yura thinks deeply, pursing her lips. “Actually, I've got it. This is the same aura you were giving off when you and Akkun started to get serious.”

Sayaka feels a moderate flush come on. “Are you saying that I'm in love?”

A flash of the teeth — unnervingly white and straight. “Well? *Are* you?”

She grips the hem of her skirt. “I can't help it, Yura. It's so easy, the way he is now...”

The drinks arrive: hot tea for Sayaka and cold beer for Yura. The latter wastes no time cracking open a can. “Hmm, yeah. A while ago you told me that Akkun was feeling a bit more like his old self. So I guess that hasn't changed?”

Sayaka catches Yura up on all the relevant details. In just a month, Akira has made significant improvements to his health, become an active and helpful presence around the house, made

some headway with his hyper-critical boss, and started the long and arduous process of mending his relationship with Misato. “And he's been so open and affectionate,” she adds, blushing again. “Not excessively, either. I was really worried that he'd get a little *too*... you know...”

“Amorous?” Yura suggests.

“Yes. To put it mildly.” Sayaka sighs. “It's really been a pleasant surprise. He's been amazingly stable. Not like what usually happens. No — he's almost always grounded and in control.”

Yura offers a warm smile. “I'm glad it's been going well. Though... hearing all this, it's hard to avoid the conclusion that Akkun's *not* taking the big job.”

Sayaka feels her enthusiasm for the conversation shrink a little. “No... No, I don't think he is.”

“You don't even know?” Yura's eyebrows couldn't go up much higher.

Sayaka averts her eyes. “He really hasn't talked about it much.”

Yura slaps her palms together. “Okay! Serious question: has he actually *declined* it? If I remember correctly, it's still up for grabs until sometime next month.”

She starts playing with her braid. “No... not as such. He just hasn't accepted.”

Yura seizes her brow in frustration. “Oh, Saya-chan. That's a thread that shouldn't be left to dangle loose. You *really* don't need me to tell you this.”

Sayaka feels a bit foolish — but, at the same time, she feels that she did right by not haranguing Akira about the job offer. It led to this result, after all. If she'd nagged him to call the UN recruiter back, it might have had the exact opposite effect. It's not something she wants to argue with Yura about right now, though. “You're right, of course. I'll bring it up with him tonight.”

“You better,” Yura chides.

The sushi platter arrives and the sisters immediately set into it, distributing pieces to their individual plates. Yura starts with a sabazushi but stops it right in front of her mouth, as though whatever she has to say can't wait. “So, enough of the husband talk. I know you could talk about him all day, but I want to hear about *you*. What's happening in the non-Akira parts of your life?”

Sayaka neatly dips her temarizushi into the sweet sauce. “There's not a whole lot to say. You keep overestimating me, Yura. I'm really not that interesting.” After she finishes the pieces, she says, “I was looking forward to hearing about you and the business, to be honest...”

“Yeah, we'll get to that,” Yura says quickly. Then, with a heavy sigh, she lays on the exasperation. “*Really*, Saya-chan? You *really* expect me to believe that? I'm not interesting.”



Her imitation of Sayaka is spot-on, but utterly unflattering. “Grade A bullshit. You *become* boring by telling yourself that.”

Sayaka flinches at Yura's unforgiving language. “Please mind the other patrons, Yura. I don't like when you get like this.”

“You're not supposed to, baby sister,” Yura replies all too easily. “So, seriously. Nothing? What about work? Hobbies? Friends? Future plans? I keep telling you to cultivate an identity outside of the house. You can't be defined by this 'dutiful wife and mother' crap. There's so much more to you.”

She *thought* she could hear this tract coming. Sayaka slides another piece of sushi into her mouth and tries not to let it get to her. It's not that she fundamentally disagrees with Yura's position. It's just that, with everything else that's at stake, it's been so difficult to think about herself. Her parents also deeply instilled in her — less so Yura — the values of humility and self-sacrifice. Exposing too many personal details feels unnatural and uncomfortable.

But Yura is just trying to be supportive. Sayaka's sure there's something she can tell her to put her at ease. “Work has been fairly peaceful...” In the corner of her eye, she spots her shoulder tote on the floor. Come to think of it, she spent the whole morning wandering north Higashiyama-ku completely on her own terms: visiting some shrines for a hefty dose of spiritual relief, then picking up assorted items at the local shops until her bag couldn't hold any more. “And actually... The fact that Akira is helping around the house is making a difference. I've been able to spend the occasional non-work day doing my own things.”

Yura grins, cracking open a second beer. “I knew it.”

“But there's more, Yura,” Sayaka says. “We've been talking about the future here and there, too. Akira's shown a lot of interest in doing whatever he needs to do so that I...” She downs some tea to soothe her nerves. “...So that I can actually go back to school.”

Yura's obsidian eyes sparkle with joy. “And get your M.D.? For real? That would be incredible, Saya-chan!”

Sayaka fidgets with the stirrer, swirling the remaining tea over and over. “It's just a thought... I won't be able to act on it until the next term regardless. If Akira can keep this going, not fall back into the usual patterns, then maybe I'll be able to finally do it.”

The other woman clasps her chin and muses quietly, “You don't have to leave it to chance, you know.”

Is Yura really going to go there? Bring up Akira's... condition, in an exposed public place like this? Sayaka tries to dispel it with a joke. “Are you and Risa in this together?”

“Are you suggesting that I'm not sophisticated enough to have learned about this stuff on my own?” Yura fires back playfully. “I haven't even talked to the Yakumos in years. Anyway, you'd know where I'm coming from if you actually checked your e-mail. Not making any headway there, I take it?”

Sayaka simply shakes her head. “Not yet, I’m afraid. In any case, Yura, I won’t talk about this here. You’ll respect that, won’t you?”

“You’re so old-fashioned, Saya-chan,” Yura grumbles, helping herself to more sushi and washing it down with beer. “But Akkun isn’t, so it’s never made complete sense why *he* hasn’t —”

“Yura... *oneesama*,” Sayaka says firmly. “Enough, please. Lecture me on the phone later if you must, but please don’t do this to me now.”

“Who said anything about lecturing?” Yura complains. But she takes the hint, finally, and drops it. They harbor an awkward silence for what could be two minutes or several — either way, it drags — and continue to work on the platter. Yura eventually breaks the silence. “So, you want to know about the current status of Katori-Chikuma LLC, do ya?”

Sayaka transfers a couple more pieces of sushi to her plate. “That would be wonderful. Please tell.”

Yura lays down her chopsticks and bridges her fingers. “Well, we have the new office mostly set up at this point. It’s still small, but obviously *way* more space than Takkun and I have at the apartment. You should check it out sometime; I’m sure you’d be able to make some nice aesthetic adjustments. Some of the stuff you have stacked in your loft might do the trick.”

*My old paintings and prints?* “Oh, Yura, you know that’s all just college experimentation. None of it’s actually *good*.”

“Sure, whatever,” Yura blithely dismisses, quickly moving on. “We have a couple of people on-board already. Women, even! Takkun’s been a darling, as always. I promised him that I’d hire men, as well, but he said it really didn’t matter to him. ‘Do what you want, Yu-chan.’”

Sayaka chuckles at Yura’s impersonation. “It’s eerie how you do that.”

Yura smiles appreciatively. “How is he always so laid-back? It must be genetic or something. Anyway, Saya-chan, expanding a business is hell. I don’t recommend it. How did I get it in my head that this would be a good idea? It would be awfully nice if, once you get a reliable body of clients, they treat you like a well-guarded secret. Positive word of mouth can be a killer, I tell ya.”

“Well,” Sayaka says, “I guess you can think of it like your baby growing up. Right?”

“That’s pretty much what’s happening, yeah,” Yura agrees. “The kid’s gotten too big, too unruly. She wants to be independent and have an apartment to herself. With any luck, she’ll take care of Takkun and I when we get old.”

Sayaka can’t help but laugh at the analogy. “I don’t believe you’ve ever told me her name.”

“Hmm, that’s a good question,” Yura says. “I kind of fancy that name Akkun had picked out for your second kid—”

Sayaka suddenly feels her heart skip a beat. “Wait. What are you talking about, Yura?”

“Weren't you two planning on a second one before everything went belly-up?” Yura asks, not a little confused.

“I wanted another child, yes,” Sayaka says, “but Akira never... *He* never told me that he did.” She feels her innards twist up into a sick mess. “Are you telling me that he told *you*?”

Yura compulsively starts a cigarette, after going the whole meal without one. “It's probably just a trick of the memory. Don't read so much into it, Saya-chan.”

Sayaka clasps her skirt anxiously. “What was the name?”

“Eh?”

“That he'd picked out. What was it?”

“Oh.” Yura releases a big gray cloud toward the ceiling. “Kaworu'. Like his great-aunt. But, you know, I knew about his admiration for her anyway. It really is possible that my mind made up the whole exchange.”

*No, it's not.* Sayaka remembers. When they were deciding what to name their first, Akira offered “Kaworu”, then dismissed it out of hand and told Sayaka that it should be her choice. .... He actually wanted another, and he never said anything to her, his own wife, about it? Sayaka feels like she could cry.

“If you want to know the truth, Saya-chan, just ask him. But, y'know, *later*, at home. Don't ruin your date over this. Please don't.” There's a faint buzz, and Yura checks her phone. “We have to wrap things up. You know I don't like leaving things like this. I don't want all the progress you two are making to get messed up because my tongue slipped.”

Sayaka drinks some more tea. “You didn't mean to, Yura. Don't worry.” She takes a long, deep breath. “And, besides, that was so long ago... I can't let it bother me so much.”

“Well, you can't unhear what I said,” Yura observes. “So the best you can do is try to approach these old scars with calm and dignity. You can work through this; I know you can.” She calls over for the server. “I'll take the tab, please.”

Sayaka tries to think about something else. Anything else. Something more immediate and pressing... “Oh! Will you be there this weekend, Yura? Takkun didn't want to answer on your behalf.”

Yura receives the bill and starts robotically pulling yen notes from her wallet. “I'll try to be there, yeah. I want to see my niece again, anyway. Been meaning to show her my new car.” She turns to Sayaka and flashes a grin. “I have a feeling she'll really dig it.”

“Misato got her taste in cars from you, after all...”

After passing payment to the server, Yura adds, “I guess it'd be nice to see Akkun again, too. Though, I'm not sure he really wants to see *me*.” Before Sayaka can ask after that comment, her sister changes the subject. “Oh, yeah, Saya-chan. Mom and Dad send their love. They really want you and Misato to come visit. And if Akkun is doing as well as you say, maybe

you could even bring him along. I don't think the folks have seen him at his best in a very long time. It might do some good, you know?"

"Yura..." Sayaka sighs. "If they didn't like him when we were first going out, what's going to change now?"

"They've mellowed out a *lot* since then. You haven't noticed?" Yura gets to her feet and retrieves her hand bag. "They've told me that getting old really puts the important things in focus. So, you never know. Now they might be able to appreciate Akkun more for what he is, instead of being disappointed by what he isn't. It's worth a try."

"Definitely a thought," Sayaka allows, "but I'd probably want to feel them out before bringing him. When things between them go sour, they go really sour. Next free weekend Misato has, I'll try to take her, at least."

Yura nods. "Alright. Well... you take care of yourself, Saya-chan. With any luck, I'll see you in a few days." To the chef, she calls, "Superb as always, Tama-kun."

Sayaka gets to her feet. "Okay. I'll see you soon, oneechan."

As Yura leaves the bar, she shouts, "Remember, *happy thoughts!*" A quick wave and she's gone.

Sayaka sits back down. Idly, she checks her own phone. No messages, and about fifteen minutes to kill. She gazes emptily at the remaining pieces of sushi. The preparation, freshness, and flavor is excellent — possibly the best Kyoto-style sushi she's ever had. But her appetite is shot.

Chef Tama glances down at Sayaka as he cleans his knives. "If you can't finish, Katsuragisan, I won't be offended," he says, offering a sympathetic expression. Well, he would have overheard much of the conversation, after all.

Sayaka looks up and smiles weakly. "Thank you, Tama-san. I appreciate it." But she's not like Akira. She makes herself eat anyway.

\*\*\*\*\*

The love hotel sits out in broad daylight, all too conspicuous in this part of Okazaki, nestled amidst shrines and Buddhist temples, with a zoo only a couple of blocks away. But with such a convenient location, Akira sure isn't complaining. Sayaka wouldn't say who'd made the recommendation in the first place, but Akira would place his bets on Yura, who's never been bashful about the kind of advice she offers her sister. He and Sayaka have been to this one a couple of times already, and it's surprisingly nice. Never visited in the middle of the day like this, though.

Judging from Sayaka's most recent text, Akira's the one to arrive first. She's always seemed more comfortable entering such establishments separately, so he proceeds directly to check-

in, acting as relaxed and natural as possible. Some people do give him weird looks, but that happens whenever he leaves the immediate vicinity of Kyoto University anyway — just an inevitability of his unusual height. When the front desk asks, he declines the chance to pay extra for erotic paraphernalia. *I've brought my own, thank you.*

Their room is simple and elegant, with tasteful traditional décor and a small fountain in one corner. The wood-paneled walls and lamp-only lighting give the room a warm, intimate feel. Akira kicks his shoes off, sets his bag down, and falls back onto the oversized elevated bed. The mattress is nice and bouncy and the sheets smell freshly laundered. He gazes up at the ceiling, letting his mind wander and the anticipation build in his flesh.

Eventually, his phone buzzes. Sayaka, saying to stand by at the door for her. Heart thumping with excitement, he leans against the door and watches through the peephole. And soon enough, there she is. Akira opens just enough to let her enter, then locks it behind her. “Hi, Sayaka,” he greets. “That's quite a bag you have there. Found some nice stuff, I take it?”

She puts it down with a plop. “A little of this, a little of that. Don't *you* be looking inside, though.” She starts to remove her shoes, setting them right next to his.

Akira's smile broadens and he winks at her. “Don't worry. I understand completely.” His birthday is coming up, after all, and he wouldn't put it past Sayaka to get him something. As unnecessary as it is, the thought is sweet.

As soon as she finishes hanging her jacket, Akira can't bear to keep his ardors inside any longer. “Sayaka,” he breathes, stepping closer to her, “I'm really glad this was able to work out. I've...” He gently clasps her face and leans in. “I've been thinking about you all day.”

“We haven't been apart that long,” Sayaka teases, a flirtatious smile on her face.

It's very subtle, but he can feel her pulling back. On an impulse, Akira kisses her quickly, before she can slip away. She's definitely a little stiff and not entirely open. “Sayaka?” he asks, releasing her.

“Oh,” she says. “It's nothing. I just need to use a toilet really badly! Can you excuse me for a moment, Aki-chan?”

He straightens up. “Yes, of course.”

Sayaka disappears for a few minutes. Akira prowls in the main room restlessly. He's not sure why. It's like... an overwhelming desire to make love, mixed up with this vague sense of being ill at ease. When Sayaka's upset, often it's the little things that matter. But what could she be upset about? Is he just misreading the whole thing?

When Sayaka comes out, she starts approaching him without any sense of inhibition, as though she fully intends to get down to business. But Akira can't help but ask. “Oh, quick question. Did your lunch with Yura go okay?”

“Yes,” she says, removing the band of her braid. “It was lovely. What an odd thing to ask.” She grabs him by the tie and slowly pulls him down so she can claim a kiss. This time, she

doesn't hold back, and Akira's flesh immediately goes ablaze with sensual heat. Sayaka takes to the bed, pulling him down onto her. As they cling fast and fierce, a mutual oral assault commences. They kiss with such frenzied abandon, it's almost like they're eating each other up.

Sayaka tastes so good that Akira is perfectly happy necking and being teased through his clothes — for a time. Eventually, it's no longer enough. He yearns to feel skin against skin. Total contact. He pulls his undershirt up over his head and throws it aside. Hands start to work frenetically at his belt to free the zealous bulge. Which reminds him...

“Sayaka,” he whispers. “I have something for you... A present.”

She seizes him tightly between her thighs and licks the crook of his neck. “Well, what are you waiting for? I'm ready. Give me everything you've got.”

Akira retaliates with a kiss and laughs. “No, no, no. *Just* a present. The kind that you open.”

“Oh...” Sayaka says, sounding mildly disappointed. “Is it necessary that I open it now?”

“Well... Not as such...”

“We have plenty of time. Don't worry so much. We'll do it right after this.” She nibbles playfully on his nose, and things only go south from there.

Akira has no idea what he was even worrying about earlier. Sayaka is playful and full of energy. She wants him. He wants her. Here, in the comfort of a giant, comfy bed, without fear of anyone hearing or seeing, they can satisfy those yearnings to the fullest. Akira heeds Sayaka's summons and wastes little time giving her what she desires.

Approximately fifteen intense, exhausting minutes later, they've both achieved satisfaction. They take turns using the bathroom, get partially dressed, and curl back up on the bed to enjoy the remainder of the glow. Sharing no words, just their pulses, body heat, and respiratory rhythms.

Eventually, Sayaka says, “So... what is it you have for me?”

“Hmm?” Akira jolts out of his peaceful daze. “Oh.” He breaks away from his rear spooning position, stretches, and pulls himself up. “Wait a sec. Let me get it.” He reaches down into his duffel bag and pulls out the uneven, newspaper-covered package. Passing it to Sayaka, now seated on the edge of the bed, he says, “Sorry about the wrapping job. I'm a bit out of practice.”

Sayaka just laughs. “It's *so* you. I actually find it quite endearing.” She turns the parcel over in her lap, apparently trying to get a sense of what it might be. Akira sits down next to her and intertwines his fingers, trying to stem off his nervousness. Sayaka notices and gives him a reassuring pat on the head, then a gentle caress down his face. “But really, Akira, you shouldn't have. You know you don't need to get me things.”

“Oh, I know,” he says. “This is a special exception. I suppose you could say it's for both of us.”

“Oh?” That seems to pique her curiosity, and her expression turns impish. “Just what are you up to, Akira?”

“Open,” Akira urges, “and see.” His heart pounds against his chest so fiercely it might break free at any moment.

“Well, then, here I go!” Sayaka tears into the parcel, exposing part of what's inside. But then she stops, her lifted, playful spirit abruptly fading into quiet befuddlement.

“Don't stop there. Keep going!” Akira tries to swallow the lump in his throat. “The contents only make sense when taken together.”

Sayaka glances nervously at him, then forces herself to continue until all three items are freed. She first scrutinizes the oddly-shaped blue vibrator in the clear molded shell, struggling to read the foreign label. Her attentions move on to the two cardboard boxes, which are no easier to read, but at least one of them has a photo clearly illustrating the intended use. This is done in complete and awkward silence.

Akira can't harbor it any longer. The nervous tension boils over, and, perhaps too frenetically, he tries to explain the gift. “The harness and the blue thing are supposed to go together.” Pointing, he adds, “This part here goes in you, so you can feel what you're doing. I didn't scrimp. I want this to be fun for you, too.” Lastly, he indicates the still-boxed lubricant. “I've heard good things about this stuff. And it's water-based, so it won't corrode the silicone.” He backs off a little and catches his breath. “Pretty neat, huh? What do you think?”

With unnervingly slow motions, Sayaka sets the items aside. She doesn't look at him. She hasn't looked at him in minutes. “What do I think?” she repeats, voice devoid of emotion.

Something's wrong. Very wrong. “Sayaka?” His voice is soft and barely audible. “Sayaka... are you okay?”

And then, Sayaka drops her face into open palms, her fingers clinging against her skin. “You have the nerve to ask me that? ... Why? Why would you do this, Akira?”

His pupils shrink; his throat goes bone dry; his mouth opens and closes like a suffocating fish. Words refuse to come forth. He tries to put a hand on her quivering shoulder, but she shrugs him off. It's such a sting that his body stiffens with paralysis, and he can only wait, and listen.

“What were you thinking?” Sayaka's voice feel so tiny and distant. “Why couldn't you just leave well enough alone?...”

Akira bites his lip and clasps his pendant, and at last his speech returns. “I don't understand, Sayaka.” He tries to speak gently, keep his tone neutral. “I asked you about this. Whether you were up for trying new things. You said—”

Sayaka finally frees her face, revealing her tear-streaked cheeks and hot charcoal eyes. "Couldn't you have passed it by me first, instead of dropping..." She points fiercely at the gift. "...THIS... right in my lap?"

Akira looks away in guilt. "I— I wanted to surprise you..."

"Well, you certainly accomplished that much," Sayaka replies with uncharacteristic bile.

He can feel the tears welling up behind his eyes. But he doesn't want to break. Things have been going so well. He can't give in to the darkness, not yet. "Can't you tell me what's bothering you?" Akira pleads. "All the present is... It's just a different way for you to be in control. You enjoy taking the lead. You do it plenty of times."

Sayaka turns away and her hands slowly clench. In a voice so cold it's almost unrecognizable, she says, "I can't... I *won't*... be a man for you."

Akira feels a fierce, constricting pain in the pit of his stomach. She might as well have stabbed him. After nearly a minute of struggling for the right words, he hoarsely whispers, "Is that what this is all about? ..... The one I was with before you?"

Sayaka is silent.

"This isn't like that at all," Akira insists. "It's just a toy, Sayaka. Just playing. I *don't want* you to be a m—"

"But you don't actually care that I'm a woman." She's getting sullen. "It's all the same to you."

Akira should've expected this. How could he be so foolish? How could he let optimism blind him like this? "So you still don't understand. After all this time... nothing's changed."

"How am I *supposed* to understand that, Akira?" Sayaka fires back. "Do you even understand me and my feelings? Or are yours the only ones that matter?"

There's no helping it. He can't hold them in any longer. The first tear floods over and careens down his cheek. "I care, Sayaka. You know I care. That's why I told you in the first place. And you decided that it didn't matter to you. You *swore* that my past didn't matter! So, why...?"

Sayaka pulls out a tissue and blows her nose. "It wasn't a lie, Akira. It didn't matter... because I love you. I couldn't stop loving you because of something you did before you even knew I existed. I can never stop loving you because of that." She wrings her hands. "But... but... things you did, and enjoyed... I can't accommodate them. They're not things *I* do..." A deep sigh. "I can't be a part of it. It's... it's... not right..."

Akira is silent for a time, his face devoid of expression save for the intermittent tears. "...You know how much it would mean to me."

"I do. And I'm sorry. I really am." She massages her temples, clearly struggling to regain her bearings. What comes next sounds moderately forced. "Akira... it's *possible* that maybe,



eventually, I'd warm up to the idea... But I would need a lot of time to think about it. I *know* I can't just step into that role for you here and now.”

He feels so numb inside that those words are little solace.

“Akira...” Sayaka says. “I'm glad you were so honest with me, all the way back then. It may not seem like it, but I really am. It's just...” Her eyes waver anxiously. “I've been wondering... Have there been other important things, any that you *haven't* told me about?”

That jerks him out of his stupor. “.....What?”

Sayaka shrinks back a little. “I was just thinking today, reflecting... You know how much I want us to be perfectly open with each other. Nothing hidden. So, I suppose, despite my bad reaction, the present was good in its way... You being more honest with me about what you want.” She fidgets. “But there have been many times when you just won't talk to me. And I wonder, always wonder, what it is that you're suffering all alone.”

Akira feels a bit perturbed by this sudden shift in the conversation. He's still stuck on earlier events. “Sayaka... When I'm not talking, it's because I don't have anything good to say. Is that the sort of thing you really want to hear? How much I hate myself? How I feel so hopeless I wouldn't care if I were dead? How I could be a hair's breadth away from destroying years upon years of my work, because it's worthless just like me?”

“Akira...” she says. “That's not—”

“Then what? What is it?” He can't get the things Sayaka said out of his mind. None of her backpedaling can erase her hurtfully ignorant comments. Even after all these years, she's so naive that she can say 'I won't be a man for you' with a straight face? What other kinds of rotten assumptions are she carrying around? He gets to his feet and starts pacing. “What do you want me to tell you, Sayaka? That I'm a closet gay? That all those late nights I was supposedly at the lab were really—”

He turns to look at her, and she's visibly upset once more. For whatever reason, he can't bring himself to care. Not right now.

“Akira... Why are you even saying such things? Are you implying that you *actually*—”

Not quite what he was going for, but he rolls with it. He doesn't really care anymore. “You've suspected it, haven't you? From the moment I told you about him, you've suspected. Your parents seem convinced. A lot of people do.”

“My *parents*, Akira?” Sayaka says, flustered. “I'm not a slave to their opinion. I married you! Shouldn't that say everything you need to know?”

She's more of a slave than she'd ever be willing to admit. But does he really want to go there? *No... no... Stay focused.* “I doubt it's what you're looking for, Sayaka, but... there *is* something I want to tell you.” He turns to face her and pats his torso emphatically. “This is the person you married. He's not going to hide who he is anymore.”

“Good,” she says. “I don't want you to!”

“Is that really true?” Akira asks. “Doesn't the real me disgust you? I'm a freak and a pervert. You're married to a vile deviant, Sayaka.”

Sayaka stands up in a bluster. “Akira, stop this right now! Can't you see what you're doing?”

There's so much pain flowing outward that no, he can't. He feels his mind dredging up four decades of hurt, of cruel people calling his most fundamental nature into question. Much as he wants to, he can't look away. He can't silence the terrible voices.

*“That Katsuragi's so confused he doesn't even know which bathroom to go to. Haven't you seen him? He sits down like a girl to pee. Maybe he is a girl. He's pretty enough.”*

*“Crying again? You're so pitiful it feels generous to call you 'son'. And to think that you're the heir to the family name... I feel sick.”*

*“Why do all the girls want him? Don't they know he's the biggest faggot in the school? Just our luck, I tell ya...”*

*“Absolutely not! No daughter of mine is going to marry that pathetic excuse for a man! Just look at him! He obviously just wants to use you as a smokescreen for his real interests!”*

Akira finds himself slumped against the wall, cradling his head protectively in his arms, sleeves soaked wet with tears.

*“You're right, Father. I'm no man at all. And if you're the sort who qualifies, then, frankly, I'm glad.”*

At length, he realizes that the loud, ungainly sobbing sound is coming from him, and that only causes him to curl up more tightly. He *is* pitiful. And worse than that...

*“You want to know what you are, Akira? Nothing. All the way 'til the day you die, you're nothing.”*

*“Never forget it.”*

## Chapter End Notes

- I made multiple attempts to foreshadow “Old Pain”'s big revelation much earlier in the story, but they usually seemed out of place and didn't make the cut as a result. The only obvious survivor is from as late as “The Dragon and the Fox” (Tatsuta's crass comment, “Katsuragi *does* kind of strike me as [a pillow-biter]”).
- The names of Haru's kids (Masahiro and Jun) are, fittingly, a reference to two of the original peeps at Hal Labs, Masahiro Sakurai and Jun Ishikawa.

- There has been a bit of talk about dyslexia not being something that affects users of symbol-based languages, but actual Japanese dyslexics beg to differ. Back in 1999, I'm assuming that this movement for recognition hadn't gotten very far, hence why the Yakumos needed to hear about the condition from a foreigner.
- Regarding “kakiwotaku”: *kaki* 火器 is “firearms” and *wotaku* ワタク is another way to write “otaku”.
- Hiroshi Tanikoshi and Seito Yamagiri are two junior staff members who've been mentioned in previous chapters. The former has had a couple of speaking parts, but the latter is still waiting for his turn. This is the first time his actual given has been mentioned, as opposed to a nickname.
- “Why should I change? He's the one who sucks.” — Yes, that's an *Office Space* reference. Completely unplanned, but once it popped into my head I couldn't NOT do it.
- Higashiyama-ku is the district south of Sakyo-ku, where we've been spending most of our time. The Okazaki Museum District is in the north part of Higashiyama-ku. You know, it's probably easier just to Google up maps until it makes sense.

# Tension

## Chapter Summary

Betrayed by his own elation, Akira's heart begins to retreat once more. Desperate for anything to nurse his bleeding wounds, he turns first to the distant past. When that fails, he dives precariously toward the future — one quite different from what he'd imagined not a day before.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Hi, you've reached the voice mail of Haru Yakumo. I appreciate your call, but unfortunately cannot answer my phone at the moment. If you would leave your name, phone number, and a brief message after the beep, I'll be sure to respond as soon as possible.”

Akira disconnects instead. He already left a message on the Yakumos' answering machine and he doesn't feel like doing it again. He sends a short, urgent text message instead.

*Why, Haru?* he thinks, snapping his cell phone shut and kneading his scalp with the other hand. *Why are you always busy when I need you the most?* It's more emotionally than objectively true. What happened almost ten years ago... It wasn't Haru's fault by any means, but it definitely left a scar upon Akira's heart. One of many that continue to ache.

Frustration wells up within him, flowing over into a single tear that drops onto a student's half-graded test below. Akira quickly wipes his face with the back of his sleeve and moves the stack of papers aside. He tried to put his mind to work as soon as he arrived, but it simply wasn't happening. He managed to make only a few marks before so many dark thoughts broke free of their shackles and completely throttled his mental processes. The chances of him getting any work done tonight as he'd hoped have gone from slim to none. All because of what had transpired not two hours ago.

There's no real point in staying here. But the other option is going home, and that means... that means...

...facing her again.

His fingers dig deeper into his scalp. *I don't know what to do. Haru would know, but I— I'm useless.*

Is there anyone else? Anyone else at all? There are no other co-workers with whom he's particularly close. Most of his work relationships are purely functional. He's on amicable enough terms with Yamagiri and Tanikoshi, but, when it comes down it, things are still strictly business. There was a time when Akira belonged to a social circle, but that didn't last

long after he got his doctorate; Haru and Risa are all that's left. Family? Forget it. There's no living person from either his own blood or his in-laws who can be relied upon.

Or *isn't* there? Right — whatever happened to Yura? Akira distinctly remembers having a kind of filial camaraderie with her. Quite unlike the Katori parents, Yura treated him like family from the beginning: invited him to call her “oneesama” and urged him to come to her with whatever troubled him. And, for a time, he really could tell her anything, even things he'd be terrified to tell Sayaka. Yura was always nonjudgmental, always knew exactly what to say.

Somewhere along the line, though, all that was lost. The comfort and intimacy died a quiet, confrontation-free death. It was years ago, long enough that he's forgotten precisely how it happened. Did she start getting on his case about seeing a head shrink? Was it something else? A combination of things, perhaps? A tragedy, regardless of the how.

So it really is true. His circle of intimates is so small that, beyond Sayaka and Haru, there's no one to whom he can bare his soul. He'll just have to make do.

Akira grits his teeth and thinks. How would a conversation with Haru probably go? Well, he'd have Akira explain the situation in embarrassing, painful detail. He'd then ask Akira to reflect upon what both of them did wrong, whether to create the situation or subsequently mishandle it. Conversely, did either of them do anything *right*? After all they've been through, is this really the end of the world? What's the next step from here?

It's pretty easy to imagine the flow and overall outcome, though no substitute for the real thing. He needs to hear someone else tell him what he wants so desperately to believe: “Just go home to her and everything will be fine.”

He starts absentmindedly flipping through the tests, a pensive grimace on his face. The date was a disaster. All because of that stupid, misbegotten package... It's true, what *was* he thinking? For some reason, he thought everything would go fine, but instead Sayaka blew up at him, and he blew right back up at her, and then he had a breakdown of the sort he hasn't experienced in years. So many of his demons reawakening all at once and putting his soul over the hot coals to writhe in agony. Sayaka did nothing and said nothing until it had ended on its own. There was no reassuring touch. He remained curled in fetal position, and she seemed impossibly far away as she spoke:

“I'm so sorry, Akira. I want to help you more than anything. I hate seeing you like this. But...” A few seconds' pause. “I'm really confused and conflicted right now. Both of us probably need some space. I...” Another pause. “I can't accept your gift. Not this moment. I want to, though. I really do want to understand you better. ... Please, let me meditate on everything. I need time to think.”

After that, she collected her things, said farewell, and left. All too quickly, it seemed. In her wake, there was nothing but cold, stark silence and tear-soaked ambivalence.

He was glad she left. So then why did he also feel so bitter? Was it a feeling of abandonment? Betrayal? Resentment? He doesn't know. The sentiment is still as fire in his chest and he's no closer to putting a finger on it. Maybe it's just too hot to touch. Whatever it is, he doesn't trust

it. He doesn't trust how it might make him act. But whether he ignores it or approaches it, it's going to affect him. And he can't stand that. He can't stand feeling like this. Not about her.

He feels like he'll burn up from the inside out if he doesn't do something. He needs a distraction. A real distraction.

Akira pulls out his box of contacts and promptly starts thumbing into *TA*. Quickly he finds it, the poor beat-up index card which never fails to instill a rush of nostalgic warmth.

Taro “Tako” Takanashi.

The cartoon octopus on the reverse side, drawn by “Tako” himself, brings Akira back. Way back, to a time that had its obvious drawbacks, but overall was much more simple. When Akira was still figuring out who he was, and still had a gleaming, unknown future ahead of him. Before his own mind turned against him, and he could still rely on himself for almost everything.

Calling the States won't be cheap, but he doesn't care. He needs to hear a reassuring voice. Akira punches the number into his cell phone, and waits with bated breath. *Please answer, please answer, please answer...*

“Hello?” asks a masculine, very American voice.

Akira frets, clutching his necklace to brace his nerves. He didn't expect someone else to pick up, but, now that he thinks about it, of course Taro would have at least one housemate. And there's no guarantee the man knows a word of Japanese. Akira's spoken English is lacking at best, and he has no real excuse given his age and profession. He has to know enough to get by here, though. He's sure of it. “H-hello,” he stutters in response. “I am looking for Taro Takanashi. Is he home?”

“May I ask who's calling?”

Akira takes a moment to parse what was said. “Akira Katsuragi. Old friend. We went to high school together.”

“Ahh, I think I've heard of you” the man says, his tone suddenly friendly. “Hold on. Let me get him.”

Akira exhales a sigh of relief and relinquishes the death grip on his pendant. He's amazed he got through that. And Taro happens to be home now, too. With his luck, he was expecting to leave another message.

A couple of minutes later, a familiar voice appears on the other end. “Still there?”

“Yeah,” Akira says. “Yeah, I'm here.”

“He tells me, 'There's some German guy named Katz-something on the line for you.’” The voice is soft and effeminate, almost mistakable for a woman's in timbre. “Says he knew you in high school.' And I'm all, 'We didn't have any German kids in high school...' Took me a second to figure it out!”

Akira chuckles. “Yeah, I have a German accent whenever I try to speak English. Better than a Japanese one, I suppose. Same language family at least. Speaking of accents, you sound like you're picking one up. I can just barely hear it.”

“I don't get to speak Japanese much nowadays. I mean, other Japanese folks aren't *difficult* to find, but with my lifestyle... our paths don't cross much.”

“That’s understandable. So, Taro, how've you been doing?”

“No 'Tako'?” his friend asks, teasing. “*Everyone* calls me 'Taro' these days. I kind of miss my old nickname.”

“But it was such a cruel nickname...”

“Most of the time. When *you* were the one saying it...” A sly chortle. “...Well, it was kind of special.”

“I suppose so,” Akira relents. “Tako, then. So, tell me.”

“Can't complain,” Taro says. “The U.S. has been everything I hoped for. I even have a boyfriend now. Ryan, the guy who picked up the phone. We've been together for well over a year now.”

“Really, Tako?” Akira says. “That's wonderful.” He feels a warmth, a slight flutter, in his chest.

“Plus I have a job I really enjoy. It’s doing hair and makeup for TV, so it’s about the gayest thing imaginable. But, well, I guess that's just the kind of person I am.”

“And there's nothing wrong with that,” Akira notes. “Not everyone is going to fall to the sides of the bell curve in all things.”

“I wasn't always okay with it...” Taro murmurs. “I guess if anyone knows about that, it's you. But I’ve long gotten over all that self-loathing crap. We like what we like. True passion should be embraced, no matter what it is.”

Akira isn’t sure he wants to touch that one. Too close to home...

As if sensing Akira's discomfort, Taro changes the subject. “And how are things going for you? I noticed that you published your thing back in April. Congratulations.”

“Thanks. It was nice to get that off my chest, even if almost no one will take it seriously.”

“Meaning,” Taro prods, “some people do?”

Akira sighs. “There's one organization that was impressed enough by it to offer me a job with them. But...” He simply trails off. There's nothing to discuss there, least of all with Taro. Well, he should give his old friend *something*, at least, even an incomplete truth. “I think I want to stay with teaching after all.”

"I see. And how's the family?" When Akira offers no immediate response, Taro follows up, "Or should I not ask?"

Akira thinks. Did he call Taro to get actual advice? Or did he call him as an escape? Now confronted with the option to bring *that* discussion up, he finds that he really doesn't want to. At least, not so early in the conversation. Something blunt and honest should suffice. "Mostly better than average. With some caveats."

"Hmmm," Taro hums knowingly. "Sounds complicated."

"It is."

"Well, you don't have to talk about it if you don't want to. I probably wouldn't know what to tell you, besides."

"It's okay," Akira says. "Just hearing your voice again helps, in its own way."

"..... It really has been a long time, hasn't it?"

Akira smiles weakly. "I know. Sometimes..." He takes a deep breath. "Sometimes I wish you were closer, Tako."

"It's best this way," Taro says. "We both know it is."

Akira's smile inverts promptly. "I suppose so. You... never would have been happy if you stayed here. And if we'd tried to make it work... You know I never could've..." He clutches the pendant once more, absentmindedly wringing it for any reassurance it might provide.

"I know, Akira-kun," Taro says. "Don't keep torturing yourself over it. Please tell me you haven't been?" His voice is ever gentle and understanding, a perfect male counterpart to Sayaka at her best.

Akira tries to swallow the lump in his throat. "No, I haven't. There's been so much else to..... torture myself over..." The final words are barely audible. "I wish I could take refuge in the good things from the past, but there's so many bad things, too, that I usually just don't think about any of it."

"Yeah, I know exactly what you mean. But you *should* think about those good things, every so often."

He feels almost ready to cry again and he's not really sure why. Saying the wrong thing now would bring it all falling down. He waits, hoping Taro has more to say.

And he does. "Even though I've at last accepted that everything happened in the only way it could... I *do* want you to know, Akira-kun, that I miss you. I still think about you. You turned my life around. Without you... If you weren't there for me back then, I really don't think I'd be sitting here right now."

It's probably true. Akira was a different person back then, one actually capable of having a net positive effect on someone else. The notion feels utterly surreal. Intellectually, he knows



he should feel good about what Taro is saying. So, then, why does he feel so sad? Swallowing his tears down again, he struggles out, "It was a very important time for me, too. I'll never forget it, either. I'm just... I can't help but feel regret that I couldn't be that person. That I couldn't make it work. You don't know how much I wanted to."

"It's okay," Taro says. "You are who you are, and I am who I am." A long, wistful sigh. "I used to be nothing more than a pitiful mess of a queer, but now? I'm happy. I like the person I am. I just wish the man who helped me get here could have kept some of that happiness for himself."

"Tako--" Akira starts.

"You might say things are 'better than average', but I can tell that nothing's changed. Not really."

Akira stares sullenly into space for a moment. "You still think it was all a mistake, don't you?"

"Hearing about your situation on and off over the years..." Taro muses. "Akira-kun, you know there were warning signs early on. You thought you could persevere. I suppose you have, in one sense, but was it really worth it?"

"I-- I don't know. Does it really matter anymore?"

"I guess at this point, you can't imagine living any other way. But no matter how many mistakes you've made, Akira-kun, you haven't made any so terrible that you deserve to be miserable for the rest of your life."

He's not sure he actually agrees — reap what you sow, no? — but trying to argue with Taro on this point would be a waste of their limited time together. Akira bites his lip and tries to think of something to say. Nothing especially productive comes to mind.

"Akira-kun... There's something I want to ask you," Taro says, not a little bit of hesitation in his voice.

*Curious.* "Go ahead."

"There's probably no way you haven't already thought about this, but... Have you considered getting psychiatric help?"

*Oh, no. Not Taro, too?*

"I don't think you know this, but I... I was recently diagnosed with depression, myself. I really didn't want to go on pills for it. I thought I could transcend it through willpower alone. But that's not how it works. The medication has really helped and I wish I had done something about this years ago."

Akira says nothing.

“Akira-kun... The way you've talked sometimes, I'm pretty sure you have it, too. This isn't a fight you have to face alone. It's okay to get help. Suffering from this isn't a personal failing, like we were always taught. It's a kind of disease. It really is.”

Akira hates this subject. As long as he lives in Japan, he will. Sayaka, Yura, Haru and Risa, they've all attempted tracts like this before, but they simply don't understand the situation in full. Trying to explain it is pointless, too. Utterly futile. But after Taro shared something so delicate, he supposes some sort of response is in order. “Thank you, Tako. I appreciate what you're saying. I really do.”

“But?” Taro prompts.

“But... there's nothing I can do about it right now.”

“How do you know?”

“I looked into the matter thoroughly years ago,” Akira says. “And there really is nothing I can do. Not in this backwards country.”

“Times are changing, slowly but surely. Are you really sure--?”

“It's not just that,” Akira says. “It's that... anything I tried would almost certainly cripple me mentally. And without my mind, I'm nothing. Absolutely nothing at all.”

“.....I see. I wish that weren't the case.”

“Believe me, Tako. So do I.”

There's a silence for a short time. Taro finally says, “I have to get going soon. Is there anything you need to get off your chest before then? There's a specific reason you called, isn't there?”

Akira frowns. “You read me like an open book, as always. There was a reason, but... if you have to go soon, there's no point in even starting.”

There's a faint sound on the other end, perhaps a stifled sigh. “I hear ya.”

“I wish I could just have you to myself for a few hours, face to face. You know? Getting it all out would be easy then.” Suddenly the unthinkable seizes him. “Tako, have you thought about visiting Japan anytime soon?”

The question seems to take his friend aback. “Japan? Honestly, the thought hadn't occurred to me. I mean, seeing you again would be nice and all, but I have misgivings for obvious reasons.”

“You didn't have misgivings the last time,” Akira says.

“The last time, my primary reason for being there wasn't you,” Taro reminds him. His voice is gentle, yet firm.

Akira finally remembers. "Right, right. Your father..." Three or four years ago, Mr. Takanashi came down with terminal illness and Taro, despite hating the man, felt it proper decorum to see him off. There was something very poignant about the gesture.

"Plus," Taro continues, "when I agreed to that meet-up, I didn't know until after the fact that you'd be keeping me a secret from your wife."

It's true. Akira knew Sayaka would take it the completely wrong way if he told her he was going to his childhood town to visit... *him*. So, he simply didn't mention that part, and as far as he knows she never found him out. Understandably, though, Taro disliked being a taboo subject. His attitude was that if Akira was too ashamed, or too scared of the potential backlash, to tell his wife he was seeing an ex-lover in a platonic context, perhaps they shouldn't see each other in person at all. "I'm sorry," Akira says. "I shouldn't have done that. That wasn't fair to you." Under his breath, he adds, "Or to her."

"It's fine, Akira-kun. I'm entirely sympathetic to the why. It's just... you don't need me to make your life more complicated than it already is."

"But I want to see you again. And I know you want to see me again, too." Akira feels unexpected passion bursting from within. "I'll tell Sayaka, if you want. Whatever she thinks, it doesn't matter anymore. I won't let her opinion control me. Never again."

There's a silence so long that Akira almost fears the call was disconnected. But, no, Taro is just thinking. At last he says, perfectly calm and composed, "I don't think a visit would be a good idea right now."

And abruptly, Akira feels himself start to cry. One tear after another, without reprieve. The dry spell that began after his love hotel breakdown is finally over. And what a time for it to end. He mutes the phone to erase his pain. Taro mustn't hear this.

It seems he heard enough, though. "I'm really sorry, Akira-kun. I know it hurts, but you know it's for the best. I wish I could be a better friend to you. If work didn't demand I be somewhere tonight, I'd--"

"I know," Akira lets himself whimper. "I know you would. It's okay. Go."

"Whatever you do," Taro says, "don't do anything stupid. Okay?"

Akira can't promise anything on that count. "Take care of yourself, Tako. And I'm sorry about all this."

"Don't be sorry. Just do what you need to do to make things right."

*I don't know if I can*, he wants to say. "Hope everything goes okay. Bye, Tako."

"Later, Akira-kun. Don't be a stranger."

Akira absently lets the phone fall to the floor as both his hands rush to cover his face. He clings at the moistened skin, trying desperately to hide the ungainly distortions brought on by yet more old pain bursting free. He thought that talking to Taro would make him feel better,

and yet Akira only feels worse than before. So much worse. He whimpers without a sound, his throat so constricted that an invisible assailant may as well be throttling him.

It's just as he feared. Any comfort gained was all too transient, if not illusory. The interpersonal distance between them now is so great that no true warmth could bridge the divide. And his fears about himself are already proving true. He's hurting so much that he's spiraling out of control. He was actually contemplating——! Taro did catch him, stop him, but even so... even so...

...there won't always be someone there to say “no”.

'I wish you could have kept some of that happiness for yourself', Taro said. Akira very nearly had it with Taro. He had someone who loved and accepted him, unconditionally. But even at the brightest of times, life was cruel. Akira couldn't love him back, not in the same way Taro loved him. Good conscience forced him to end it before they parted ways to their respective colleges.

Though it inevitably hurt, their deep mutual understanding prevented any immediate or lingering bitterness. They kept tabs on each other after that. After a rocky start, Taro went on to joy and success, while Akira, after a promising one, ultimately deteriorated into a lowly, pitiful parasite... endlessly feeding upon others and giving nothing back.

He wishes it weren't this way. He wishes the happiness he thought he had earlier today was real.

As hard as he tries, he can't help but remember what his father used to tell him. Every time life went sour for the young Akira, the elder Katsuragi would, without fail, invoke the name of God. Everything that happened was the ineffable will of the Lord. And... “Until you give your heart to Him, Akira, there will be nothing but darkness for you.”

It was cruelly ironic, as Akira's name was intended to mean the exact opposite: “bright” or “luminant”. Perhaps it didn't really matter, since kanji for personal names had been abolished after World War II and, legally, his name was a meaningless cluster of syllables like everyone else's. However, there was nothing to stop someone from writing their name however they desired in informal contexts, and his parents had made their intent perfectly clear. They had christened him their beacon of hope, that he would shine with the brilliance of the holy spirit, maybe even become a member of the clergy. And he has done nothing but disappoint them.

There was a time when Akira was able to live and thrive in spite of everything, but not anymore. There is no brightness within Akira's life, he can see that quite clearly. Everywhere, there is desolation, a thick suffocating haze, a void where nothing can thrive nor even take root but life-sucking emptiness. And yet he feels unbearable pain, a burden so great and thick there seems no way to relieve himself of it. Clearly, pain is something and not nothing. It doesn't quite make sense. Perhaps, given the paradoxical nature of humanity, it doesn't have to.

He doesn't want to feel this way. There is something within him that feels he probably deserves it — but he doesn't actually *like* it. He would rather feel nothing. Or, better yet, *be* nothing. If only Akira could make it true. But it is one thing to yearn for nonexistence with

all your being, and quite another to actually bring it about. Yet one more way in which he is a poor Japanese, and a perennial disappointment to the rigid, pious Kazuo Katsuragi.

So what, then? What can he do? How can he escape this feeling, escape himself? He doesn't know. There's nowhere to go. Nowhere that's safe. Even here, in the intellectual sanctuary of his office, he's begging to be caught in this position of utmost vulnerability. Anyone could walk through his door if they chose, and see him like this... He can't be so weak here. He can't show his true colors. Nobody here but Haru can know the full extent of his suffering. Nobody.

Somehow, Akira has managed to go all these years with little incident. It's hard to believe, thinking back on it. There's no possible way his affliction is a true secret. Perhaps he's just been incredibly lucky. He's known others for whom that wasn't the case. Rumors about them having mental illness would circulate and then, one semester, they would vanish from the campus, just like that. And that could easily be him. One wrong move and he'll be stigmatized as something far worse than an intellectual pariah: one of the psychologically irregular.

Sayaka and Misato... It's tempting to worry about them, but deep down he knows he doesn't have to. Push comes to shove, Yura will take care of them. But if Akira became marked, he would struggle to ever find work in his field again. At least, not without also leaving Japan for a less backwards society. And that's been established as a non-option... hasn't it?

There's too much at stake, and almost nobody understands that. Not even Taro could.

Maybe... Maybe if this is how it has to be, then being forced to work outside Japan would be in the best interest of everyone.

Akira hunkers toward his lap, letting his arms wrap protectively round his breast. He gazes, unfocused, into the dark space below his desk, wishing he had the option of crawling down there and bawling at full volume. But he can't. All he can do is suffer his pain in complete silence.

However much time goes by, Akira doesn't seem to move at all. Not even the vibrations of his phone on the cheap carpeting below prompt so much as a twitch. His fingers dig into his arms like long, pale talons. His eyes, still framed by the residues of misery, are vast and empty. Whatever they see, they provide no intimation that they have seen it.

A knock arrives on the door. Another, and Akira violently jerks back into a state of alertness. "I'm here," he says, naturally as possible. Reflexively rubbing his face against his knuckles, he adds, "Please come in."

It's Seito Yamagiri. The younger man — a tanned and toned Osaka native — peeks in. "Sorry to bother you, Katsuragi-sempai. Just wanted to give you a head's-up on this Thursday."

"Oh?"

Seito sees himself in all the way. "Some deadline issues have come up, so neither of us will be able to make it. After that, though, things should go back to normal."

Akira nods. "I'll note it in my calendar."

"So..." Seito casually leans against the doorway. "...how are you feeling? You pushed yourself pretty hard today."

Akira allows an automatic response. "Aches haven't hit me yet, but they will. They always do." He forces a smile.

"It gets better, sempai. Hang in there."

Keeping his current circumstances partitioned feels impossible, and he glances away somberly. "I'm trying."

Seito's eyes narrow. "Are you okay, sempai? Something up?"

Akira gets to his feet and quickly pockets his hands. He tries looking his kouhai in the eyes. Although what seems to be genuine compassion lay within, Akira's immediate impulse is to escape it. The entirety of his being feels emotionally flayed, and the scrutiny of less vulnerable eyes is as the elements hazing an open wound. "It's kind of you to ask, Seito-kun..." He trails off, further words congealing on his tongue.

Yamagiri doesn't take it personally. "I'm sorry. It's not my business to pry. Bad habit, really."

The unexpected self-deprecation causes Akira to relax a nonce and let a chuckle escape his lips. "Don't sweat that stuff with me, Sei-Sei. My own habits were never outstanding." He laughs again when he realizes he self-demonstrated. "Sorry — Seito-kun..."

The younger man grins. "Don't worry, Katsuragi-sempai. Okadome-san isn't even in the building right now."

"Yes, well..." Hearing the name of his supervisor causes Akira to absentmindedly straighten his collar and tie. "It's important to not let improved habits slip back down."

"True enough." Seito takes a sip from his water bottle, then regards Akira thoughtfully. "You've been doing good. Everyone notices the difference the past month has made."

"Th-thank you, Seito-kun..."

"But, well, Hiro-kun and me... and a lot of the other post-grads... It's hard not to miss the old you sometimes. You always stuck out."

"Hard not to, being this tall," Akira says.

"That's not really what I mean. Yeah, I guess it's part of it, but only a small part. There's something about you that's different from everyone else. Even if you try to fit in, you really can't."

Akira feels increasingly uncomfortable. He sits back down and swerves ninety degrees, his gaze averted. Perhaps if he stops feeding into this surreal social situation, it will simply go away.

“S-sorry, Katsuragi-sempai! You know I'm not really good with words...” Akira can easily imagine Seito waving a hand around and grabbing the back of his head in embarrassment. “What I mean to say is, it's a good thing. Whatever it is about you that Okadome-san doesn't like, don't change it too much, alright? Don't become somebody else.”

Akira's mouth hangs open helplessly. Seito hasn't stopped talking. Akira's mind wants to just pretend that he's accidentally hearing words that aren't meant for him, like eavesdropping the next conversation over at a bar. But hearing his own name doesn't let that illusion work for long.

“The students are the ones who really matter, you know? And you were always there for them. For *us*. Even when other professors weren't. You're the only one in this department who hasn't completely forgotten what it was like to be a student yourself. You know you're the best teacher we have, right?”

He caresses his pendant nervously and forces himself to look back in Seito's direction. “Thanks, Seito-kun. I appreciate the kind words.” His own are stilted and forced, coming from a place opposite conviction.

But Seito is unflappable. “Whatever it is you're going through, Katsuragi-sempai..... I'm young and stupid, so I won't pretend I can help. But if you ever want to grab a drink or something, shoot the shit... Hell, you can join Hiro-kun and I later on if you want. Might help take the edge off.”

“Okay.” Akira nods vaguely toward Seito. “Alright. Maybe I will.”

Seito sees himself out. “Take it easy, sempai.”

“You too, Seito.”

The door shuts, and then he's alone again. Akira continues to rub the cross and stare uneasily at it, or perhaps even *through* it, for a while. Seito's spiel couldn't have come at a much worse time. Even though most of what he had to say was very complimentary, there was something about the way he said it that resulted in every drop of kindness being swiftly evaporated. The implication of his kouhai's words is clear.

*You can't gain anything without losing something equally important.*

No... maybe the younger man didn't actually mean something so cruel. But it's very tempting to believe it. It fits so well.

*You can't be everything Okadome wants without sacrificing everything that makes you a good teacher.*

*You can't achieve full personal satisfaction in your relationship without risking the loss of that very relationship.*

*You can't have both intellectual consummation and emotional consummation. You have to choose one.*

And it goes on and on. He feels his mind's eye skim over the full contents of his life, and he sees the same thing again and again. As much as he tries, he can't escape it. No matter how much two things might not seem to be mutually exclusive, he is only ever able to hold onto one. Even as he thinks it, he knows he's succumbing to one of the most well-documented frailties of human cognition, and yet he can't bring himself to care. The emotional reality will always take precedence, leaving the intellectual one coughing on dust and struggling to catch up.

Akira lets his pendant dangle once more and lurches over the side of his chair to retrieve his phone. As soon as he pops it open, he's notified of what he missed. Two new text messages, and one missed call. He's afraid to look, but at the same time there's the very real possibility that Haru tried to get in touch. He's the only one who stands any chance of soothing Akira's nerves right now. Even if he's still unavailable, just knowing that his best friend has heard and acknowledged his plea for help would be so much better than the persisting silence.

First, though... First he should update his calendar with what Seito told him. Akira transfers the information to both his phone calendar and to his conventional bound planner. With that out of the way, he returns to his phone's home screen, and re-reads the notifications. *2 new text messages. 1 missed call.* Again, and again. He's not really sure what he's deliberating over, why he doesn't just get it over with. What is he expecting to see? How bad could it possibly be? Akira stares at the tiny screen for so long that it dims more than once, requiring the tap of a neutral button to brighten it again.

In the end, he powers it down and sets it on his desk. Even that is too much, however; its very presence feels like a thorn in his side. He needs to remove it from sight completely. Gazing around his office, soon his eyes stumble upon his gym duffel — the same one that accompanied him to the love hotel, and still holds the contents of the ill-conceived present. Akira casts the phone within, then ceremoniously seals every zipper and flap before finally shoving the bag into a dark corner where he doesn't have to see it.

Akira sits down at his desk and tries to distract himself with the test papers once more. He's able to make some progress, possibly because the physiological need to cry is no longer crippling him. But even so, every time he glances up toward the front of his desk, he is met by the faces of Sayaka, Misato, and Kimiko — and even his own — silently judging him. No matter that the photos are uniformly from Akira's few idyllic moments; that just makes their mockery all the more effective.

One after another, Akira rotates the photos ninety degrees so that they face the nearest opposing wall rather than him. The only left untouched is the odd picture out, that of Great-Aunt Kaworu. Akira finishes grading the paper he's on, then turns toward her image. As he regards her pure, angelic visage, he clutches the pendant and his chest heaves with the deepest sigh.

His grandparents always relayed the tale with great enthusiasm: how the very young Akira saw Kaworu's image and, not yet knowing who she was or what she was named, deemed her to be his own heavenly protector. She is, perhaps, the only survivor of his parents' determined efforts to devastate his potential for whimsical superstitions. Akira eventually did stop talking about her in terms of a guardian angel, but he's not sure he ever really stopped feeling it, deep



down. He never met her — it was impossible, as she died long before he was even conceived — and yet he feels with every fiber of his being as though he knows her.

Sometimes he contemplates whether this sense of intuitive connection is anything like what his parents feel — and wish *he* felt in turn — for God. If so, his own conviction has slightly more substance to it, for — quite unlike God — Kaworu was able to express herself without need for unreliable intermediaries. Whatever she wanted to say, she was able to say it herself. And he's read everything that remains. Kaworu's journals are his holy books. Akira is overwhelmingly lucky to have them. His maternal grandparents had been holding onto everything Kaworu left behind, unsure of its ultimate fate. Right before Akira left Nagoya for Kyoto, they told him that Kaworu's legacy would bypass their daughter and Akira's mother Chika — who had always shown little interest — and go directly to Akira. Without a permanent residence, Akira took only the pendant with him at that time. He came back years later for the rest, not long before both of his grandparents passed away. Ever since, the collection of journals has been enshrined on the top of the bookshelf in Akira's study. Ultimately, he wishes to see them published and Kaworu Igara's legacy rightfully shared with the world — but that, like so many other things in his life, has yet to materialize.

He often wonders how different his life might have been if Aunt Kaworu had lived to old age. It's an ultimately futile thought, for the obvious reason that the resultant impact on the Igara family and beyond would be so significant it's a certainty that Akira himself would never have been born. Dwelling upon it too much quickly becomes surreal. In a cosmic sense, could it be said that Kaworu Igara died so that Akira Katsuragi could live?

All too easily, he can imagine his parents saying that it was all part of God's plan. Kaworu's tragic death to a disease that could perhaps, today, be identified and treated? It wasn't meaningless at all; it was God's will! And, of course, nothing God does can possibly be meaningless, since deities only exist in the first place to provide meaning to those who cannot get it any other way. Or perhaps not. Perhaps Aunt Kaworu and Sayaka prove that there is more to it than that, and his own poor experiences just incline him to cynicism.

He wishes things could be different. As much as he doesn't want his father to be right about anything, Akira also wishes with all his heart that he could possess whatever it is that Sayaka and Aunt Kaworu share. How nice it would be if human suffering weren't ultimately meaningless. If it *was* actually part of a plan. Would that his misery meant something in this vast, cold universe, as opposed to being merely the unfortunate byproduct of a most elaborate chemical dance.

In a different world, Aunt Kaworu might be able to explain his pain in terms he'd understand, without resort to the cruel God worshiped by his parents. It's an appealing fantasy. But that's all it is. Kaworu Igara is dead and gone, and gods are not a thing that exist anywhere but the human mind. Akira is on his own.

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By the time he escapes the confines of his office, darkness has fallen. It seems Yamagiri has left, and perhaps it's just as well. There are others around, of course, but no one with whom Akira wishes to speak. The feeling is apparently mutual, and Akira is able to make a bathroom run, brew some tea in the common area, and return to his sanctuary without incident.

As he nurses his mug, he continues marking up the pile of tests. Before long, he notices that the light for his office voice mail is blinking. Someone must have called while he was gone. Anxiously, he glances at the caller ID — but, to his surprise, there is none. It's an unlisted number. That rules out Sayaka and Haru... and, for that matter, every other person he can think of who would have real reason to call him here. Just in case, though, he hits “play”. The voice is totally unfamiliar and almost certainly foreign. It hasn't the chance to say more than a few words before Akira hits “delete”, returning to his professorial duties without another thought.

About a half hour passes. He's made good progress. Surprising, as he really did believe tonight would entirely unproductive. Another thirty minutes and he'll have survived to the end of today's shift. He's not sure he's quite ready to go home, nor of the mood to tell Sayaka as much. But thinking about that ahead of time is unnecessary; he should stay focused and keep the pace up. Akira stretches his arms and gets back to work.

Not a minute goes by before the phone rings. Sayaka this time, surely? And..... no, it isn't. It's the mystery number again. Curious. Akira caps his pen and answers.

“Hello,” he says, “Dr. Katsuragi here.”

“Ah, Dr. Katsuragi! So pleased to speak with you at last.” An exuberant, articulate male voice. And with the same glaring accent as before.

Akira immediately wonders why he dismissed the message so readily, as it's immediately clear that the speaker's native tongue is Akira's own second language. That in and of itself shouldn't legitimize the caller, of course, but it's difficult not to feel an illogical kinship over such details. Who in the world could this be? “May I... ask who's calling?”

“Of course. I am the director of the United Nations' Commission for the Sciences. My name is Lukas von Frisch.”

Akira becomes slack-jawed. The *director*? Inadvertently, he blurts out, “Why would the director of an important organization be using an unlisted number?” But that name... Something about it *does* feel familiar, in the vaguest possible way.

There's a tepid chuckle on the other end. “You find that discomfoting, Dr. Katsuragi? I can call back on a different device if you would prefer.”

Cradling the receiver between his ear and shoulder, Akira begins to rummage for the bottom of his desk's “in” tray. “N-no,” he stutters, “that won't be necessary. I'm sure you're legitimate. Please go on.”

And so the sonorous, distinguished-sounding voice does. “I believe you've been acquainted with our human resources department. Agent Chiyoe Tatsuta, to be precise.” In spite of the obvious accent, Frisch's Japanese is essentially flawless. Though... there's something subtly irksome about his overall speech pattern.

Akira finds the padded A4-sized envelope, one corner marked by the return address of Tatsuta's office in Tokyo. It's the summary report on his research, a copy of which he requested during their meeting. Feels like an eternity ago. Akira never opened it; by the time it arrived, he had other things on his mind. “Ah, yes...” he murmurs, absentmindedly struggling to get the envelope open. No use — it's quite secure and will require a bladed implement.

“Is this a bad time, Dr. Katsuragi?” Frisch asks.

“N-no,” Akira says. He sets the report aside; whatever he wanted to check can wait a few minutes. “Apologies. Please continue.”

There's a faint sound, perhaps the click of a lighter. “I am to understand that you've been dodging Tatsuta-san's calls? ..... May I ask why?”

“I... Uh...” Akira starts to futz with his hair. “We actually *have* spoken since the initial meet-up. ...Once, I think.”

A brief pause on Frisch's end. “Ah, yes. On September 29, to be precise. You had not yet made a decision regarding our proposal at that time, correct?”

“That's right,” Akira affirms.

“And do you remain undecided, Dr. Katsuragi?” Somehow, Frisch's question comes off as congenial and menacing all at once.

“I—” Akira tries to swallow the lump in his throat. “I haven't been sure of my answer. I have another month to think about it. Don't I?”

Frisch hums. “Indeed, you do. We would have preferred to not be left in the dark, all the same.”

“I understand... But...” Akira scratches the back of his head. “Tatsuta-san has a way about her. She can be unpleasant to deal with. Very... coercive. Needlessly so, I think.”

“I'm aware,” Frisch replies. “She is a rather divisive woman. However, it is her job to get results. Normally, there's very little that escapes her. Perhaps, in retrospect, she was the wrong match for you?”

“Perhaps, yes,” Akira agrees. “But she did accomplish her fundamental goal. I received all the information required to inform my final decision. And I *do* have to admit that the offer is alluring.”

“—But?” Frisch prompts.

“But... I can't commit one way or another.” A deep breath. “Not yet.”

“I see,” Frisch says. “I do respect your desire to take your time with this, Dr. Katsuragi. It's within your rights. The offer will, of course, be going nowhere until another month passes. At the same time, the two months is a formality. We obviously prefer it not take prospective enlistees that long to decide.”

Akira bites his lip. “I— Yes, I can understand that...”

“I can't commit,” Frisch repeats with a thoughtful tone. “You haven't said yes — though, significantly, you won't say no. May I take that to mean you are still on the fence about this?”

Akira can't *deny* it. “I suppose so...”

“That is where I come in, Dr. Katsuragi. I believe I may be able to expedite your decision. I would like to discuss the matter with you further, if I may. Learn of any concerns and questions you may have. Do my best to address them. Present additional information that may help sway your opinion.” He pauses for what seems to be mere effect. “In person, as soon as possible.”

“I— I really don't know...” Akira blurts ineffectually.

Frisch keeps coming, solid as steel. “Are you waiting on anything specific? Other job offers?”

“No...” It doesn't even occur to Akira to lie. The truth slips away like an agitated fish.

“All I need is an hour of your time, Dr. Katsuragi. Two at the absolute most, if we take transit into consideration. I truly feel as though Tatsuta mishandled you, and I would like to make up for it.”

Akira's mind continues to flounder in indecision. *I don't know. I really don't know.* Earlier today, the right answer would have come to him easily. But now, his conviction has faded to doubt. He should have told Tatsuta “no” long before this could become a problem. Worse, his mind struggles to articulate precisely why that never happened. That line of thought, like so many others, has been neglected, left to sink into the mire of muddled memories. It's far beyond his reach now. All he can do is act within the moment.

“So...” Akira finally says, “would this be like before? The restaurant and all?”

“Indeed,” Frisch replies. “A pleasant, casual outing.”

“How casual?”

“No additional decorum will be required. Whatever you wear normally is fine. There is no need to impress us, Dr. Katsuragi. We are already quite impressed with you.”

The words emerge of their own accord. “When?”

“As soon as this evening, if you're available.”

He doesn't hesitate. "I am." *I have nowhere else to go.* "Do you have a specific time and place in mind?"

"How do you feel about international cuisine, Dr. Katsuragi?"

"I don't know. It depends."

"I know a number of equally fine establishments," Frisch says. "Korean? Thai? Indian? Italian? German? Fre—"

An easy choice. "German will do. I wasn't even aware we had a place like that locally."

"One of Okazaki's many well-kept secrets," Frisch chirps. "Let me provide the address. Tell me when you're ready."

Akira swiftly removes his pocket notebook and turns to a fresh page. "Ready." Once it's been written down, Akira contemplates for a brief moment. "That's not too far from here. I could probably be there by 6:00."

"Excellent. 6:00 it is."

Akira nods, adding that to the page and emphatically circling it. "I'll see you there, Herr Frisch." ...Herr? Did he really just say that?

"I look forward to it," Frisch says. Then, with a playful lilt, he adds, "...Doktor Katsuragi."

Akira hears a click on the other end and hangs up in turn. He slowly leans back in his chair. He isn't sure why, but his heart is racing. Trying to get a grip on himself, he clasps his cross and stares at what he wrote down in the notepad. "Zum Anknabbern, 42 Okazaki Tennocho, Sakyo-ku. 6 o'clock PM." Underneath all that, "Lukas von Frisch" in delicately printed romaji. He underlines the man's name twice, then puts the notepad away.

He glances at the clock — only 4:45. Time enough to still accomplish a thing or two. First things first: he extracts the ISTAA report from its envelope with a pair of scissors. There's a small typed note stamped with Tatsuta's seal clipped to the front, little more than a formality. "Your copy, as promised", it says. "If you require anything else, do not hesitate to contact me during regular office hours", which she kindly provides. Akira turns the thick, bound volume over, then flips through the leaves.

Certainly, everything looks precisely as he remembers: page after page of straightforward breakdowns of his methodology and proofing, the viability of every hypothetical, and the long-term utility of his demonstrated intellectual ability to ISTAA's goals and aims. The impartial third parties commissioned for the work appear to be qualified specialists in numerous fields, nearly all unfamiliar names and from every corner of the globe. Figures that the only people within the scientific community who have scrutinized Akira's work at any level of detail were all paid to do it. Even so, this is valuable stuff — impartial peer review, provided free of cost. It will take Akira many long hours of careful cross-referencing between the individual reports and his original publications to receive the full benefit.

Why, exactly, did he let something like this linger at the bottom of his tray all this time? At first, it seems a significant question, but it doesn't take very long to remember the reason. Just skimming over a single write-up, he feels his chest flood with an overwhelming sense of long-desired affirmation. Back then, during the meeting with Tatsuta, he had struggled to suppress that feeling with his own abundant self-doubt — but it didn't work, not completely. Akira had correctly identified that feeling as a very real danger, and cast the forbidden fruit from his sight where it could do little harm. But now? Now.....

He's being helplessly propelled back toward temptation.

Akira at last remembers why he wanted to access the report during the call. That list of commission members' names, signing off in the very back. He seeks out the page, to find that his memory hasn't betrayed him. Topping the list is “Lukas von Frisch, Developmental Director & Chief of Operations”, flanked by a signature that is both efficient and elegant.

The mind boggles. That's considerably more significant than how Frisch had earlier described himself, as a mere “director”. Akira immediately feels the desire to believe, same as with Tatsuta, that he's being toyed with. That's far more logical than the CEO of an international organization singling him out as someone worthy of individual attention. He's just not that important. There's no way.

But, no — there has to be *some* reason he agreed to meet with Frisch. Perhaps it's mere desperation. Or perhaps it's something more. Maybe it's the part of himself that knows he's always been onto something, that deeply, intuitively recognizes his own significance. It's tempting to ignore it. Sometimes it's even the right thing to do. But perhaps the time has come to once again listen. Give it a chance to be the voice of reason.

He gives himself about a half hour to peruse. But, all too soon, it's time to go. He empties any extraneous contents from his hand bag and slides the report on in, just in case there's opportunity to read more on the way over. As Akira zips the bag up, he wonders if he should bring his cell phone. Quickly, his mind vetoes the notion — it will just feel like Sayaka's presence hovering over him the entire time. Should he even give her the courtesy of a call, to tell her where he'll be? He's supposed to already be home, after all. Is it really right to leave her in the dark?

Probably not. No, *certainly* not. But right now Akira doesn't care. Not one wit. He'll get home whenever he does, and she can deal with it.

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Akira leans back and regards the restaurant's festive, hand-crafted sign. *Zum Anknabbern*. A playfully self-deprecating name, meaning “good enough to eat”. That might not fly back in Germany, but clearly the restaurant's owner is having fun here in Kyoto, where the joke will go over most people's heads.

The entranceway is refreshingly tall, such that Akira can, for a change, pass through without thinking about it. Very slight mismatches in the paint suggest that the top was vaulted up after the fact. Passing on through, it's immediately clear that this place has a much more cheerful atmosphere than the *Guren no Fukuryū*. As far as Akira can tell, all of the patrons — mostly European or American tourists — seem to be enjoying themselves. The place seems authentic in every respect, perfectly replicating the atmosphere of a Bavarian restaurant-pub: from the imported hosts and servers, to the architecture and décor, to the music and lighting. Definitely takes Akira back. With any luck, the food will match the rest.

As different as the environs and his mental state are from last time, though, the déjà vu is strong.

A young blonde woman, sporting the stereotypical puffy white sleeves, low-cut blouse, and apron, breaks away from the front pub area and greets him. “Welcome to Zum Anknabbern, sir. How may I help you?” The Japanese is mildly stilted, but effective enough.

“I’m here for a dinner meeting,” Akira says. “My host might have already arrived.” When the hostess provides an expectant look, he elaborates, “Lukas von Frisch?”

“Ah, you must be Dr. Katsuragi,” she says. Akira simply nods. “Herr Frisch is expecting you. Right this way.”

Echoing his previous dinner meeting, Akira is escorted all the way to the back, where the nicest tables are invariably located. The colorful Teutonic atmosphere continues all the way, though distance from the bar does make this area more quiet. Aside from the pervasive tobacco smell — his fault for not asking about that, he supposes — it’s quite nice.

Akira spots an older gentleman seated alone at an oversized circular table, legs loosely crossed and a cigarette gripped delicately between index and middle fingers. He’s so singularly distinctive there’s no doubt he is Lukas von Frisch in the flesh. As Akira approaches, the striking pale blue eyes gaze in his direction, projecting their anticipation and an almost uncomfortable sense of familiarity. Immediately, Akira’s muscles tense and he can feel the rush of blood pounding away at both his eardrums.

“One of the waitresses will be with you shortly,” the hostess says, her voice impossibly distant. “Please enjoy your stay.” Akira doesn’t even see her leave.

Frisch brings the cigarette to his mouth and partakes of it with all the sensuality one might provide a lover. Gray mist soon emerges from his lips in a fine funnel, thoughtfully targeted away from the table. Then, promptly reversing the act of tenderness, Frisch grinds the butt into the ashtray, vigorously, leaving no embers intact.

At last, he stands, towering as high as Akira himself, maybe even with a few centimeters’ advantage. Frisch immediately leaves a strong impression: a fit, handsomely weathered man no younger than sixty, with stunningly silver hair and a neatly trimmed chevron mustache. His garb is almost alarmingly casual — even Akira is more dressed up —, nothing about it suggesting his station. But there *is* something about him, something about his overall presence, that Akira can only describe as “aristocratic”. Perhaps, given the “von”, that’s to be expected. Normally, Akira would find that off-putting — but not today.

“Good evening, Dr. Katsuragi,” Frisch greets, bowing at a modest angle. Akira immediately returns with a deeper bow. “I appreciate you coming to meet with me on such short notice.”

Straightening up, Akira shakes his head. “No, not at all, Frisch-san. It's my pleasure. I'm quite interested in whatever you have to say.”

Frisch smiles. “Feeling more confident, are we?”

Akira releases a modest sigh. “It's simpler to say, perhaps, that I'm interested in being persuaded.”

Frisch raps the tips of his fingers together. “Excellent.” He extends an open palm to the opposite end of the table. “Please have a seat, Dr. Katsuragi.”

Akira does.

The older man retrieves his purse — an expensive-looking piece of leather craftsmanship — and begins to rummage within. “To start with, you must want some assurance that I am who I claim.” Is he referring back to Akira's hangup on the phone? Or perhaps this is a customary step in any meeting that takes place outside the office? Frisch retrieves a small leather card holder and passes it to Akira. “Please take a look, Dr. Katsuragi.”

Akira hesitantly opens it up. The thing is packed with identification cards issued by the United Nations Commission for the Sciences. Each card is bi- or trilingual: English as the default, and the others contingent on the particular UN headquarters that issued the ID. Every major world language seems to be represented, far as he can tell. A holographic UN seal is emblazoned on each card, something Akira remembers seeing on Tatsuta's ID. According to these, Frisch is a German citizen and will turn 61 in February.

One card, placed perfectly in the very middle, is different from the rest, issued instead by “UN/ISTAA”. Located in Hamburg — or at least this particular branch is — so the languages are English and German. The holographic seal is a much smaller version of what Akira remembers seeing on the ISTAA booklet: a tree resembling a brain in profile. While the other IDs are valid well into 2005, this one expires at the beginning of next year. Brings to mind what Tatsuta had said about how ISTAA wasn't *quite* ready to go public.

“Thank you,” Akira says, returning the holder. “That quenches all remaining doubt, I think.”

“*Fantastisch*.” Frisch stows it back away. “So, before we get down to business... Are you hungry, Dr. Katsuragi? I haven't eaten since the morning, myself. Please.” He gestures to the menus that the hostess set down when Akira wasn't paying attention. “Help yourself. Your meal is, of course, complimentary.”

“Ah— Yes, of course. Thank you.”

He peruses the main menu. So many competing options. He could easily go for at least half of them, but schweinebraten with a side of kartoffelklösse and sauerkraut couldn't possibly let him down. The spirits menu has a lot of possibilities, as well. While he's trying to decide, the waitress arrives. Frisch greets her with casual familiarity *auf Deutsch* — he's clearly been



waited by her before — and divulges his order. Even with such a short interchange to judge from, Akira gets the distinct impression that Frisch's speech is just as contrived and over-embellished in his native tongue. Interesting. The waitress's attention soon turns to him. He orders the braised pork and, feeling more daring than usual, also opts for an apple and pear brandy.

Once that's done with, Frisch comments, "I must commend you for choosing a German dining venue. Had you not, I would've needed to visit Zum Anknabbern on my spare time."

"You're a regular, I take it?"

"Well," he laughs, "as regular as an only intermittent presence in your country can be. I've been traveling abroad most of my life, and my return visits to Germany are ever limited. A piece of home in a place of business is always welcome, accordingly."

Akira nods. "I can understand that." He looks off to the side and notices an alpenhorn mounted on the far wall, amidst other Alpine paraphernalia. "Are you from Bavaria specifically?"

"Oh, yes," Frisch says. "My father is actually Austrian, but I was born in Augsburg on the estate of my mother's family. I've ultimately spend more time on the German side of the border than not. Beautiful city, Augsburg. And the surrounding forest and countryside, simply exquisite. Have you been there?"

"I may have passed through at some point," Akira allows. At that point, their drinks arrive. Frisch's is a colorless liqueur in a tall, frosty glass, accompanied by the partly-emptied green bottle. Akira's amber-colored brandy comes in an ornate snifter. He samples it. Much stronger than he's used to, but not bad.

"So..." Frisch strokes his mustache methodically. "I'm to understand that you personally spent part of your formative years in Germany?"

Akira's left eyebrow peaks. "I wasn't aware that was common knowledge."

The older man leans back, grinning ever so slightly. "In my line of work, you come to know many things that aren't."

*How comforting...* "Yes," Akira relents, "it's true. I—" He cuts off, immediately struck by the fact that he's on the verge of providing unnecessary personal details. To this man, a complete stranger. Charismatic, yes, but a stranger nonetheless. What Frisch is doing couldn't be more obvious, could it? Revealing some details about himself, only to segue into questions directed at Akira — clearly intended to put his guest at ease and make him open up and become more susceptible to whatever form of psychological persuasion he has planned. But perhaps this isn't actually a problem, considering the whole reason Akira is here.

He takes a deep breath, then another, and finally looks into Frisch's pale blue eyes. They seem to be regarding him with a deep calm that's somewhere between fascination and detachment. It's decidedly ambiguous, to an almost exhilarating extent. Whatever precisely lay within that gaze, it's also unusually warm and comforting. The owner of those eyes is not

necessarily someone Akira can trust... but he would like to. More than anything. He has to dip his toes into the waters and see what happens.

At last, he proceeds. "I spent part of my childhood in Düsseldorf. It had a... lingering effect, I've been told."

"Hmm," Frisch intones. "Such as your unusual height, perhaps?"

"Maybe." Akira shrugs. "Everyone else in my family is typical Japanese height, so I guess not being limited to the usual Japanese dietary staples, even for a time, could have played some role." Thinking about it, "I suppose, while I was in Germany, I *did* develop atypical eating habits that lasted well into early adulthood." Ones entirely distinct from the pathological dietary behaviors that eventually took over...

"Apologies if this question is out of line, Dr. Katsuragi," Frisch says, "but have you, by any chance, considered partly European heritage?"

The question takes him by surprise. "No. Well, I mean..." Akira scratches the back of his head. "I'm post-war, so it's distinctly possible. But if it *were* the case, my family would have made certain that no one ever heard a word about it. I have no stake in the Japanese obsession with racial purity, so it really makes no difference to me." His index finger starts to make small circles upon the cross. "But... why specifically do you ask?"

Frisch brushes a finger along the inner top edge of his right eye. "You don't have an especially distinctive epicanthic fold. In my experience, that's more common when the blood has thinned." He picks up his glass and swills the contained beverage around. "So to speak."

Suddenly, Akira wishes he had access to a mirror, but the nearest available thing is the chrome of the silverware, and that won't really do. He'll have to keep it in mind for his next bathroom run. Meantime, he simply shrugs. "I'm only ever mistaken for Euro stock in the interim before someone sees my face."

"Oh, to be sure,"—Frisch ever so slightly tips back his head and lets some of the liqueur trickle down—"you definitely have more East Asian features than not. The distinctiveness of your upper eyelids is a very subtle detail. You would probably need to have your genes tested to be sure. If that is something that interests you, anyway."

Akira shrugs again. "Maybe. As a novelty, it would be interesting. I don't have the money to throw away on something like that, though."

"Understandable." He sets the glass back down. "So, putting that aside, how is your German? You would have needed to learn it at one point, yes?"

"Well..." Akira quickly sifts through the most obvious conversational tidbits, deciding how much depth he should provide. He doesn't get to discuss this part of his life often. *All the way*, it's decided. "As you might have guessed, my family lived in the Japanese quarter of the city. Immermanstraße, Oststraße..."

Frisch nods. "I've been there. Quite an interesting blend of influences in Düsseldorf. A very densely textured place."

Akira, harboring no disagreement, goes on. "My parents tried to keep me as sequestered from foreign influence as possible. Sent me to a Japanese international school, the whole deal. For all the good it did." He winks. "I was a defiant child. Prospect of punishment stopped phasing me at an early age and I was too 'crafty' to truly keep under wraps. So I spent as much time out and about as I could. Ingratiated myself with the local children." At last getting to the point, he says, "I became fluent quite quickly."

"And have you been able to hold onto any of that, Dr. Katsuragi?"

The thin man signs. "Not as well as I'd like. My working knowledge of common vernacular is fairly rusty. It's mostly technical jargon and the purely business end of social niceties that get any exercise."

Frisch cups his chin in a palm. "Due to your international participation in the physics community, I assume?"

Akira nods.

"If you're interested in getting a little extra practice, Dr. Katsuragi," Frisch says, "you're welcome to do so here. I'd be quite interested in hearing your command of Deutsch."

"I, uh..." Akira glances off. "I never feel completely comfortable speaking it in Japan. Bit of a personal hangup, I suppose."

Frisch provides a solemn nod. "I understand that. If you don't mind my saying so, your own people are nothing if not xenophobic."

Quite a risky thing to say to a Japanese. Did Frisch somehow know about Akira's predilections already? Or was he able to accurately guess it from what's already been said? The comment about racial purity couldn't have made that too difficult... Akira rolls with it. "Oh, by all means. I'm in full agreement. Any ill opinion you might have of my country, it's almost a certainty that I'll share it."

"Fascinating. Your country fosters an above-average sense of nationalism, does it not? Would you consider yourself an exception?"

"Absolutely." Akira can feel himself rapidly firing on all cylinders. He's almost never able to talk about this, least of all with such unforgiving openness. It won't matter what he says to Frisch, and it's wonderful. "I'm one of the least Japanese Japanese people you'll ever meet."

"And would you say this is a result of your time abroad?" Frisch cocks his head, accentuating the sense of inquisitiveness. "Or is it something else?"

Akira considers this. "A combination of things, I'd guess. It's hard to say. Someone in the position of observing my personal development through cold, impartial lenses might be able to, but I'm too close to the matter."

Frisch's neck reverts. "I see."

At that point, food arrives, bringing the conversation to a temporary respite. Everything looks and smells absolutely divine. Akira didn't realize just how hungry he was. Breaking out fork and meat knife, he sets into his dish with vigor. Setting a piece of flesh upon his tongue and working it with his teeth, he's immediately taken by how tender, juicy, and flavorful it is. Impeccably cooked, and quite possibly of a higher caliber than what he last remembers having at an actual restaurant in Germany. He takes a sip from his drink and comments, "This is excellent."

Frisch — in the midst of slow, thoughtful mastication — provides a nod and hum of emphatic agreement. He drinks from the tall glass, then returns to his own meal. On the plate is piled what appear to be some manner of bratwurst. Each one is about fifteen cm long, neither too thick nor too thin, and uniformly cooked to a dark fleshy color. Having finished one, Frisch plunges his fork into the next. Rather than proceed by cutting off a reasonable section, he picks the entire thing up and places one end in his mouth. His eyes close in savor and...

The anxiety sets in fast and fierce, tiny muscle spasms breaking out across Akira's body. This is *incredibly* uncomfortable to watch, least of all because of the pulsating twitch in his left eyelid. Yet he can't bring himself to look away from the lewd display. The lascivious embrace of his lips. The playful little nibbles. The satisfied murmurs. Frisch's dining seems intended to provoke, as if, somehow, he *knows*. About the toy, about Taro, about twenty pitiful years of repression. But there's no possible way Frisch can know. It *has* to all be in Akira's head, the result of his senses playing a malicious trick on him. Either that, or this is just how Frisch eats his bratwurst and it's all a marvelous, vicious coincidence. He can't decide.

Though the table conceals his unwitting vasocongestion, he still feels absolutely exposed. An impotent and incapable passenger within his own body. A dark, clandestine impulse beckons him to take some kind of action, the kind requiring nothing more than the most subtle of looks, but there is nothing to do but ignore it. He doesn't trust himself enough to even chance the possibility that Frisch is imparting a message and waiting on a reply. He has to get his mind away from this. Back to business.

Akira swallows down the excessive saliva that had pooled in his mouth and forces himself to speak. "So, I—" He throws back some of the brandy, hoping it will soothe the nerves. "I've noticed that you have impressive credentials, Frisch-san."

Frisch looks up from his plate, and his eyes seem to twinkle with quiet mischief. He brings his napkin to his lips, followed by a rinse of the palette. "Indeed."

Not the response Akira was expecting. He provides a stronger prompt. "If I might ask, what exactly do you do for the United Nations?"

"A valid question, Dr. Katsuragi." Frisch pushes his plate aside, setting down thoughtfully intertwined hands. "Overall, it is my duty to see ISTAA off the ground in a timely manner and make sure its development adheres to the vision established by my superiors." His sturdy, calloused fingers ripple up and down against his knuckles hypnotically. "This requires having a strong international presence and regularly monitoring what all of the important players beneath me are doing."

“Interesting,” Akira says, for lack of anything better.

Without missing a beat, the older man goes on, as if reciting a preexisting tract which must always be divulged in full. “Whenever possible, I like to simply set things in motion, then occasionally check in and make sure everything is functioning as planned. Anything that *isn't* is swiftly dealt with. Bureaucracies are a major problem in most organizations, but due to the UN's need for expediency I am largely liberated of such shackles. My operations are almost entirely autonomous, only occasionally requiring clearance from the higher-ups.” The sense of mechanization abruptly dissipates as he finishes, pointedly looking at Akira, “If need be, I can take lower-tier matters into my own hands.”

“Which is...” Akira gulps in spite of himself. “That's what you're doing here with me. Isn't it?”

Frisch leans back, wrapping his hands behind his head, the hint of a smirk on his lips. “Indeed?”

*Is he testing me?* Akira gives the man what he, apparently, wants. “If Tatsuta wasn't working out, there's no particular reason one of her peers couldn't have taken up my case. But, instead,”—he provides his own pointed look—“you're the one doing it. Arguably the most important individual in your division of the UN, spending precious hours on one lowly recruit. It's curious, no? There must be countless matters of greater significance clamoring for your time.”

Frisch tenderly sips from his glass. “And why do you say that?”

Akira does the same. “It seems an inescapable conclusion of your job description.”

A sly smile. Frisch dabs the alcohol from his mustache. “No doubt you must be wondering, Dr. Katsuragi, why you warrant such an exaggerated level of special attention.”

“The thought had occurred to me, yes.”

“Tell me, Dr. Katsuragi.” Frisch steeples his fingers, suggesting another incoming tract. “Why did you spend ten years of your life pursuing the S<sup>2</sup> theory? Surely you knew that you would face harrowing opposition.”

Akira's immediate impression is that this is a non sequitur, but he tries to play along. Kneading at the back of his cranium, he says, eyes averted, “There's no one particular reason.”

“I would be honored to hear the story behind it,” the other man says, a sense of gentle honesty percolating into his voice. “Even just part of the tale would suffice.”

It's hard to isolate it from his mind: a succinct “story” behind the S<sup>2</sup> theory. Akira is tempted to just dismiss it out of hand as the product of madness. Certainly, it *is* that, at least in part. But that really isn't adequate grounds for summary dismissal, either. However the idea was first conceived, almost all of the actual back-breaking work was done during periods of perfect lucidity. Akira can be certain about this because, whenever possible, he had Haru look

over his work for obvious flaws. Haru, being a fellow protégé of Dr. Amagiri — upon whose theoretical achievements Akira's own are ultimately built —, was in a better position than most anyone to discover potential problems. And find some he did, but these were mostly simple mathematical slip-ups and other such oversights, nothing especially devastating. Haru's opposition to Akira's work was never as a physicist, but as a friend, his objections mostly on the grounds that research of such an obsessive nature actively took away from the things that Akira also needed to be doing. In any event, Haru's quiet endorsement seems to be vindicated by the ISTAA report. Even Akira's monumental difficulty getting the monograph published is on his side, in a way: he can't think of a single rejection letter that actually justified the decision on scientific grounds.

What he's been doing for the past ten years... it's *not* mere nonsense or madness. It's a genuine window of understanding opened up in the dark, intangible fabric of the cosmos. Beyond it lay answers to some of the greatest secrets of the universe. Humanity need only to enter that door without fear and trepidation and see where it leads, following the path painstakingly mapped out within Akira's head. Unlike anyone else, he knows precisely what to do next. He knows how to reach the final destination.

In his heart of hearts, he knows this all to be true. He must simply let himself feel it again. Embrace the eternal flame and let its power flow through him.

“The tale...” Akira's eyes dart down impishly and his lips peel back just a little. “It really begins with the work of my sensei, Dr. Shinkichi Amagiri. He was a rebel himself, albeit one vindicated within his lifetime.” Akira looks back at Frisch. “Are you familiar?”

“Dr. Amagiri is the godfather of Dirac Sea physics, if I'm not mistaken.”

“You are not. Sensei always had a fascination with physics' discarded pile. All the things deemed silly and fruitless, and left to rot in aging texts. Not infrequently, they inspired him. He'd uncover a thread that, if tugged on enough, would unravel all the useless nonsense, revealing an idea with actual promise. That's how the revival of the Dirac Sea began. By the time Sensei took me and Dr. Yakumo under his wing, he had published a solid line-up of papers on the subject. Haru and I were both trained to continue that work.”

Frisch nods. “The  $S^2$  theory definitely owes much of its foundation to Amagiri's work and your own initial explorations of same. But it's also radically divergent. Dirac Sea physics form only part of its DNA. A lot of your ideas, frankly, have never been seen before. At least, not in such a cohesive and empirical state. How did that transition come about? From dutifully following your sensei's footsteps to spearheading your own explosive suite of concepts?”

Akira thoughtfully strokes the side of his face. “A lot of it is a blur now. But, I guess, I owe a lot of it to my...” His throat bobs. “...my wife.”

“Indeed?” Frisch says, looking surprised.

“She... uh...” Suddenly the words are coming less easily. But he can get through this. *Just make it quick and simple.* “She never found the utility of pure theoretical physics especially convincing. I suppose, to her mind, exploring the deepest mysteries of the universe should be

an entirely spiritual pursuit, not how one makes their living. She would always try to be gentle and indirect, but I knew what she was really saying: 'You have an incredible gift, and you're wasting it on things that don't actually matter.'"

"And what *would* actually matter?" A coy inquiry.

"Saya— er, my wife..." Akira starts thumbing his pendant. "She deeply believes in helping other people. Personal talents should not be wasted on trivial pursuits; they should be used for the good of the many. I guess something inside me saw the logic of that. A seed was planted, you could say." He sighs deeply. "I think it all started to really come together when our puppy was... uh..." He rubs the edges of his eyes. "A, uh, car got her..."

Frisch allows a sympathetic frown. "I'm sorry to hear it. Dogs truly make everything better." He imbibes what little remains in his glass, and refills it halfway from the bottle. "If it's too much, Dr. Katsuragi, there's no need to continue on my account."

"No..." Akira shakes his head. "No, it's just that I don't think about it often, so it... you know... it always hurts when I do. I can go on."

"By all means."

Akira takes a moment to collect himself, then proceeds. "Anyway, as I was saying... The car. I never owned one. I never needed to. I always just ignored them. But after that, I couldn't. They cause so many needless deaths. But as I thought about it more and more, I realized that automobiles, they were just a distraction. There was a much greater issue underlying it all. Something that has been causing needless suffering, conflict, and destruction for as long as humanity has existed, and will only get worse the longer we're on this Earth." He plunges a fork into one of the remaining morsels on his plate and holds it up. "Energy. The need for energy." Then down the hatch it goes.

"Indeed," Frisch says. "I've seen that your monograph dedicates a not insignificant section to the issue. And I believe you've spoken about it at all three of your big lectures this year."

Akira finishes chewing, then washes it down. "I, uh... Well, once I got invested, it was hard not to feel passionate. Like maybe I could, eventually, make a difference in the world."

"And there's absolutely no reason you can't."

Here they are. They've finally reached the critical point. Whatever happens now will determine everything to follow.

Frisch goes on. "Clearly, Dr. Katsuragi, you believe in your work. You feel its inherent value on a profound level."

"I... Yes, I suppose I do."

"And yet something is obstructing your path forward. At this point, the most obvious problem has been removed. With ISTAA, money is no longer an issue. You know that we will fund your research to its logical conclusion."

Akira gulps heavily and his eyes waver. “Y-yes, I do understand that.”

Frisch eases back into his chair and steeples his fingers over his lap. “So, Dr. Katsuragi, if you do not mind my asking... What, precisely, is preventing you from taking our offer?”

His fingers tighten around his great-aunt's cross. Akira takes a deep breath and expels, “I'm afraid it's a private matter.”

“Hmm,” the German muses, rapping the tips of his index fingers together. “Domestic issues? Those can be a problem, of course. But we are *more* than willing to work with you and your family. You need only to allow us.”

“I never said—” Akira starts, then realizes there's no point. Frisch clearly has an ability to read people far, far eclipsing Akira's ability to hide matters of the heart. “Things are very complicated right now. I can't... I shouldn't be reckless.” Immediately, Akira wonders what in the world he's thinking or doing. He went to such great lengths to convince himself that, yes, this meet-up was a good idea and all he required was a tiny push from Frisch to take the leap. And now he's accelerating in full reverse? Just how fickle *is* he?

Frisch fidgets briefly about his breast pocket, then lets his index finger caress his mouth contemplatively. “A troubled marriage is a painful thing. Nor a matter easily resolved. It can take months... *years*... for the final verdict to be reached.”

Akira stares into his lap, fiercely biting his lower lip.

“You're seeking answers, Dr. Katsuragi, but you're the only one genuinely capable of providing them. You must decide what is truly important to you.”

Akira tries to speak, but his voice emerges a whisper. “I want to. More than anything.” He looks back up. “That's why I came here. You said—” He coughs into his sleeve, then resumes with better volume. “You said you wanted to persuade me. Well, then... persuade me!”

Frisch smirks. “You dislike Tatsuta's tactics, but, I'm afraid, she learned much of what she knows from me. Are you certain you wish to hear it, though?”

“At this point? I'm not sure it really matters.” His long, scrawny fingers begin to anxiously agitate his shaggy purple bangs. “Whatever you think I need to hear, Frisch-san... please say it.”

The German straightens up. “Consider your options. Look at them with your scientist's eyes. You could pursue what is quite possibly a doomed relationship to its cold, bitter end, in accordance with the misguided hope that your true calling in life is little more than domestic mediocrity. Families are everything, Dr. Katsuragi... to those who have naught to give the world but their shuffled genes.”

Akira's speechless. He didn't expect something so immediately callous. He wants to disagree with it, violently. But he can't. The words don't reach his tongue.



“For a man of such overwhelming intelligence and trailblazing vision, family is well and good. But it's clear that your potential memetic legacy is so much more significant.”

Frisch punctuates his cruelty by pulling a cigarette from his breast pocket and lighting it up, with such speed and fluidity that Akira has not even the slightest chance to protest. Attempting to do so after the fact would just make him feel even more impotent. He takes the insult without complaint.

The older man chortles, apparently amused. “So, Dr. Katsuragi... is *that* what you had in mind?”

Akira, shoulders stiff, buries his hands in his lap. “Maybe. I don't know anymore.”

“Let me put it simply, then.” The German allows himself a long, deep inhalation; visibly savoring every milligram of nicotine that enters his bloodstream. “If you let this offer pass you by, that's an opportunity to benefit all humanity that may well be gone forever.” Smoke ominously billows from his mouth as he speaks. “Is that a blemish you really want on your life?”

“*Why?*” Akira says. “Why only two months?”

Frisch continues to smoke, unperturbed. “It's really not up to me, Dr. Katsuragi. The order to seek out certain kinds of talent within a certain amount of time was sent down. I obey.”

“That doesn't answer the question...” Akira murmurs sullenly.

“You're correct. There are some questions for which I can't provide a direct answer, I'm afraid. Unlike many others, I'm fully willing to admit that.”

Akira's eyes start to water, though possibly more because of the smoke than due to the usual culprit. “So if, after another month, you can't get me... what will ISTAA do?”

A narrow gray cloud dissipates skyward. “Get by with a pale imitation, I suppose. It's not what I would prefer, I assure you. Losing you would be catastrophic. The key to limitless energy is right inside your head.” Frisch taps his temple for emphasis. “Even with your paper out there, do you think anyone else truly comprehends your ideas? Enough to actually take them to the next stage? I'd expect even the best possible substitute to require another decade just to completely wrap their head around the most basic principles in your paper. You're *that* far ahead of everyone else.”

“So, that assessment report...? Was it just for show?”

“Not at all,” Frisch says. “But, obviously, there's a world of difference between checking someone's research for fundamental competency and such, and actually being able to continue that research yourself.”

“I suppose.” Akira starts fidgeting again. “I... Frisch-san, I want to see the S<sup>2</sup> engine through. I really do. But this is a terrible time. I want to give you an answer now, but there's no way I can. Not in good conscience.”

Frisch strokes his mustache. “You honestly believe that whatever is happening in your life will be resolved in a month?”

Akira laughs bitterly. “I really don't know what to believe.”

The older man sips from his drink. “Perhaps what you need, Dr. Katsuragi, is a vacation.”

A strange, almost contemptuous sound escapes Akira's lips. “A *vacation*?” He compulsively reaches for his own drink.

Frisch is, as always, unaffected. “This weekend I'm needed down in West Bank for a bit of minutiae. Qumran, specifically. Perhaps you've heard of it?”

“Maybe.” Akira shrugs. “I'm not sure.”

“Dead Sea Scrolls, then?”

That rings some bells. “I've heard the name, but I don't know much about them.”

“Found in some caves in the area,” Frisch elaborates. His eyes dart briefly down at Akira's pendant as he adds, “A fascinating series of discoveries, with incredible ramifications for Judeo-Christian theology that are still being unveiled decades after the fact.”

Akira, concealing his cross within his hand, murmurs in acknowledgment.

Frisch reaches into his purse. “In any case, we have a temporary facility down there, called ARQA Base.” He produces a handful of Polaroids. “The whole thing will be ripped down sometime next year, so it doesn't look like much.”

Akira takes a look. It's a long (*very* long), three-story prefabricated building abutting a cliff face at an almost perpendicular angle. There seems to be nothing but stones, outcrops, and desert in every direction. No sign of actual roads, even, just worn-out depressions in the sand. The only signs outside the facility are mostly in Hebrew, with some illegibly small English and possibly Arabic. The acronym “ARQA” seems to be slapped onto everything. “What does 'ARQA' mean?”

“Archaeological Research of Qumran Alliance,” Frisch says. “Awkward, as many acronyms are.”

“Archaeology?” Akira shakes his head. “That doesn't have anything to do with me.”

Frisch takes the photos back. “ARQA is a small UN offshoot with the purpose of making excavations and research in that area less... sticky, shall we say.”

“I see,” Akira says, still waiting for the relevant part. “What's your involvement here?”

“The base is a joint operation between ARQA and my organization. ARQA gets top billing, of course, for the standard political reasons. However, most of the talent, technology, and so forth — *that* is provided by the commission. What we have here, Dr. Katsuragi, is proof of concept of ISTAA. This is, in reality, an ISTAA project. One of the first.”

“And... that's why you want me to see it?”

“Indeed.” Frisch strokes his mustache again. “I want you to see, with your own eyes, what becomes possible with us. You will be able to witness, for yourself, just how state of the art we are — how no expense is spared giving our researchers the tools they require. You'll be able to meet successful enlistees. Every last one will be pleased to answer any questions you might have. Provided you don't exceed certain boundaries, of course.”

“Of course...” Akira repeats, not entirely sure what Frisch means but not sure it really matters, either. “But, Frisch-san, archaeology? You still haven't told me—”

“Ah! Quite right. You needn't worry about that. ARQA Base has a little bit of everything. I'm fairly certain we even have some theoretical physicists.”

The mind boggles. What in the world could they be doing with the cooperation of an archaeological alliance that would require theoretical physicists? “I'd be lying if I said I wasn't deeply curious.” He takes a drink. “About just what is going on there and why you think I would benefit from seeing it.”

“That's the idea, Dr. Katsuragi. If I didn't appeal to your sense of curiosity, what would be the point?”

“I suppose so.”

“That brings us to the matter of your availability,” Frisch says. “It *has* to be this weekend. Depart Friday afternoon, arrive back before dawn on Monday.”

The previous time Frisch mentioned “weekend” it didn't quite register, but now... Akira shakes his head vigorously. “No... There's no way I can go. I have important obligations.” Everyone is coming over to help knock the wall down on Sunday, and he's promised to help Misato with her project. Whatever his feelings about Sayaka, he can't let himself miss those.

“Oh?” Frisch taps his index fingers together. “How important?”

Akira tries to stand his ground. “Incredibly. That's all I can say.”

Frisch doesn't seem affected by this at all. He casually works on a morsel, and, afterward, just as casually sips from his glass. “I'm willing to compensate you for your time and trouble, Dr. Katsuragi.” He gives Akira a pointed look. “You have a teenage daughter, I understand? How is her college fund coming along?”

Both of Akira's eyebrows shoot up. “Preteen, anyway. But what does that have to do with any —”

Frisch slowly twirls the glass within his palm. “I trust it's still in a hard place, what with your professor's salary. But it doesn't have to be that way.” He produces his wallet and starts pulling 10,000 yen notes from within, laying them down on the table one after another.

Akira watches helplessly. What on earth is this man doing?

After Frisch sets down the twelfth note, he says, quite calmly, “I will pay you this much, *times four*. And all you have to do is accompany me and tour the facility. Nothing else.”

Is Frisch insane? He wants to give Akira ¥480,000 for doing what amounts to nothing? “You’re trying to... *bribe* me?” He cradles his forehead wearily. “Is this even legal?”

Frisch shuffles the notes back into a neat pile. “You may be surprised.”

“Enlighten me,” Akira says.

“The Frisch estate is one of the United Nations’ many patrons, Dr. Katsuragi. As the current head of that estate, I may, of course, donate funds anywhere I please.” A sly grin. “Toward a bright young woman’s scholastic future, for instance. It would not be the first time, and it would hardly be the last.” He takes a drag off his cigarette. “Frankly, Dr. Katsuragi, such a paltry sum would be *more* than worth it, if it helped enable your possible investment in our organization.”

Akira says nothing.

“¥480,000 should put a fair dent in your girl’s tuition. Cover at *least* the first year, I imagine. Quite charitable, don’t you think? Wouldn’t your family agree that a trifling expenditure of your time is worth that much?”

“Maybe,” he allows. “It’s... it’s really hard to say.” Akira runs his fingers under his hair, cupping his scalp. “And all I have to do is visit this place? That’s really all?”

“Correct.” Frisch at last snuffs his cigarette. “You’ll have to sign nondisclosure forms, of course, but otherwise I require nothing more than what I stated previously. That is, for you to accompany me on a tour of the facility. It will take most of Saturday and possibly some of Sunday. There is zero obligation to enlist with ISTAA, and your daughter will receive her scholarship via mail within the week.”

“Wait. *Possibly* Sunday?” Akira asks. “If what you require of me only takes a day, and I could be back here on Sunday, that would make a world of difference.”

Frisch shakes his head. “Regrettably, I cannot be certain of the timing. Were that possible, I would not unduly waste your time. There are many factors that are out of my control.”

“I... I see...”

“If it so happens that we’re done sooner than expected — well, Kalya and the Dead Sea are certainly worth seeing while you’re down there. I can provide a guide to you free of charge.”

“That’s very generous, but...” Wait. Dead Sea? West Bank? Israel-Palestine? A long-delayed alarm triggers. “It occurs to me, isn’t that part of the world a bit... volatile?”

Frisch offers a reassured smile. “You’re not mistaken, Dr. Katsuragi. There are inevitable complications that arise from working there. At the same time, there are also many precautionary measures that can be taken. ARQA Base is a highly secured location and has

yet to suffer incident. I have also been to the area many times and, as you see, I am still here.”

“So... you would guarantee my safety?”

“Absolutely. All protective measures enjoyed by me will also be conferred to you.”

Akira gazes deeply into his plate. Being treated like a VIP in a potential danger zone, there's an innate thrill and adventure to the notion. Normally, Akira finds little appeal in personal endangerment, but today is not a normal day. “If I do this... What guarantee do I have that this isn't a trick? That you'll keep your word? ... *All* of it?”

Frisch's mouth dips up on one side. “A simple matter. My office will create a contract, and we'll both stamp it before the flight.”

Akira grits his teeth. He wishes an answer would just come from without and take this terrible decision out of his hands. But that won't happen. It's up to him. All up to him. His thumb rubs the cross so fiercely that the knuckle has gone white. A vacation. Yes. Get away from Sayaka for a couple of days, see a part of the world he's never visited, collect his thoughts on everything. Not burden Misato with a parent-child project she never wanted part in anyway; score her a sizable scholarship instead. There's the matter of the wall, of course... Demolishing it at long last was his idea, his pet project, and it's only happening because he advocated it so passionately. People are coming together, who haven't been in the same place for *years*, for the sole purpose of helping him and his family. It would be much better if he were there to see it through, and part of him has certainly looked forward to the event. But his presence isn't required. They can do it without him.

Akira's mouth opens and closes a couple of times before words finally escape his lips. “..... Make it so.”

Frisch seems to beam with delight. “So, then... I have your full cooperation?” After Akira fails to object, he says, “Excellent.” He produces a business card, flipping it over and scrawling a date and time on the back. “One of our vehicles will pick you up at your residence at this time and drive you to Tokyo International Airport. Be reasonable about baggage, of course. A suitcase and handbag should suffice. For clothing, you'll want to bring...” Further routine instructions are provided, and Akira scrawls any stand-outs in his pocket memo.

Once that's done with, Frisch pays the waitress and begins to quickly wrap things up. “I regret to say that I am presently needed elsewhere, so I must depart.” He stands and extends his hand. They bowed the first time, so fair enough. “It was an absolute delight meeting with you, Dr. Katsuragi.”

Akira rises and returns the gesture. “Same. This was a very interesting eve—” He suddenly realizes that he's made his usual mistake of extending the left hand and quickly corrects.

Frisch emits an amused chuckle. “There's no need. For, you see,”—he retracts his right hand and extends the left—“I am actually sinistral myself.”

Interesting. How did he manage to not pick up on that? Preoccupied with too many other things, no doubt. Akira at last places his dominant hand within Frisch's, and a strong, steady shake follows. At first he's taken back to the similar handshake he received this past summer at DTNI. But there's a subtle difference in duration; while Frisch doesn't blatantly overstay his welcome, his hold is extended *just* long enough to register as odd.

Separating, Frisch says, "I shall see you on Friday then. I have great hopes for this trip, Dr. Katsuragi. There is little doubt in my mind that you will find it revelatory."

"We will see," Akira says. "We will see."

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Akira quietly opens the front door and steps into the entranceway. He hangs his coat and removes his shoes, an understated sense of fatigue punctuating every motion. As he rounds the bend, he wearily loosens his tie and unbuttons the top of his shirt.

Sayaka is lying there on the loveseat, snoozing, a journal face-down over the armrest nearest her feet. Akira regards her cautiously. He sets his bag down without a sound and creeps into the kitchen. His nerves are fried and need some ointment. Tea. Yes, tea. He starts filling the kettle with water.

The sound of the faucet promptly stirs her. "...Akira?" she says in a groggy voice. "Oh, thank goodness. I was really getting worried."

He sets the kettle onto the range and provides some heat. Without looking her way, he utters, "Why?"

Sayaka sits up. "What do you mean, 'why'? After what happened? And then you don't pick up your phone or call me back... Now you walk in"—she quickly consults the bird clock on the kitchen wall—"a whole three hours late. Of course I'd be worried!"

Her admonition slides right off him. Akira just can't be bothered with it. He's just so... tired. Too tired to provide one word of response, or even the slightest intimation that Sayaka's concern matters. He coasts to the bedroom, where he starts hanging his dress clothes and putting on casuals for the night. Though his back is turned to the fusuma, he can feel Sayaka's hot charcoal eyes burning into his naked skin.

"You aren't going to talk to me?" she says.

Akira hangs his dress pants. He's tempted to just ignore her, but a tepid response worms its way out regardless. "What's there to say?"

"You can't even tell me what you were doing out so late?"

He looks over his shoulder. "Does it really matter?"

Sayaka sighs. "You're angry at me. Can we please talk about this?"

"Angry?" Akira repeats with perfect calm, his eyes fully averted. "Do I seem angry?"

"This isn't like you at all, Akira." Cracks are appearing in Sayaka's voice. "You're scaring me."

Akira pulls a T-shirt over his head and turns around, adjusting the arms. Once he's done, he at last looks her in the eyes, his expression unusually cold. "At least you're being honest with yourself now." Before she can even react, he opens the fusuma enough to squeeze past her, then aloofly proceeds into the corridor.

Her voice doggedly follows him. "How could you say such a thing, Akira? When have I been anything but honest with you?"

The question is like a drill boring gruesomely into his brain, spitting out hard pellets of congealed memory. They hit him, one after another, with perfect and painful clarity: every time she's been less than upfront, even to the point of outright deception or manipulation. Oh, if only she knew what she was capable of. A bemused leer distorts his face. "Hah... You actually believe that, don't you?"

"What do you—?"

His head swivels to the right so he can behold Sayaka's wall of cherished memories. It's just like before at his office: all these specters of the past have no purpose here but to mock him. In his mind's eye, he sees himself violently destroying them all, smashing the frames open and tearing the photographs within to pieces. Every piece of glass that maims his hands in the process is just a bonus — physical pain to distract him from the far worse pain within.

As his fingers curl up into his palms, so tightly that his hands shake, he's able to see through the thick fog of his memory, to that brief and painful time when he had yet to develop any sense of self control or inner decency, and the world around him was so terrible and beyond his ability to affect or even filter — and so his only recourse was to violently lash out at everything. He was so young and small it's in doubt how many of these are true memories, rather than inventions of his mind based almost entirely on second-hand anecdotes. Perhaps it doesn't really matter. All that really *does* is the swift realization that he doesn't want to go back there. Not to such a dark and distant place.

He's soon aware that Sayaka is speaking to him, and possibly *has* been the entire time. Rather than try to discover what he missed, he just keeps going. She'll surely follow, but he needs to get out of this narrow, dark, memory-encrusted space. He doesn't stop until he reaches the range. To his chagrin, the water hasn't boiled yet. He slumps against the wall and stares at the kettle vacantly, absorbed by his own distorted reflection. Sayaka soon appears on the chrome, but he doesn't react.

"Akira..." Quiet and inundated with worry. "I didn't mean to— I never wanted to hurt you. I already told you that I'm not perfect. It was a mistake. Reacting that way... A terrible mistake."

His head hangs limply, forelocks veiling his eyes. “It doesn't matter if it was. You made your feelings perfectly obvious.”

“Akira...” She fumbles a moment for words. “Is it really the end of the world if I can't bring myself to ever... do *that* with you?”

“No...” He repositions himself, setting his back against the counter and cabinets and sliding his hands into his pockets. “I suppose not. Whatever happens here, the world will go on.”

“You know that's not what I—” Sayaka cuts herself off and turns away. “Maybe I'm hoping for too much too soon.” She takes a step away and lets one hand wrap around the other arm. “Maybe I should leave this alone. Just for a little while.”

Akira's face lifts up slightly. “Why not just go back to ignoring it? Never know. Maybe this time, it will go away for good.”

The spout of the kettle starts to murmur and shake.

“Why...?” Sayaka whispers. “Why are you doing this?”

He provides no response.

Sayaka starts rubbing the sides of her eyes. “Things you were saying before I left the hotel... Should I be worried, Akira? The way you are now... I can't stop worrying about what might have happened once I left.”

“Well, then... Did you consider that, perhaps, leaving me there was a bad idea?” His words, while cynical, are devoid of any passion.

“Maybe it was,” she concedes. “But I— I felt so terrible, Akira. I didn't know what else to do.” The tears at last escape from her. “If I stayed, I could have made it even worse for you. Of course it wasn't the right thing to do. By then, there *was* no right thing.”

She's doing her best. But it hurts. It hurts so much. Everything that emerges from her mouth just makes it worse. He doesn't want to cry again — there have already been so many tears today — but it seems inevitable. His face is scrunching and twisting in acute pain, betraying him as it always does. One of his hands escapes its hiding place, but it's so little to hide behind.

“I've...” he whimpers. “I've never betrayed you, Sayaka. That's one promise I *have* managed to keep, all this time. Sometimes I wa—” The piercing shriek of the kettle promptly drowns out his voice. As it rings in his ears, what he nearly said aloud resounds in his mind.

*Sometimes I want to.*

He takes the kettle off and pours the scalding hot water into his mug.

*Hurt you.*

Drops in the bag and watches with fascination as its contents bleed out.



*Hurt myself.*

He pulls the bag up by the string and squeezes it between his thumb and forefinger. Immediately, he feels the flesh of his fingertips begin to cook. But he doesn't care. He kind of likes it, actually. A nervous smirk seizes his mouth even as tears begin to fall.

“Akira...!” Sayaka cries.

Next thing he knows, she has wrapped around him from behind. His hand is suddenly in the sink, cold water running over it. He doesn't resist. If it makes her feel better, why not? Why not let her dote upon him again...

And yet, something in him resents it. Deeply.

“I'm just a child to you,” he sputters, reclaiming his hand and twisting out of her embrace. “You've never really seen me as an equal. Just an overgrown boy for you to baby.”

Sayaka shuts off the water. Frowning, she responds, “Where in the world did *that* come from?” Shaking her head, she adds, “I'm tempted to channel our daughter here.”

“Meaning, what?”

“If you don't want to be treated like a baby, don't act like one.”

He laughs oddly. Yes, that *is* just the sort of thing Misato would say. To her mother, of course. Never directly to him. How he wishes she would. Just dig into him with her talons and say exactly what she thinks, show him the depths of unrepentant cruelty he knows she possesses. “Where *is* Misato...?”

Sayaka's frown deepens. “She told you this morning where she'd be.”

Oh, of course. This morning. Pleasant family breakfast. Feels like a lifetime ago. So remote from the present that it's only natural his brain didn't even consider that what Misato told him then would still be applying now. He can remember it clearly. Martial arts practice, then studying with Kei and the others. “I suppose she did.” He stares at his fingers where the skin is starting to turn white and blistered. Another odd laugh escapes him. “Speaking of Misato... I have good news for her, whenever she gets back.”

Sayaka's expression seems to lighten. “Good news? Why didn't you mention it soo—”

“She doesn't have to put up with me this weekend after all.” The sides of his mouth are stretched in an exaggerated, uneasy smirk. “She can just interview Risa like she wanted to in the first place.”

Sayaka's shock is palpable. “Akira... what are you talking about? What do you mean??”

Akira sucks on the wounded flesh for a moment, in no hurry to respond. Just as slowly, he stows his hand back into its pocket. “You wanted to know what I was doing tonight, yes?” Her silence signals an affirmative. “Someone from the United Nations called me at my office.

A different person than before. Someone much more important. He wanted to talk ASAP.” He looks into Sayaka's eyes coldly. “I said yes.”

She seems to flinch. With a lost expression, she wanders to the table and collapses into one of the chairs. “So, then... What else? That's not all.”

“You're right.” He joins her, pulling one of the chairs out a half-meter. “It's not.” He sits belly to back with it, arms slung loosely over to provide a prop for his head. “They want me to tour one of their overseas facilities this weekend. Trying to coax me into taking the next step. I agreed to go.”

Her face immediately becomes stern as stone. “I'm the one you're angry at!” Sayaka rises, emphatically slamming her palms onto the table. “Don't you *dare* take this out on Misato!!”

“Misato?” An uncanny laugh. “The daughter who hates my guts? Who probably couldn't care less if I were dead? I'm doing her a favor.”

Sayaka's consternation rises. “You're sabotaging all the progress you've made, for what? *What*, Akira?” There's fire behind her eyes.

Akira feels strangely unaffected. “I'm serious. I *am* doing her a favor.”

“How in the *world* does this benefit her?”

“I *did* tell the representative about my plans. But he was insistent that it be this weekend. To the point that he'll compensate us.” He looks away. “A scholarship, for Misato. A ridiculously big one.”

The flame rapidly dies. “A scholarship...?” Sayaka presses her knuckles to her lips. “How much?”

“480,000.”

Sayaka's speechless.

“That's Misato's tuition, right there. .... And it's just one weekend, Sayaka. All I have to do is go. Nothing else.”

“This isn't right,” she says. “There's something just not right about this.”

“It's fine. I won't do anything without stamping a contract.”

She nibbles gently on her hand, lost to thought. “The sense of timing is...”

“...terrible,” he agrees. “I know.”

Sayaka stands up and starts pacing. “You know you don't have to do this, Akira. If we still don't have the money by then, Yura and my parents will—”

Akira scoffs at that. “Yes, of course. They're always on stand-by to bail out this family from my ineptitude. Doubtless your parents will sternly remind you that the situation ultimately stems from your own failure to marry an actual man.”

“And *so what* if they do?”

He keeps going, unperturbed. “Yura... She'll have her usual sisterly advice. Latest recommendations on divorce procedure, perhaps.”

Sayaka freezes. Rather than respond to Akira's goading, she simply mouths, “Yura...” Anguish abruptly seizes her face and she clutches her brow. It looks like she's about to cry again.

It doesn't matter if she does or not. Making Sayaka cry is just something he does. Today seems to be a new record, though, for her actually breaking down in front of him, instead of maintaining her front long enough to bleed out later, in private. Might as well expedite things. “Oh, so she already did? Splendid.”

“Stop it!” she hisses through clenched teeth. “Stop being such a brat! You're better than this!”

“Am I?” he says. “Am I really?”

“I've seen you at your worst again and again... I can't even remember the last time you were like this.”

“I guess you weren't actually seeing me at my worst. Perhaps, even now, you're not.”

She turns her back to him. “I don't know what happened between you and Yura. She's critical of you, yes. But she's the same toward me. You don't think she's hard on me, too?” Sayaka laughs. “She's always said the things I needed to hear but never wanted to. That's the real reason I've always respected her. ... That's why you stopped talking, isn't it? Because she wouldn't leave the tender subjects alone.”

“It hardly matters anymore,” he says, weaving his fingers together.

Another tepid, nervous laugh. “I finally remembered.” Her body sways with unease. “Back in the hotel... What pushed you over the edge.”

Everything is now such a blur that he can't isolate any one thing over the others. It was *all* terrible. He wrings his hands and waits with bated breath.

“It was when I asked you if there was anything you'd never told me. Wasn't it?”

He shrugs ineffectually. But, realizing she won't see that, he provides a “Could be.”

“You took it very badly. But I swear I didn't mean for—” Her head drops, and everything about her body language implies a deeply felt shame. “I wasn't trying to imply anything.” She turns back to him, and her face is solemn as can be. “I was preoccupied... with something I shouldn't have been...”

Akira feels his patience thinning. “*What*, Sayaka?”

It doesn't help. “I shouldn't have said anything then. Yura told me not to, and she was right. It was a mistake.”

Again with Yura...? Finally, he puts two and two together. “Your lunch *didn't* actually go fine, did it?” Sayaka's silence speaks volumes. “Why did you lie about that?”

“I didn't want to ruin everything! It wasn't anything that couldn't have waited until later.”

*But you couldn't wait...* He frowns deeply and bites his lip. Sayaka *had* already been upset about something. It wasn't his imagination after all. Why did he let himself disregard it? He should've forgotten about the gift and pressed her to open up to him. Then, maybe... maybe...

*...Maybe we could have cried about something else instead.* “What was it, Sayaka?”

“Eh?” she asks, disoriented. “What was—”

He rises, concealing his hands once more. “What was it that came up during lunch? Something you feel I've been keeping from you...?” It's hard to avoid the conclusion that Yura blurted out something she shouldn't have. He's sure she didn't mean to. All the same, mishaps like this only reinforce the idea that cutting ties with her — or falling out of touch, or whatever actually happened — was for the best.

Sayaka takes her sweet time replying. “Too much has already happened today, Akira. I don't want to make things any worse by dredging this up.”

Akira sighs. “Then why did you mention it at all?”

“I— I didn't want you to have the wrong idea.”

“Well, how am I supposed to have the *right* idea if you won't tell me what was actually bothering you in the first place?” Irritation is seeping into his voice, of a nature far more honed than his flailing earlier. What an absolute mess this all is. How much of her reaction to his present wasn't actually about the present at all? Is there any real way to find out that doesn't risk aggravating the misunderstandings?

“You really want to know, Akira?” she says, posed almost like a challenge.

“Of course I do!”

Sayaka staggers toward him. Before he can decide how to react, she grabs him by the collar and pushes her face into his shirt. Quite suddenly, her breathing goes ragged and warm tears soak into the fabric.

“Why...?” she sobs.

He wants to get away. Far away. He struggles out, but she just grabs him from behind, pushing her nose into the groove of his back, her grip on his arms vice-like and fast

approaching pain. She won't let him escape. Not this time.

In a quiet, pitiful voice, she says, “Why didn't you ever tell me, Akira? That you... you...” Her chest heaves and inarticulate pain flees her throat. “That you wanted a second child?”

Akira feels a chill go down his spine.

“Why was it something only Yura got to hear?” She's weeping. “I never asked, because I felt so bad about what I put you through... I didn't deserve another. I had no right to impose that on you again. But—but if I'd known it was something *you* wanted, too, then... Then maybe Misato could've had a—”

He stands there, frozen, saying nothing.

“Maybe we could've had our Kaworu.”

His cross calls to him, but he can't answer.

“And instead, all this time, you've let me believe—” She gasps for air. “I've been left believing that you hate me for what I did. Left thinking that, deep down, you harbor a deep resentment for me.” Another deep breath. “No, not just me. Misato too...”

The strength at last starts to leave her; he can feel her slumping, her grip loosening. Akira's left hand immediately takes advantage, lunging for the pendant and clinging fiercely around it.

“You— you tried so hard to hide whatever you were feeling...” Sayaka sniffs. “But that—that *thing* you did to yourself—” After all this time, she can't even bring herself to say its name. “It spoke more clearly than words ever could.”

At last, Akira feels a fierce urge to speak. He wiggles free and faces her. “Sayaka, tell me: was I even *remotely* like myself when I got that done? Of course not. I was completely out of my mind!”

Sayaka glances away and wraps her arms across her chest. “Yes. Maybe it wasn't something you would normally do. But why would you do it at all if there was no enmity there?” The accusing, pitiful dark eyes turn back. “You went out of your way to keep it secret. The way you were acting, I thought you were seeing someone else. Do you have *any* idea what that's like, Akira?”

Akira doesn't remember that time very well at all — it was at least eight years ago, and confusing in every possible way — but apparently it's when Sayaka's own lapses into melancholy became a habitual thing. He knows what deepest melancholy is like. Intimately. But that's not what she's asking about, is it? While he has frequently worried about being abandoned by her, he's never actually harbored suspicions of infidelity. He can imagine it, maybe, if he puts his mind to it, but he's never actually been there. “No, Sayaka, I don't. Thanks to you, I don't.” He tries to sound grateful...

...but she either doesn't notice or doesn't care. "It's the most terrible feeling in the world, Akira. I've never felt more miserable than I did then. I felt so worthless I could have even—" She bites down on her words and looks away abruptly.

Is she *trying* to emotionally manipulate him? "How much more groveling for forgiveness do you want, Sayaka?" he snaps. "It wouldn't have been madness if I had any idea what was happening! I feel terrible about what I put you through, but it's over and done with and there's nothing I can do to change what happened. *Nothing!*" Tears of frustration are starting to spill onto his cheeks.

A silence sprouts and begins to grow. He can't bear it, so he starts talking without thinking. "What do you want me to do, Sayaka? Get the surgery reversed? Make sure we fertilize a second egg before your supply runs dry?" His gesticulations get increasingly frenzied. "This won't come at the expense of your revived career plans, of course. I'll happily give up everything to be a stay-at-home dad." There's such a strong edge of cynicism and spite to his voice, it's nearly unrecognizable.

Sayaka is a mess of tears. "I know you can't be serious, but... Part of me thinks it would be a lovely idea. The other knows it's too late."

"Of course," he sputters. "Of course it's too late." He seeks out his tea, but it never brewed completely. The tea bag is lying in the sink. He throws the mug into the microwave for a couple of minutes and gives the bag a quick rinse. As he sets it down onto a saucer, something occurs to him. "Tonight wouldn't have gone half as terrible if you hadn't assumed so much from something Yura said. ...Or that you *claim* she said, even."

Sayaka finishes blowing her nose into a sheet of paper towel. "I'm sorry. I... I got carried away, didn't I? I knew I shouldn't have said anything. I just keep messing up."

He's tempted to provide bitter affirmation, but something stops him. No more games. The record needs to be set straight. "I'm pretty sure I know which conversation Yura was referencing, based on what you've said." The water finishes reheating, and at last he drops the tea bag within the cup — actually leaving it there this time. "I never said flat-out that I wanted another child."

Sayaka stares at her feet, seemingly paralyzed by guilt.

"Here's how it actually went," Akira says, slowly agitating his tea with a spoon. "I told her that I was becoming more comfortable with the idea of fatherhood. Yura joked that I might eventually come around to the idea of having another. So I laughed and said, 'Maybe'." He sets the cup aside. "That's it. That's the stunning revelation you were deprived of. Absolutely *nothing* of any substance that you didn't already know long before Yura did."

Sayaka looks confused. "So, why did Yura mention 'Kaworu'...?"

Akira shrugs. "I might've said something about using the name if a second ever happened, since it didn't get used the first time around. Nothing but an aside. If it was even mentioned at all."

“Oh.” She continues to stand there, looking utterly lost and exposed. “So... what now?”

He has absolutely no answer to that question. His mind is utterly drained. “I’m going to drink my tea and go to bed.”

“So that’s it? There’s nothing more to say?”

“If there is,” Akira says wearily, “I’d prefer to say it another time.”

Sayaka plays with her braid, her foot shuffling back and forth. “This weekend... There’s no talking you out of it. Is there?”

Akira sighs. “How about this: I’ll let Misato decide. If she wants me to stay, I’ll stay.”

She exhales sharply in scorn. “That hardly changes anything. You already know what she’ll say.”

“So, then, Misato’s feelings aren’t an important consideration?”

Sayaka gives him a patronizing look. “Of course they are. Which is precisely why you can’t trust what she says. She’ll act like she doesn’t care one way or another, because that’s how she protects herself from being hurt again. You know that. There’s nothing I could possibly tell you here that you don’t already know.”

“Maybe,” he says. “But maybe trying to fight this has been a mistake. Maybe I am exactly the kind of person she thinks I am. Getting to know me better would only confirm what she already knows. So, really, there’s no point.”

Sayaka frowns. “Who’s making assumptions now?” She starts crying again, very quietly. “So that’s it, then? You really are just going to throw away the past month, aren’t you?”

Why is she dragging this on? His first instinct is to just ignore her. The tea is cool enough now. He starts drinking. It’s decidedly imperfect, but he’ll take anything at this point.

“Why are you letting what happened today destroy everything you’ve worked so hard to build? I don’t understand, Akira.”

The rest of the mug’s contents drain down his throat and he sets the cup into the sink. “It’s quite simple. The past month was the product of delusion. Today, my eyes were opened.”

Sayaka starts to quaver with understated ire, her grief escaping from her, one thick drop after another. At length, she wipes off her face and somberly says, “So it’s like everyone’s been telling me all these years... There really is no hope for us after all.” Turning on her heel, she says, “Do what you want”, then slumps off to their room.

And then, Akira is alone again.

At first, he doesn’t feel a thing. His emotions are an unreadable void. Physiological demands drag him into the bathroom, where he brushes his teeth and obtains urinary relief. Then those same needs crave a bed to sleep in. The one he shares with Sayaka is out of the question.

Spare futon it is. But he doesn't really want to meet a rude awakening from Misato, either. He carries it into the study and rolls it out onto the cramped strip of floor. Finally, he lets himself drop.

There, in the dimness, some unseen force begins to squeeze at his chest. He tries to ignore it, but, the more he does, the harder the pressure becomes. Before long, something inside him bursts. It could be his heart, for how dead he feels inside.

It's the same as before: insufferable pain in spite of the void. The sensation emanating from his chest is beyond description. It's like he's exploded from the inside and everything is spilling out. He curls up into himself, as tightly as he can, and soon feels warm liquid pain bleeding onto his knees.

In the distance, he hears someone cry, and his own voice violently bursts free to join it in a duet of anguish.

## Chapter End Notes

A very dense chapter. There's so much information there's probably no possible way it will all make sense the first time around. But that's fine. It's all part of the design...

- Taro's name came up as early as “Enter the Dragon” in what probably seemed like a throwaway moment. His nickname “Tako” was arrived at, presumably by homophobic teenaged peers, by replacing the masculine ending -rō with feminine -ko. As a bonus, *tako* also means “octopus”.
- So we now have the names of Akira's folks: Kazuo and Chika. I can't remember their origins precisely. Might've asked the #egf IRC channel for suggestions, just to mix it up a bit.
- Akira's comment about given name kanji being abolished after WWII is a nod to the fact that no *Eva* character has a personal name provided in anything other than katakana, anywhere, ever. Might as well just make it part of this alternative universe!
- The kanji that Akira's parents *would* have used is 明. There are meanings beyond the one(s) he divulged, but I'm not sure they matter as much.
- “Lukas von Frisch” comes from Karl von Frisch, an Austrian ethologist who shared the 1973 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine with Konrad Lorenz (namesake of Kiel Lorenz, natch) and some other guy. He did a lot of work on the honeybee “waggle” dance. (This particular aspect didn't make it into the character in any meaningful way, but I suppose it's not too late for a cheeky reference somewhere.) The “Lukas” part was a result of me making a list of ship parts in German and then seeing if any actual real given names were reasonably close, to avoid the oft-noted “Kiel” problem. *Luke* means “hatch”.
- Frisch's reaction to Kimiko's fate was prompted by NemZ's own in-thread reaction to the same after “The Crossroads”: “It's simply a fact, dogs make life better.”



- “ARQA” is a playful reference to a discarded NGE concept that appears in both the Proposal and the BGM menu (the latter published in S<sup>2</sup> Works). Apparently it would have been some kind of ruins, or the site thereof, that played a significant role in the ending. “Arka” is a common and more obvious rendition of the katakana アルカ (ARUKA), but in all likelihood it's supposed to be “Arqa”.
- The left-handed shake here was a very spur-of-the-moment thing. I'm not sure if I had previously established in my mind for a certainty that Frisch was also a lefty (*sinister*, they called them in Latin), but it was too perfect to resist. I only learned *after* writing it in that the left-handed shake is something adopted by the Scouts and has a bit of associated symbolism that could be called both ironic and fortuitous.
- The mood shift that takes place between the end of dinner and Akira arriving home has been deemed jarring by at least two readers. I've made some slight adjustments since then, but I fear they may not be enough. I *do* want Akira's anger to have an element of the unexpected — we've never seen him quite like this, so this is, to an extent, inevitable — but not to the point that it's distracting.

# Idle Hands

## Chapter Summary

Akira wrestles with uncomfortable truths as he travels to West Bank with Frisch.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Friday, October 22, 1999

At last the Airbus A340 reaches peak altitude and the Kanto countryside is obscured beneath a substantial layer of iridescent cloud cover. Akira's inner ears pop one final time, achieving equilibrium with the cabin pressure. He gazes vacantly to his left, where nothing but a thin pane of silicon separates him from a free-fall into oblivion, toward the patchwork world far below. His eyes anxiously flit to his right, where the stately German gentleman he met only earlier this week sits by his side, perusing a Chinese journal of technology — and then dart back before they're noticed.

From the outer pocket of his roughed-up handbag, Akira retrieves a tan folder addressed to him, and he reviews the thin bundle of paper within: his copy of the contract he had asked Frisch to provide back on Tuesday. As well as he understands the legalese outlined here — which is not nearly as well as he ought to — this agreement guarantees that Misato will be issued her scholarship once Akira completes the tour of the West Bank facility. Both he and Frisch stamped this prior to boarding, and so they are legally bound.

Akira is thankful that he never mentioned the scholarship to Misato (with any luck, neither did Sayaka), since the method of delivery, outlined here in depth, involves several degrees of separation. Despite Frisch's verbal frankness about the source of the money, the man is far too proper to entertain an under-the-table exchange. Instead, the funds will be funneled from his private estate through third- and fourth-person entities, and finally bequeathed to Misato via the smokescreen of a philanthropic publicity stunt for her entire middle school. Meaning, yes, other students will benefit; Frisch will expend even *more* money in the interest of Akira's cooperation than the already agreed upon, and suspiciously unreasonable, amount.

Frisch's tenacity both impresses and horrifies Akira. If he were wise, he would have assumed shady motivations at the onset and never needed Haru to try, and fail, to convince him of this during their long, arduous discussion on Wednesday. But Akira is not wise. Not about things like this.

After putting the contract safely back into his carry-on, he regards his open-palmed left hand. Silently, the gauze-wrapped thumb and forefinger admonish, *This is the sort of self-*

*destructive stupidity that got you into this mess.* He should have let Sayaka treat it instead of refusing her help. Under the bandage and ointment, his first and second digits continue to peel and blister; the pain is dull and persistent. All things considered, the burning is insubstantial, and he'll live with minor scarring at worst.

Akira breaks out of his daze a bit and starts to let himself notice how awkward and cramped the situation is. He would have expected a man of Frisch's socioeconomic status, much less one interested in wooing another to his organization, to spare no expense on the flight arrangements. *Surely* business class, at the very least. And yet here they are, crushed together in the sinistral column of the suffocating coach section. Earlier, when he received his ticket from Frisch, he felt tempted to point out its economy grade, because surely there had been some mistake. But that would have been unbecoming, unthinkable. Still, as he struggles to find a measure of comfort in that claustrophobic window-side seat, part of him wishes he had said *something*. His shoulders bump against Frisch's for what feels like the hundredth time, resulting in another automated under-the-breath apology. For now, he settles for crossing his arms in an X configuration, hands bracing his arms toward his center, reducing his shoulder-breadth just enough to—

He glances down, and, no, he and Frisch are still touching. The only way his legs fit the space is if his knees splay. And since Frisch is of similar height and proportions, the same goes for the German, as well. Akira tries to wedge both his knees into the left corner, but he has to contort himself so severely that he knows it isn't sustainable. So he returns to the way he was.

Only now, Frisch stirs from his meditative state, looking up from his reading and pulling his half-frame glasses down a tad. “Would you prefer the aisle seat, Dr. Katsuragi? If you'd find that more comfortable, I really don't mind.”

Akira bites his lip, debating for a moment whether or not to ask. It spills out regardless. “Frisch-san... Er, Director—”

“There's no one here for whom you need to put on airs, Dr. Katsuragi. Just 'Frisch' is fine.”

The lump in his throat grows thicker. He starts fingering the pendant, seeking his center. “*Frisch*,” he forces out — despite his distaste for honorifics, the name feels oddly sharp on the tongue — “do you... normally travel this way?”

The German stows his glasses into a front pocket and smiles. “You were expecting more luxuriant arrangements, Dr. Katsuragi?”

“You...” Akira debates whether he should go on, but the impishly inviting twinkle in Frisch's eye soon settles it. “Just from the little I've seen, you don't exactly seem averse to, well...” He would hate to say 'flaunting your wealth'. But he can't think of anything that's all that much better, either.

Frisch closes his journal, keeping his place with a hooked finger. “I think I understand well enough. I can imagine that this must be quite mysterious to you. But it's actually rather simple. Would you believe, Dr. Katsuragi, that this”—he gestures at the economy-class environs—“is how I normally travel?”

What an odd thing to say. Akira doesn't know what the correct response would be, so he just nods politely.

“It has the advantages of keeping my profile low and travel costs down, of course. And there's another aspect to it, as well. Which I may tell you about later, as I think you would appreciate it.”

Curious. Very curious. This would feel like an evasion if not for how believably it was intoned, little different from the times, say, Haru delayed a sensitive matter to be discussed after work, somewhere more private than the office. Frisch continues to exhibit a befuddling, utterly fascinating mixture of aloofness and overfamiliarity. Akira, at a loss for anything else to add at this time, simply hums in the affirmative, and the conversation comes to an abrupt close. Frisch returns to his reading.

The rich brown pools of Akira's eyes wander, anxious and a-quaver, eventually settling upon a scrawny knee. His right knee, the one still touching Frisch's left. A single incidental point of sustained contact. It should be nothing, yet the shadowed recesses of his mind give it enhanced significance. As his heart beats with escalating haste, torrents of plasma rage through soft flesh and tough sinew. He becomes aware, far too aware, of his own sensual radiance. Where two people touch, a conduit forms through which energy passes from flesh to flesh. His into Frisch. Frisch's into him.

He forces his gaze out the window again. Akira feels entirely too awkward, trapped in this tiny space by synthetic seating and Frisch's broad, warm body. Ensuring his shoulders are pulled in tight, and clutching the memento of his great-aunt, he tries to wrap his errant mind within the blanket-like expanse of white cloud. But it's no use. The illusion of freedom is all the exterior vista provides. He's anchored here and can't escape.

Akira could accept Frisch's offer and switch seats. But he doesn't hate his discomfort quite enough to make it someone else's problem. Maybe he could even like it, if only he... if only he relaxed just a little. He tries to focus on his breathing.

*Slowly expand the diaphragm to full capacity. Hold. Slowly release the spent air through the mouth. Repeat.*

His clutch upon himself gradually loosens, until at last their shoulders touch again.

Frisch gives no indication of noticing, as usual, but Akira's reaction is, typically, overstated. His heart snaps back into a jog. Electricity pools under his breastbone, until it overflows and rises up into his throat, curving out to caress the rims of his pectorals. The usual flag of arousal raises itself, to be swiftly and subtly maneuvered into a less obvious orientation.

He feels ridiculous, like he's fourteen again and his body is overreacting to everything. But that's just making excuses. Isn't it?

A sense of guilt diffuses through him. A sentiment not only undesired but perhaps, also, unjustified. Akira has remained by Sayaka's side for all this time, never straying nor even, to his best recollection, so much as contemplating the option. It's the very least he can do for

being such an unpredictable, unreliable partner... a spouse characterized by either scarcity or excess, and never the right amount.

That hadn't been the case before things went pear-shaped. He doubts himself about many things, but, of this, he is certain. He put her first, always her first. Her needs superseded his own. He dared not strain her comfort zone, no matter the cost to himself, no matter what ate away at him from within. Because he would rather it be like that than again risk losing her.

Akira had transiently tricked himself into thinking that it was possible for them to return to a more idyllic state, while also having learned and grown from their battered journey together. Perhaps *even now* this is not an entirely unreasonable possibility. Misato is probably a wash at this point, but if he really wanted to he could potentially still patch things up with his wife. Sayaka is nothing if not endlessly forgiving. Of course, if it were that simple, he wouldn't be sitting next to Lukas von Frisch en route to Tel Aviv right now. The emotional reality remains much as it was the night of their fight. Even the physicality of it lingers upon his fingers.

Wednesday and Thursday passed as a numb, myopic blur. Akira received prompt counsel from Haru, but he was in no state to benefit from it, sound as much of the advice may have been. Akira was like a dull edge, utterly useless, able to provide little more than irritation.

As for Sayaka — in the wake of their fight, Akira and she spoke as little as possible. Her expression was weighed down with guilt; her eyes darted away for fear of provoking further conflict. They said almost nothing to one another, and the silence was pregnant with longing and loathing and every kind of tension there is.

Then, much as now, the feeling of bitter resignation cast a long, dark shadow. It was clear that there was no point to fighting the good fight, not anymore. He's done it long enough and not without cost.

Long ago, when rifts began to appear in his and Sayaka's shared hopes and dreams, he let his loyalty to her overwhelm fidelity to himself. The powers that be saw fit to punish him for his sacrifice, cursing him to live the rest of his days with incurable madness. Madness that is, at times, thoroughly enjoyable, but just as thoroughly destructive. (This alone would be more than reason enough to despise his father's God — and, for that matter, all deities said to intervene in human affairs.) In exchange for his foolish attempt to adapt to the cracks in the foundation, for putting sentimentality before prudence, the life he ought not to have brought into the world made a devil of him and turned a blind eye to her mother's instrumental role in everything.

Akira knows that Sayaka feels guilty. But though she's apologized for many things, she's never apologized for *that*. Not in any way that feels true and complete. She probably doesn't even know *how* anymore; her guilt has long since become an amorphous force of nature, something that transcends the limits of language. If he were someone else, perhaps acts of kindness would be apology enough. Alas, he is not, and all these years he's needed nothing more than for her to tell him what happened back then. Tell him why the Sayaka he had fallen in love with, and by then known for years, suddenly started violating the dream they had built together. Even if he can suss out the reasons, he needs to hear it in her words, in her voice.

But he expects he never will. Maybe it would even be easier if her memory remains contaminated. Easier to move on, that is. That will happen, won't it? Frisch was right, surely. Akira needs to accept the inevitable. That's why he's here. Because he needs another option. He needs a new future.

His fingers dig tight into his arms. He's going to cry again.

*No, not here, not now. Must fight it.* He struggles to focus on his breathing again. *Don't think about how much you would miss her and how a huge piece of you would be gone forever. Don't think about the priceless gift she gave you, showing you after years of doubt that you were capable of romantic love after all. Don't think about the private choir lessons, or the hikes in the mountains, or the personal shrine tours, or feeding the ducks or watching the koi or the cherry blossom festivals, or the first few times we made love, or the wedding, or—*

Akira grits his teeth. *NO. That's all in the past. The good times are gone. They're over.*

*Focus on the now. What do you feel, right now?*

The answer is the same as yesterday, and the day before that, and the night before that. Pain. Anger. Irritation. Impotent, meandering hatred. But most powerfully of all, the flight instinct. The urge to escape overwhelms all else.

.....To escape Sayaka and Misato? To escape *himself*?

Yes, that's precisely it. He's let himself become trapped within the walls formed by years of accrued, nameless guilt. Sayaka's guilt. And some of his own, too. But those walls are coming down, aren't they? Whether he's there or not, the walls will come down. Sayaka can't stop it; she *won't* stop it.

The toy. The phone call to Taro. The awkward physiological response to Frisch. A long-ignored part of Akira's identity seems to have decided that it would be ignored no longer. Time has a way of catching up. Sayaka knew about this for twenty years and she elected to do nothing. Tuesday's date was hardly the first time, after the initial reveal, that he attempted to bring it up in some way. Over the years he's tried to gently nudge her many times, *countless* times, but he eventually took a hint and let it go. (Far more pressing concerns back then, besides.) If Sayaka refuses to engage with this part of him, other outlets can be readily found. Akira knows that he's a frequent object of desire. Superficially he may seem oblivious, because he has grown so used to lusting eyes that they usually produce little more feeling than mild annoyance (or, less often, amusement) and can be easily ignored. But *if* he were so inclined, *if* he at last decided that, yes, straying from Sayaka's side was in the cards..... it would so easy to find someone to enable him. This knowledge is frightening, but also comforting.

His shoulders relax, the top of his right arm pressing into Frisch's left. He lets himself enjoy the warmth this time. Frisch is a difficult person to read, so Akira has little trouble accepting that this attraction is another form of delusion and certainly won't go anywhere. But Frisch doesn't have to know what he's thinking. The bisected landscape of his mind may be Hell, but it is, for better and for worse, his Hell and no one else's.

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After nearly eleven hours of cramped tedium, they arrive at Sheremetyevo International Airport for a brief layover.

Frisch escorts them to a fancy business lounge and tells Akira to make himself at home and help himself to the refreshments. Then, as Akira watches in silent resignation, Frisch settles at a table and starts to barricade himself. The high-tech laptop computer comes out first. The satellite phone he used during the flight stays in its bag this time, but in its place he produces two different cellular phones. In no time at all, Frisch is speaking with a contact in a language Akira doesn't know, as he navigates his e-mail client through countless, equally enigmatic message headers. By the time he finds what he's looking for and opens a giant spreadsheet attachment, Akira looks away. It's none of his business. And even if he could read it, he doubts he would understand any of it anyway.

Despite providing intriguing company at first, Frisch has spent most of their time together in a state of unavailability: attached to his devices, attending a CEO's myriad concerns. The man is the essence of workaholic, but nothing suggests he begrudges it. He doesn't seem stressed out at all, as many people in a similar position might be. No, Frisch seems to be entirely in his element, surfing effortlessly on top where the pressure cannot crush him. A man as important as Frisch can't afford to be anything less than tireless, besides.

Akira is reminded of his own often-intense work ethic — spending ridiculously long hours in the office and the lab, in dogged and passionate pursuit of his goal, unhindered by his own physicality. He wishes he could be privy to whatever it is, exactly, that Frisch is doing, but the man has been conducting all outward communications, verbal and written, in languages with which Akira lacks familiarity. If he had to guess, he'd assume this was entirely by design, too. Haru's paranoia must be getting to him at last.

Upon locating a couch long enough to accommodate most of his height, Akira at last makes himself comfortable, as Frisch had insisted. He tried to get some sleep on the plane, but the most he could manage were shallow, unsatisfying dozes that invariably left him more achy and irritable than he'd been before. Despite the cozier environs, he doubts he'll do any better here. May as well try, though.

He forces his eyes shut and attempts to calm himself. But every key clack, every mouse click, every unfamiliar cluster of phonemes that reaches his ears just hone the ill-defined, persistent sense of irritation he's been feeling ever since his initial boyish awkwardness from being around Frisch dissipated. Grumpily, he turns onto his side, facing toward the back of the couch.

Akira didn't expect unbroken attention from the man, but after their dinner together, earlier this week, he certainly expected more than this. He doesn't need much. Just enough to affirm that what happened earlier this week wasn't one-off and nothing more than Frisch feeding him whatever words would result in his cooperation. What an unearned sense of intimacy

that encounter produced, reduced now to little more than soul-searing isolation. After all this time together, Akira doesn't know any more about Frisch, who he is or what he does. He's been kept at arm's length. Practically ignored. Does he really matter at all?

It's been impossible for Akira *not* to obsess over the notion that someone so powerful would give him such personalized attention. Especially since, after so effortlessly alienating himself from family and friends once more, he feels he has nothing else. This is it, his sole lifeline. If Frisch doesn't pull him out, he'll surely drown. Who else, now, stands any chance of reacquainting him with the sense of self-worth he knows he has somewhere within him? *Just tell me again*, he thinks, *how much ISTAA needs me. Why it has to be me and no one else. Why sacrificing this weekend to fly out here will be worth it.* He rubs his cross with nervous vigor. So much unresolved tension and anxiety holding his mind hostage. He doesn't know what to do with himself. These thoughts he's having, he doesn't deserve them. But he doesn't know how to get rid of them either.

Restless, he sits up at the left edge of the couch, letting all his psychic energy bear down on the pure white totem. When the knuckle of his thumb starts to hurt, he tries to distract himself by going through his bag. He didn't bring any fancy devices. The cell phone is still at his office, sealed away in the duffel bag, and Akira has readjusted quite easily to its absence. It wouldn't have been much use on this trip, anyway, since his service coverage is limited to Japan. He could have brought one of the work laptops, but thought better of it and didn't wish to lug around any more than necessary. So his carry-on just has various odds and ends: some mail to process, student papers to read, journals to catch up on... He wanted to bring the ISTAA report along, along with his own papers for cross-referencing, but his monograph is way too hefty to make that idea feasible.

He takes out one of the tan folders and starts flipping through it absentmindedly. Research papers to assess and grade. Ranking intellectual growth and effort with a cold numerical denomination must be his least favorite part of being a teacher. Numbers lend themselves best to problems far removed from the convoluted realities of humanity. Maybe that's why he's a theoretical physicist in the first place. The pursuit is complicated enough to push the limits of his mind, but, ultimately, it leads to astounding clarity. Proofs do not lie. Formulas do not deceive. People do.

No amount of being mentally honed by a demanding discipline seems to help when it comes to deception of self, however. This week abundantly proves that. Not just where he and Sayaka are concerned, either.

This past Wednesday morning... Despite knowing better, despite half his conscious processes advising against it, Akira sat adjacent to Misato at the kitchen table with his own breakfast, and he asked her just how much she cared. Not directly, of course. He was too cowardly to ask such a thing directly. But that was the meaning hidden behind his words.

"Misato, something's come up... I have an opportunity to travel overseas this weekend, and—" For a brief moment, he considered mentioning the scholarship, but something stopped his tongue. Instead, far less compelling justification wriggled out. "I know the timing is terrible, but there's... a lot riding on this. For the future. So... um... I was wondering, how



set you are on the idea of interviewing me for your project? If it's important to you, Misato, I'll stay. No problem at all."

She didn't turn to look at him, nor did her expression show any indication of change. "Yeah, sure. Go do your thing. I don't care." A gut punch of nonchalance.

Akira had no words beyond, "I see." The rest of the meal was spent in silence. He wanted to cry then, though he knew he didn't deserve to make any fuss over her response. As much as he'd hoped that, by then, Misato might give him something — *anything* — he also knew that this, his daughter showing no trace of any disappointment, was the only possible outcome. And it merely crystallized his feelings that the past month had been illusory and all for nothing, and that his offspring had harbored no love for him in quite some time.

Haru's efforts to control the damage came too late. He tried to get to Akira as early that morning as possible, to the point of calling him at home before work, but it had been a sleepless night. Akira could scarcely function enough to go to YTD, let alone divulge his inner demons in gruesome detail. And, given the extra sensitivity of Tuesday's events, he especially couldn't do it with the possibility of anyone aside from Haru hearing. As a result, things had to be put off until early afternoon, when their schedules fortuitously freed up around the same time. Haru's home would be empty for about another hour, so Akira agreed to meet there.

Akira took a seat in the Yakumos' kitchen. Haru poured some sake out for them both, and the two men began to talk while Haru made dinner preparations. Akira had been here at least as recently as last May, but, emotionally, that may as well have been a lifetime ago. Certainly, at the time, Akira wouldn't have seen Haru doing *this*. The domestic sphere of Haru's life had evolved considerably in such a minute interval. Watching with detached fascination, he commented, "I didn't know you could cook."

"What, you think I'm too old to learn?" Haru replied.

"No, it's just... ironic, is all. Don't you remember what you were like freshman year?"

"Of course I remember. A man's allowed to change and grow, isn't he?"

"I suppose so."

"Mind you, I'm not a very good cook. But the results are edible, at least. And I'm slowly getting better. Takes a lot of work, though. .... We can't all be naturals, you know." Haru looked over his shoulder pointedly. "Aren't you bored, just sitting there?"

"A little." Akira stared at his left hand and the two fingers wrapped in gauze. "Not sure I would be much use to you, though. Hurt myself worse than I thought, last night."

"Ah, yes. *Are* you planning to tell me how that happened? Or do you have another artful dodge in your pocket?" Haru gave Akira an expectant look, then started scrubbing a daikon in the sink.

Akira flexed his hand, staring vacantly into the hollow formed. He tried to find the right words, but every possible explanation that came to mind was far too ridiculous and surreal to actually verbalize. ...He had intentionally hurt himself? Was he even someone who *did* that?

Turning off the faucet, Haru audibly sighed. "How about we start from the beginning, then?" He dried off the daikon and set it on a clean cutting board. "You still haven't told me what those messages from yesterday were all about. I think I deserve to know, for all the worrying you put me through."

Akira twitched, his face cringing in dread. He turned away, raising a hand to his countenance, trying to hide from Haru's perceptive eyes. *Why did I agree to this?* "It would've been so much easier to talk about this if... if..." He gulped. "...if you'd been there right away."

"Akira-kun, I called back within a half hour!" Haru set his preparations aside and pulled a chair. "What do you expect, me to be on 24-7 standby for you? That's just silly. You know I have things going on."

Akira did feel silly. But he couldn't deny that irrational, puerile sense of betrayal, either. His free hand clutched at the fabric of his pants.

"Akira-kun, what was so pressing that you couldn't call me back? What changed?"

Akira didn't have a real answer to that. He started biting on the end of his thumb.

Haru sighed once more. "This has something to do with the date, doesn't it? There's no way it can't."

Just hearing the word "date", Akira's innards churned in dismay. "Yes, that was it. Sayaka and I—" Trying to steel his nerves, he started circling his thumb over Kaworu's cross. "We made each other upset. And it was mostly my fault."

"Just what did you do?" Haru asked.

"I..." Akira covered his face again. "I expected too much from her."

Haru raised an eyebrow.

Moisture started to seep from Akira's eyes. "I thought, you know... with how well things had been going between us, maybe I didn't have to be afraid of the past anymore. You know that Sayaka never truly accepted everything about me... that she almost dumped me after I first told her, and..."

"Told her? About what?"

Akira tilted his head, giving Haru a penetrating look.

It took Haru a moment. "Oh... *Oh!*" he intoned in recall. "Yes, sorry, a bit slow on the uptake there. Well, Akira-kun, you know I don't really 'get it' myself... But being as it's completely irrelevant to our relationship, I never actually needed to."

“That's fine, Haru. People don't need to understand.” He wiped his face and cracked a weak, ephemeral smile. “I'm not even sure I do. But Sayaka... I've known all this time that she never really so much as *accepted* that part of me. Like her mind wants to justify it away as... I don't know... youthful experimentation, or a dumb mistake, or anything else. The idea that it wasn't just a passing thing, that it actually has consequences for who I am, and for our own relationship... Even though, in the big picture, this information changes nothing, it's those little details, Haru... I think they scare her.”

Haru listened thoughtfully, a moderate frown on his face.

Akira wasn't sure why, but he felt the courage to keep going. “So much that I've had to completely hide that side of myself for half my lifetime. I was sick of it. And at the same time, I felt so good about myself, about *us*, that I deluded myself into thinking that things might be able to change.”

Haru let his index finger caress his chin. “I'm going to guess that, whatever you said or did, Sayaka-san did not react favorably.”

The shame and the pain burst free, and Akira cradled himself reflexively, his forehead dropping onto the table. He couldn't hold it in any longer. As he cried, he wondered how it was even possible — that his lacrimal glands still worked, after all the abuse they had recently taken. It was absurd; it didn't make sense. Nothing made sense.

Haru knew this side of him quite well. He was one of the few people allowed to see it at all. Patting his friend gently on the back, Haru, not wanting to be a voyeur to Akira's pain, gave him some space and resumed work on the Yakumo dinner. Akira ran dry rather quickly, quite unlike the previous night, when the inability to stop crying had prevented him from getting any real sleep.

“You're running on fumes, aren't you?” Haru asked, scraping vegetables into a boiling pot and setting the lid on. “Need to take a nap or something?”

Akira shook his head, impulsively reaching for his sake. “No. I don't want to burden you.”

“Stop sounding so Japanese, Akira-kun. It doesn't suit you.” Haru set a timer and returned to his chair.

He smiled weakly at that. “I'm sorry that happened, Haru. I wish I didn't do that so much...”

“Well, you already know what Risa and I would say, and we already know what you would say in response, so I guess there's no point in saying anything further on that matter.”

“I suppose not.”

“So...” Haru laced his fingers in his lap. “There was a bit of drama during what was supposed to be a romantic get-together. Is there any reason to think you two can't work it out?”

A frown. “After our fight last night... I'm not sure I want to.”

“There was a fight, too?!” Haru's eyes gaped wide. “Is this something that happened later?”

Akira nodded.

“Like... a *fight* fight? Raised voices and everything?”

Akira sighed under his breath. “Yes, Haru. It was a real fight. I feel terrible about it, but I was so... so...” He gulped. “I just couldn't hold it in any longer.”

“It's been so long since I actually saw you blow a fuse that it's hard to imagine.” Haru scratched the back of his head. “Just what happened, Akira-kun, for things to get that bad? What aren't you telling me?”

Akira, still stooped over with shame, glanced obliquely at his friend. “Honestly? It would be impossible to recount all the causes. I'd let myself become either blind or numb to them, but there's so much wrong, Haru...” He turned away. “Everything is just so broken. I don't have hope for anything now.”

Haru leaned in slightly. “Fights happen, Akira-kun. You don't think Risa and I have our moments? But it's just part of our process. I know we've all been taught to just put on a brave face and bear adversity without complaint, but I also know that *you* know you don't have to do that with Sayaka-san. You two *should* be getting those skeletons out of your closets. So what if it takes a few fights to clear the air?”

Akira rubbed the bottom of his nose, sniffing, struggling for something moderately productive to say.

Rubbing his friend's shoulder, Haru said, “Don't be scared of this. You probably feel like a jerk, but it's okay. You can work through this. It can still mean something — your progress with Sayaka-san...” After a moment's consideration, he added, “And with Misato, too.”

“...Misato?” Akira murmured, shifting in his chair. Immediately, he began to nervously caress his aunt's cross.

Haru rightfully suspected that something was amiss, and Akira was, characteristically, unable to conceal the truth about what he'd done that morning. No sooner had he finished his account that Haru's gentle compassion exploded into perplexed ire. “Akira-kun, why the hell would you do that? What the fuck is wrong with you?!”

Akira trembled before Haru's harsh tone and gave himself completely to self-pity. “So what if Misato doesn't want me? That's her right.”

“You're an idiot.” Haru started pacing the room, gesticulating. “Of course she wants you. You're her father, the only one she has. You know damn well why she didn't put up a fight!” Sighing with exasperation, he cried, “And you *had* to get the UN involved in your personal drama? *Really*? Whatever happened to calling things off with them?!”

“I never agreed to any such thing.”

“You certainly *implied* that you did.” Haru stalked off to the common area and quickly returned with a cordless receiver, which he shoved in Akira's face. “Call her, now. Call it off.”

“‘Her’—?”

“Tatsuta.”

Akira pulled away. “I don't have her number on m—”

“That's not much of an obstacle. I e-mailed her contact information to myself after getting it off you. Just a quick login away.”

It took Akira a moment to recall what Haru was talking about. Right, he had wanted to look into her using his old friends in high places... “Tatsuta isn't assigned to me anymore, Haru. The trip was arranged by someone else.”

“So what? She's on the inside. She can get the message wherever it needs to go.” Haru set the phone down on the table. “I'm not going to let you put this off any longer, Akira-kun. I know you too well.”

Akira rose from his chair, wiggling the numbness out of a leg. “What if I were to tell you, Haru, that I actually *wanted* to go?”

His friend frowned deeply. “I'd tell you that you have responsibilities to your family and friends to which your own desires are secondary.”

“A big boost to her college fund helps Misato far more than help on a single project she doesn't even need me specifically for. You know she'd be happier working with Risa.”

Haru crossed his arms. “If I were a lesser man, I would try to convince Risa to become suddenly unavailable.” He checked on the soup. “But that poor girl needs grown-ups she can actually depend on, so you know I won't.”

Akira stared at his feet and continued to fidget with the pendant. “I'd stay if I could, Haru, but I just don't trust myself. I keep imagining how Sunday might play out. Over and over again. Every possibility is one where I make everything worse. So, it's better if I'm not here at all. It's better if I'm helping Misato from afar.”

Haru set the range on low heat. “Keep telling yourself that, Akira-kun.” He started emptying tiny measuring spoons of spice into the pot. “Maybe if you think it enough times, it'll become true.” At last, he set the lid back on, slightly off center, and faced Akira once more. “Don't you realize how full of shit you are? You're scared and you want a way out. If it's not one thing you're escaping to, it's another. Isn't it?”

Akira withdrew further into himself.

“Wouldn't you just love to be shipped overseas and never have to deal with your family again? Or with me, for that matter? Who needs a conscience, am I right?”

“Please stop,” Akira whispered, clutching his head. “I just agreed to a tour of one facility. Nothing more!”

Haru prowled the kitchen, haphazardly opening drawers and peering into cabinets. Snorting in disdain, he said, “Whatever they've told you, Akira-kun, don't believe it.” His perusals get increasingly frenzied. “Gods damn it all, did Risa find every last one?!” After circling upon himself momentarily, he seemed to have a moment of epiphany, and finally carried a chair to the bookshelf in the next room.

Akira let himself zone out, enjoying the reprieve, only to be shocked back to awareness by the click of a lighter. “Haru?!” he blurted, glancing up. For the first time in months, Haru was nursing a cigarette. “What are you doing...?”

Haru folded a piece of paper towel into a makeshift ashtray and tapped into it. “You think you're the only person allowed to turn his back on personal progress? I can't always be the strong one.”

Akira felt so horrible he couldn't bring himself to criticize, apologize, or anything in the middle. “I should go...” he whispered, fighting back tears. His body seemed to float toward the entranceway on its own.

Haru's hand stilled him. “Not just yet. If you're really going to entrust yourself to these UN people, even if it's just for a couple of days, there are some things you should know.”

The smell of tobacco was overwhelming, so Akira put some additional space between them, then faced his friend and waited silently.

“I'm probably just wasting my time, as usual,” Haru said, “but if I didn't tell you what I'd learned, I'd never forgive myself. I wish I had gotten this out of the way earlier, but you were doing so well, Akira-kun, I didn't want to risk anything that might have thrown you off balance. I know you too well.” He soothed his clearly bedraggled nerves with a long drag. “I've heard back from a couple of my old acquaintances. I think you've heard of them. Jumpei and Kouki. I wasn't really expecting much to come from giving them Tatsuta's name, so the encrypted e-mails I got were pretty shocking.”

...*Encrypted?* Akira mouthed in surprise.

Haru's eyes had an alarmingly distant expression. “The reorganization that the UN is going through is actually a very big deal. It's like the entire thing is being rebuilt from the inside out, and it's happening on a level where no one can really say or do anything about it. There's tons of money and influence creeping out of the deepest, darkest corners. Those being newly appointed to positions of greatest power frequently have shady allegiances. A lot of underground fraternities and crime syndicates are involved. Even small fry like Tatsuta — I don't know if you got any weird vibes from her, but she has ties to the yakuza, apparently.”

One of Akira's eyebrows went up. “That really doesn't surprise me. But... Haru, I'm not sure how I should respond to this. I guess I have to wonder if you hear how you actually sound.” He frowned.

“It’s crazy, right?” Haru said. “This is some real Illuminati-level shit. If it weren't coming from Jun-kun and Kouki, I wouldn't have even given it a second thought.” He placed the cigarette to his lips again and inhaled deeply. “Just think about how many people in the organization itself are turning a blind eye to this takeover because, hey, conspiracies aren't real! It really is perfect, isn't it?” He raised the cigarette again, but stopped himself, and just stared at it this time.

“If your friends know about this, why don't *they* do something?”

“Oh, they are, in their own way,” Haru said. “But they have to be really careful. Neither have terribly influential positions. It seems that people who stand in the way of the corrupting influence just ... disappear.”

Akira pocketed his hands. “So, what does any of this have to do with me? You're going to tell me that they want my research for something nefarious, right?” He snickered derisively.

Haru's expression honed in on Akira, turning deadly serious. “They're building a new military in secret. For what, I can't say. But I do have it on good authority that this ISTAA of theirs is not as philanthropic as it wants you to believe. By all indications, the two seem to be connected.”

He had never mentioned “ISTAA” to Haru. That meant his sources were at least somewhat reliable. “So, then—”

“ISTAA is a front for the research and development of the new UN Military's weapons, armor, vehicles, and gods know what else.” Haru snuffed his cigarette and eased himself back into a chair. “When you were in total disbelief about them taking interest in the S<sup>2</sup> engine — your instincts were absolutely right. They don't care about bringing clean, free energy to people. They just want to turn you into the next Oppenheimer.”

Akira's face contorted. “You mean... an S<sup>2</sup> bomb?”

“Don't act so surprised, Akira-kun. You knew from the very start that it was a possibility.”

He felt angry all of a sudden and he wasn't really sure why. His fists curled tight in his pockets. “You can't be serious, can you? There's no way you and your insider buddies can know all this for a fact. Just how much of what you've told me is guesswork and hyperbole? At least half? You can't scare me with lies, Haru.”

“I may have put two and two together in some instances,” Haru admitted, “but if I'm trying to 'scare you' it's because *I'm* scared as hell and you should be, too.”

Akira shook his head from side to side, chortling insincerely under his breath. “If these people are the frightening band of cultists and criminals you're making them out to be, then, really, what do my own choices matter? They'll get what they want, with or without me.” He threw his head back, trying to keep the tears from falling. “I could destroy all my research and kill myself...”

“You know I would never suggest such a thing!” Haru said.

“...but what would that accomplish besides maybe delaying them a bit? My paper's already out there. I can't retract it. Someone with the right kind of talent would be able to continue my work. If they exist, the UN will find them, sooner or later.”

Haru was finally at a loss for words. He wrung his hands in silence.

Akira dabbed at his eyes. “So what happens in those silly books you read? What does the protagonist do at a time like this?”

“I don't know,” Haru muttered. “Sometimes he pretends to go along with the conspiracy, only to help take it down from the inside. But you know I can't in good conscience suggest you do that.”

“So what, then? What can I do??”

“Leave this fight to the fighters, Akira-kun. You have your own problems to worry about. Tell the UN in no uncertain terms that you're not interested in anything they have to offer you. Be there for Misato on Saturday no matter what. Help us take down that ugly cement wall on Sunday.” He took a deep breath. “And hold onto some hope for you and Sayaka. I know you're feeling angry and hurt and you just want to give up. But keep fighting. It's not over yet.”

At that time, Akira let himself feel a glimmer of optimism momentarily. But quickly, all too quickly, it was overshadowed by the looming terror of what Frisch might be hiding and the inescapable sense that whatever the man wanted, he would, eventually, get. Akira wasn't sure just how much he believed Haru's intelligence, but it was hard *not* to be scared by it all.

Akira wasn't so naive that he'd never considered the possibility that his ideas might be used for terrible purposes, but actualizing the technology had always been so remote that there had been little impetus to mentally prepare himself. Besides, if scientists let fear of technological misappropriation limit humanity's frontiers, so much less would ever change for the better. So much was contingent upon finding a reliable, renewable energy source, wasn't the risk worth it? He wanted to believe it.

The remainder of that week made very little sense to him. He wanted to act upon Haru's suggestion with all his heart, but too many forces were pulling him in too many directions. There was no way to logically sort through them all or put together an altered course of action. And so, numb and befuddled, he let inertia carry him forward. It wasn't the right thing... but there *was* no right thing anymore.

Just when he thought his life made sense, it all crumbled before his eyes. There's nothing he can trust now, not even his own feelings. He's already tired of being pushed around by this storm. He wants something, anything, to anchor him down.

Is that thing Frisch? He had strange thoughts about the man as soon as they met and he still cannot shake them. They're uncomfortable. But also alluring. If Frisch represents, at least in part, the unknowable threat of Akira's work being used in a way that violates its creator's intent, then maybe... just maybe... Frisch could be the only way to get that control back.



The German, sensing he's being stared at, returns Akira's gaze, and Akira quickly looks away, pretending his eyes hadn't been lingering. It's unconvincing, he can tell, as Frisch issues a good-natured chuckle and returns to what he was doing.

Abruptly, Akira's heart begins to race. He clutches the cross, hoping it will soothe him. Instead, he's overwhelmed by a nebulous feeling of oppression. The atmosphere is heavy as lead, crushing his ribs, slowly asphyxiating him. There's no time to come to an understanding of this. He must escape.

A minute later, he leans over one of the sinks in the men's bathroom, dousing his face. Capillary-dilating heat, then spine-tingling cold — a refreshing jolt to the system. As he dabs his face dry, his eyes chance their way into the mirror, but immediately avert. It's too much, like staring into an open wound. He feels so obvious, and his stomach turns in revulsion.

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By the time they land in Tel Aviv, night has fallen and the sleepless city glows with neon exuberance. During the ride to the hotel, Akira gazes out the window, rather taken with the sleek modernism that passes by. To think this is all he'll see of Israel while he's here: little more than an assortment of sweeping, tantalizing blurs. He's never been in this part of the world before, and under ordinary circumstances he would want to stay and explore for a day at least. Visit the prominent scholarly institutions, if nothing else.

The language barrier might be an issue, though, and he has no way of overcoming it himself. Frisch seems to be quite the polyglot, but the man is under no obligation to provide for Akira's extracurricular whimsies. Still... Even though Akira knows it's already late and there's an early morning ahead...

"...It feels like such a waste," he says. "Just passing an amazing place like this right by."

Frisch issues a low, sharp chortle, apparently amused. "I heard no such complaint about Moscow."

Akira shrugs. "I've been through there before. Not recently, but still." He gazes through the glass again. "There's just something fetching about this city."

"Quite so. Well, do recall, Dr. Katsuragi, that there will likely be some time on Sunday morning before the flight back. Customarily, on trips to Qumran, any spare time should be spent at Kalya. A simply delightful kibbutz. The best way to experience the Dead Sea, if I might be so daring."

*The Dead Sea.* He's heard about it, of course, but — scrolls aside — mostly in its capacity as a tourist trap. "Would that really be the best use of the time, though?"

“Dr. Katsuragi,” Frisch says, “it would be a true pity to have been so near the Dead Sea, yet not floated upon it. The greatest waste of all, perhaps.”

Akira’s of no particular mood to argue. It’s hard to tell if Frisch is even being completely serious, besides. On an impulse, he checks his watch. Five in the morning? That can’t be right. His eyes dart toward the front console of the cab, hoping for a local time.

“Six hours’ difference,” Frisch offers with a smile. “I understand. It’s been a long day for us both.” As Akira adjusts, the German adds, “Even after all my years flying, it still amazes me, you know. How feats of engineering can so daringly defy not only gravity, but the turn of the Earth itself.”

Suddenly so talkative? What a change from before. “At the end of the day, we’ve done nothing more than break reality down into its constituent parts and manipulated variables until the desired outcome was achieved.”

“How cold,” Frisch comments. “You struck me as being a bit more whimsical than that.”

Akira shrugs. “Depends on my mood, I suppose.”

“As you’ve no doubt observed, I spend most of my time on conference calls and pouring over spreadsheets. If that’s all my work was, it would be dull beyond compare. But the payoff, Dr. Katsuragi — that’s what keeps me here.”

“Payoff?” Akira says.

Frisch strokes his mustache. “*Wonder. Awe.* Watching as the bounds of human understanding and capability are pushed further and further. My vantage point is a rare one. Not unlike that of a gardener, beholding the once-barren earth that buds and blossoms from his careful ministrations.”

“Is that how you see yourself?” Akira asks. “...As a gardener?”

It’s then that they arrive at the hotel, and the thread of the conversation is lost. Although Akira finds it unnecessary, he does not protest when his luggage is taken inside for him, to be brought all the way to his room. The exterior and lobby speak to needless extravagance, a far cry from the cramped conditions that brought them here. Perhaps Frisch can only thwart what’s expected of him so much.

As Frisch checks in, Akira stares into a coin-filled fountain, hands tightly pocketed. His eyes soon wander across the lobby. It’s pleasant enough, but just... far too fancy. Overembellished. Trying too hard to impress. Even the potted plants, which provide a welcome visual reprieve, seem to all be chosen on the basis of how exotic they look. He wanders a bit deeper in, and sights what looks like a miniature arboretum in an arcade leading to another wing of the hotel. While staring into it, his brain tugs on a discarded thread.

‘Gardener.’ At first glance, the comparison seems harmless, even cute. Few pastimes seem more innocent and pure. He thinks about Sayaka, and her devotion to the flower beds that blossom year after year. His own reluctance about helping, for fear of doing more harm than

good. On deeper contemplation, however... a good gardener needs to be willing to do harm on purpose, don't they? It's not all about nurturing the plants you're trying to grow. It's also about removing the ones you don't want. Uprooting them... leaving them to wither and die.

If Frisch's organization is, ostensibly, a nursery for scientists and their research... then who or what are the weeds?

Before he can dwell upon the thought for long, he hears a voice call for him.

"Ah, there you are, Dr. Katsuragi!" Frisch approaches, key cards in hand. "I don't blame you for wandering off. It's practically a museum here."

Akira accepts the key and murmurs a thank you.

"I would recommend turning in, Dr. Katsuragi" Frisch says. "Wouldn't want you to be so bedraggled in to the morning."

Akira barely looks Frisch's way. "I'm tired, I suppose. But I doubt I'll be able to sleep." He prods his cross, fearful that he's already said too much, but too wound-up to keep it bottled. "What about you, Frisch-san?"

Frisch smiles. "I did not plan on sleeping just yet. I typically don't require much."

"I see. More work for you, then?"

"Hmm." Frisch strokes his mustache again. "I suppose, given this state of affairs, I could indulge you a small taste of the Tel Aviv nightlife. That's what you'd wanted, if I'm not mistaken."

Akira pockets his hands again. "I suppose."

"I know just the place. It's not far, either."

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The pub is small and cozy, with an earthy atmosphere. Frisch leads him to a table for two hugging a stucco wall. Akira at first sits without thought. Then he starts looking around.

Given the hour, there are a solid number of patrons. Perhaps to be expected, though. Wouldn't be much of a sampling of "the Tel Aviv nightlife" if people weren't out and about. The type of people, though... Decidedly not the sort Akira is used to seeing in Kyoto bars, groups comprised entirely of men, winding down and bonding socially after a hard day's work. The only similarity is that there's not a woman to be seen anywhere. He senses intuitively that the regular patrons are not here for professional reasons, but for... rather more personal ones.

Akira absentmindedly tugs on his collar. His throat feels thick and dry. The air feels much warmer than it did a moment ago.

“Is the environment not to taste, Dr. Katsuragi?” Frisch asks, sensing Akira’s discomfort. “Would you prefer to leave?”

Akira doesn't answer directly. “Why did you bring me here?”

The German smiles. “The owners brew their own, available only here and one other location. Nowhere else in the world. It’s the finest in Israel I’ve yet found.”

“That’s...” Akira gulps. “That’s *really* the only reason?” Frisch is doing it again, making him uncomfortable when he obviously didn't have to. Why?

Frisch remains unfazed. “Does the patronage bother you? If so, I admit I made a rare misjudgment.”

“No,” Akira abruptly corrects, “it’s not that. It’s just... you could have mentioned it in advance, at least.”

“For what purpose? This isn’t a gay bar, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

Akira flinches in spite of himself.

Frisch rests his chin on steepled fingers. “Everyone is welcome here. But for that very reason, you will naturally see more of the people who are less welcome elsewhere. While Tel Aviv is ahead of the curve in that regard, there’s still progress to be made.” He straightens up again. “You are a pariah yourself, are you not? That’s why I didn’t think twice about bringing you here. Because you know all too well that long quest for acceptance, marked by one arbitrary rejection after another.” And with that, he reaches into his pockets, producing a cigarette and lighter. As before, he helps himself, ignoring Akira’s clear signs of discomfort.

Akira reflexively turns away and stares into a window in the roof, as if that will remove him from the situation somehow. He doesn’t know how to feel. Frisch’s armor-piercing comments make him feel foolish, petty — and more importantly, exposed and vulnerable. Much more than he is most of the time. *What’s your game?* he wants to ask, but he’s not sure he wants even a halfway sincere answer. Nor is he sure who he’s more afraid of — this man, or himself. “I need a drink,” he mutters.

“Good, good. That’s why we’re here. Shall I make the choice for you? Do you have any preference?”

“Something hard,” Akira says. If he only gets a *little* drunk, he might do something stupid. *Too* drunk — he’ll feel far too sick to do anything.

Frisch nods elegantly and goes to the barista, leaving a trail of burning tobacco in his wake. He returns with a single large bottle, Hebrew script on the label, and pours both of them a glass. Sitting down again, he raises his. “A toast, then, to later today, and what I hope will lead to a pleasing arrangement for us both.”

Akira clinks halfheartedly. Sampling the brew, it's not quite what he wanted. It's perfectly fine, but it doesn't taste particularly hard. A glance at the label seems to confirm this. Did Frisch mishear him, or did he intentionally ignore him? No matter; there's no use complaining. Akira would struggle to order anything on his own, so this will have to do.

"I never did apologize," Frisch says abruptly. "For my reticence during such a long journey."

"There's no need," Akira responds. "I came into the picture late. You have things to do. I understand." How formulaic and customary. Not to mention transparent. Frisch can surely see straight through it.

A breezy chortle. "Dr. Katsuragi, you needn't burden yourself with such formalities. Not here and not now." The German sips from his glass, then dabs the stray droplets tenderly off his mustache. "I wonder, might a change in more than scenery help?"

"Hmm?"

Frisch suddenly switches from Japanese to his native tongue. "You said you were uncomfortable speaking German in your homeland, but what about now? This entire time, I've been waiting to hear you."

Something about the man feels fundamentally different now. His overall manner is much the same, uneasily straddling meticulous verbosity and casual overfamiliarity. But, somehow, Akira can immediately sense that Frisch is more assured, speaking at a faster clip and far more brusquely. There's no way he can compete with that. And yet...

"You'll have to forgive me," Akira says in his best German. "I'm a bit out of practice."

"Almost no accent. That's very unusual. How young did you say you were at the time?"

Akira fumbles at the back of his head. "I'm not sure. Three or four when we moved to Düsseldorf, I think."

"Yes, that definitely would explain it," Frisch says, nodding to himself. "In any case, while we're here, you can get some practice in. I assume this is one skill you don't wish to lose."

"No, no. Definitely not."

Frisch taps his cigarette into the ash tray. "About my apology..." He takes a drag. "You're under no obligation to accept, but I felt compelled to offer it regardless. Anyone can see that you are being crushed alive by your circumstances."

Akira glances away and sips from his glass. "'Anyone', huh?" What a horrid thought. Attempting to inject some levity, he jokes, "Are you trying to suggest that you, a CEO, have feelings of humanistic compassion?"

Frisch seems to find sordid amusement in this. "Granted, in my line of work, empathy is generally discouraged, except in those cases when it can be used to achieve the desired results." He pours more of the brew for himself. "If you are a callous manipulator for long enough, Dr. Katsuragi, it's quite easy to become numb to what you're doing, because *that* is

the only way to continue doing it.” Staring into his glass thoughtfully, “We’re all just trying to get by. And the human animal thrives on paradox.”

It’s not clear to him what exactly Frisch meant by that. Why he felt the need to say it at all. He’s not sure he *wants* to know. At the thought of thriving upon paradox, Akira embraces his cross. A symbol he should, by all rights, despise, and yet it serves as an emotional crutch, one he can’t imagine living without.

Unlike the last time they wine together, Frisch does not stay silent on the matter. “I was under the impression that it was Russian Orthodoxy that was brought to Japan, and yet it’s a Greek cross that you wear.”

Akira conceals the object completely within his palm and averts his eyes. “You’re not mistaken.”

“The topic makes you uncomfortable, I see, but it’s hard not to be intrigued. I wouldn’t have taken you for a Christian, nor someone who would wear an important spiritual symbol for frivolous reasons.”

“Your impression is correct.” He sips from his glass again, taking down more than he intended. “I ... I don’t really know *why* I wear this thing.”

“Surely,” Frisch says, “you must have an inkling. No?” Unprompted, he gives Akira a refill.

Akira stares at the dusky fluid. He eventually gives in and lets more of it trickle down his gullet. “I started wearing it so long ago. I don’t know if the reason even matters anymore.”

“If it didn’t matter, Dr. Katsuragi, the subject wouldn’t result in such immediate withdrawal.” Frisch finally snuffs his cigarette. “I hope, for your own sake, that you have someone to whom you can bare your soul.”

He rubs the cross between thumb and index finger. “Do *you*?”

Frisch laughs. “You assume, Dr. Katsuragi, that I have a soul to bare.”

After that, the space between them churns and bubbles with silence. Akira puzzles, unable to decide if Frisch was evading, self-deprecating, or something else. A minute passes, maybe more. Frisch, typically, yields no sign of discomfort. But eventually Akira’s tongue becomes restless.

“This cross...” He traces the edge of the object with his thumb. “It once belonged to my grandmother’s sister. That side of the family had wealth at the time, so they got to see a lot of the world. The story goes that my great-aunt picked up the cross during an actual visit to Greece.” In his mind’s eye, he can see Aunt Kaworu’s beautiful handwriting, garnishing a page of her journal opposite a watercolor of a Grecian beach. “She found it simple, beautiful, and elegant.”

“That it is,” Frisch agrees. “Zinc aluminum alloy?”

“I wouldn’t know, really...”

“So you wear your great-aunt's cross to honor her memory. She was important to you?”

“I suppose,” Akira says. “I never had a chance to meet her, but I always felt drawn to her. The things she left behind. She was the only person in the family who seemed sort of like me.”

“A sense of connection is important,” Frisch says. “Keeps one anchored in a chaotic and largely uncaring world.”

The words have little effect. Akira has rarely felt as disconnected as he does now. Frisch doesn't seem discouraged, though. “Earlier, Dr. Katsuragi, you seemed to find it curious that I would ride economy class. After all, I could surely afford *not* to.”

Akira isn't sure what this has to do with anything, so he remains silent.

“The reason for this is, at once, both simple and convoluted. You see, while I was born into the aristocracy — branded by it, even, when my parents named me — I have never felt *connected* to it. This is a feeling to which you can relate, yes? Rather than growing up knowing that you belong somewhere, you learn, more and more, that you actually belong nowhere at all. A stranger in your own land.”

A sense of utter surrealism has started to envelop their table. Akira feels the buzz of the alcohol amplifying beneath his skin.

“Forging alliances with the other bluebloods. Frittering away fortunes on displays of excess. Looking down upon the proletariat with delusions of superiority. If that is not how you want to spend your life, then it is difficult to view any of it as a plus. A life not actually lived, but one spent in chains. A gilded cage is still a cage. I was expected to act against my nature, day after day, year after year. To marry a stranger, to perpetuate an estate. To use and abuse the less powerful, and think nothing of it.”

Frisch pauses momentarily to light another cigarette, and he breathes from it long and deep. Turning to Akira with a piercing, overly intimate expression, he goes on. “You are common, my peers would say. Below my notice. Socializing with you like this degrades me.” Another drag. “But *they* inherit esteem rather than earning it through actual talent or ability. Clearly, their opinions are not to be taken seriously.”

Akira returns Frisch's look for a moment, and it's both exhilarating and terrifying. He stares into his lap, where he wrings his hands anxiously. “Why are you telling me this...?”

“Because you, Dr. Katsuragi, are a veritable genius, and I am honored to breathe the same air as you.” Frisch lifts his glass again, expecting another toast, and Akira reluctantly provides it. “Individuals such as yourself are not below the rich and powerful. Quite the opposite. You are the true chosen ones. And it is with that boundless, uncaged potential that I prefer to mingle. Far outside any fortress of self-importance. Far away from the inbred, myopic aristocracy.” He pauses for another drag. “*There*, Dr. Katsuragi... is where I drop my anchor.”

Is there anything he could possibly say, in response to this, that would not risk needlessly exposing himself in some way? More than he already is, anyway. What's the right way to think or feel under such strange circumstances as these? Is Frisch lying? Is he telling the truth? Either feels equally valid, but Akira doesn't know enough about this man to know which is more likely. Or just what, for that matter, Frisch intends to gain by talking about such things at all. Saying he doesn't have a soul to bare, and then, completely unprompted, going ahead and baring it? If the intent is create a veil of confusion, through which it's impossible to diagnose intent, then it's working.

One thing seems clear, however: Frisch is dangling lures and trying to get Akira to bite. To what end? ...Who can say?

He wishes he could stop thinking, stop fighting. Just give in and engorge himself, whatever the cost might be. Simply let the tidal pull of this man and his ineffable charisma draw him closer, and closer.

Akira downs another quarter liter, and taps his glass for more.

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Frisch takes them to their rooms, adjacent odd numbers. Hanging onto Frisch's every motion from the corner of his left eye, Akira swipes his door and finds his luggage waiting inside for him. He stands in the open doorway, hesitant. His alcohol-tinted delirium has other ideas.

Frisch interrupts whatever is percolating in Akira's mind, saying, "You have lots of questions, I know. There will be plenty of time on the ride over to deal with them."

Akira silently mouths, *Why not now?* "...What if I can't sleep?" He realizes after the fact how childish he sounds, and curses himself under his breath.

"A most unfortunate scenario. I need you fresh and alert in the morning, after all."

Akira glances away. "I can't make any promises..."

Pushing a stopper under his door to hold it open, Frisch looks back over his shoulder and asks, "Do you struggle with insomnia, as well? I could give you a mild sedative." He doesn't wait for the answer, instead venturing deeper into his room and rummaging through one of his bags.

Akira wanders into the other man's doorway, his eyes drifting vacantly toward the enticingly large, empty bed. Intense yearning clashes violently with a sense of revulsion that writhes in his belly like a den of snakes. He can only stare, frozen, hoping his body doesn't betray him. Words emerge from his throat as if spoken by someone else. "I avoid drugs. They tend to disagree with me."



Frisch steps up to Akira with a small brown glass bottle. "I've seen you imbibe alcohol," he says with a wink. "In any case, it wouldn't be quite correct to call this a drug. Melatonin occurs naturally in the body. Take only half a pill if you're worried."

Akira begrudgingly accepts the small tablet. He stares at it momentarily, then glances back at Frisch and on through him, deep into the room, so he can be overwhelmed by that exhilarating feeling of visceral disgust once more. There's no point in taking any chances. He swallows the whole pill right then and there, so much saliva built up on his tongue it goes down easily.

And then comes the moment to break away, say good night. But it doesn't happen. He's suspended there in front of Frisch, unable to move. His glistening brown eyes, quavering with excitement, lock with Frisch's icy blues, which refuse, intrepid, to turn away. His breath hastens, his whole thoracic cavity is pounded like a drum by the anxious plasma pump within its walls, his lips contort into a boyish smile that bares the slightest sliver of crooked dentition. He drowns in the pale pools, so cold yet too hot to handle, burning within their handsomely aged frames. Utterly seized, he cannot escape. He doesn't want to.

An artery in his left buttock throbs at irregular intervals. There's an itch above his right eyebrow but he ignores it. His body feels fuzzy, distant, to the point that he's not even certain whether he's engorged or not. And yet, somehow, he's completely thrall to his flesh, right this very moment. *I want this*, he tells himself. *I want this. I've wanted this longer than I've known*. He doesn't even know exactly what it is that he craves so desperately, but now that he's found it and it's right here looking him in both eyes he won't let it escape. He must consummate. He can't suffer in deprivation any longer.

After some number of excruciatingly long seconds pass, Frisch at last relaxes his expression. With a smooth and soothing smile, he simply says, "Do get some rest, Katsuragi. We have an early morning upon us." As he backs into his room, he bows and says, "Good night." The door closes softly.

Akira is dumbstruck. Frozen in perplexity. What just happened? He doesn't know. It's surreal. He was so sure that the outcome would be different. There was not an iota of doubt in his mind that Frisch desired him. Akira knows the look. Female, male; young, old; he knows the look. Frisch didn't allow his body language to be coarsely obvious — he has class — but he wasn't exactly subtle, either. This wasn't a delusion, surely it wasn't. It couldn't be.

So, then... why? Is this a game? What is Akira supposed to do? Check to see if Frisch's door is actually locked? Knock? Wait a while first, then tell Frisch that he still can't sleep... as if he were a small child seeking solace from a parent?

Akira feels too vulnerable out here in the hallway. He swipes his door and wanders within, taking his inebriated haze with him. His clothes seem to fall off his form, article by article, until he's standing in front of his suitcase in boxer briefs and socks, debating what to do next. Ultimately, he strips down completely and collapses onto the bed. He feels tired, dreadfully tired. But agitated, to the point that he surely cannot sleep. Not yet.

Frisch, back there... He didn't use Akira's title, for the first time. Frisch speaks very methodically, so it's hard to believe that it was a slip of the tongue. Was it a message, then?

Some sort of acknowledgment? That he sees Akira as more than a professional to recruit into his organization? That, perhaps, he too...

These thoughts are so inappropriate. Disgusting, even. He feels gross for having them. But Sayaka's not here, he must remind himself. She's not a concern. It's only him. His mind, his body, and whatever the confluence of both desires, whether she likes it or not. That's how it was between him and Taro. Akira didn't have to apologize for anything, to anyone. What they had wasn't romantic by any means, but it was still life-affirming, a genuine connection, and he misses that. It ended before its time.

Akira doesn't understand why any of this is happening. He and Sayaka have had their differences before. Akira has been erratic and vulnerable before. He can't remember ever trying to be unfaithful in any seriously considered way. Fidelity wasn't even a chore, because his erotic senses didn't seem to even acknowledge that other people existed. Perhaps Taro flickered as the ghost of a possibility now and again, but his psychic ward made the possibility highly improbable, and then he left for America and that was that. But now...  
*Now...*

Akira fishes into a hidden compartment in his luggage, where forbidden traveling companions have been hiding, out of Sayaka's sight. The toy is sleek and black, and thick as Taro had been, which was... well, far from shabby. Akira has been attempting to maintain himself this whole time... trying to hold onto that feeling, once enjoyed so shamelessly. As he rinses the fuzz off, warming the silicone with hot water, he wonders if there was any possible way to tell Sayaka about his desire, and his interest in sharing it, without instigating a mutual meltdown. A futile thought. They'll never make love again; he's sure of it.

Thinking about it makes him feel both deeply angry and excruciatingly sad. He lies supine on the bed, looking to the ceiling to keep his tears contained, and brings his knees high. Goes through the familiar motions of slathering lubricant where it's required. The anticipation brings him back to full stiffness. Controlling his breathing, he begins the slow, delightful process of insertion.

Eagerly, his hands get busy, working his erogenous zones with yearning roughness. He cries out, making no attempt to control the volume of his moans, hoping desperately to be overheard. It feels heavenly, but he'll never forget the weight and warmth of another person and how that truly completed the experience. Through the fog of his memory, his moments with Taro remain vividly intact. But, now, his mind substitutes his old friend with the unknown quantity in the room next door.

Utterly overwhelmed by the older man's statuesque figure, overwhelming charisma, and flamboyant eroticism, he surrenders himself to the fantasy completely. *I want you inside me, all of you, right now.* He imagines the German's weight and texture and smell, the sensation of having someone bigger and stronger pushing him down, doing to him as he pleases. *Do me harder than you've ever done everyone. I have so much lost time to make up for.*

It doesn't quite make sense to him, why someone like Frisch would instigate his sexuality anew. So few ever have that Akira has sometimes wondered what was wrong with him. After he arrived at university, he tried dating — his own sex, the opposite sex too, but no one felt right, no one made him *feel anything*. Only Sayaka, after he had stopped looking altogether.

And only a few days ago, he believed he was perfectly happy with her. The melding of flesh and emotion, it was true bliss, wasn't it? But it wasn't complete; it wasn't enough. If he couldn't be himself with her, did he really want to be with her at all?

As Akira's wrist begins to hurt, and his pleasure nears its inescapable acme, he imagines how delectable it would be to flaunt such a scene to Sayaka. Just let her watch in nauseous, irate jealousy as another male ravages her husband. Akira would laugh bitterly at her, and remind her that this could all have been hers, if only she hadn't been such an idiot.

By the time he's about to finish, his mind has come full circle — Sayaka wearing the present he'd given her, savagely driving it into him, while Frisch watches from a safe distance with tangible interest. Sayaka curses him as she thrusts, recounting in detail how vile he is and how much she hates him. He can't fight back even if he tries, as his limbs are bound, so tightly it cuts into his skin. And then, she strikes him across the face, hard enough to leave a mark. But there's no pain, only the epitome of fetishistic bliss.

Climax at last arrives, long, intense, and messy. He lies there for a time, enjoying the lingering sensations that throb throughout his body. But soon it's evident that, despite obtaining physical release, he's still backed up mentally. Getting too sleepy to worry about it, though. The supplement he got from Frisch must be working.

He washes up and voids his bladder. Catching himself in the mirror, he can see, even in the dim light, that he seems to have slapped himself rather hard. Akira runs a finger over the mark tenderly, a sense of ill ease burrowing into his chest. No matter. He sets his alarm and crawls naked into bed.

As he lies there on his side, he lets his fingers wrap tightly around his cross. Right now, he has no other guide and no other source of reassurance. Despite the near certainty that it's nothing more than a molded piece of metal, it somehow possesses the power to soothe his nerves. It really shouldn't. His great-aunt is dead. Even if there were a Heaven, humans don't become angels when they're received at the gates. The guardian angel he was promised could never be her. And he grew apart from God so quickly, any guardian that might have been appointed would have been revoked decades ago. He's alone. Completely alone.

Soon, he drifts into unconsciousness, toward a night of dark dreams doomed to be forgotten after waking — then inevitably revisited the next time he sleeps.

## Chapter End Notes

This chapter was uniquely difficult to get through, taking me well over a year. I wish I could say precisely why. The disruption in writing environment as a result of changing abodes (moving from an overcrowded house where I at least had my own room, to a rather small apartment where I do not) played at least some role. In addition, hitting the correct emotional notes while Akira is in a state of such violent transition was exceptionally challenging, and required many false starts to get right. I'm not sure what

else to say, aside from, “Thank heathens that’s over with.” (Until the second draft, anyway!)

## End Notes

The basic backbone of *Crying Man* (CM) originated back in fall of 2005 or thereabouts, and within the following two years that seedling matured into fully recognizable form. All manner of notes and disembodied scenes piled up between then and March 2015, when I finally started undertaking what is, for all intents and purposes, the first actual draft of the story. Only once I write my way completely from one end of CM to the other will I start entertaining the idea of serious revisions, so until then expect needless verbosity and repetition, stylistic inconsistency, “early installment weirdness”, and so forth.

The opening (pre-ARQA) movements of CM were first posted to the EvaGeeks.org forum. Early chapters were very short and untitled, but, as I found my feet, they became increasingly long (30 pages in Word is typical) and a titling convention began. This discrepancy is corrected in the AO3 port, with the first six chapters being compressed into two.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!