

When Ann returned home, to a house with no lights on, the first thing she did was send Shiho a few texts. Every part of her was exhausted, her heart was in pain, and even though she'd been doing almost nothing but think about how things had ended between them the other day, it still hurt. What she really wanted to do was hear her voice as soon as possible, and to promise that things would be alright; that a solution was on its way, that they just needed to hold on a little longer, and that if Shiho needed her to be there, she would.

But pushing too hard right now might end up having the complete opposite effect, and that was a risk that she just couldn't take. So the TV was flicked on, and a few more lights, just so she wasn't sitting in the dark, and there was more than the occasional ringing in her ears. Her eyes flicked back to the phone every minute, even if, obviously, she would hear it ding before seeing whatever the message might have been.

A call! Ann answered, and the words exploded out:

"Shiho, listen, I--!" But, it wasn't her.

"Ann-chan," it was *Kamoshida*. "I've been trying to get in touch all day. Any reason you haven't picked up yet? There's some news I've been meaning to share."

Fire filled her. If Ann opened her mouth, she knew exactly what she'd say to the *sick fuck*, but...

How is he best manipulated? Carmen's thoughts were calmer than her own. There were too many ways for it all to go wrong, and all because of that *prick*. Ann hung up. Kamoshida tried calling back, but she denied the call and then blocked his number. It almost made her feel better.

There just wasn't enough *time*. She had to get to Shiho before Kamoshida did. Even if Shiho blamed her for losing her position, anything was better than...

Ann tried calling her. It went to voicemail.

"Shiho, it's Ann, please pick up as soon as you can, I need to talk to you. I'm-- I'm sorry about earlier, just, *please* call me back. This is important, I promise."

The feeling in her stomach was unreal. Waiting took too long. She called again. Voicemail.

"Hey, I know things are hard, I..." *What do I say? What does she want to hear? What does she need to hear?* "...I don't know if you're listening to these, but if you are, please, I promise I'm going to make this all right soon, okay? I mean it, I-- I swear. *Please*, call me back, okay? I I--" The word was too hard to say. "*I'll* see you tomorrow."

Ann tossed the phone across from her on the couch, and cried. The TV may as well have been static. The house was cold, and big, and so empty. The flame in her tapered, even as Carmen's voice filled her head again.

They are your tears to cry, she spoke into the silence. I will not interrupt. When you are finished, we will act again.

"I'm just..." Ann hiccupped. "I'm wasting time crying, aren't I?"

There's no such thing as wasted tears. Not for one such as her. We will act again.

There was so much strength in her words. It turned reassurance into certainty, and allowed her to cry without guilt or shame. Everything came out so much easier, knowing it was only temporary. Later, with a snuffle, Ann looked up. "Right. I can still do more. I'm not the only one who cares."

Ryuji's number hadn't changed since he'd first gotten a phone. The other blond picked up on the first ring. "Ann? What's up, everything okay?"

God, it was stupid, the way she'd let anything get in the way of being able to hear him fussing over her again. "I will be. I can't reach Shiho, and... I don't think she's going to call back, but. But I know she'll be at school tomorrow, so I wanna make sure one of us sees her in the morning. Before *he* does."

"Ah, yeah, good idea," there was the sound of shifting as he moved around. "Hang on, I'll set my alarm." And then a pause, where it was just his breathing. It was reassuring, in a weird way. "Things'll work out, y'know?"

"I know. Thanks." She smiled, sure that he could tell somehow. "I'll message you later." They hung up. One more person to call.

Akiza's number was new to her. Actually, outside of school and that other place, there was a lot she didn't know about the other girl. When this was over, she'd have to fix that. The phone rang, and Akiza picked up without much wait. The conversation between them went mostly the same as it had with Ryuji, until the end. Akiza clicked her tongue.

"Hey, Ann. About what happened yesterday with Suzui."

Ann's grip tightened some, before forcing herself to relax. "Mhm?"

"It... It sucks, but, it's not any of our faults. I ended up talking to Ryuji about it earlier." It sort of sounded like there was more the other girl wanted to say, but her words kept stopping before they really started. "I want to say more, but for once, I don't think I know how. I guess... I'm just

glad to have had a chance to change all this. Maybe that's a lot to say over the phone this late, but... haha. I don't know."

"No, I get it," Ann sprawled out across the couch, tucking a pillow under her chin. "I mean, it's hard to even think about what things would be like if I couldn't do anything at all. Or... if I hadn't asked you to help a few days ago. God, it's been less than a week since then." She laughed, Akiza did too. It wasn't really all that funny though. "I'm glad to have met you too."

"... Thanks." The pause then had been so long, Ann was afraid she'd said the wrong thing. "I'm worried about the way Kamoshida was acting in there."

"And... the 'news'." Ann followed. "He called me, actually. I didn't mean to pick up, but he started to say something about it then, too."

"Probably best not to worry about it," Akiza said a little fast. "That part's out of our hands. We just have to find Suzui first."

"Right."

There was a tiny, higher voice on the other line.

"That's Ann, right?"

Morgana, of course. Would she have to worry about him overhearing *all* of their phone conversations? Cats had good hearing, after all. Akiza confirmed. "Yeah, that's her."

The cat's voice was suddenly much closer, close enough that she had to hold the phone away from her ear. He took on the sort of tone he'd used in the castle. "Hey! Try to get some good sleep tonight, Panther. Tomorrow we can start making good on everything I learned today."

Ann snorted. "Okay, Mona. Thanks. You too."

"You're welcome!"

Akiza spoke again. "I should probably head to bed too. Try not to stay up too late."

It wasn't the same kind of reassurance Morgana had given. Ann wondered how late Akiza would be up tonight as well. "Yeah, alright. You too."

The call ended, and all of them traded a few texts about where they'd be stationed tomorrow morning. Ann went to bed hoping everything would be alright.

It had to work.

4/15

The early morning was cold and miserable; the overcast weather didn't want to quit, and none of them had caught even a hint of her. Asking around, checking, it was sounding more and more like Shiho hadn't shown up at all today.

It didn't work.

"She's probably just at home," Akiza was quick to reassure. It did nothing to help settle her. Ann did take *some* relief, though, when Ryuji offered to check by her home, skipping school to do so. He'd be back not long after lunch was over, but in the mean-time, Ann had failed to listen out for anything else.

*'Bad news' came the text from Ryuji.
'Her mom said she never came back
N that Shiho was spending the night with you
Don't think it's a lie either
Sounded really worried after I asked
Gonna ask around some more before heading back'*

Ann shot Shiho one last text.

*'hey, ive been looking for you
all i need to know is that youre okay
just. send me anything.
i care about you so much'*

It wasn't until immediately after lunch that it happened.

A boy from the front stood up, able to see outside through another set of windows. "Hey... what's that?"

The girl behind her shouted. "Wait, she's going to jump!"

"Suzui?" Mishima gasped.

Ann was up before the teacher could finish whatever he was saying, breaking past the door to look outside. Shiho was on the roof opposite them, perched on the lip of the building, holding onto the fence with both hands. Fear made her freeze, before she willed her body to move. To *run*.

Her steps hammered through, pushing aside anyone who got in the way, running, *sprinting*, heart beating out of her chest, tears already pulling themselves from her eyes.

No. No no no no no

At the stairs a teacher held his arms out, trying to get ahold of the situation. There were only a few other students there, one of which was the student council president making some kind of lukewarm attempt to talk her way through. Rushing forward, the teacher was forced to try and stop Ann physically, but she managed to wiggle past the narrow gap and bust through the door and land on her knees, panting her lungs out.

“Shiho!” She managed anyways, wishing with everything that she had enough for more.

Miraculously, Shiho was still there, clinging to the fence with only one hand and looking unsteady. The teacher shouted for her to return, but didn’t come out himself. The dark-haired girl looked back. “Ann?” It was so quiet over the pounding terror in her skull.

“Shho, I’m here, I--” she ran out of breath again. *Damn it!*

The other girl’s eyes snapped forward, to something that wasn’t her, and wasn’t the courtyard beneath. Wind beat against both of them. Every movement of Shiho’s clothes, the way her legs were bent in slightly, like standing all the way was impossible - it hurt so much more now.

“Shiho,” Ann tried again, after as many seconds as she dared to wait. “Please, just, hold on, okay? I’ll help you climb back over, and--”

“No!” Shiho’s voice was cracked and shrill. “I can’t go b-back! W-won’t go back, I--” It was impossible to really hear, but Ann could see the way her best friend’s chest was heaving, panicked. Every step closer brought more detail into focus; the red lines that had been dug into Shiho’s fingers and palms, gripping themselves, and squeezing the fence. “Dragging down. D-down. Shouldn’t... shouldn’t ha-have to d-deal with m--” Shiho swallowed. “With *him*.”

“I’m here, though!” A thousand things fought for room in her head at once, and every word that tumbled out felt impossibly wrong, but she couldn’t just say *nothing*. “I’m here anyways, because I-- because we deserve to be happy, an-and, I’m not leaving until you’re here with me!”

Shiho shuddered, leaning a little harder to one side. Her foot slid forward, closer to the edge to catch herself, and Ann barely managed to stifle a scream. The other girl’s tone dipped further. “C-can’t fix it. Ka... Kamo-- *he* already... he already...”

There was a new bruise on the right side of Shiho’s face. Still, the other girl was hanging onto the fence, white-knuckled. Ann’s arms felt disconnected, like they belonged to another person, but she reached out as the distance was finally closed, and brushed fingertips against the fabric of Shiho’s sweater. No reaction, so with her right hand she squeezed the solid mass of Shiho’s

right shoulder, unable to reach any farther. “Don’t think about that right now.” Ann’s left hand moved in a way Shiho would know was coming, and intertwined their fingers. She was so cold. Why was she so *cold*? “Just... come back to me. Please. I’ll make this right. I’ll... it’ll be okay.”

There were so many people in the courtyard now, Ann could see. It was unreal, the way the whispers carried, so indistinct and still damning at the same time. Shiho looked back again, with an expression Ann knew would never leave her mind. Tear-streaked and shaking, it took a minute for the sobs to become audible. Ann squeezed her shoulder tighter, hanging on with everything.

“It’ll be okay,” Ann whispered, burying her head against the metal that divided them. “Please, come back. *Please*.”

Shiho shook her head. “Ann... I can’t... I can’t *take it anymore*.”

“You don’t have to. We don’t have to. I’m here.”

“I’m so scared.”

“I know. It’s okay. I’m here. I’m here.”

“We’re so high up.”

“I’ll help you over.”

Shiho’s expression was twisted in so many ways, in grief, and terror, while they kept eye contact, before it started to slowly melt into something like disbelief. There was a connection Ann might have been able to trace, if she could think about anything but getting her back. The dark-haired girl’s lips became a fine line, before the corner of her mouth twitched sadly up. “I... I don’t want to miss you.”

It was weird, the way those words made her manage to smile some too. “You don’t have to. I’ll be here, with you.”

“... Pull me over?”

“Of course.”

The entire process was just as nerve-racking as walking up had been, but neither of them wanted to wait however long it would take for someone else to help. Ann clambered to the top, using the midway bar, and managed to pull Shiho back with both hands. Having to leverage her own weight ended up sending them tumbling back to the rooftop, but they were safe. Shiho was safe.

Crumpled to the ground, the fall, or being safe, or whatever it was, set the dark-haired girl off again. Shiho sobbed and sobbed and sobbed, arms wrapped around Ann's waist. Ann pulled off her hoodie and draped it around the girl, laying an arm on Shiho's back as gently as possible, the other threading through her hair. The motion gave her a brief window to look around, and she spotted Shiho's backpack tucked away on one side of the rooftop entrance, almost completely hidden away.

"I'm so sorry." Shiho croaked. "I was so stupid, I'm sorry."

Ann spoke in the gap, trying to get her to stop. "You're not stupid. This isn't your fault. It's..." It was only *one* person's fault. The rage tapered down, simmering beneath her skin.

Later.

"I was so s-scared," Shiho continued. "I didn't know where to go. I-I wanted you to hate me, so it'd be easier. Couldn't go home. Couldn't--"

Ann tried to hush her again, brushing dark, bedraggled hair from Shiho's face, and tried not to flinch at the tenderness of her skin. The other girl's sobs began to quiet, until becoming silent. Ann shifted her, and found that Shiho had fallen asleep.

"...Get some rest. I'll see you soon."

A pair of weighty steps could be heard, and movement from the corner of her eye brought Ann's gaze away from Shiho's frail form. Principal Kobayakawa had trundled up the stairs, the other teacher that had been staring so far stepping aside to allow two paramedics with a stretcher up as well. The large man drew himself up and spoke.

"We'll be taking Suzui off your hands, Takamaki." He offered a business-like smile, the fake sort she saw at shoots all the time. Ann opened her mouth to speak, but he bulldozed on. "Not to worry, I will be personally accompanying her to the hospital to ensure she receives the necessary treatment, and will inform her parents as soon as she is deemed fit to see them."

"I'll come with her!" Ann pressed. "She'll need me when she wakes up."

The paramedics looked to her, then the principal, as Ann helped them move Shiho onto the stretcher, letting her keep the hoodie. Kobayakawa shook his head. "No, you will remain at school. As I was not present to witness the events which transpired here, I cannot verify whether or not your presence would be compromising to young Suzui's recovery or mental state." The very idea caused some of the anger Ann had pushed down to surface. There was an edge to his tone now, one that 'important' men always seemed to think was intimidating. "We can suffer no intrusions that might corrupt Suzui's account of what happened today, after all. It's for the best, you understand."

How far would the school go to secure its image? How could they think what had happened today wouldn't escape through other means?

But then... the only thing that mattered to the school was what was official. Whatever came out on paper was the truth, and everything else was deniable; nothing but slander or accusations they had better be prepared to back up with irrefutable evidence.

Your words will hold weight, Ann, but only to the right people.

Rage carried in her eyes, but Carmen was right. This wasn't a fight she could win.

Yet.

Seemingly satisfied with silence, Kobayakawa harrumphed and turned about face, the paramedics already making their way down. He pulled the teacher aside, and she managed to overhear,

"Come here, you fool. We're going to discuss what you've *seen* today."

"Y-yes sir." The teacher blurted, and they were gone.

Ann simmered in it all, taking hold of Shiho's backpack and waiting at the top of the stairs for them to disappear, then moving to where the hall had been made empty, before tearing off in a certain direction. She knew *exactly* who to share her words with.

Akiza was left in the aftermath of Ann's dead sprint from the classroom, voices cluttering her ears. The phone in her pocket vibrated. Ryuji got back a little bit ago, and had no idea why people were starting to crowd around whatever exits they could get to. It wasn't likely they'd be able to help Ann, so she met up with him instead, ducked around a corner at the school's main entrance.

"Dude, what's happening?" Ryuji sputtered.

"It's Suzui-san. She's... up on the roof, outside the fence." Thinking about it again made Akiza's stomach uneasy, and the way Ryuji's eyes shrunk did nothing to alleviate that. She spoke fast, doing her best to burn away any feeling, because now was no time to get caught up in it. "Ann's probably already there. I'm sorry, but I need your help with something else."

"...What else?" He answered, after a pause. They were in the same boat now.

“Earlier, when we were asking around, I noticed Mishima was more nervous than usual. When, what was happening, er, hit the classroom, he bolted too. I wanted to press him later, but...” She looked down a moment. “Anyways, I think he knows something.”

“And now we’re gonna get it outta him.” Ryuji finished, fists already clenched.

She nodded. “Yeah.”

The students that had gathered near the entrance were trying to use the opportunity to leave school, and meeting resistance from whatever faculty had gathered up at the front. From them, a blue-haired boy broke off, running in the opposite direction, nearly tripping. Ryuji, apparently, had spotted Mishima before she did, and was already taking off after him. For a moment, she was afraid they were just chasing some stranger, but as they closed in, there was no mistaking the all-too-recent bruise spilling across one side of his face.

Mishima wasn’t thinking clearly, apparently, because he’d basically cornered himself running into a supply closet. The same supply closet Ann and her had questioned Shiho in, Akiza realized bitterly. Ryuji and Akiza were already blocking his escape when he turned around to face them, and looked more than a little surprised.

“What do you know?” Akiza cut straight to the point, trying to stay level. There was no telling what Mishima had been through either. He floundered, looking around.

“Wh-what do you mean?”

Ryuji’s fist slammed against a nearby locker. “You know exactly what the hell we mean! Come on, man, spill it!”

“I...” Mishima swallowed, one arm holding the other. “I don’t know what he did. N-not exactly.” There was no need to clarify who ‘he’ was. Ryuji ended up stamping a foot forward, before his expression eased some, and it was clear the intensity wasn’t directed at Mishima anymore. “He... h-he told me to send her to the PE faculty office yesterday, after practice. That’s all I know.”

Biting her cheek, it was starting to become impossible to keep her distance from it all. Rapid footsteps hammering closer caused the three of them to turn around, and seeing Ann *sprint* past the door with an expression that radiated pure hatred set Akiza back to where she’d been before meeting Ryuji. Panicked.

She bolted after the other girl, following in the wake Ann left behind. From the sounds of it, Ryuji and Mishima had started following after, on a delay. It wasn’t until they started approaching the PE faculty office, however, that Akiza began to understand what was about to happen.

“What did you *DO* to her!?”

Ann's voice was torn and ragged. Akiza entered Kamoshida's office behind her, and could finally see the tear tracks that had run down the blonde's face. Kamoshida stopped whatever he was writing, but didn't turn to face them.

"And what exactly is this about? I hope you have a good explanation for barging into my office like this, Ann-chan."

"Don't you *dare* give me that 'Ann-chan' bullshit! *She almost killed herself!* Do you really think you're gonna get away with this!?"

Akiza felt the pieces click into place. Julie *burned* just beneath her skin.

Oh, god, no...

The sound of sneakers skidding on tile broke the moment of silence that hung in the air like a carcass, Ryuji and Mishima thundering into the room behind her. Kamoshida finally looked over to the door, scowl evident on his face as he rose to his full height.

"*More* of you brats now? Just what evidence do you think you have against me?" Arms folded across his chest, his scowl morphed into a smirk, mirroring the arrogance of the King. To Akiza's shock, it was Mishima who spoke up.

"Suzui will testify! A-and so will I!" Mishima's hands, clenched into fists so tight they shook, hung stiff at his sides. "After everything you put her through, put *all of us* through, once we testify, so will the others!"

"Oh yeah? You and what attorney, hm? Who exactly do you think would believe such *ridiculous* claims?" Kamoshida was *laughing* at them now, goddamn him. "Besides, I wouldn't count on testimony from her anyways. Last I heard, Principal Kobayakawa is taking it upon himself to make sure her account is accurate, the saint."

Akiza swore she could hear Ann's teeth grind together in fury before she spoke. "My parents will get a lawyer! You think they won't have something to say when I tell them how *friendly* you've been with me?"

Another chuckle from Kamoshida. "Oh, I can't wait to tell them all about this," he sneered. "You see, Mr. and Mrs. Takamaki, Suzui-san just couldn't perform to the team's standards anymore, and it seems your daughter wanted to take it out on me. I'm *terribly* sorry that you had to come back from overseas to deal with this. We'll be recommending counselling for Ann, she must be so distraught after what happened to Suzui. We were *all* so--"

"Shut the *FUCK* up!"

Ryuji's hand slammed into the wall beside the door, thankfully silencing Kamoshida for the moment. Ann stood frozen while he continued. "The way you talk makes me goddamn *sick*, you creep! What makes you think you can just do whatever you want to fuckin' high school kids, huh!?"

Kamoshida sighed. "Oh, Sakamoto. Do we need to have another case of 'self-defense'?"

Akiza barely thought to put a hand on Ryuji's shoulder before he growled, taking a step forward. True, they could probably all do something together, but it wouldn't help. Not *here* anyways. At that, the giant of a man's face split into a wicked grin.

"Ah, what a shame. Maybe it would have been your other leg this time. Not like you're using them for anything, anyways."

Akiza used her spare hand to slip the phone out from her bag, wagging it confidently, to Kamoshida's refreshed annoyance. "Luckily for *us*, we don't need anything like that, *or* Ann's parents. I set my phone to record before we came in, and it backs up to the cloud automatically. We can just go straight to the cops." Somehow, the anger and exhaustion that had been cycling through nonstop since last night made it even easier to keep her poker face. It was a total bluff, of course; even if she had been recording him, nothing he'd said was concrete, and Akiza wasn't sure any of it was admissible. But it was better than nothing.

At least, she thought so, until Kamoshida started laughing again.

"Ah, right, the criminal transfer student. I'm sure the police would *love* to hear from a delinquent with a record. Especially with all those *rumors* going around, who knows what you did that got you sent here? Though, you'd know all about that, wouldn't you, Mishima?" The teacher took a step forward, and Akiza fought to stand her ground as he looked over her shoulder. "After all, it was you who leaked the record to the student body."

Akiza froze.

What...?

"Th-that's... but-- you made me...!" Akiza heard Mishima's shoes scuffing the floor behind her, stumbling like he was about to fall over. "You gave me no choice! Y-you said I had to, or you'd throw me off the team!"

"Did I now? I don't remember anything like that. Even if I did, though, it doesn't change what *you've* done. Following through would mean you buried the transfer student's reputation just to save your own skin." Another step forward, and Akiza couldn't help taking a step back. "And guess what? I found something out yesterday. You left a *very* interesting detail out of your little leak, Mishima."

His gaze swiveled to Akiza, and her blood turned to ice. Even Julie's frothing anger halted, and the rest of the world grew muffled.

He can't--

No--

Please--

"Your friend here has been hiding something from you," he said, and every pair of eyes that turned to her pierced her like knives, pinning her between their gazes. Akiza felt *exposed*, willing her heart to start beating again, to wake up from this horrible nightmare, back at home with her parents where this wasn't about to happen--

"You see, Principal Kobayakawa shared some information with me about Kurusu, here. It was supposed to be kept under wraps, apparently, but he and I are so close that I guess he couldn't help but share."

"Please," she whispered, feeling tears prick at the corner of her eyes. Did she just let her voice drop? She couldn't tell, everything was so muffled, everything but his voice--

No, no, stop, please, I'LL DO ANYTHING--

"You see, your friend Kurusu here is actually a boy."

Glass shattered somewhere in Akiza's heart.

"His parents apparently made a sizable donation to the school, on the condition that he be allowed to attend as a girl. I can only imagine he's getting off to it, or something like that. I wish I'd known before I offered up the volleyball team. I'm just not into crossdressers, Kurusu. Sorry to disappoint you."

Akiza stepped back, saved from falling by the wall behind her as her bag thudded to the floor. Something awful crawled out of the hole in her heart, black and clawing, gouging where the glass had already shattered as he turned away from them, waving a hand dismissively.

"Everyone present here will be expelled at the next board meeting." He took his seat again, returning to his paperwork. "This is what happens when you choose to defy me. Enjoy the last three weeks of your freedom."

Akiza turned and ran, bolted from the room as his laughter chased her down the hallway. The blackness in her heart clawed higher.

Feet hit pavement, and Akiza flew out the front door of Shujin hall and down the steps, blowing past people and not able to hear whatever was shouted at her from behind. Only raw, heart-wrenching emotion was washing over her, chasing away everything else while she ran. By the time she'd started to become aware enough of her surroundings again, she was sitting on the ground in an alleyway she didn't recognize, hugging her legs to her chest and letting the tears flow freely.

This was the end of everything. Everything she'd hoped and dreamed about since she was told she'd be going to Tokyo, midnight prayers for a new start, for a clean slate, for the ability to live without fear. All snatched away in an instant.

Regret tasted like bile in her mouth.

Kamoshida would probably force Mishima to leak her identity to the rest of the school. Ryuji and Ann wouldn't want anything to do with her, obviously. Morgana wouldn't trust her with his fate, let alone even the simplest of things after that. Oh god, she'd still have to sit behind Ann in class, wouldn't she? Stuck behind Ann, the incarnation of everything Akiza could never be, taunting her from two feet in front of her face. Akiza's grip on her legs tightened, threatening to rip ladders into her tights.

Her tights. Her school uniform.

Crossdressing freak getting off on this tranny femboy stop it stop it STOP IT--

Julie's wings settled over her again, and the sobbing quieted just slightly.

Do you truly think so little of them, chérie?

Right. Akiza was stuck with Julie in her head now. Couldn't even be free to cry in peace, apparently.

Mon coeur, please. Talk to me.

Why? I thought you said you were me. Don't you already know what I'm thinking?

Perhaps. But as much as I am you, you are me. And I know that they will not leave you in your hour of need. You made a pact with them, an unshakeable bond shared between the downtrodden. Would you not go to them, were your roles reversed?

Of course she would. In an instant, in half a heartbeat, she would be by Ann's side, there to lend Ryuji a hand, there to share their burdens. Maybe Julie was right. But, if she was...

...why didn't it feel that way?

“...iza? Akiza? Where’d you go!”

The dark-haired girl snapped upright, turning towards the end of the alleyway.

Ryuji...?

The thudding of sneakers on asphalt echoed through the dense passageway as the blond rounded the corner, casting his gaze around before his eyes landed on her trembling form, half-hidden in shadow.

“Ann! Mishima! I found her!” He called out over his shoulder before turning back to her, approaching slowly, as if afraid he might scare her off like a skittish animal. “Hey, uh... You kinda ran off.”

She stared at him, unable to form words. Suddenly, Julie’s wings pulled back, leaving her feeling exposed and vulnerable all over again. Desperately, she willed for their return, the way they’d been there only a day ago on the roof while she was alone. They didn’t come.

Ryuji sighed, scratching the back of his head and squatting down in front of her. He let out a hiss as he lowered himself and stretched his calf out.

He got hurt because of me, thought part of Akiza.

He ran through the pain for me, thought another part.

“Sorry, I’m, uh... Listen, I know what it’s like for Kamoshida to throw shit like that at ya. Well, I mean, not *exactly* that, but...” He chewed his lower lip a moment, looking away, before meeting her gaze. “We got worried about you.”

“Oh thank god, Akiza!” Ann dashed towards them as she rounded the corner, dropping to her knees and throwing her arms around the dark-haired girl Akiza’s eyes snapped open, shell-shocked at her touch.

She’s so warm...

For just a moment, Ann’s fingers threaded through Akiza’s dark curls, and she felt herself go nearly boneless against the other girl, choked sobs wracking her frame again. Distantly, she was aware of more footsteps as Mishima approached, and the patter of paws indicated Morgana. Ann leaned back after a moment, keeping a tight grip on Akiza’s hand.

“I’m sorry, I... we got so worried after Kamoshida said all that stuff, and you looked so scared, and...” Ann sniffed, having to look away for a moment, and it only occurred to Akiza then that

she'd forced Ann to go through something like this twice in one day. The blonde tucked a pigtail over one of her shoulders, concern creased across her face. "I'm so sorry he said all that."

Morgana butted his head against Akiza's shin, curling up against her foot and staying quiet, but his eyes said plenty anyways. Her free hand found his back, and the gentle rumble of his purrs helped her find some comfort.

"You guys--" She cut herself off with a hacking cough, the sound of her old voice assaulting her eardrums like gunfire as she fought to correct it. "You guys aren't mad?" There, properly this time.

"What? No! Why would we be?" Ryuji spoke up across from her, and she looked between him, Ann, Morgana, and Mishima, who stood back a bit, refusing to meet her gaze.

"Because I... Because I'm not..." Akiza trailed off as another hoarse cry shook her.

Just a boy pretending.

Ann and Ryuji shared a glance as Akiza pushed her glasses up onto her forehead, wiping her eyes with a free sleeve. Concealer stained her cuff, laying the dark circles under her eyes bare.

"We're not mad, Akiza. Just... surprised, I guess? We had no idea..." Ann gave her hand a reassuring squeeze, and Ryuji reached out to take the other one.

"If you wanna talk, we can, like, go somewhere that's not an alleyway." To Ryuji's eternal credit, that comment actually pulled a little choked laugh from Akiza. She tightened her grips on their hands, grounding herself in the sensation of touch, as if she would sink back down without them to pull her up.

"...I know where we can go."

They made the train journey in near silence, Akiza refusing to let go of Ann and Ryuji's hands except to swipe her train pass. Mishima had trailed behind them, remaining silent.

Akiza reluctantly released their hands as they approached Leblanc, and a quick peek through the windows revealed the cafe to be mercifully empty. She took a deep breath, pushing open the door. Sojiro's gaze swept over to them, brow furrowing.

"What, did you bring your friends over..." His eyes widened as he took in her appearance, disheveled and clearly just done with crying. Akiza's eyes were still red and puffy, and she was visibly shaking like a leaf. "...Kid, what happened?"

"I..." Her voice was still hoarse, and Sojiro shook his head as he pointed to one of the empty booths.

"Go, sit. I'll get you kids some coffee and close up." As the students awkwardly shuffled over, Sojiro laid a hand gently on Akiza's shoulder. It didn't feel at all like Kamoshida's had. Sojiro's voice was low, dark eyes roiling with worry. "Do I need to expect anyone else?"

Akiza shook her head.

"Alright. Tell me later, okay?"

It took her a few seconds to nod, surprised to find herself actually happy about that prospect.

She sidled into the booth next to Ryuji, across from Mishima and Ann, as Sojiro set four steaming cups of coffee on the table. He locked the door behind him as he left, and a weighty silence fell over the four teenagers.

Akiza's hand found Ryuji's almost automatically, twining their fingers together. He blushed at that, bouncing one leg restlessly and looking away. She smiled just a little as she grabbed for her mug, noting that his hand felt just as warm as the coffee.

Mishima was the one to break the silence.

"I'm sorry," he said, staring intently into his cup with a pained expression. "I shouldn't have leaked your record. I was so afraid of Kamoshida that I..."

"He made you do it," Akiza interrupted, finding her voice. "It's not your fault. He threatened you."

"It is my fault, though!" Mishima's own voice nearly cracked at the end of his exclamation, hand tightening around his cup. "I should've done something. I just let him push me around like... like..." He trailed off, and Ryuji piped up.

"Listen, man. Y'ain't gotta kick yourself around like this. We all know the spot he put you in. You're not a coward for tryin' to keep yourself safe." Mishima looked up, meeting Ryuji's gaze with apologetic eyes. He shook his head and smiled lightly, nodding. Akiza spoke up next.

"You could've leaked the... other info about me, but you didn't." Akiza still found herself talking awkwardly around the truth. "That shows a lot more about you than the other stuff. That means a lot to me, Mishima." She gave a grateful smile, and he scratched the back of his head.

"R-right. I just... well, I thought I could be okay if I just put out some of your record..." he deflected some, apparently still uncomfortable with the idea for now. That was fine. He'd figure out who to blame soon, Akiza had no doubts. "...I didn't want you to have to deal with *that* too."

“...I should probably explain that then, huh?” The dark-haired girl bit her lip, taking a deep breath to steady herself, and another sip of coffee. Ryuji squeezed her hand, and Morgana moved from her side to curling up in her lap.

“Not if you don’t want to.” Ann cut in before she could speak. “Don’t feel like you have to do *anything* just because of what he said. It doesn’t change anything between us.”

Akiza did smile at that. It still wasn’t a full smile, but it was very real. “Thanks, but. I want to anyways. I want you to... understand, I guess.”

She let the rest come after a bit of processing.

“I... wasn’t born a girl. I was a boy for a long time, until the end of elementary school.” The words felt thick and heavy coming out of her, like she was trying to jam a square peg through a round hole. “That’s when I started to get an idea what the awful feeling I had might be. I wanted to be a Sailor Scout for Halloween, and my mom got me a Tuxedo Mask costume instead. I cried for hours, and I had no idea why. After that, I started to figure it out.”

The others looked on in silence, without a shred of judgement. She took another sip, and the warmth made it easier to keep going.

“Lots of days, I would look at myself in the mirror and feel like I’d gotten punched in the gut. I still have days like that sometimes. I didn’t have anybody that I could talk to about something like that. My parents and I weren’t close, even then, and in a backwater country town like the one I grew up in, there wasn’t exactly a therapist or anything I could turn to. I was already getting bullied for being the scrawny kid with glasses, how was I supposed to tell anybody that I secretly wanted to be a girl?”

“God, that’s awful.” Ann’s expression was somewhere between sorrowful and furious.

“The community for... people like me isn’t very big in Japan, at least not compared to some other places. I focused really hard on learning English just so I could talk to other people like me, to find out what they did about it, what I could do to make myself feel better. I found out that there’s, like, medical treatments for this kind of thing. I couldn’t get a doctor’s approval for it without my parents finding out so about a year ago I started buying the medicine secondhand from the internet and doing it myself.” From the corners of her eyes, she saw the others’ faces scrunch up in concern.

“Wait, you were like, self-medicating?” Ryuji’s worry was plain to hear. “That’s like, super dangerous. People get super sick doing that with vitamin supplements and stuff.”

Akiza laughed bitterly. “It’s not so bad for these meds. I don’t have any of the conditions that make them risky. Besides, it’s either danger from that or stop looking at myself in mirrors.” She

gestured to herself. "They're how I look like this. Girlish enough to pass at a glance. Sometimes the meds make me sick if I mess the doses up, but it's never that bad."

"So, what, there's just guides on the internet for how to do this?" Mishima spoke up, more curious than outright skeptical.

"Sorta," she answered. "Lots of people do it, so I got some advice from the internet. I had it mostly figured out within a couple months. It's slow going, but... I'd rather have it than not."

There was a pause, full of quiet and laced with awkward tension. Akiza didn't blame them. What were you supposed to say to something like this?

"So, when you moved to Tokyo... Shujin let you enroll as a girl?" Ryuji was the one to break the silence.

"Yeah. My parents found my meds and I had to come out to them right before I got arrested. They paid Shujin a bunch of money to let me come as a girl so I wouldn't make a fuss." She took another sip of coffee. *God, this needs cream.* "Not the most loving of parting gifts, but I'll take it." She smiled bitterly and the silence returned, albeit more comfortably this time, as she added some milk and sweetness to her drink.

"Thanks." Ann said, prompting her to look back up. "For telling us, I mean. It must have been scary." After the thoughts she'd had in the alley, and everything Ann had said so far, Akiza didn't expect to be able to meet Ann's gaze. Crystal blue pierced her in a way she didn't know how to explain, and filled her with an emotion that was unfamiliar; unparsable and strangely raw. All she knew for sure is that, whatever it was, she preferred it vastly over the emptiness that had been there before. Ann pressed a hand across her heart. "I don't know if I understand it all, not the way you do, but I want to be here for you."

"Yeah, that goes for me too." Ryuji chimed in, and Mishima echoed the sentiment. Even Morgana let out an agreeable meow, nuzzling his head against her stomach.

"You... you're okay with it? You still want to be friends?"

"Well, duh! Of course!" Ryuji grinned, withdrawing his hand from hers and throwing his arm across her shoulders. "We got a job to do, and there's no way we'd just drop ya like that. You're our friend." His expression changed on a dime, to a familiar sort of concern.

Ann nodded, and Mishima, after a pause, followed suit, allowing himself a smile too.

*Your friends. **My** friends.*

They know, and they don't care. They still like me.

Akiza let out a sharp laugh, pulling her glasses off. Her tears started to flow, and Ryuji panicked briefly.

“Oh shit, uh, are you okay, did I do somethin’ wrong?” His arm retreated, but Akiza only started to laugh harder, leaning against him and shaking her head. He blushed again as she rested her head on his shoulder.

“No, never. I’m just...” She sniffed, wiping her eyes with a smile. “I’m just glad I met you guys.”

Mishima had been the first to leave, excusing himself and leaving a few yen on the table for the coffee that he didn’t drink. Akiza and the others had discussed some more about their mission, now that they had a hard time limit of three weeks. Today had been a wash, and they decided to take Saturday off as well, to rest and recuperate from the day’s ordeals. They’d parted ways after a conversation about finding a doctor, and a promise from Akiza to follow through.

Sojiro, seeing how drained Akiza looked, didn’t press her yet, instead allowing her to take a much-needed shower before she returned to the attic. Morgana sat perched atop the work desk, watching as Akiza brushed her hair before bed.

“Hey.” His voice was softer than she was used to hearing. “I, um. I didn’t speak up earlier because I didn’t want any of you to respond to me in front of Mishima, but I’m in the same boat as Ann and Ryuji.” His tail swished with uncertainty, and Akiza gave a little half-smile.

“It’s okay, I got the message. It means just as much from you as it does from the others.” Akiza truly meant that; despite his feline form, Morgana was just as much a person as any of them, even with his seeming inexperience with humans. “I’m surprised you didn’t pick up on it earlier, to be honest.” He cocked his head at that, hopping down from the desk and trotting over to the bed.

“I don’t know how I could have,” he began. “I don’t really get how humans work in a lot of areas. Anything that might have given you away, I probably thought was normal for a human girl.”

That... was an interesting thought. Morgana not being familiar with humans was one thing, but being broadly unfamiliar with *gender as a concept* wasn’t something Akiza had expected. “I suppose that makes sense. All the same, thanks for not blowing my cover.” She smirked and set the brush down, pulling out her phone to text Ann.

Hey, you left a hair clip here

>img_4-15-2018 sent.

I can give it back in homeroom tomorrow.

“Of course!” Morgana said, scooching over to allow Akiza to climb into bed. “I’d never do something to jeopardize our partnership!” He practically meowed the end of that sentence, puffing up his chest in a frankly adorable manner. Akiza giggled and gave him a scratch between the ears, earning a purr as her phone chimed.

*ohhh, i was wondering where that went lmao
i have a tone of those, dont worry about it*

Akiza toyed with the thing, flipping the little red clip between her fingers. She set it aside for the moment, tapping out another message.

Ok, sure. Have you heard anything about Suzui yet?

*shes stable, they treated her for shock and dehydration when she got there
she hasnt been deemed “not a suicide risk” yet, but they let her keep her phone
so weve been texting
shell be fine
not sure when theyre gonna let her out though
gonna stop by after school*

A tired smile crossed Akiza’s face. Knowing that Shiho would be okay, after being so close to the brink... well. It was a feeling Akiza knew.

*Say hi to her for me!
I’ll keep you two posted on the doctor tomorrow*

*YES OMG GOOD LUCK <3
ok i gotta get to bed, im dead after today
remember me n ryuji r here if u need us for anything at all*

*Yeah, I’ll let you know
Gnight <3*

With a flick of her finger, Akiza closed the messaging app, gaze drawn back to the hair clip beside her. Something about it kept pulling at her attention. She reached over to it, opening up the front-facing camera on her phone. It was a bit awkward with one hand, not really knowing the intricacies of the thing, but after a minute of finagling she managed to get it to sit right, bangs pinned back and out of her face.

Her face, which she’d always thought of as not soft enough, too masculine, too *handsome*. The face that she wore glasses to conceal, even though she had perfectly good contact lenses. The face that she’d grown her bangs out to hide. And here it was, unobscured by glasses or makeup or hair.

A little flicker of a smile crossed Akiza's lips as one hand traced across her cheekbone.

Maybe it wasn't quite so bad after all.

With a click, she locked her phone, setting it down and turning out the light.