

It's pumpkin spice season, and the cafe is bustling and livelier than ever. The boss ordered all hands on deck until further notice, so even though she planned on relaxing in her apartment this morning, watching her favorite shoujo and seinen while drinking warm green milk tea mixed with honey, Kaede is off to work!

Rer life felt like a completely new one after being released from the hospital. There, rie have been miraculously revived and treated after rer supposed death. She doesn't know how, but all that matters is that she's here now.

She remembers watching the killing game being put to an end through a television screen. How powerful and brave everyone's words were, and how they managed to survive in the end. She always knew she could put her trust in Shuichi..and rie couldn't be happier that they're alive and well, along with Himiko and Maki. And if *she* managed to survive her execution, that means everyone else is ok too!

The only issue is, well, she's cut off from everyone. Rie has no way of contacting them, no matter how hard rie try. She could ask around—"*Do you know someone named 'Shuichi Saihara?'*"—only but so many times. But then again, it feels like she *doesn't* deserve to see everyone again. Oh well, it could be worse. So rie continue to live in her apartment, trying to live the best rie can, whilst rewatching childhood shows.

She considered playing the piano again, but the sounds of the notes caused her ears to ring, the keys made her hands tremble, and when mixed into a melody, rer throat felt salty and thick, and rer insides rose within rer, until it all came out. So working as a part time barista will have to do for now, as she has no other talents nor interests.

"A small caramel frappe for 'Reiko!'" Kaede hollered.

A young teenager came up to the counter and took the drink and receipt from rer hands, then walked off with their friends. She brushed her curly strawberry blonde hair away from her face, wiping off a bit of sweat from her brown skin. Who knew working at such a typically calming place would cause so much strain?

Kaede's been in a who-knows-how-long loop of taking orders, making them, and then calling the customers' name so then it'll be served away. Thankfully, it's less overwhelming due to all of rer coworkers being there. She scanned the warm cafe, so when someone came up to her, she could prepare her train of thought for a new order.

However, someone caught her eye.

It was only for a second, but she saw someone from the backside, with dark sea hair, with short, pretty, tight curls. This revealed the person's neck, which was much darker skinned compared to her brown.

Rer mind immediately thought of one thing. It *had* to be—

“Shuichi!?”

The person didn't turn around, but rer legs started walking anyways, around the corner, and nearby the door. The walk turned into a sprint, and before she knew it, she patted the person's back. Maybe he just didn't hear her before? Maybe, just maybe..

The person turned around, and his black colored eyes met hers. Of course, it's something right out of a story. “Oh! Sorry, I thought you were someone else,” and she speedwalked back to her register, embarrassment and disappointment filling up her heart the whole way there.

The rest of the shift was the longest one she ever had, and rie're not sure if its because of the amount of people who apparently *need* a pumpkin spice latte today, or because of rer mind being occupied by that upsetting moment.

Kaede admired Shuichi ever since she first met him that unfortunate day. They were timid, sure, but she felt that hope within them. She liked the warmth in their hands, the politeness in their voice, and how they paid attention and listened to every detail that came to their ears. She would've loved getting to know them more, even for just a little longer. But, with a television screen between them, and with a hard belief that they're never going to meet again, the belief that one of them is long gone...that dream drifted further and further away. Truly, no matter how hard Kaede tried, she couldn't get a hold of any of her new friends. She wonders if it's for the best, maybe this is her actual punishment.

Once all of the customers left, she let out a long and heavy sigh. Rie clocked out, turned the sign to '*Closed!*', and headed her way back to her apartment.

The evening autumn wind sent chills down rer spine. The whole day has just felt so cold and unlucky. Maybe rie should just stop trying to find everyone altogether. What if they're whole new people now? What if they only bring back ghastly memories, like when rie tried to play the piano? Maybe..if rie hadn't sent down that ball, maybe rie wouldn't have been framed. Maybe rie could've survived, and been by everyone's side the whole time. Oh, how she longed for it. But all because of a reckless decision, all of it is taken away now. Everything is *her* fault. *She* put this all on *herself*, and it's only karma that she's all alone now.

The sky turned dark, and she could see her apartment building in the distance. Kaede shivered as the wind blew, she's starting to regret not taking the bus. Her legs are starting to ache too..at least her home is in sight, it shouldn't take too much longer to get there.

A distant soft voice stood out against the quiet night. Rie paid it no mind at first, anyone and everyone talks at night. This is no different. But the more she walked, the more she heard the voice, as if she were getting closer. It seemed like the person was having a phone call, and she had a better grasp on their voice. Masculine, a bit wobbly and breathy, but struck confidence like lightning when needed.

..It can't be. She should just give up already. Rie looked down on the ground and continued her stroll. She's almost home. All of this will be over soon.

"Kaede?" the voice shouted from a distance. Rie must be hallucinating. The voice from the very beginning had to be fake. Rie have to just forget about it all.

"Kaede??" She told herself to just keep walking.

"Kaede!" Why won't they let her ignore them?!

The longer she paid them no mind, the closer the sound of footsteps became. Hope and excitement bubbled up in a part of her, but another told her to ignore it, that her expectations will only continue to be let down, deeper and deeper. She can't have that joy, she shouldn't.

A warm gloved hand contrasted her crisp palm.

"Kaede Akamatsu?"

Rie couldn't afford to turn away anymore. Rie faced the unmistakable look of her old friend, though with some differences. Their loose curls were now long dreads pulled back into a low ponytail, and his eyebags seemed to be lighter. Either that, or his new glasses were blocking a proper view of his eyes. Maybe they haven't cleaned them in a while? Their face was a bit longer, which made sense, since the last time she had seen them, they were only nineteen. He was much more well dressed for the occasion, a sweater, a jacket, jeans, and light gloves, in contrast to Kaede's much looser long sleeved shirt, and shorts that only reached her knees.

..It was a lot to take in, for only about a two year difference.

But what do rie even say? Rie just ignored him for the past few minutes, and quite noticeably too. All because she didn't want to get disappointed again. And it turned out to be the exact person she was hoping for.

"I-it's really you!! I mean—it wasn't hard to notice. But it's so hard to believe! I thought I'd never see you again! I have so many questions, b-but I don't even know where to begin!"

They went on to explain how much they've missed her, how he hoped that rie were alive somehow, and that even though they've managed to go through so much without her, a part of them still felt missing, as if it was ripped out of him. But Kaede couldn't get herself to say anything back. She wanted to tell him how much she missed him, and how proud she was. The mix of that rejoice and pride, but the guilt of avoiding them, of leaving them behind for so long, stirred up within her, rendering her speechless. So then what does she do?

She clasped Shuichi into her arms, and despite her being taller than them, she nuzzled herself into them as deeply as she could. Rer tears ended up in his dreaded hair, and rie sniffled and sobbed into their forehead. They didn't seem to mind though, as they held her back just as tight. Their warmth flooded rhem with relief, the relief of knowing that rie deserves such kindness, despite rer risky actions, and putting everyone in such disarray, even with good intentions. The embrace itself felt selfish, in a way. As if she were demanding forgiveness. A part of her knew it wasn't though, it'll just take time before it becomes whole. One day, she'll manage to forgive herself too.