**Summary**

They'd had time above all else. Time to part, time to grow, time to reunite and start all over again.

However, the question remained; what had they gained, other than a world’s worth of trouble?
Chapter 1

Additional character tags to be added. Rating will go up. Updates will hopefully be semi-regular.

It was dark out, yet still hot, still humid. Parking spots were sparse, and for that reason they'd chosen to meet up within a walking distance from Ibuki's office. It was less a restaurant and more a bar. They served food, but Ibuki hadn't ordered anything to eat. He hadn't ordered much of anything. Non-alcoholic drinks were his only options. Miwa and Kai arrived together, only barely tardy. There'd been a slight miscalculation of the distance between the shop and the station. They saw each other regularly enough, even if Kai wasn't always around. When he was though, he was still often preoccupied, and even when he wasn't he most preferred to spend time at home, with Aichi. As they spoke, Ibuki learned Aichi was away for the week. He was in the states, hosting a seminar, and would return by the weekend.

“How's life treating you? You look well.” Miwa had commented perkily. Ibuki wasn't sure how to take it.

“Miwa...” Disapprovingly, Kai muttered.

“Well, I,” Ibuki considered carefully what to say. “I do try to take care of myself.”

“Well, cheers for that,” Miwa was casual enough about it. The implication served to let Ibuki know his friends worried about him, but also that they noticed when he was not quite as well. It had been a trying last few years for him. Ibuki was in a strange place. Things were starting to catch up with him. He was still quite good at isolating himself, hiding his troubles in plain sight with a stubbornness that was almost childlike. He had his personas, subtle variations of his own self. Some he had adopted completely. They were now part of his own true self. Still, he'd tired. Of himself, of the feeling that he was not yet wholly sincere to others, nor to himself. Things were finally starting to make some sense, in the grand scheme of things. Regardless, all around him he found proof of the things left to be done.

“So? Are you not gonna ask me?” Miwa directed the question to Kai, specifically. “About how my date went?”

“You're about to tell me right now anyway, aren't you?” They'd only had so much time to talk.

Ibuki was a little reluctant to ask. “You had a date?”

“Yeah. It went, uh... not so good.” Miwa was sipping beer with a wry smile on his face. “You know
how some people click? It wasn't really like that.”

With a disconcerting amount of detail, Miwa told his story, and his friends, both unable to relate, listened without interrupting. Kai and Ibuki were like white canvases, Miwa could paint them any story. Well, at least if it was about dating. “So it was only short of an absolute disaster.”

“It sounds to me like you had fun.” Kai indicated he'd either not properly listened, or listened carefully enough to read between the lines.

“At least you are putting yourself out there.” Ibuki's comment, as carefully worded as his disposition allowed, drew Kai and Miwa's gazes. They stared at him.

“So. How are you doing?” Miwa asked, suggestively, and Ibuki felt the four walls of the small establishment close in on him. Kai said nothing. He didn't need to.

Ibuki didn't even have the capacity to be frustrated at his own blunder. His words had escaped him as his mind emptied. Trying not to panic, he knew he had to say something. “I'm... well,” Something more than that. “Preoccupied.” It was such a ridiculous, if banal, excuse but it was all he could manage.

“If you ever need, you know, help, or advice, you could always ask us.” It was not an empty offer Miwa made, Ibuki knew that. He'd still feel skeptical about taking it.

“I... I know.” Now properly embarrassed, Ibuki wanted the conversation to end.

“I mean it, you know?”

Kai grumbled. “I'm sure he knows.” He had less faith in their collective resourcefulness than Miwa had. In reality though, it wasn't as if Ibuki had all that many options.

“I...” Ibuki realized then, that he'd been given a choice. His friends had invited him to speak of himself. His mind raced in search of an answer, and one that could be justified. He was quickly running out of time, as Miwa and Kai watched him. “I'll keep it in mind.” He felt guilty. His friends thought of him, and yet he could not confine in them. He didn't enjoy this development, but right now he had little choice. It'd already been so long, but he wasn't ready. Not yet.

Thankfully, they spoke of other things. Ibuki remained distracted, despite his efforts. When they said goodbye, it'd gotten late. Ibuki hadn't had dinner, and he wasn't used to feeling hungry at this time of night. As he walked back to his car, he had a dawning sort of realization. It was one he'd had before, actually, but it was harder to ignore now, and in time it would be even more so. When he sat down in the driver's seat, it was with a rather heavy sigh. He'd gotten older, and things had changed, but much was still the same old. Kai and Miwa were still the same. As for himself, he was still fighting some of the same battles, despite everything. It was tiring to think of. Once home, he parked the car in the garage, and rode the elevator up to his Shibuya flat, again the very same he'd lived in since he first got his promotion to main branch chief. He unlocked the door and entered carefully. The kitchen as seen from the entrance was dark, but he could smell food. He heard the television, still on.

He could hear the hum from the AC, and turning on only the lights under the kitchen fan, Ibuki peered into the fridge.

“There's leftovers for you. On the top shelf.”

Rice, and stew, in two separate containers. Hungry, Ibuki prepared a plate for himself. It was already approaching bed time, and tired as he was, he only put so much care into preparing his meal.
“Don't microwave them together. The rice'll turn into goop.”

Ibuki had already put the rice on his plate. Oh. Well, there wasn't much he could do about it now. As the microwave whirred he took his pants off, liberated, and put them in laundry basket in the washroom. Once in the living room with his plate of food, he ate by the coffee table. Idly watching TV, the late night variety ended, replaced by commercials, followed by news.

“I'm surprised you're still up.” He commented.

Coming to a sitting, Chrono's face revealed itself as the heavy textbook slid down to his chest. He looked beyond tired. “Astrophysics are kicking my ass.”

“I'm certain you'll do fine,” Ibuki felt his encouragement could be more, do more. “You already took the exam once, right?”

It was summer. Exams were being retaken before the start of the new semester. “It's... probably best I don't think too hard about it right now. I'm tired. Nothing good'll come out of it.”

Ibuki knew how hard Chrono was trying. That made it hard to see him struggle to have faith in himself. “If you fail your classes you can always come back to work.” It was a joke, delivered dryly.

“Oh wouldn't you love that,” Chrono didn't sound too displeased at the idea. In reality, any divergence from the norm would be punished by conventional employers. What Chrono was going for was anything but conventional, but he still needed every advantage he could get.

“I mean, I'll pass,” Chrono's usual level-headed reasoning shone through. “Probably.”

“...You really didn't have to wait up for me.” Ibuki was a little concerned with how tired Chrono looked.

“I had to study anyways. I got stuff done.” It sounded like an excuse. Ibuki decided not to question him. He was normally so responsible. “Did you have fun?”

“Oh, yes,” Ibuki felt the question uplift him. “It was a good time.”

Chrono was smiling, shaping his own image of the evening Ibuki had spent with his old friends. “You don't exactly look like you came home from a night out.”

Ibuki placed his drinking glass back on the surface of the coffee table. “Thankfully.” He replied lightly.

It was late. It wasn't the time for a heavy or serious conversation. When Chrono rose from the sofa to get ready for bed, Ibuki let him go.

The washroom was a box of light in the dark apartment. Brushing his teeth, Ibuki felt slightly revitalized. He'd longed for bed for a while now, comfortably tired. Chrono came in after him, and in the silence Ibuki heard the dishwasher click, then whir. Undressing to only his underwear and a tee, Chrono put his clothes in the laundry basket, too. It was starting to fill up.

“We can run the washing machine tomorrow,” Ibuki commented as he'd noticed.

“Right... You need anything for the conference?” Chrono kept fairly close tabs on his schedule.

“I... I don't know.” Ibuki sighed. “I still don't know what to wear.”

“Oh, you'll think of something.” Sliding up next to him, Chrono retrieved his toothbrush from the
cabinet, but just as he did, he became distracted. Washing his face, and then brushing his hair, Ibuki was finishing up his routine.

“I know you're busy, but it's been a while...” They looked at one another. “Since we worked out.”

“You can do that without me.” Ibuki commented.

“Oh, I am. And I will,” Unsurprising, Ibuki thought. Chrono took a step back, and with his guard down, Ibuki was not fast enough to react, not until Chrono had leveled himself with his hip, and grabbed him in a vice grip.

With a heave, Ibuki felt his feet lift, floating just above the floor. “Chrono-” Body rigid, with his hand now tightly gripping the cloth on Chrono's shoulder, Ibuki spoke while holding his breath. “Put me down.”

Swinging around, Chrono gave it a few seconds before complying. “Did you get lighter?” He asked, voice clearly strained.

In the mirror, Ibuki saw his height dwindle as he slid down, his arms over Chrono's shoulders. His feet back on the floor, Chrono was now back to being only about half a head shorter than him. He'd gradually gotten stronger since committing to his workout, but it did nothing for his vertical height. A bit ruffled up, Ibuki's gaze lingered on the reflection of the two of them together in the mirror.

“Seriously, though.” Turning the tap water back on, Chrono was now about to brush his teeth. Ibuki listened, his mind buzzing. Chrono had let him go, but he might as well not have. “It's not good to wait too long. You have time this weekend, don't you? We should at least go out running.”

Chrono was right. Ibuki never doubted that. He'd used to work out all the time when he was younger. During his teenage years he'd submerged himself in it, overdone it, and while he'd gained a more healthy attitude towards it as an adult, it'd become harder and harder to find the time for it. Chrono had tried to change that negative trend, and he'd been quite successful.

Ibuki continued brushing his hair, staying behind longer than needed. Chrono finished brushing his teeth, and as he leaned down over the sink to wash himself, Ibuki watched his neck as it became exposed. His mind was still buzzing. Surely it would, for a while. Tonight was a Wednesday night. Tomorrow would be Thursday, then he had the press conference on Friday. The weekend felt far away, but for now, Ibuki accepted that there was nothing he could do about that. In the bedroom, Chrono struggled to get comfortable under the covers. Ibuki fiddled with the remote to the AC. It was August, the hottest month of the year. Setting his wake up alarm, Ibuki laid down in bed. Tired, yet clear of mind, he realized sleep would not come right away. His self-consciousness had floated away. All it took to watch Chrono in the dark was a slight turn of his head. A sense of urgency came to him, strong, almost enough to petrify him. How long would he wait?

Time had passed him by. It frustrated him. At one point, the circumstances had made their choices reasonable. Now, they were becoming harder to justify. They'd spoken of it before, but without even any effort, they were naturally fruitless. They'd made enough excuses. Today, for the first time, Ibuki had felt like he wanted that to change. The silence between them had lasted for a moment long enough for it to be broken.

“Today, I...” Unable to find either heads or tails, Ibuki dove straight in. “When I met with Kai and Miwa, they insinuated that they’d, well,” Laying back to back, Ibuki heard Chrono turn over with the sound of moving sheets. “Help me... meet someone.”

“So?” Chrono didn't sound surprised. He was so easy to talk to in that way. He listened. He scaled
problems appropriately. “What did you say?”

“I didn't say much of anything.” Quiet was his voice, but still easily definable against the distant ambience of the city. “I didn't know what to say.”

“You know, you can talk to them if you want to. They're your friends.” It was insinuated that he would have wanted to. Chrono didn't have to make that connection, but he did, and offered Ibuki that narrative, to accept or decline.

“That's not fair to you.”

“I mean sure, I'd prefer to know. But it's not like you need my permission to talk to your friends, I mean... I told Shion and Tokoha without asking you.”

“That was different.”

“Yeah, I mean, sure, but...” Though it sounded like Chrono agreed, he wasn't very particular about it. “All I'm saying is that, if you wanna tell them, you can. If you feel like you need my approval then, well, I'm giving it to you.”

Being considerate to Chrono had only been one aspect. Ibuki knew Chrono understood as much. The silence that fell upon them was uncomfortable. Uncomfortable, because, in the end, they both knew they'd rather ignore this problem. While it may be unlike Chrono, Ibuki didn't blame him in this case. Not in the slightest. Though surely he was using Chrono's own uncertainty to shield himself, to make excuses. “It's been too long.”

“I know,” Chrono agreed, his voice richer than before. “So. What do you wanna do?”

Today, he'd thought he wanted to do something, but moreover, he didn't want to do anything without Chrono. “I'm not sure,” The frustration in his voice was fresh. “I want us to do it together, though. Agree on something together.”

It's not like it was that complex. The solution was clear. “Starting now, I'll be doing what I can do to... familiarize myself with the idea.”

“Look... I get that, but...” Ibuki heard Chrono shift in bed again. “I don't think there's ever gonna be a perfect time or place. Some things you just gotta do.”

“You're right.” Ibuki had Chrono's explicit permission now. He'd just have to settle for that. There was only so much else he'd get to prepare himself. He would like more time, but how could he ask for that now? “I'll just have to... do it. Next time I have a chance.”

“Right,” Chrono sounded a bit tense. “You talk to your friends. And I'll, well, I guess I'll talk to, Mikuru and uh... my dad.”

It was hot in and out. Yet temperature in the bedroom seemed to drop several degrees. An obstacle larger than anything else; a mind ghost.

“Do you want me to-” Ibuki couldn't voice his question before Chrono shut him down.

“No,” He groaned. “Look, no. It's all my fault anyway, or like,” Chrono had his own matters he considered overdue. “I'm not even out to him. I have no idea how I'm ever gonna talk to him about this.” Ibuki could tell this was something he disliked admitting. Chrono surely felt like he was putting on some extra very ill-needed pressure onto the situation.
“I wouldn't say it's your fault.” Ibuki sounded vaguely conceited.

“Right,” Chrono turned swiftly, “It's not like he ever asked.”

Ibuki had turned too, and it wasn't so hard to see in the dark. “I don't think I'm ever gonna get used to the idea but,” Just below the surface, Ibuki heard something deeply troubled in Chrono's voice. “I guess that's just how some things are.”

There was a simple truth in that, and Ibuki found it comforting. He disliked his own need to complicate matters, at least matters of the heart and soul. He was still uncertain. This left him in a state of unrest, but when Chrono rolled over and laid close next to him, it was easier to ignore.

“You should sleep,” Chrono said, quietly. “We can talk about this more tomorrow.”

“Yeah,” Ibuki replied. He felt a little less restless. “Let's do that.”

In the dark of night, before drifting off to sleep, Ibuki took a moment to think. He knew things would never change until he took a step forward. He knew, because he had been there before. His first step, he would have to take it soon. With Chrono, he'd already walked a mile. He wanted them to walk this final stretch together, too.
Chrono had been to the appointed restaurant before, a long time ago. The occasion, he didn't particularly remember. The gates, traditional in style and ornately decorated, and the path that allowed passage through the front garden into the building were only vaguely familiar. He was expectant, and he was anxious. Moreover, he was early. A full fifteen minutes early. Indoors, there was a heavy scent of wood and food. No lines, as it was a Thursday. Fiddling with his hands in his pockets, he hesitated to approach the hostess to be seated, quite unlike himself.

“Table for one?” She asked carefully. She didn't look very busy.

“Two. I'm... expecting someone.”

“I see. Would you like a table in the salon or in a side room?”

“I, uh, have a reservation, actually.” Chrono felt silly for not bringing it up first thing.

“I understand,” Now preoccupied with the reservation registry, offline, a bound book she had at her desk, the hostess had broken eye contact. “Your name?”

“I... I didn't make the reservation. It was, my friend who...” Chrono realized he was complicating things. “It should be under Ibuki, unless...”

“Oh,” Her eyes came to life. Chrono could tell she recognized the name. “I see. Very well. A side room table for two, at eight.”

“Sorry I'm... a little early.”

“That's alright. We'll seat you in the meantime.”

“Thank you.”

Chrono hadn't know the details of the reservation. As she brought him inside, Chrono tried to not think too hard about any of it. When asked if he wanted to order something to drink, he declined without even thinking first. She left, letting him know she'd be back once his company arrived. As the door closed, sliding into place, Chrono slid into a lean on the table where he sat, seated on the floor. The interior was quite beautiful, but it did little to distract him. He hated feeling unprepared, but there was not much that could prepare him. He heard the distant voices of people, laughing, eating, conversing. Tonight ought to be a night like that, except Chrono knew it wouldn't be. No, it would be more genuine, more special than that. His own expectations made himself feel overbearing. Unusual perhaps that he'd be aware of that. Maybe he'd grown more self-conscious with age, or time itself had just given him too much time to think about today. He still didn't know quite what to expect, but that wasn't what worried him. It was Ibuki who worried him. There was nothing new there, at least.
They'd spoken on the phone a few days prior. It was Chrono who had called. He'd promised himself to not make it weird, not make it a big deal, but it was hard. He hated feeling nervous talking to Ibuki. It strained him, but he couldn't fight it. He knew as much. Ibuki would surprise him, however. Surprise him with his somber tone, but even more so by how they'd both been on the same page. It was as if he'd been waiting for the call to come, as if he'd been preparing what to say, just like Chrono had. After that, it had been impossible to not let the implications consume him. He'd been a little moved, and it made today all the harder to predict. Chrono really hadn't expected Ibuki to remember, not like that. With his fingers drumming against the table top, he was distracted by his own thoughts. When he heard footsteps outside in the hall, and voices piercing through the wall, his mind emptied. Ibuki spoke to the hostess, excusing himself. As soon as he appeared in the door frame, Chrono came to a standing. He wanted to greet him properly.

“It's... good to see you,” It hadn't been that long, but it had been a while. Ibuki looked a bit paler than usual. “I didn't mean to be late.”

“You're not late,” If he smiled, maybe he wouldn't look so nervous, Chrono thought. “I just got here early.”

Unsure of where to draw the line, more so now than ever, Chrono regardless didn't have the guts to hug him. Ibuki raised his hand to put it on his shoulder, and he thought that it would have to do. “It's good to see you too.” He was happy to say those words, and with such utmost sincerity, too. When Ibuki smiled, it did good to relieve his worries.

They sat down undramatically. Chrono poured them some water. The waitress would arrive soon and take their order.

“Before I forget, there's something I have to give to you.” Ibuki sounded distracted.

“What? A present?” Chrono jested, hoping that Ibuki hadn't bothered.

“Yes. But not from me.” From an inner pocket, Ibuki revealed a brown envelope. Carefully, he slid it across the table.

“Happy birthday,” Ibuki congratulated him quietly, as Chrono inspected the envelope. “It's from your father.”

“It's---” Chrono inhaled sharply. “From my dad? Seriously?” This wasn't the sort of thing he wanted to deal with. Not today. Not now. “...Are you kidding me?”

“He asked me to, well,” Ibuki looked quite ashamed. He barely managed a shrug. “Give it to you. When I had the chance.”

“Why'd he ask you? Why not Mikuru? Or, you know,” Irritated, Chrono still managed to stay composed. “See me in person?”

“I'm sorry Chrono,” Ibuki apologizing only made him feel so much better. This was awkward for the both of them. “I'm sure he would've...”

“Are you?” Chrono asked tiredly, but they both knew the answer.

“I asked him if he was sure about me handing it over to you. Your aunt won't be home for another few days, and it just so happened that I'd planned to see you.”

Indeed Mikuru was out of town for the time being. It wasn't something that particularly bothered him. They'd celebrate when she got home, as he would with his friends. They'd made plans for the
weekend. Incidentally, this had meant that Chrono was free on his birthday. When he'd suggested they meet up no sooner and no later than the 9th of September, he hadn't expected Ibuki to take on his offer, but he had. It was all coming together a bit more perfectly than he'd dared to hope. When and where; in the end, the details did not matter much. Chrono was not that sentimental. It did mean something to him though, that Ibuki had been so keen on keeping his promise to him after all these years.

The envelope had a card in it. It read, *Happy 20th Birthday, Chrono. Love, Dad.*

He'd only just opened it and glanced inside. Chrono groaned and pushed it away.

“How much is it?” He wasn't sure he'd get an answer. He took a chance on it, anyway.

Ibuki had taken a sip of water. “…It's too much to be considered pocket money, but too little to give you any long-time financial security.”

“Right,” Chrono didn't know what to say. He hadn't expected this. Then again, he hadn't expected anything at all, not from his father. He was uncomfortable; a gift, sure. But money?

“I'd assume it's a way of saying he trusts you to be responsible with it…”

Now that was a little insulting, at least to Chrono. “Oh, okay. Only now, he trusts me to-” He sighed. “Fine. Whatever.”

Chrono saw his emotions reflected on Ibuki's face. It offered him some comfort. Maybe it was best to let it go, for now.

“I don't... have anything for you. I didn't know what to get you.” It was pleasant, to hear Ibuki speak so earnestly.

“That's fine. You don't need to get me anything.” Chrono always felt awkward receiving presents. Maybe Ibuki could've gotten away with getting him something, for old times' sake, but Chrono was relieved he hadn't. He wasn't sure if he would've cared for the implications, anyhow.

“I mean, you know. You're here.” That was what he'd wanted most. Chrono looked at the envelope before him on the table. “Unlike him.”

“Well, I suppose it's a start.” Ibuki was humble.

“I can't talk to you if you're not here.”

“Well, it would complicate things…” Ibuki smiled.

The waitress came to take their orders. Ibuki got them a set five course menu, and Chrono trusted his judgment. They got drinks. Nothing too strong, at least not for starters. They would be here for a while. Ibuki preferred Japanese liquor, and Chrono opted to try the same.

The food would take some time. As they were left alone once more, Ibuki wasted little time. “I hope you don't mind.”

A suggestion phrased somewhat unusually for him, Ibuki had placed his deck box in front of him on the table. Unsurprising, and yet Chrono needed a moment to take it in. “Not at all.” It would be a good distraction, a good ice breaker. Of course, they'd usually play, whenever they had the chance. That didn't make it any less special.
Truth was, it had been a while. They were both rather busy, these days. They'd seen each other around, but it'd been harder to find opportunity to actually spend time together. In reality, they'd never causally hung out that much. It happened, but only occasionally. Chrono would often think of Ibuki. More so now than he had before. Since Ibuki had made him that promise over four years ago, a lot had happened, and Chrono was more aware of that now, too. He'd waited, patiently, decidedly, thinking that it would be a matter of the future. Now that the future was here, it wasn't much like he'd imagined it.

He'd changed. His experiences, his outlook, yet his integrity helped him stay true to himself. Graduating high school had felt like such a frustrating small step, and Chrono had realized, regrettably, that his old complexes still laid in wait for him to lower his guard. He'd wanted to grow up so bad, and when he'd finally gotten there, taking that first step had only made him realize how long the road would be. As grounded as he was, it was still disheartening. When the results for his university applications came back unfavorably, it was even more so. He'd cried that day. There wasn't a single person around him who hadn't comforted him, encouraged him, but in reality the result wasn't that surprising, and Chrono knew it. He'd set high goals for himself, maybe too high. He'd doubted himself, and he'd had to fight it to regain his motivation. Chrono still remembered, quite vividly, the call he'd made a few days later. Hardly ever had he heard Ibuki speak to him so softly. Seeing him today made him remember. The tone he took was the same.

Chrono had failed his first round of university applications. That spring, Ibuki had made sure to briefly remind him of the clan leader test, taking place around the same time. Chrono had taken it, thinking it couldn't hurt. He'd taken it, and then quickly forgotten about it. When it was the only test he hadn't failed, he had a decision to make. Ibuki understood it wasn't easy, and he knew Chrono would only be around until he could do what he really wanted, and go back to school. Chrono had felt bad about that; to be hired on such terms didn't feel great with him. He'd suspected that Ibuki was making an exception for him he might not have made with anyone else, though as he'd denied it, Chrono had decided to trust him. That bluntness and honesty between them, their ability to speak of such things freely, Chrono valued highly. Other people would often be intimidated by his frankness, but not Ibuki. Working together, it became all the more obvious. They could talk about everything.

Well, almost everything.

Their had always been a familiar but loosely defined relationship. Ibuki still had his secrets, most of which felt like they were hidden in plain sight. Chrono had heard things, seen things, understood certain things. Even without the story told to him, he made certain connections, connections which he kept to himself. With the promise Ibuki had made, he had reason to not get overly impatient or curious.

Chrono had worked for the Vanguard Association for about a year. By his own request he'd been stationed at the main branch. Or he had, in the beginning. As much as he'd enjoyed working with Ibuki, getting to know him in brand new ways that he never before had, his own involvement with Ibuki's personal life had been limited. The reason was, as Chrono soon realized, that Ibuki had no personal life. Occasionally, they'd all go out. Maybe get some food and drinks, for the sake of someone's birthday or the celebration of a milestone. Chrono would then realize, that perhaps he wasn't capable of speaking to Ibuki as freely as he'd always thought. Some questions were hard to ask. Hard to ask perhaps, because the answers were hard to hear. Chrono was awful at playing dumb. The others might tease Ibuki, but no more than that. The final product of it all was that even after all the years they'd know each other, Chrono knew nothing about Ibuki's love life. It would've been inappropriate for him to know sooner, so he would've had reason not to know. As time passed Chrono could only assume he didn't hear any of it because there was nothing to be said. The years Ibuki had on him haunted him. The life Ibuki may have lived, the people he might have known, might have loved, all of which he knew nothing about. He tried not to think about it so much, but it
would cross his mind. Right now, sitting across of him, Ibuki could be seeing someone, he could be yearning for someone, missing someone, and Chrono wouldn't know. It would be strange to say it hurt. After all, Chrono didn't know, but it made him uncomfortable. Most uncomfortable he was, perhaps, with his own hang-up. Ibuki didn't owe him any of that information. It was very personal.

In contrast, Chrono's own romantic endeavors had been on public display for all of their friends to see. Chrono's first impressions of Pale Moon clan leader Yanagi Naki had included him speaking of his boyfriend. Hired a year ahead of him, they'd only met very briefly once or twice while Chrono was still in school. Once they started working together, they'd become acquainted fast. Naki was a little taller than him, a few years older than him, easy-going and fun-loving in social situations, but serious when on the job and dedicated to his cause. Already early on, Chrono had admired his social skills and natural charisma. They'd only just about become friends, when it came up in conversation, that Naki had broken up with his boyfriend. In hindsight, he sure felt stupid. He was used to feeling awkward around pretty boys like Naki, more transparent than he'd like, and that had made it hard to navigate the situation. They'd gone out together a few times, but it'd taken a kiss for him to understand.

It was all new to him, even if it hadn't been particularly sudden. It hadn't been something they'd intended to hide from their friends or colleagues, but Chrono wished it all hadn't been so clumsy. Such is youth, perhaps; but Chrono yet again struggled to be youthful on his own terms. He thought he'd gotten better at it, and naturally he had, but everything that was new brought new challenges. He could only stand remaining bashful and awkward for so long. Naki had fallen in love with him first, and realizing that he was so flattered, even if he couldn't really understand it. He was flattered, but his own mutual feelings only grew stronger, and being together felt good, so good in fact that sometimes he'd forget all about his worries and complexes along with his ideas of maturity and self-reliance.

In the end, it had only gotten him so far. There's not much of anything that can make up for inexperience. First times are always awkward. Chrono had his own ideas, wishes, needs. As good as his judgment usually was, he was bad at taking things slow. He'd been patient enough, for the most part, or so he'd believed at the time. It's easy to be wise in retrospect, it's easy to see where you went wrong when you have all the answers on hand. All in all, he'd also come to realize that much of what happened had been unavoidable, and that his experiences weren't unusual or extraordinary. He'd wanted a bit too much, a bit too early. He'd embarrassed himself, but it was okay. At this stage, what pained him to think about, was his how his awkward first love story had been told directly adjacent to so many of his friends and coworkers, including Ibuki. Maybe they hadn't known the most personal of their struggles, but much else had been on display. It still embarrassed him to think that Ibuki would have seen him and Naki, holding hands, making plans, flirting awkwardly, on and around the job. It was the last thing he wanted to think about right now, but it was hard not to. Chrono knew what it meant, but he didn't want to think about that, either. It made him feel guilty. It was so indulgent. He wasn't here to indulge himself.

Their relationship had come to an end that summer. It had been about ten months. Not working together anymore, it just wasn't the same. They weren't seeing each other like before. Still, it was strange. Not that it had ended, but how detached Chrono had felt the entire time. He'd moved on so quickly, it almost scared him. It didn't feel right, and yet, it was a chapter of his life that in the end had opened and closed so neatly, he had no reason to complain. His friends seemed more upset about it than he did. Mikuru too, had asked him, why he wasn't bringing over his friend Naki anymore, asking if they'd had a fight, or if something had happened. Chrono almost wished something had happened. He'd never actually told her. Even now, he hadn't. Much like he hadn't actually told his friends, but they'd all figured him out anyway, Mikuru had been able to tell. She'd been able to tell, all while being polite enough to not ascribe anything to their relationship.
Ibuki had gone first. It was at the start of the ninth turn, Ibuki's second stride, and Chrono couldn't help but think Ibuki was playing in a quite restrictive manner. He was concentrating, but he appeared aloof beyond that. It reminded Chrono of the old days, the time before he knew the real Ibuki. Surely though, he was guarded for a different reason. As the game progressed, Chrono had caught himself preoccupied with the reality of the situation. Perhaps Ibuki was the same, or perhaps he had gone already beyond that. In fairness, Ibuki had a better grasp of the situation than Chrono did.

Ibuki had paused for a moment, which was only natural with the ride and stride phases coming up. Ibuki did not look at Chrono's face, but reassessed the board. There wasn't anything particularly out of ordinary about it, so Chrono could only assume Ibuki was reconsidering variables not available to him. Ibuki had amassed four damage. All but one were face up. Chrono had opted for a little board-disruption in the previous turn. Chronofang Tiger G had booted Ibuki's counter charger, Sacrifice Messiah, back to the deck. If he had another one, surely he'd play it this turn.

"...I stride," He didn't announce it, but he made sure to flip the cost over in his hand for Chrono to see. Ideal Ego Messiah, the same unit that occupied his vanguard circle. "Progenitor Dragon of Horizon Limit, Origorem."

It was a bit of an unexpected choice, tell-tale perhaps of what resources Ibuki had available to him. Even more so, it made Chrono realize his own mistake. Coiling around him and constricting him was the image of his impending loss predicted in his own fan of cards. He didn't want to let it get to him, but he knew it would take a lot for him to survive this turn.

"Stride skill." From his hand, Ibuki placed a locked card on an open front row circle. "Plus five thousand to the vanguard."

"Can I?" Chrono asked, as he reached for the locked card, yet to touch it.

"Sure." Ibuki replied, lightly.

Curiously, Chrono turned it over to have a peek. Awaking Messiah. Such an old card, and yet a good choice in this context. Chrono took note of it, knowing the card text by heart. Behind her in the back row was Lady Battler of the White Dwarf. The choice was less odd, with one Dunamis Messiah next to her, behind the vanguard circle.

"I call." Ibuki placed Lady Battler of the Black Dwarf in the other front row circle, then, a second Dunamis behind her. Chrono was already trying to crunch the numbers, though he knew Ibuki had a number of options available to him. Origorem as the vanguard was a game changer.

Ibuki didn't give him enough time to over think the situation. "Black Dwarf attacks the vanguard.” Resting Black Dwarf and Dunamis, a combined power of 16 thousand.

As soon as Origorem's skill goes off, guarding would become harder. This still only required him to drop ten thousand's worth of shield. Furthermore, damage triggers wouldn't make any difference, either.

"Cruising Dragon intercepts,” With the other front row circle occupied by Chronofang, he had only one grade two that he could intercept with. With a short moment's worth of consideration, he dropped Spearhead Unicorn from his hand. “And guard.”

Ibuki was unsurprised. "Dunamis' skill, soul blast one. Dunamis is locked, Awaking is unlocked."
Awaking gets plus four thousand.” As Awaking had now been unlocked, her skill activates. “I stand Black Dwarf, and she gets plus two thousand.”

The movements on the board were familiar. It was almost comforting. Yet, things were about to change.

“Their boost, the vanguard attacks. That’s 38 thousand.” Ibuki turned one card face down in the damage zone. “Original’s skill. The power of the opponent’s units are reduced to zero until the end of turn.”

It was barely audible, but Ibuki had sighed just now. Something appeared to have left him. It was now or never. Chrono wondered if he had been reconsidering if he should try to win this turn or not. Chrono was glad he had decided to push for it. Anything else would have been too unlike him, especially considering the turn he had been able to set up. Chrono felt a surge of excitement. He’d been so focused on everything but the fun of the fight. Faced with adversary, he wanted to win. He wanted to rise up to the challenge.

“Perfect Guard.” As Arka appeared on the guardian circle, Chrono discarded an extra grade three in his hand, Obstinacy Ox.

The faintest of smiles crept on to Ibuki’s face. “Very well.”

Chrono smiled, too. The drive check hardly mattered. Chrono’s loss was all but certain. However, Ibuki didn’t know that.

“First check,” Grade two, Metallia Messiah. “Second check...” Draw trigger, Beloved Child of Superstring Theory. “I give the power to Black Dwarf, and draw one.”

“Third check.” Grade two, Lady Fencer of Matter Transmission.

That could have gone a lot worse, but Chrono’s numbers were already failing him. The previous turn, he’d used Metal Party Dragon to call out Chronofang. He’d gained an extra attack and stopped Ibuki from counter-charging this turn. However, he might’ve benefited more from a strategy that would have left him with an extra intercepting unit. It was marginal, but marginal made a difference.

“Dunamis’ skill, soul blast one.” The Dunamis behind the vanguard became locked, and the Dunamis behind Black Dwarf becomes unlocked. Ibuki’s left and right columns were now without obstruction. “Plus four thousand to Awaking Messiah. Black Dwarf attacks the vanguard.” With boost, it was 23 thousand.

Dropping the single heal trigger he had, Chrono opted to use his one chance at a guardian as early as possible. “...I guard with Ilishu.” One counter blast, and that was 30 thousand shield.

Ibuki was thinking. Chrono saw him eye the card backs in his hand. He had only two left, with the equal amount of damage left to take. Ibuki reached for the damage zone, doubtlessly aware what his chances were. Ibuki paid his second counter blast that turn. “Black Dwarf’s skill. She locks herself, and gives five thousand power to awaking.” Chrono knew this would happen. “Soul blast. Dunamis’ skill. Black Dwarf is unlocked, and gains four thousand power. Black Dwarf attacks again.”

As Ibuki rested the card, Chrono reminded himself of the extra power that Awaking would surely gain, if Ibuki choose to use his last counter blast. He was thinking with a clearer focus now, one he’d lacked up until this part of the game. “Guard.” The attack was only 13 thousand. With his vanguard at 0, it was an extra ten thousand. Hypnosis Sheep and Thruster Bison amounted to 20. Until the end, he was forced into over-guarding, and it stung.
Ibuki, however, was not yet relieved. “Awaking attacks. That's 34 thousand. White Dwarf's skill. Black Dwarf unlocks.”

“...No guard.”

Normally, it wouldn't have been enough. White Dwarf offered no power bonus, but she was also cost-less. Origorem had Chrono's vanguard at zero until the end of the turn. There's no threshold to overcome. Chrono reached to make his damage check. He would be allowed to heal if it came to that. In that moment, Chrono felt himself zone out again. Would it be over like this?

Turning the top card over in his deck slowly, it revealed a draw trigger. Chronodoze Sheep, one out of only two draw triggers in the deck. Stumped, Chrono realized it was not yet over. He could not gain any power, but with some luck, he could still survive.

“Well, what do you know.” Ibuki didn't sound very surprised.

Drawing from the top of the deck, Chrono grinned as he saw what he'd drawn.

“...Black Dwarf attacks.” Resting her for the third time, Ibuki sounded like he'd resigned his victory, at least for this turn. The meager nine thousand swing required only a single trigger to be guarded.

Chrono threw the one card in his hand down, face down on the table top. With the same smile on his face, he said, “No guard.”

Visibly thrown off, Ibuki let a chuckle slip out of him. “...Alright.”

Chrono threw his hands down on the table. “If I'd just... taken that fifth damage sooner... I could've survived.”

In his damage zone, Chronojet Z laid as his sixth damage. “Wh-what did you...?”

Sullenly, Chrono showed the final card in his hand. Ibuki recognized the art of Steam Tamer, Arka, at a glance. “Oh. How unlucky.”

“No really.” Chrono disagreed. “If I'd just preserved hand better I could've used her. Like... taken that damage sooner. Use her to guard Awaking. Then use the last trigger to guard the last attack...”

It would have been a gamble for sure. Chrono blamed himself for not quite being able to predict the last attack.

“That's true.” Ibuki wasn't going to make any excuses for him. Chrono didn't want him too. He appeared a little wistful. “You did seem distracted.”

“Well, yeah,” Chrono could only admit to it. “Sorry.”

“It's fine. Perhaps it was selfish of me to challenge you like this.” Lightly, yet soundly, he spoke. It was that particular quality he had to his voice.

“Don't say that. I mean, it was fun, and it's been a while, so,” Despite his words, and the genuinely of his sentiment, Chrono actually hated conversing with Ibuki like this. He hated feeling like there was something unresolved, something unspoken between them. He hated treading, and he hated hearing Ibuki shift the blame to himself. “It helped me relax a bit, anyway.”

He'd said that, inviting Ibuki to be a bit more honest, too. It appeared to have effect, and Chrono saw Ibuki exhale, his shoulders relaxing.
“Truth is, I'm just buying time,” Chrono was relieved to hear some rawness in his words. That was what he wanted. “Even now, I'm not sure what to say. It's not like I haven't had time to think.”

“Well, making me wait sure didn't help with my expectations, you know?” Chrono had no intention of going easy on him. Well, maybe just a little.

“I suppose not,” Ibuki sounded humored. “I'll have no choice then, but to let you down.”

“Sure,” Chrono folded his arms on the table. ‘Gimme your worst.”

“I'm not... even sure where to start.”

“How about the beginning?”

Ibuki finished his cup with one fell swoop. He was already drinking. When he laid his gaze to rest, he appeared to stare into thin air. Chrono waited. He wasn't impatient, not anymore. In his stead, Ibuki grew restless. “---I was a child of weak constitution.”

“Wait, you don't have to---” Chrono cut himself off. “...That's the beginning?”

“I said it was going to be bore of a long story, didn't I?” Ibuki's mouth had barely twitched.

“I'm sorry.” Chrono promptly apologized. “I didn't mean to... I mean, please go on.”

Ibuki poured himself some more rice wine. Chrono wasn't used to seeing him drink like this. He wondered if he should be concerned, but decided that it was best not to mention it.

“I failed to... find my own context, and built my own identity among my peers.” The carefully structured and objectively phrased description have Chrono some ideas of how Ibuki wanted to approach the subject.

“I suppose you could say I was... shy,” Ibuki said it with distaste in his mouth. “Or perhaps... timid.”

“Well, you and, you know... a lot of other kids.” A relaxed tone, and with a shrug, Chrono spoke. He eyed Ibuki for a reaction.

“I'm well aware,” Ibuki's irritation rose and subsided with his words, just like that. “I suppose, well...” There was a slight slur in his voice, causing Chrono to stick his eyes onto him like glue. Ibuki shook his head. He'd lost track of what to say.

“In my case... there was more to it than just that. When I was young, maybe it didn't appear to be so extraordinary.” Ibuki was yet again staring into his cup, but appeared to catch himself. He sat it down. “Perhaps... Initially I wasn't that different from any other child.”

It sounded like he hadn't considered that before. He also sounded like he didn't actually believe it. Chrono wasn't here to offer empty comforting words. For Ibuki's sake too, he wanted to know the truth. “What do you mean by that?”

“It's all been muddled by time. Maybe things could have been different, but I have no way of knowing.” Ibuki was aware his statements were out of context. “What I do know, is that--- as I remember it, I was... extraordinarily, should I say, confused... about how to approach, well,”

Ibuki's voice swayed between certainty and uncertainty like a pendulum. “Life, or perhaps myself. Who I was, who I should be. I had no... integrity, and moreover, no confidence.”

It was a potpourri of words, but Chrono was hanging onto the threads Ibuki give him. It wasn't so
hard to understand the direction the story was headed, even if there was a disconnect between the story told and the Ibuki that was sitting right in front of him right now.

“I couldn't make friends,” Ibuki said it with an exhale, “As I know you've guessed.”

“I thought you were friends with Kai and Miwa?” Chrono asked.

Ibuki had frozen with his drink in hand. He yanked his head to the side. “This was in elementary school. We were friends. For a short while. By their grace.”

“Look, I,” Chrono hesitated. It was hard not to say anything. “Are you sure you should be saying that?”

“Chrono,” Tiredly, he marked his retaliation. “Like I said, maybe with time, things could’ve been different. I was... innocuous, perhaps. This was when I was still putting in some manner of effort.”

Chrono knew that in the end, only Ibuki had the right to tell his own story. If anything, he became curious to know what Kai and Miwa might have to say on the matter.

“As I got older, I stopped trying. It didn't take very long.” Ibuki was drinking again. “It escalated quickly.”

“It hurt to keep blaming myself for everything bad that happened. So I stopped doing that. I blamed everyone else instead.” There was something comforting in the readiness of his tone. “I became hateful, and distant to others. I thought that there wasn't anyone who could ever understand me.”

There was more than enough of an understanding between them for them both to know, and recognize that they were similar in ways. Chrono could relate in part to Ibuki's story, but there were also aspects that were significantly different compared to his own.

“I felt like no matter what I tried, I couldn't make much of an impression on anyone. Or if I made one, it was the wrong sort of impression. I tired of it, and decided to stop trying. At first, it made things easier.”

Shutting out others for the sake of some peace of mind, believing any other efforts to be futile; Chrono knew the immediate positive effects, because he'd been there himself. His own starting point had been different, he'd held a more nihilistic outlook, and suffered less frustration as a result. His past, at least in detail, was unfolding only just now, but Chrono knew Ibuki well regardless. Ibuki was the sort of person who took people's words to heart, yet struggled to accept positive feedback. Ibuki was the sort of person who was always ready to take the blame, even if it hurt him. For awhile now, Ibuki hadn't sough Chrono's eyes or met his gaze.

“In the long run, it made me a pathetic and despicable sort of person.”

“You were just a kid,” Chrono heard his own voice waver. He wanted to be more headstrong, but it was hard to not get emotional. “It's not like you knew better.”

Ibuki was quiet. Chrono didn't like the distant look in his eyes. “I don't... want to make excuses for what happened.”

“It's not excuses,” Chrono found his words so easily. Ibuki was still intimidated by it, sometimes. “It’s just the facts of the circumstances.”

“What does that change?” Ibuki was prone to rhetorical questions. Chrono had to double-guess himself to realize that this was not one.
“It...” What he'd say next would matter. Chrono needed a second to think. “It means that it's okay to take a step back, look at things a bit more objectively, and you know, realize that still blaming yourself for something so circumstantial isn't doing you or anyone else any good.”

Chrono saw Ibuki close his eyes, and without a breath, he spoke. “...I feel like you're jumping to conclusions.”

Already ready to get angry, Chrono realized that that, too, wouldn't do anyone any good. As far as Chrono was concerned, Ibuki sometimes needed to be yelled at to understand, but now was not the time for that. “Maybe I am. But with what you've told me so far, you know, it's hard not to.”

Indeed only Ibuki could tell his own story, but Chrono hoped Ibuki would understand how colored his own retelling could be.

“I need to take a certain amount of responsibility.” Ibuki was insistent. “I invited for unspeakable things to happen.”

Chrono knew how much a certain amount would be in Ibuki's world. It meant an unfair amount, most certainly. Although it concerned him, Chrono had no intentions to keep Ibuki from speaking; quite the contrary. Then, as they'd fallen silent for a short moment, a breather shared between them, the waitress announced her presence from behind the sliding door. She entered, and served them the first three of their shared dishes. Two types of fish, one type of meat, rice, pickles.

Ibuki flipped over the menu in his hand, skimming the contents. His expression had softened. “Is there anything else you'd like?”

The waitress paused to hear their conversation. “Oh um, I'm good I think... for now at least,” Chrono thought they'd already been served quite a bit of food.

“They have a side dish of fried pumpkin I'm quite fond of...” Ibuki still sounded a little distracted.

“Oh, that does sound good,” Chrono had no plans of holding back just for the sake of doing so. Ibuki was treating him. It would be rude. “We'll have one of that and um, maybe some edamame?”

“Good idea.” Ibuki agreed. Maybe it was foolish to order more food before they'd even started eating, but for the sake of the occasion, neither of them cared.

“One edamame and one fried pumpkin,” The waitress took notes as she repeated their order. “It'll arrive shortly.”

As she shut the door behind her and left, the intimacy of the space they shared returned. Ibuki had some food. “You should try the broiled tuna. It's very good.”

Chrono had been intending to. For once he decided not to think about what any of this could possibly cost. Surely Ibuki could afford it, anyhow. Over the years, Chrono had realized they shared an affinity for Japanese food. It was a silly little something to treasure, but he couldn't help it. Chrono had some fish like Ibuki had suggested, and he'd been right.

“Wow, it really is good,” Chrono's words were slightly muffled by the food in his mouth. Washed down with the alcohol, it tasted even better. The fatty, savory fish, and the sweet, fresh liquor together was one of the tastiest things he'd had in a while. “Remind me to keep this place in mind the next time someone offers to buy me dinner.”

“It is a bit too expensive for corporate dinners and meetings. Unless we really need to impress someone.” He heard Ibuki smile when he spoke. “But I'm glad you like it.”
Chrono rested the tip of his chopsticks against his serving plate. He watched Ibuki eat some meat, drink some more. “When you say a certain amount of responsibility, do you mean like,” Chrono wasn’t afraid to tie back to where they’d left off without any heads up. “The stuff you did with my dad? The whole mutiny deal within the Vanguard Association? ‘Cause I mean, that was ages ago now.”

It’d been about six years to be exact. Longer if you count the time it took Ibuki to set it all in motion. “…We’re getting ahead of ourselves,” There was a slight strain in his voice. “It’s a bit more complicated than that.”

Chrono watched the door. No-one was approaching it just yet. “Complicated how?” Chrono was aware he still hadn’t given Ibuki much chance to explain himself. “I mean I know stuff… happened, not just what exactly. Or why you’d need to take responsibility for it.”

Ibuki was silent, and Chrono was silent too, but the moment shared between them was not pressing. An inaudible sigh left Ibuki, and, Chrono could tell he was finished. He was finished buying time, finally, after all these years.

“With the world view I’d… attained, the attitude I had towards others, and my isolation from people in general, made me… attractive,” He paused briefly, and Chrono saw him concentrate, stringing the words together in his mind before speaking. “To certain forces.”

Chrono was stringing things together too, however wordlessly.

“I’m sure you’ve heard of the Link Joker invasion,” Ibuki’s voice had grown cold, if distant. It again reminded Chrono of times long gone by. “The earliest known crisis that threatened both earth and cray.”

“I have. Void and Chaos Breaker… right?” He’d heard his fair share of the story.

“Yes. Although I never had the chance to meet Chaos Breaker in person, not back then.” Ibuki sounded barely humored. “Void needed messengers on earth. Humans to help carry out their mission; malleable, impressionable, isolated humans, overcome by their own emptiness.”

Ibuki swirled his drink in his cup. “I wasn’t part of any of that. Perhaps I was a bit too hateful, a bit too emotional to be of use.”

Chrono didn’t like hearing Ibuki speak that way about himself, but he decided to shut his mouth and listen.

“The Star-vaders, with Chaos Breaker and the other admirals, they came for earth, and they came for cray, they fell, they scrambled to escape, but that wasn’t the final say of it.” The swirling stopped, and Ibuki drank. “Void’s missionaries traveled the universe, in search of planets that sustained life, life that they could emaciate, hollow out into nothing but husks so that they could be repurposed as they saw fit.” Void was never a person or being. Void was a thought, a force, a concept. While his experiences were a bit removed from the source, Chrono’s understanding of it was quite sophisticated. Ibuki’s description was relatively brief, and didn't he want to elaborate more than he needed. Chrono was never afraid to ask questions, so his silence wasn't disconcerting.

“Long before earth or cray, void conquered a planet called brandt.” Ibuki’s storytelling had become methodical. “They won that war, but due to the planet's harsh environment the beings birthed were... different. Eventually, they came for earth. When they did, they too needed an envoy on this planet.”

Ibuki raised his head. Chrono leaned his head in his hand, and when their eyes met, he felt a chill.
Ibuki's face appeared worn beyond his years, and as he held his breath he paled further in the warm lights of the old electric lamps and the candlelight on the table.

“I was their envoy.” He spoke the words Chrono had come to expect. “They choose me. I was... the perfect vessel for their ideals.”

Chrono said nothing, for there was nothing to be said. Ibuki smiled, somehow, faintly, wryly and his hands had become tightly clasped in his lap. It was such an unusual sight. Chrono saw it as his responsibility to take it in.

“It's hard to retell it how it happened,” Ibuki's voice had gradually grown quieter. Having listened so carefully, Chrono had barely noticed. “Not only because it is unpleasant, but because I don't quite remember. Brandt came to orbit the earth, and I felt the gravitation pull before anyone else. I dreamed of them, and they spoke to me. I don't remember when it happened, but it ate into me, changed me. Perhaps there was no specific turning point.”

“You really don't... remember?” Chrono asked him carefully. Most other people might not have pressed the issue. Ibuki looked almost relieved.

“They didn't want me to remember. Any memories I had that were inconvenient to them, they got rid off.”

Chrono's head had risen out of his hand. “What?”

“Yes,” Ibuki replied, “Which is why this time in my life is hard to talk about. Though most of my memories returned, they feel like dreams. I've had to piece them together myself. There's still things that don't seem to make sense. The words and the feelings they imposed, implanted in me, they never faded away. I still remember it all. I still remember clearest of all what I was like when I didn’t remember.”

The pieces fell into place. Chrono's knuckles whitened atop the table, his fingernails digging into his palms. He felt sick with unease. A number of things in distant memory had started to make sense. “What do you mean?”

“I'm referring to the person I was back then. Only by curating some of my memories, I became a willing collaborator to their plans.” Putting his arm up on the table, Ibuki was downcast once more. “To this day, it still frightens me. The things I did, the things I were capable of...”

“You were hardly responsible, if, I mean, they did those things to you, if they twisted things like that...”

“Chrono,” Ibuki cut into him with an unexpected firmness. “It was still me.”

“So?” Chrono retaliated. He heard his own voice shaking. “It would've been the same to anyone in that situation.”

“Maybe so, but that's still within the realms of speculation. We don't know how things would have turned out if it had been someone else.” Ibuki sounded genuinely uncertain. “But I do know what did happened. I can't deny it, or run away from it. Even if I was also a victim, I invited for it to happen.”

“No one would actually blame you for what happened, you know.” An interjection, regardless of nothing but comforting words. Chrono was sad, sad like he hadn't been in a long time.

“I'm aware of that. Everyone I've spoken to has forgiven me. They all forgave me, all too easily.” Chrono was ready to disagree, visibly upset, but Ibuki wouldn't let him. “That is... that is their
judgment. They have the right to make it, even if I feel differently.”

“Sounds to me like the one person who can't forgive you is yourself.” Chrono spoke sharply, a shadow cast over his eyes.

Unlike how things may seem, Chrono took no real satisfaction in watching Ibuki falter by his words. “I'm... I'm aware of that, too.” He sounded a little shaken up. “I've thought about it so much. I still think about it. How I wish I could've had the strength to deny them any power over me. But I didn't. I was powerless, already before they came for me.”

For once, Chrono felt his words fail him. He wasn't so naive not to understand the situation. Ibuki hadn't told him because he sought guidance, or because he wanted to be comforted. He'd told Chrono because he'd asked. He knew he had no obligation to do anything but listen. May it be so that Ibuki didn't want words of comfort either, but Chrono wasn't so certain Ibuki knew what he wanted, or wanted what he needed.

Chrono saw Ibuki's hand lay on the table, pale and cold. He wanted to hold it, he wanted to hold it so badly, he could feel his heart breaking. It scared him, that he felt like he couldn't control that feeling, that impulse. He wasn't sure if it would be appropriate, but at the same time it begged the question; if not now, then when would it ever be?

“I didn't know you back then,” Chrono's voice was a whisper. “So of course I can't say anything about how things went down, or if it could've been different.”

Ibuki's hand wasn't as cold as it'd looked. His skin was smooth, and Chrono allowed himself to run his thumb over the back of his hand. “But I've been watching you, you know. And I've seen how hard you try. You always try so hard to do the right thing.”

As Chrono realized how easy it was to speak his mind on the matter, he relaxed. He felt his face burn a little, but not from embarrassment. That warmth came from his feelings stirring up inside him. “So I know. I know you're not a bad person.”

He was surprised when he felt Ibuki's other hand on top of his own. “Thank you,” Ibuki spoke quietly, breathlessly, his voice breaking. “It... means a lot. Thank you.”

“Hey, you know... don't mention it, I just... I can't do much but say how I see it,” He smiled, but, that was a little hard, too. The rawness of the emotion was a little overwhelming. “It's tough, I mean... this all happened to you, but I never even knew.”

“And yet, you always know just the thing to say.” Without pause, without hesitation, Ibuki spoke. It was Chrono who found himself stumped. “I'd been dreading today... but I'd also been looking forward to it. In the end, above all else, I suppose it just feels relieving to have finally told you, at least in part.”

Still a bit dumbstruck by how Ibuki held his hand in his, a familiar yet unfamiliar feeling, Chrono had nothing more to say, and yet it was a comfortable silence they fell into. For now they'd both said more than enough. When he felt Ibuki's fingertips move slowly, lightly, across the surface of his skin, it felt so intimate Chrono could almost not bear it.

He'd blocked out the ambient sounds of the restaurant, and did not hear the waitress' footsteps approaching down the hall. When she opened the door, Chrono tore his hand away in surprise a lot faster than he would've liked.

She served them their fried pumpkin and edamame, and it'd been as good as Ibuki had said it would
They returned their focus to the food, still mostly untouched, and lighter conversations followed. Chrono still had questions. Of course he had. Questions that would beckon more questions, surely. He realized as much himself. He reckoned he had time, and that there was no rush. Tonight had already tested Ibuki more than enough.

They drank, Ibuki not necessarily more so than Chrono, but he'd already had quite a bit. Chrono didn't have the heart to comment on it too much. He'd barely ever seen Ibuki drunk, and could only conclude that letting him drink his fill this one time couldn't hurt. They spoke of the not-quite-as-distant past, and caught up on the things they'd missed in each other's lives. Chrono still thought about the things he'd never told Ibuki about, and about the questions he'd never asked. Maybe now, he could get away with it, but he wasn't so smooth he could bake it into their conversation, and he hated playing games. He still feared becoming transparent, although he struggled to be that honest with himself. He also struggled to understand if such a thing was even conceivable to Ibuki.

It was terrible how awful it made him feel, and it was the last thing he wanted to think about right now. His fear, as old as it was still relevant, maybe now more than ever before. Maybe Ibuki would never see him as anything other than a child. Maybe there was nothing he could do, nothing he could say, nor any amount of time that could ever change it.

Before long, it was late, and in the haze of his own elevation, Chrono's worries felt comfortably distant, despite how close Ibuki was to him. When handed the bill, Chrono avoided to look at the total. Ibuki sort of squinted at it and paid without giving it more than a glance.

Outside, it was pitch black. They walked together through the neighborhood, their conversation simmering, but never quite stopping. The water in the Sumida River was clear, reflecting the lights of the highway, the Tokyo Sky Tree, and the restaurant boats were still making their rounds at this late hour, packed with tourists. The walkway that lined the riverbank was abandoned, except for them. It wasn't a coincidence they walked this road; Chrono still lived on the same block, in the same bedroom in Mikuru's apartment. The very same apartment he'd sworn he'd move out of as soon as he could. Well, it was many years ago now, many years already since he'd abandoned that way of thinking.

By his side, Ibuki swayed a little. Chrono grabbed his arm, “Hey, are you okay?” He'd asked with a smile on his lips, a little playfully, but his concern was never without some manner of conviction.

“I'm fine.” Ibuki replied similarly. He made no attempt to get away.

“You had a little bit too much, huh?” Chrono put his hand on Ibuki's back to support him.

“Just... just a little,” Chrono felt Ibuki sigh against him. In reality, he wasn't very drunk, and they both knew it. “I'm... I'm sorry if I made this whole business into... such a big deal.”

Ibuki had lost a little of his usual vocabulary. Chrono felt a little heavy-hearted once more. It had been a big deal, at least to him. “It's okay,” He said, “It can be as big or as small a deal as you want.”

“It's not that I didn't...” He sounded tired. “I did want to tell you. I did. I just couldn't.”

“It's okay,” Chrono repeated. “I understand.”

“I didn't want to put that all on you...” In Ibuki's voice, Chrono heard new-found clarity. “You'd already done so much for me. I couldn't... in good conscience... have you take in all that. I was still dealing with it. I still am but... I knew you'd make it your business. I didn't want that...”

Chrono listened, and found he'd never thought of it quite that way. Ibuki was right, even if he
might've felt differently about it back then. Ibuki's honesty above all else felt so liberating, and to hear him speak his mind so freely, Chrono thought that perhaps things had changed more between them than he'd realized. Chrono let his hand lay heavy on Ibuki's far shoulder, and when Ibuki leaned onto him, that was liberating, too.

“You were still so young,” He spoke wistfully. “I mean, no longer a child, but... still too young for me to rely on you, like that, and have you make it your problem.”

Four and a half years ago, Chrono would have hated to hear that, even if he'd known it was true. Now, when he himself was closer to the age Ibuki had been at the time, he had no problem understanding.

“You made the right choice,” Chrono said. “I mean, it wasn't easy to wait, but you kept your promise, so it's not like I have anything to complain about.”

“I made the right choice...” Ibuki mumbled, in wonder. “For once.”

Chrono laughed. “Don't say that.”

“I don't know where I'd be without you,” Ibuki's words muffled, spoken into the side of his face caused a tremor to rise within Chrono's body. He felt dizzy. “Not in the world of the living, that's for sure...”

Chrono sniffled. He felt like he might cry, but not because he was sad. He lifted his hand from Ibuki's back, and pressed laid his head to rest on his shoulder. “Maybe,” He said quietly. “Maybe, but you're here, so it's okay.”

Ibuki held onto him tightly, just like he had that December night when he'd first made his promise. As they walked together alongside the river, Chrono thought how happy he was, and how good life could be, and he thought about all the questions he still had and all the things he wanted them to speak of. He'd seen tonight as an end, an end to his wondering and questioning and an end to this barrier between them, and he'd been so focused on that he hadn't realized it could also be a beginning.

When they reached the station, the taxi station by the Matsuya railroad exit, the magic still hadn't quite let up. Chrono didn't have it in him to hesitate to ask, if they could do this again sometime, because he'd had such a great time. Ibuki had been caught a little off guard, still a little woozy, and Chrono thought it was cute. Sure, he'd said. Of course, he'd smiled. Chrono had wondered if he understood, if he'd felt the same way he had, and would think about that more and harder later, once he was down from this high. When they said goodbye, Ibuki let Chrono hug him, something that felt so much more accessible and natural now.

Chrono went home, taking his time, spring in his step. It was dark, and he could glimpse the stars. Oh, how he yearned, for things near and far. He'd felt so disencouraged lately. Disillusioned, even, for even after getting into school, he struggled, and even after he'd found love, he'd lost it, and his friends, they were all scattering by the wind. The stars were still distant, and they'd remain that way, but other things were closer than he'd ever dared to imagine.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

I mentioned I would update biweekly, but I've decided against that and will instead be updating weekly for starters. Unsure how long I'll be able to do that, but we'll see.

Also, the rating went up.

At dawn, the city was empty. The sky was red, and while the day was breaking, certainly the world was ending. A call from beyond the veil, and he instantly recognized the voice of an old friend. She looked at him with red eyes, and like him, she was alone. In the distance, he could still hear the calls, the cawing of crows, beckoning the coming of a new day, a new world, a new order. A world of nothing, the ultimate form of freedom.

It was all quite familiar, and just as Ibuki remembered he'd had this dream before, the white crow spread her wings and took to the sky. With a falling sensation he woke in his bed, alone.

*Caw caw,* he heard beyond the window, in the dark before dawn.

*Caw caw,* she called out to him, for she was still alone, like him.

His fears were such, and they were the truth and nothing else. He heard the alarm sounded, and the world faded yet again. Waking for a second time, in the heat, in the familiar sensations of reality, Ibuki laid still in bed, exhausted. He eventually reached for his phone, and turned the alarm off. It was early, and he felt like his old self, which in contrast felt more like a husk. Next to him, Chrono had rolled over and buried his face in his pillow. He was most certainly awake, and Ibuki felt bad.

It was still summer. He wouldn't be going to school for a little while. He was regardless preoccupied with schoolwork, but it wasn't like he needed to get up early. Still feeling a great strain in his body, centered in his chest, Ibuki laid back down on his back and drew a sigh.

“What time is it?” Although Ibuki suspected he knew, Chrono still asked.

“Just past 5:30,” He needed to be at the office at seven today. They still had a lot of things to take care of before the weekend. The weekend, which still felt so far away. It was still only Thursday.

Chrono moved just a bit, adjusting himself, and Ibuki turned at the sound. With his back turned, covers below his shoulders, he laid with his arms under his pillow. Drearily, Ibuki stared at his neck, from his jawline to where it connected to his shoulder, and he felt so very dull and heavy, with the slight residue of energy in his body far out of grasp. In his mind, he was already reaching out to lay his hand on Chrono's upper arm, bury his face in his neck and smell his hair. He does not act, but he
recounts the actions it over and over in only a short passing moment, daydreaming. It's ridiculously easy when you know each sensation so well.

He considers it, almost caving to his whims, but as he realizes what's about to happen, panic comes, and his thoughts are replaced by a reprimanding mantra. Instead of thinking, daydreaming, he acts, slowly moving to get his heavy body out of bed. He thinks that he really does not need this right now, but cannot imagine any other possible outcome all things considered. Regardless, he can't be late, and he can't make bad matters even worse.

When Ibuki gets up, Chrono does too. Ibuki looks at him and he still feels bad. “You don't have to be up,” His voice is sluggish. “You can go back to bed.”

Chrono too looks about as tired as Ibuki feels. “I'm gonna make breakfast.” He replies, replacing Ibuki's statement with his own. He's too tired to argue, not about this one thing that they've argued about before.

“Suit yourself.” Ibuki replies, bitterly. As soon as he's said it, he regrets it.

Wishing things were different isn't enough to change them. Ibuki decides to get a grip. If he cannot be happy Chrono decided to get up to make him food, he should at least be thankful. Without complaining, Ibuki showers, brushes his hair, washes his face, and eats the food Chrono makes them.

“Will you have time to meet up for lunch today?” Chrono is already thinking that far ahead. In contrast Ibuki feels like he left his thinking mind behind in bed, all his cognitive capabilities poisoned by his bad dreams.

“I don't know. I should have time, but there's always a chance something will come up,” Ibuki wished he could just say yes. He's too much of a realist to do that. “I'll call you when I know.”

“I might head to school to pick some stuff up, so I'm gonna be around.” Right now, lunch together felt more like a distraction than a treat, but Ibuki also knew that once he was at work he'd feel differently.

“I see. We might be able to work something out, then…”

There were no more conversations to be had. Breakfast still dragged out on time a little. Ibuki never had much appetite when he was tired. It was just minutes after they'd finished that he stood by the door, ready to go. Chrono had slipped up behind him to say goodbye, and as Ibuki had turned around to see him, he put his hand on his shoulder. Without even a single breath's worth of hesitation, Chrono leaned up to kiss him. As he pressed against him, Ibuki felt Chrono's hand in his hair. Despite the early hours, he felt like he'd waited for this for a lifetime. It was just a goodbye kiss. It should have been just a goodbye kiss. Feeling Chrono's arm loop around his neck and his tongue in his mouth, Ibuki pulled away. They didn't have time for this.

Awkwardly, Ibuki stepped backward towards the door. “I should be going.”

“Yeah,” Chrono took no offense. “I shouldn't keep you.”

“Right.” Ibuki replied quickly, and wondered if Chrono could tell how worked up he was. He could, most likely. It never seemed to slip him by.

“I'll call you.” Ibuki was making his way outside.

“Yeah, we'll be in touch.”
As soon as the door closed, Ibuki turned to furiously press the elevator button. He just wanted this day to be over, and then tomorrow, too. Things weren't coming together the way he wanted. Once in the garage, starting up his car, and getting out on the road, he hardly felt any more clear of mind. Like yesterday, and already the day before that, there was a buzz in his head, clouding his thoughts, settling in his body. It distracted him, irritated him, and even more so because he thought he'd rid himself of this feeling. Ibuki didn't particularly enjoy driving, and on days like this it especially felt like a chore. He couldn't afford to get distracted, and it strained him further. Within moments his thoughts would slip away, find their way back to his waking moments, still in bed, still recounting the actions he did not take, now stringing together the full course of events. His senses become dulled, and as a red light delays him on his way, he indulges himself a little bit further. As he does, he feels a tingling sensation under the surface of his skin, on his hands, on his face, quickly spreading.

Ibuki is slow to react to the light once it becomes yellow, and then green. It's hard but he manages to shake it off. Arriving at the office, getting out of his car and slamming the door, he felt his woes turn into true frustration. Aware that the look on his face was probably at least a little terrifying, Ibuki decides to give himself a moment. He had a job to do, as much as he didn't want to right now, and he had responsibilities that only he could take care of. His job mattered, the impression he made on his colleagues mattered, so even if it was hard to find motivation right now, he knew he had to, for his own sake. It had become only more apparent to him over the years, his appointed role, it's meaning at large but also to himself, personally. It was a great honor, truly, and it meant the world to him. It extended far beyond himself, far beyond even the realms of reality as he comprehended it. It had been long since he'd felt the messiah's presence in his life. That surely meant things were well, but in part he could miss her voice, her light. Right now though, he hardly felt qualified as any representative of hers, his sleep-deprived body in shambles and his mind in the gutter.

Having somehow come to terms with the situation he was in, Ibuki left the parking lot and went indoors. Walking down the corridor to his office, Ibuki crossed paths with Mamoru who power-walked towards him, pale as a ghost and seemingly possessed by an unrelenting manic energy. A glance was all it took, and Ibuki could accurately guess that he'd probably slept approximately 45 minutes in the past 24 hours.

"Good morning chief!" He chirped, his gaze a dark abyss. “I uh, left the budget plan brief on your desk! Sorry it's um, a few days late!"

“Good morning Anjou,” Ibuki could only feel so humbled. The Dragon Empire branch was always stretching their deadlines. They were always at least a little late. They did their work more thoroughly and more passionately than any other of the branches, and while Ibuki treasured that, he preferred that they'd be on time. “I'll need you to go over it with me before I leave today, since I won't have time to review it before the press conference tomorrow otherwise.”

“Oh, of course!” Mamoru didn't look very surprised. He was a little hard to read when he was like this. “I just... Can we do this before lunch?”

Ibuki could already feel his lunch date floating out of reach, towards the horizon. “Sure,” He'd seen it coming miles away, and yet he'd dared to hope. “Please go... lie down for a bit.”

“Thanks chief. I... I will.”

Once at his desk, Ibuki didn't wait to text Chrono about their canceled plans. His wordings sparse as usual, he didn't have to worry about being misunderstood. He finally had what he needed, but he still hadn't completed writing the script for tomorrow and before he could start he had more information to review. Further interruptions included a call from the PR department, one person located in a
building a few hundred meters away, about confirming a number of names on the list of invitees. The biannual press conferences was their foundation on which they built their relationships with collaborators and sponsors. Everything had to click. What they were planning now was the event schedule for spring-summer next year, and this time of year Ibuki was always painfully reminded that the Vanguard Association was a machine most fine-tuned for solving short term problems; most likely due to always being behind schedule. Over the years he’d tried and tried again to create time, to streamline the processes, to learn from past mistakes. While he had largely been successful, the last few days before they announced their six month schedules would always be hectic and stressful to say the least.

Mamoru was a few minutes late to their appointed meeting, and Ibuki hardly noticed, as he was hard at work. They’d only barely gotten started when Ibuki’s phone rang. Hardly flinching, Ibuki reached for it, hesitating only once he saw the number.

He picked up. “Hello? It's me.”

“Hey, uh,” Chrono sounded distracted to say the least. Distracted, with a sense of urgency. “Do you have a moment? I sorta need to... talk for a bit.”

“Sure,” Removing his phone from his ear, Ibuki looked at Mamoru. “Anjou, could you... get us some coffee? We’ll most likely be stuck here for a while, and I haven't had any since morning.”

“Oh! Sure thing.” Mamoru appeared to take the hint. Ibuki hadn't the energy to care for the implications. Mamoru hadn't even had the time to close the door behind him before Ibuki was back on the phone.

“What is it?” Ibuki had barely realized how tense he was. He stretched his back in his chair.

“So, like,” Chrono sighed. He sounded no less stressed out. “I got a call. Just now. From Mikuru.” It wasn't like Chrono to be irritated with Mikuru, and Ibuki naturally felt a little uneasy.

“And?” He didn't mean to be so impatient. Chrono had barely paused.

“It's my dad,” Chrono sounded frustrated. “He's coming back home, tomorrow night.”

“What?” Ibuki struggled to absorb the information. “Tomorrow?”

“I think he wanted it to be a surprise.” Chrono groaned. “And well, I am surprised, that's for sure.”

Ibuki sunk into his chair. “So... you're going home.”

“I'm sorry,” Chrono sounded just as let down as Ibuki felt. “I gotta, like, start packing and head home to I can tidy up, go shopping...”

“You're leaving today?” Ibuki already knew the answer.

“Look, I really... I really wanted to stick around until the weekend. I was planning to, since you've been so busy and all.” He usually stayed as long as he felt he could. Ibuki knew that.

“It's not your fault,” Ibuki tried to hide how disappointed he was, and failed. “I... well, I feel like I've barely had any chance to see you all week is all.”

“Yeah. I know.” It hadn't always been obvious to expect things to be this way. “I really wish I'd at least known, you know?”
There was a moment's silence between them, a shared frustration brought by this new information. Ibuki had been holding on because he knew he'd get to see Chrono after getting home, and now he felt increasingly childish and selfish as his motivation was leaving him. He sighed.

“Hey, if...” Chrono spoke. “If I hurry, head on back to your place, hurry to pack, get food on the way back, then get to Mikuru's place, I might be able to stay one more night.”

While Ibuki had been feeling sorry for himself, Chrono had been thinking of a way to solve their problem. How much like him. “I don't want you to rush back and forth all day just for one night.”

“Come on,” Chrono was cheering up a little. “I probably don't have to clean the place much. And I could cook them something simple, then I won't need to prepare much, either. I wanna stay at least one more night, anyway...”

“...Where are you now?” Ibuki had an idea, suddenly.

“School. I went to pick up some stuff. How's so?” Chrono attended TU, which wasn't far from here. Hence why they'd considered meeting up for lunch.

“You could come by here and pick up my car. That should save you time.”

“Really? That'd be great but, how will you get home?”

Ibuki smiled. “Why? Don't wanna come pick me up?”

“...Sure. Just make sure you don't stay too late, okay?”

The door opened and Mamoru came back in, carrying two cups of coffee. Ibuki saw him struggle, and got out of his chair. “I have to hang up, but let me know when you're done.”

Chrono sounded a lot more lighthearted then when he'd called. “Sure! I'll be in touch.”

Hanging up the phone, Ibuki went to help Mamoru with the door. As he was handed a cup of freshly brewed coffee, Mamoru spoke to him. “Keeping busy, are you?”

“Well, I suppose.” Yet again, it was an invitation, one that could be declined. If he wanted to, Ibuki could speak to Mamoru of his personal life. If the circumstances had been any different, he might've accepted the invitation. Instead Ibuki used his workload, his fatigue, his many distractions as an excuse to not speak any more on the subject. Mamoru didn't pry, he never once had, and Ibuki wondered if it was because he knew there was no point in trying. Chrono had come by the office before, specifically to see him. It wasn't strange, or at least if they thought so, no one had said so. Ibuki wondered what it would take for someone to bring it up, but he regardless wasn't very eager to find out.

When the reviewing of the Dragon Empire budget plan was finally finished, Ibuki had worked through most of his lunch. He'd suspected as much would happen, and realized why Chrono had insisted to cook him a proper breakfast. He didn't want to be late home, and when Chrono called, it
was about half past seven. With nothing taken for granted, Ibuki was still making his own plans. Things had changed now that Chrono was going back home, and instead of staying late, Ibuki packed the last of his work to take home with him. When Chrono saw him coming into the parking lot at the appointed time, he looked genuinely surprised.

“I thought I was gonna have to get up there and tear you out of your chair.” Chrono slammed the car door. He spoke from experience. They'd used to work together, after all.

“I still have a few things left. I'm bringing work home with me.” They'd met halfway by the gate. With Ibuki holding a plastic folder under his arm, Chrono offered to take his bag. They were void of any other greeting, an unspoken understanding between them.

“Oh, are you going home already?” Lucky that, for Ibuki hadn't noticed Mamoru leaving just after him before he'd spoken.

“Yes, I...” Uncomfortable, Ibuki knew he didn't need to be so secretive. “I am, I'm taking some work with me.”

Mamoru had never sounded accusing. “Good thing that! You got an early morning tomorrow... Unlike me, I can luckily go home and rest for the weekend.”

“Say hi to your folks!” Chrono said, and Mamoru perked up.

“Sure! And hello, I see you're,” Mamoru had noticed the car, not parked where it had been this morning. “Taking Ibuki home, huh?”

Mamoru was so kind, and so easy to deal with, in the sense that he let his observations be open ended.

“Only if he lets me.” Chrono joked.

With that, Mamoru excused himself, only demanding Ibuki make sure he went to bed on time for tomorrow. With his natural friendliness one of his biggest assets, Ibuki also recognized that it sometimes made Mamoru a bit hard to predict. Ibuki couldn't always tell quite what he was thinking.

Chrono put Ibuki's bag in the backseat and got into the passenger seat. Preoccupied, Ibuki thought nothing of it. He was watching his rear view mirror on the left side, and then on the right, when Chrono asked him, “Or maybe you want me to drive? If you're tired.”

“That's fine.” Ibuki whirled his head around, finally certain there was no-one else in the parking lot.

Chrono had been watching him, and he'd realized just as Ibuki had, that they were clear. They kissed, quickly, lightly. Rolling up the window and turning on the AC, Ibuki started the car. He wanted to go home.

“So, I've been thinking...” Chrono sounded like he had an idea, an idea he wasn't sure Ibuki would like.

“What is it?”

“I've been thinking about this weekend,” Ibuki wasn't sure if he should be bracing. “I thought, maybe, well, maybe you could have dinner with us?”

“Dinner? With your aunt and your father?” Not only confused, Ibuki was now a little scared. “You don't mean we're going to... talk to them, are you?” The slight shiver in his voice was pitiable, Ibuki
“N-no?” He was guilty of relief when Chrono sounded not so different from himself. “I mean, it's pretty sudden. For us, I mean. I mean it would be for them too, but like that's the whole point.”

Ibuki allowed himself to glance at Chrono, who looked like he was struggling a little.

“Look,” He took a deep breath. “What I mean is, I've been thinking. And, if... if we wanna do this, then maybe it's time we at least warmed up to the idea. If we could... spend some time with them together, it won't be as hard, once we decide to tell them.”

As soon as his reasoning had been made clear, it made sense. While certain he'd be uncomfortable, Ibuki didn't hate the idea. In fact, it was perhaps the one thing they could do that would make their situation feel manageable.

“You're,” He still couldn't wash all the doubt out of his voice. “You're right. It's a good idea.”

When Ibuki saw Chrono smile, he felt revitalized. “I thought it was about time you and my dad got to see each other again.”

“Sure. If you don't mind me intruding on your family time.” Ibuki said it only partially as a joke.

“I don't exactly mind...” Chrono spoke earnestly. “If anything I'd prefer you being there. As a distraction. It'll make things less awkward.”

“Oh I'm not... so sure about that.” Making things less awkward was not his forte.

“Besides, I wanna... you know... show 'em that we're good together.”

Ibuki's eyes faintly stung, the focus in his vision faded. “Yeah.” He replied quietly.

“I don't think they'd... well, I don't think they'd be too hard on you, but I still wanna show them. Get them a little familiarized with us.”

Ibuki didn't know what to think. Certainly Chrono knew his family much better than he did himself. However, Ibuki had his own perspective on things. Though he worried, he was certain of one thing. He couldn't let this chance go to waste. If Chrono was going to line him up, give him an opportunity, he wasn't about to waste it. He'd come way too far to do that.

“...Are you okay?” Chrono knew, he always knew when something was bothering him. He'd always felt as if Chrono could see right through him.

“I'm fine,” Ibuki hoped to be truthful. “I just... need some time to think.”

“Yeah, me too.” Chrono admitted. “Sorry if I'm... being too particular about this.”

“Oh, you're not.” Ibuki replied. “Believe me, as far as I'm concerned, you're not.”

Humored, Chrono let it go. “Alright then.”
The kitchen fan hummed. From where he was seated at the kitchen table, Ibuki heard Chrono slice vegetables against the cutting board.

“Are you gonna be able to finish that up?” Chrono asked, and Ibuki looked up from his laptop screen.

“I should be.” Ibuki had already emotionally removed himself from this particular task.

“What is it that you've got left, anyway?”

“I have to finish up the script for tomorrow...”

“What?” Chrono's voice rose. Ibuki narrowed his eyes and stared harder at the computer screen.

“You really should have people doing that stuff for you, you know?” Chrono argued. “You're busy enough as it is, it really shouldn't be your job to write up, like... the official statements for a press conference.”

“It's only twice a year,” Ibuki rebutted, “I can do it fine myself.”

“Which is why you're doing it now, at home, late at night?”

Well aware he couldn't argue against that, Ibuki held his breath for a moment. “We're... getting better at the time management each year. Moreover, if I'm going to represent the organization I want it to be with my own words.”

“It can still be your words,” Chrono wouldn't be convinced so easily. “Just written by someone else.”

Ibuki could poke at his argument, but that would require playing dumb. Arguing with Chrono was hard, not only because he was good at it, but because he was usually right. “Designing and outfitting a new position or assigning new tasks also takes time and effort. So for now, I'm doing it.”

Ibuki saw Chrono look at him from across the room. “Sure, but... you know how I feel about it.”

“Oh trust me, you never leave me guessing.”

“I just think it's nice when you can have some free time.” Chrono adjusted the temperature on the stove, bringing the water in the pot to a simmer. “Things were fine all spring, so I know you can do it. Things don't have to be like they've been this week.”

Ibuki wondered how reliably Chrono had been able to read him as of late. Probably more than he realized. There was less shame in his transparency, more so in his dependency. Even right now, Chrono was cooking for them. Ibuki knew Chrono liked to do things for him, but he wanted to be able to give him the choice of doing so.

“I know...” He replied quietly. He watched Chrono's back, his arms, the width of his shoulders. His mind was still buzzing, and his time was running out.

When Chrono turned around, Ibuki was still watching him. “So you'll think about it?”

“Yeah, I...” If it meant they could spend more time together, how was he supposed to say no? “I will.”

Ibuki took a work call in the living room while Chrono filled the sink with water to soak what he'd
used while cooking. Dinner would be another while, but his work was mostly done. Hanging up the phone after some tense reaffirming of information, Ibuki felt vaguely unsettled. The television was off and the apartment was unusually dimly lit. Coming back into the living room, hearing the water run and seeing Chrono standing there, by the sink, in his kitchen, he became nervous, as if it was something new. He knew what to do, he knew what to say, and he'd been thinking about it since he woke up this morning, and yet he hesitated, even if only for a moment.

Ibuki knew Chrono could hear him coming, and he knew he expected to feel Ibuki's hands on his shoulders, and feel him press his face against the side of his head to whisper in his ear, about as quietly as he could.

“It's already late,” It was barely a complaint. Ibuki could hear the smile in Chrono's voice. “And you still have work to do, don't you?”

Ibuki sighed unhappily, feeling like a child. “I do. It'll be long before you can be here again, though.” His voice was just above a whisper. He felt the heat of Chrono's skin against his face, and inhaling his scent he felt lightheaded.

“I know,” Warmly, Chrono replied. He knew their options as well as Ibuki did. “The food'll be done in a little while. If you hurry up then... maybe we could make some time.”

Ibuki was already distracted. Truth was, he didn't care if he went to bed late. He didn't care, but there was no point in telling Chrono that. He'd just be mad. “...I still have to decide what to wear for tomorrow.”

Tired, Ibuki allowed himself to lean his weight on Chrono. “Why don't you go pick something out then? It shouldn't have to take long.”

Slowly, Ibuki tore himself away. “Right...” He sighed, knowing that indeed it wouldn't have to take too long. He was concerned about the impression he made on others, but it was far from an impossible task.

Ibuki had only just approached his bedroom door as Chrono called out to him, “Why don't you just wear that kimono jacket you got for your birthday? You still haven't used it even once.”

“It's too gaudy.” Ibuki replied, just loudly enough for Chrono to hear him. He'd received it as a gift from a private sponsor, and while it was appreciated, Ibuki considered it against the organization's image to wear anything so expensive while appearing as its representative. It would give people the wrong idea if he looked like he made that much money.

“It doesn't have to be!” Chrono called back to him. “You can wear it dressed down.”

Browsing his wardrobe, Ibuki found it, and realized that maybe Chrono was right. “Besides, I know it'll look good on you.”

While this reassured him for no unknown reason, it still took Ibuki a little more convincing to settle for it. They ate a late dinner, and while Ibuki still had things to do, he made sure to get a proper meal. They conversed about tomorrow, and about the weekend. “I'm gonna call Mikuru tomorrow and ask her. I honestly think they'd be happy to have you, just gotta know if it'll be Saturday or Sunday.”

“What do you know how long your father's staying?”

“About a week? I'm not sure, I didn't ask. He usually doesn't stick around for very long.” Chrono sounded vaguely irritated. “I haven't heard from him since spring, and he kinda showed up outta nowhere then too.”
Ibuki remembered that. It had disturbed their plans back then too. He hadn't had the guts to see him then, but this time he wanted it to be different. “I thought he might get in touch in time for your birthday, but this is a bit early for that.”

“Yeah...” Chrono tired quite quickly speaking of his father.

“I meant to ask, but do you think I should bring anything?” Ibuki asked.

“What? For my dad?”

“Well, I... I suppose I intended it more for your aunt than anyone else.” He'd assumed as much was obvious.

“I mean I guess you could, but... it's just a casual dinner. I don't think she'll expect you to get her anything.”

Perhaps, but Ibuki wanted to get her something. It wasn't just his need to make a good impression. “What does she like?”

“She, uh,” Chrono had to think for a second. “I don't know, alcohol? She doesn't really have any hobbies. She mostly just works a lot.”

“I see...”

“So I guess she's a lot like you in that way.”

Ibuki smiled. “We're both hard to buy presents for?”

“Well, I guess that too.” The fondness in his voice shone through.

They finished eating. Chrono had to tell Ibuki off to keep him from helping with the dishes. Still needing to finish up his work, polish his statements and send them to be delivered, he sat back down by his computer. The minutes passed him by, and suddenly it was later than he'd liked. Chrono was more than done with chores and studied quietly, doing his readings and taking notes. When Chrono had packed his bag and finished putting his things away, Ibuki heard him brush his teeth in the bathroom, and felt the urgency grow.

When they crossed paths outside the bathroom, Ibuki heading in and Chrono headed out, Chrono spoke to him. “Finally getting ready for bed?”

Realizing that Chrono had probably been waiting for him only made it harder to look at him. “I need to... take a shower. Wash my hair.”

“What?” Ibuki was about to close the door behind him. He caught Chrono's glare in the slim opening gap of the doorway. “It's almost midnight?”

“I'll be quick.” It was hard to be firm when Chrono was staring him down.

“Well, you better be...” Chrono was more concerned than angry, more confused than disappointed.

It would be hard to find the time to shower tomorrow, and he wasn't about to risk missing the chance of washing his hair. Getting clean took its set time, and while Ibuki hurried, he knew it would only make that much of a difference. In part, he was in denial about the implausibility of the situation. Finishing his shower, he still had to blow-dry his hair, to keep it from being a disaster the next day. And curse his fragile skin, the hot water made it blush and if he didn't moisturize it would flake and
tear. When he finally came out of the bathroom, wearing clean underwear and a t-shirt, the apartment was dark and quiet. He heard the dishwasher running and there was a slim sliver of light pouring out of the bedroom. Quietly slipping inside the bedroom, Ibuki tread carefully in shame. Chrono, laying under the covers with his back to him, turned over, lifting his eyes from his phone and squinting. Ibuki turned up the light on the dimmer just a little.

Ibuki didn't even want to know what time it was. “I didn't mean to... I'm sorry I took so long.”

Chrono put his phone down. “Well, I'm not the one getting up tomorrow.”

Closing the door carefully, Ibuki sat down on the bed, a bit hesitant to get under the covers. The AC was running, and it was a hot, if temperate evening. Laying down, Ibuki watched Chrono, hoping to get some sort of cue.

“Maybe we should just go to bed.” Chrono suggested with a sigh, and Ibuki felt the words cut into him like a knife.

“Well... if, if you're tired...” Ibuki strung the words together hesitantly, his voice stiff.

“Oh, *I'm* fine,” What sounded like the start of a lecture instead had Chrono rolling over on his stomach with a sigh. “It's late,” He said decidedly. “And you need to sleep.”

Ibuki stared hard at the ceiling. “I have... other needs.” He could speak his mind, knowing Chrono would do the same.

“I know,” Chrono's words were both reassuring and flustering. “I'd been looking forward to it, too.”

Turning his head where he laid, Ibuki watched Chrono peer up at him. He smiled, although Ibuki did not, and Ibuki saw something curious shine in his eyes. Raising his hand to Ibuki's chest, Chrono felt his skin through the fabric. Ibuki wondered if Chrono had noticed him staring, unable to filter out the thoughts that plagued his mind in the long, long hours of today, and yesterday, and the day before that.

Chrono moved closer, speaking directly into his ear. “Maybe we could settle for a quickie?”

They were face to face, almost as close as could be, and Ibuki wished he didn't have to look so unhappy. “No?” Chrono asked, already knowing the answer.

“...I don't know.” Ibuki hated sounding so stingy. He really did. “It's... It's been a long week.”

“Well, yeah,” Chrono exhaled. “I know.”

When Chrono pushed himself on top of him, Ibuki rose his hand to hold Chrono's arm, naturally, like a reflex. As Chrono lightly kissed him just below his ear, his breath hot on his neck, Ibuki felt his body heat up. He tried, and failed, to relax. Chrono knew what he wanted, down to the specifics, and as he heard his voice in his ear, roughly textured in a delicate murmur, it was almost too much to bear. “It's been a long week for me too.”

Feeling Chrono's fingers in his hair, running down it's full length, Ibuki met his lips and they kissed. With Chrono's weight on him, and his tongue sliding past his lips, Ibuki above all else felt blessed. Still holding him close, arm around his waist and his hand holding Chrono's face, they parted. “And you don't mind?”

“I don't,” With one hand on Ibuki's chest, Chrono had braced himself. “It's late. But you're right. We won't get another chance like this for a while.”
It was a satisfying enough answer. With his hand still in his hair, Chrono stared at him. Ibuki could feel the heat that'd built in his chest courtesy of his beating heart rise to his face. Chrono pressed his lips against Ibuki's lightly, kissing him, his face, his neck, all while his hand went in under his shirt and up his chest. A shiver passed through Ibuki's body, a shiver that transmitted to Chrono as he pressed down on him hard, kissing him with a slow building intensity. With his hand rubbing Ibuki's chest, teasing him with sweeping movements, Chrono sucked hard on the skin of Ibuki's neck. Their lips soon met again, a deep kiss shared between them, savored. Ibuki knew Chrono could still overwhelm and topple him, and he'd invite to it. Chrono was driven, assertive, and Ibuki wouldn't have it any other way. They parted, and briefly Ibuki could feel Chrono's heavy breath on his face before he would taste him again. Their kisses were so warm, Ibuki felt his heart swell. This was what he wanted, it was what he'd yearned for.

Chrono pulled himself up, straddling Ibuki, shifting the weight of his body to his hips. Feeling him, Ibuki drew a quiet breath that was barely a gasp. Chrono had been stroking his hair, now letting his fingers touch his face. As he reached down to kiss Ibuki once more, he slid backwards, kissing his neck down to his chest. With Chrono's warm hands firmly on him, under his shirt and traveling lower, Ibuki could only think of what waited. It never took that much; not for Ibuki, no. Chrono's hand on his thigh, grabbing him, rubbing him, up and down, touching the thinner skin on the inside of his leg, was more than enough. Chrono's lips had left his body, and instead he'd raised his head to sit back to watch as Ibuki become increasingly excited under the firm touch of his hand. Ibuki felt his gaze grace his skin hotly, and he blushed. They could do this for a good while. Ibuki would quickly feel as if he was going a little crazy, and more so when Chrono watched him. In a moment's passing they kissed again, with Chrono pushing himself forward. As he felt Chrono's hips grinding against his own, Ibuki inhaled sharply, groaning against his lips. Ibuki knew now, without a doubt, that Chrono could feel him. It still embarrassed him a little how easy it was for Chrono to do this to him, but as the heat rose to his head, he forgot all about that feeling. Oh, it felt so good, but this was still just the beginning. Soon, Ibuki could feel Chrono too, only making it so much more unbearable.

Rising his head, heaving himself up with his palms on the mattress, Chrono didn't bother to catch his breath before speaking. “You good?”

Laying flat on his back with Chrono on top of him, Ibuki struggled to raise his head, too. “Y-yeah, I should be...”

They shouldn't get too distracted. Sliding off Ibuki and off the side of the bed, Chrono could be heard opening the drawers on Ibuki's nightstand. He took more than a few second, which was enough for him to complain. “You gotta stop hiding this stuff like you live with your parents or something...”

Ibuki heard his grumbling and moved to peer over the edge of the bed. Certainly it couldn't be that hard. Chrono looked up at him, and saw Ibuki become flustered. “Give me that,” He said as he took the square plastic package Chrono held between his lips to free his hands. “And it's in the bottom drawer.”

Laying back down, Ibuki felt his heart beat in his chest. He still got a little nervous. Just a little, though. Chrono only took a few more seconds before he came back, wasting no time to get all over him, kissing him, quickly getting distracted by his neck, his hair, his shoulders. With his hand clutching the back of Chrono's shirt, Ibuki gave him a nudge. Sliding down, his body between Ibuki's legs, Chrono again could not quite stop himself, as he got stuck by the gap that had appeared between the hem of Ibuki's shirt and the top of his underwear. Ibuki squirmed, and with his fingers in Chrono's hair, he felt the movement of his head under his hand as well as he felt his lips and tongue on his skin. As Ibuki raised his leg and pulled it towards him, Chrono appeared to snap to attention. Resting the underside of his thigh against Chrono's shoulder, Ibuki adjusted himself against the
mattress, sliding an inch or so on the surface. Chrono's lips were still pressed against his skin as Ibuki felt him pull off his underwear from below him.

Chrono's hands were always so warm, but the lubricant made them cold, at least at first. Ibuki made an effort to relax, but apparently it wasn't quite enough. "You're a bit tense," Ibuki felt Chrono's breath against his abdomen as he spoke.

"I'm... aware, I..." There should be a reason, he thought. "I suppose I'm still a bit stressed out."

"That's not good," Chrono sounded a little distracted, but nonetheless concerned. Ibuki felt the pressure, not from Chrono, but from himself, and from the clock that was ticking. "Is there anything, like, that you want me to...?"

Ibuki tried to think, but his mind was swimming. He was still impatient; perhaps that impatience in itself was the issue. "For now, just... keep going. I mean, it... it feels good."

"I could blow you, if you want." The tone of his voice made it all too clear, that this was something Chrono wanted, rather than something he was selflessly offering. Ibuki knew what he liked, too.

"You know I'll just," Ibuki breathed, trying to figure out if it was a good idea or not. "I'll just come like that, I'm afraid."

Maybe the risk was worth it. He wasn't completely sure. Chrono hadn't stopped moving, and as Ibuki felt him push and work the friction he'd been building up, he gave up trying to figure it out. Surely he wouldn't be tense for much longer. Chrono leaned forward, taking the leg hinged over his shoulder with him, so that he could reach deeper. Ibuki hadn't fully expected it, and couldn't stop himself from gasping at the sensation. It wasn't long before Ibuki could really feel his patience failing him. "I should... I should be good now."

"Really? Are you sure?" Chrono was just checking on him because he cared. Ibuki knew that. Ibuki also knew that Chrono could keep this up all night, if he'd only let him, if only they had the time.

"Yeah, I... I should be."

Rising, Chrono climbed back up Ibuki's length. Setting his hand set down on Ibuki's bare stomach, the lubricant and the moisturizer made for a bad combination. Chrono had no time to even make a single sound before he face planted on Ibuki's chest.

"...Are you okay?" Propping himself up on his elbows, Ibuki watched Chrono turn his head and look up at him, not completely sure what had just happened.

"I'm fine." His voice was a little muffled by Ibuki's shirt, and Ibuki recognized his slight irritation as embarrassment. How endearing.

"I'm going to roll over." As Ibuki said it, he brought Chrono with him to a sitting.

"Wait, really?" Surprised, Chrono pulled himself up. Ibuki couldn't help but feel a bit self-conscious. This wasn't usually how they did it. Ibuki knew Chrono liked to see his face. He too preferred it that way.

"Sorry, I'm... still a bit tense." Ibuki's tone of voice reflected his words. He didn't like sounding stingy.

"Hey, it's no problem." Ibuki was still holding on, hoping he'd feel more relaxed in a moment.
As Chrono got off him, Ibuki turned over to lay on his stomach. With his head rested on his arm, he adjusted himself to get comfortable. He was just about to wonder what Chrono was up to when he heard him speak.

“Where’s the, uh,” Ibuki struggled to turn his head to have a look. “Where’s the condom? You took it before.”

“Oh,” Sharply, Ibuki moved his arm to feel around on the mattress. He had indeed had it, but he had let it go at some point. He felt Chrono search along his sides, but there was nothing there. “Wait. Here it is.”

Ibuki had ended up rolling on top of it, and found it inside the wrinkles of his shirt. “Here.” Handing it to Chrono and hearing his thanks, Ibuki laid back down and again tried not to think about how late it was. As he heard Chrono rustle a bit behind him, he realized that this would be it, and as he did he once more felt his heart beat heavily in his chest. When he felt Chrono's warm hand on his side, he knew to raise his hips as Chrono helped him steady his stance. Ibuki felt his hand before anything else. Even though they'd taken their time to prepare, Chrono was still checking on him.

“Chrono.” Ibuki let the impatience seep into his voice.

“Right,” He heard the smile in Chrono's voice, sounding like he was holding back a laugh. It made Ibuki all the more flustered, yet all the more excited. He pressed his lips tightly together, but still couldn't keep himself from making a sound. Chrono was always slow at first, careful and sensible. He pushed, bit by bit, his familiar shape giving Ibuki a rush. Ibuki knew it would take a little while, and as Chrono moved slow, he tried to gather his patience. As Chrono gently came to a slow, rocking movement, Ibuki heard him sigh. Little by little, Chrono gradually let Ibuki engulf him. Once they were connected by the hip, Ibuki felt Chrono lean down his full length, as far as he could. He brushed Ibuki's hair out of his face, gently, with his fingertips against his skin, tucking it behind his ear. With his temple against his pillow, Ibuki still couldn't see much of Chrono from where he laid, but he could track his movements. As Chrono placed his hand atop the back of his own, Ibuki felt him relax into him with a searing sensation. Ibuki was already lightheaded. Chrono started moving again, pacing himself a little faster. Ibuki closed his eyes and with Chrono's hot breath on his back he absorbed the sensation, living it. This was what he'd been waiting for.

“You're still a little tense,” Chrono could no doubt feel it, and as Ibuki breathed in sync with him, he wondered what else he could feel.

“It's fine,” Ibuki spoke breathily, with a certain amount of nerve. “You can go faster.”

“Okay,” There was that smile in his voice again, sounding as he pressed himself forward. Ibuki sunk deeper into the mattress, and he felt Chrono's hand in his hair again, his fingers grasping at his scalp in a firm grip. As he did move faster, Ibuki heard Chrono groan quietly. Ibuki didn't realize, but he was now ready to forget all about today, and tomorrow, and finally relax. The searing sensation had turned burning hot, and it was becoming increasingly hard to think.

“Yes, th-that's good...” The words left Ibuki on a breath, and voicing his feelings in and of itself brought him pleasure. They made love with a steady rhythm, and as he moved, Ibuki felt Chrono draw a shivering breath against the skin on his back, and then hold it. He would do that. Hold his breath, bite his lip, all while pressing his face against Ibuki's back, or his neck, or where else he could hide it.

As the intensity built, slowly, Ibuki anticipated the shiver in his body that would come and push him further and further. He felt it coming, and then, Chrono's weight shifted uncomfortably on top of him, inside him, his knees slipping on the sheets of the bed. As he exhaled loudly, Ibuki felt Chrono's
rugged panting against his neck as he'd come to a sudden stop. Surprised, and breathless with Chrono pressing down on him, Ibuki could at first not find his voice to speak. “Chrono?” Confused, Ibuki voice was lightly studded with concern. And concerned he was, for good reason. “Chrono, did you--”

“It's okay, I just,” Chrono was trying to catch the breath that he had been holding. “I felt like I was gonna finish, so...”

“Already?” Ibuki said without really thinking. It struck him as unusual. This normally didn't happen.

“Yeah, I don't... know.” Chrono sounded a little out of it.

“I feel better. I could lay on my back, if you'd like.” Ibuki said this, knowing Chrono would snap to attention.

“Oh, yeah. I'd like that...” Chrono's voice was warm, like the touch of his hand, or the friction that had built between their bodies.

They parted, but not for very long. As soon as Ibuki was on his back, Chrono was above him, kissing him. Ibuki lost himself in it for a moment, but wasn't about to let Chrono waste too much of their time. Soon, they came back together. Ibuki didn't have to do much, once Chrono got the hint. Putting his hand under Ibuki's thigh, lifting it, pushing forward, Chrono came in close. It was so much easier this time, it was almost effortless. They continued where they'd left off, and as he moved, Chrono pushed himself up, on top of Ibuki, taking his legs with him, spreading them wider. Ibuki felt Chrono's eyes on him, staring at him with a shining intensity. It still made him flustered, as much as he loved it, it still made his face burn and his head spin. They held eye contact, and Ibuki felt like it was almost too much to bear, the way Chrono looked at him, the way he leaned in closer only so that he could get a better look at his face. Ibuki knew, he knew he'd become increasingly disheveled, and with Chrono's eyes on him he became all the more aware of it, aware of the sounds that left him with every breath, erupting from deep within him. His hair that he'd taken care to wash and blow before bed had become a mess too, strands sticking to his face, becoming tangled as they rubbed against the pillow under his head.

As Chrono leaned down close, as close as he could while his movement rocked them back and forth, and as Ibuki felt his gaze and his breath equally close to his face, Chrono whispered to him, his voice rough and warm with feeling. “You're really adorable, you know that?”

With a slight twitch in his body and sharp inhale to his lungs, Ibuki had tensed up and let out a strangled sound that could only be described as yelp. Chrono stopped moving.

“Sorry? Was that...” He sounded sorry indeed, but also like he had no idea what to say. “What that too much?”

Ibuki had raised his hand to his face, covering his eyes. He was still breathing heavily. “It's fine. I... it's... it's fine.” He wished Chrono hadn't stopped to ask him, it only embarrassed him further.

“You sure? ‘Cause if it is, you can just tell me.” Chrono had said things like that to him in the past, but still not quite like this. Perhaps, Ibuki thought, he'd been easing in on it, testing how far he could take it.

“I... I like it,” Ibuki admitted, as hard as it was on him. It was only fair. His voice was hard, darkened with tension. “I like it, it just... surprised me.”

“A-Alright then...” Chrono sounded hesitantly pleased with the answer. It was a little hard for Ibuki
to look directly at him. “I mean, I thought so. I'm just making sure.”

Ibuki knew it'd sounded almost like he was in pain. That frustrated him, more so because he didn't want that to bother him right now. “Let's... let's continue. I should be... close, anyhow.”

“Yeah,” Chrono sounded more than eager. There was something almost devilish over him at times when they had sex like this, but Ibuki knew it was just the extent of his feelings showing through.

They'd become interrupted a second time, and Ibuki felt more ready than ever before. There was clear resonance between them there, and Chrono soon stopped holding back. The sound of movement became more defined. Ibuki had gotten better at not letting it affect him so much, but it was impossible for him to ignore it completely. He might wonder if Chrono enjoyed the sound of the bed creaking under them or the sound of how they rubbed together, if he didn't quickly lose track of any train of thought. Feeling they both yearned for the extra support, Ibuki pressed his hand against Chrono's lower back, clutching the fabric of his shirt. As the sensations overloaded his senses, Ibuki threw his head back and uttered Chrono's name, his voice almost strangled by his bated breath. Well aware of what was happening, Chrono pressed down onto him harder. Ibuki's voice sounded almost like it was breaking, and as he said his name a second time, it was with a yearning need.

“I, I'm coming---” With both readiness and urgency in his voice, Ibuki confirmed what he knew Chrono already suspected.

“Yeah?” Indeed aware, and oh so very pleased, Chrono's voice was almost as heavy as Ibuki's own. “Do you-- do you wanna come?”

“Yes,” Ibuki inhaled his response sharply, his voice sounding higher than he would've liked.

“Yeah?” Chrono sounded almost humored, and as he smiled, Ibuki felt his heart soar. “I... I am.”

“Don't stop.” With mere seconds to spare, Ibuki knew he had to be somewhat concise. “I want you to, finish, like this---”

“Shit, okay,” Straining his voice, Chrono spoke, and Ibuki saw something pass over his face, as if he was only just now letting go. His voice trembled, and yet he sounded unwavering. “If that's what you want, then---”

“Chrono,” Ibuki called out breathlessly, raising his voice louder than before, and as his climax passed though him, he let his head fall back, his back arching, rising him from the mattress. Chrono kept his promise made less than a moment ago, and Ibuki heard him mumble and curse quietly under his breath. Chrono moving past his climax was too much, it was overwhelming, and Ibuki felt himself shiver and heard himself whine to his continued rhythm. It was too much, and yet, it was never unpleasant, and seconds later when Ibuki heard Chrono gasp loudly as his body came to a stop with a final, heavy push, he felt incredibly accomplished.

They were still together, Ibuki could feel Chrono's heavy panting resonate with him along the slight movements of his body. “Are you okay?” Chrono asked him, impatient to check on him.

“I'm... I'm perfectly fine.” Ibuki responded, unsuccessful in his attempt to try and regain any composure.
Sighing, Chrono appeared satisfied with his answer. They parted, and it was a little awkward, as Chrono tried to not make a mess. Ibuki wanted to cuddle, and he wanted it right now, but as soon as Chrono got up, he swung his legs over the side of the bed and patted down a tissue from the nightstand drawer on the wet spot on Ibuki's abdomen. Then, he got up, stumbling towards the door as he tried to put his underwear back on.

“Do you need anything?” He asked, and while Ibuki was thankful he did, he couldn't think of anything.

“I'm good. Just... come to bed.” Chrono didn't respond, and Ibuki heard him in the kitchen, throwing things away, running water and getting something from the cupboard. He wasn't gone for long, and when he came back holding a glass of water, he closed the door behind him with his foot and turned off the lights.

“Here.” Casually, he offered Ibuki to drink.

“Thank you.” Ibuki accepted. He'd said he didn't need anything, but thinking about it now, he was feeling quite thirsty.

Chrono came to bed, and just as he'd placed the water glass on the nightstand, Ibuki felt Chrono draw in close to him. They kissed lightly, and as Chrono rested his head on his shoulder, Ibuki allowed himself to relax, finally at peace.

“It was really good for me.” Chrono spoke with his voice muffled, his face pressed against Ibuki's neck.

“Yeah.” Ibuki responded quietly. He'd been most certain as such, but it was still reassuring to hear.

“And I could tell it was for you too.” There was a teasing sound to Chrono's mumbling voice.

“Yeah...” Ibuki allowed himself a smile. He hadn't doubted that in the slightest.

“I'm sorry. I'm... I'm so tired...” After a moment, Ibuki moved just a little, and while he returned Chrono's embrace, that was about all he was good for right now.

“It's okay, it's late.” Chrono sighed. He sounded tired too. “Do you wanna know what time it is?”

Ibuki grimaced. “No, I don't.”

“Just asking.”

Ibuki thought a little of tomorrow, but his thoughts quickly faded. Embraced, he felt a calmness he might describe as otherworldly. This was something that said more about him than anything else, surely. Ibuki was still getting used to this feeling. But getting used to it he was, and he treasured it. May it strengthen his resolve, and give him the courage he needed to push through. He could never let go now. It was too late for that. The nightmares may come and go, but he refused to give them any more power over him.
It was still early when he woke up at the sound of his phone ringing. In a state of disarray, unable to recall what day it was, Chrono rose to grab his phone off his desk. When he saw the number, he spiraled into confusion. He picked up.

“...Hello?”

“Ah, hey! Hello, Chrono! It's been like, forever hasn't it?” Tsuneto's voice could be heard on the other end, and Chrono was still somehow baffled.

“It really has...” He replied, still not fully familiar with the situation.

“So, what's up? How are you?”

“I just woke up. It's... It's seven AM.” In his confusion Chrono stumbled to a standing. He was home alone, and with moment's passing he remembered that today was a Saturday.

“Hey, sorry! Did I wake you up?” Tsuneto sounded cheeky. A bit too cheeky. He was straining himself.

“What do you want?” Chrono asked with a sigh.

Tsuneto became stiff with silence on the other end. “Look, I... I need your help.” With a sharp 180 in terms of tonal shift, Tsuneto's quivering voice sounded almost fearful.

“...What is it?” Chrono knew him well enough to know his dramatic tendencies.

“You'll help? For real?”

“I mean, you'll have to tell me what it is first.” Chrono would have hoped he didn't have to explain that, but when Tsuneto got himself riled up, he'd jump to conclusions with such rapid succession it was impossible to keep track of what he was thinking.

“Okay, okay, so,” Tsuneto tried to calm himself down a little. “So I'm, like, at school, and,”

“You're at school? Today?”
“No, no, I meant to say that... At my school, clubs are obligatory, right?” Chrono had to try and remind himself where exactly Tsuneto went to school. “And we got a vanguard club so that's good, and I'm in it.”

“Sounds fun.” Chrono said, earnestly. He wished he had the time for something like that.

“Yeah! Yeah, it is,” Tsuneto was talking faster again. “And we do all sorts of stuff, right? Today we're having like, a meet up outside of school, and it's gonna be one of the last before some of the older member graduate and uh... do you wanna come?”

Chrono had no idea what to say. He hadn't met Tsuneto is a pretty long time. They would run into each other now and then, but it'd been a long time since they’d actually hung out. He had nothing important planned today, and it sounded like it could be fun; that was not the problem. There was something more to this, without a doubt.

“Sure I'd... I mean, yeah? It sounds like fun, but---”

“So you're not busy? Are you busy?”

“I'm not busy.” Chrono was starting to run out of patience. “I mean no offense but why are you asking me? It's kinda out of nowhere, and also with really short notice.”

“Look, so, well... I...” Tsuneto hadn't actually expected Chrono to just go along with it without asking, had he? “Look. I just... I wanna make a good impression and I don't wanna show up there alone. Kei had some family stuff come up. And Carl... failed one of his exams and has to retake it. And I don't know who else to ask.”

Chrono still wasn't fully convinced there wasn't something more to this. “Okay, what's going on?”

“Nothing's going on,” Tsuneto was already getting defensive. Suspicious. “It's just... like, our club captain's graduating, and this'll be my last chance to see him in a casual setting, so like... I can't just show up all on my own, you feel me?”

Chrono, who had been peering into his fridge wondering what to make for breakfast, was overcome with sudden fatigue when he understood the implications. “...You want me to come with you so I can help you get with this guy?”

“Chrono, please,” Tsuneto dropped the act so fast Chrono could physically feel the whiplash. He sounded almost like he was about to cry. “Please. I gotta at least try. If you met him, you'd get it, I know it.”

Chrono winced, and Tsuneto wouldn't let him think in peace. “He's great. And I wouldn't ask you if I wasn't out of options you know? And besides, you know I'd do the same for you.”

Tsuneto's ramblings were already headed in all sorts of directions. Indeed, Chrono didn't think he was lying, but the truth was also that Chrono would never be so out of options that he'd ask Tsuneto for help with something like this. Even if he had all the options, he still probably wouldn't ask anyone. No, the mere thought of it embarrassed him deeply, on a very primal level.

“Besides, it'll be fun! You said it yourself!”

Chrono had indeed said that just a few seconds ago. “...I'll go, but---”

“Yes! Thank you!” Chrono wondered if he would regret this.
“I said, I'll go but there's a limit to what I'll do, okay? I'll come with you and hang out. That's it. Okay?” Chrono had no idea what would come out of this, which was more than enough a reason to make the conditions he was working under very clear.

“That's fine! That's perfectly fine? Wh-what do you think I'm about huh?”

“Look, I'm just making sure.” Chrono was not great at navigating these sort of situations. It would be bad to be humiliated. He also didn't want to let down Tsuneto, either, since he seemed quite serious about this guy. Then again, Tsuneto was no stranger to infatuations of the indulgent kind.

“I'll text you all the info and stuff. Or wait. It's in an email. I'll just forward it to you.” Tsuneto had already moved on.

“Sure,” Chrono said, already tired. “What time is it?”

“Uh,” The fact that he hesitated didn't make Chrono feel super good. “It should be around five. Tonight. We're all having dinner. I'll send you the info okay?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Being dismissive could backfire when talking to Tsuneto while he was like this. Chrono didn't want to make that mistake. “I'll keep an eye on my inbox okay? And I'll let you know when we can meet up.”

“Nice! Great!” Upbeat, maybe a bit too upbeat for his own good, Tsuneto was back on track.

“Right, see you later, then?”

After they hung up, Chrono felt vaguely optimistic about the whole thing. He needed to get out, to take his mind off of things.

They met up with time to spare, because Tsuneto wanted to be there early. The meet up would be at a fairly generic second story restaurant, a ten minute walk from the Shinjuku station through the narrow store-lined streets still littered with Christmas lights. With his hands in his jacket pockets, walking well-paced in the growing crowds of people, Chrono listened as Tsuneto gave him the low-down, accompanied by many hand gestures. His name was Michio, he was a bunch of years older than the two of them, and also he was the sweetest, smartest, and prettiest guy ever. Tsuneto had so far done pretty well in his efforts, and they were considered perhaps more than acquaintances, but not quite friends. Chrono took most of Tsuneto's long-winded explanation with a grain of salt, with one exception. Chrono knew what Tsuneto was into, at least when it came to men, and while he'd never admit it to him, he considered him to have pretty good taste.

Upon arrival, they realized they were indeed early. Chrono was quick to understand who the club captain in question was, even with Tsuneto's vague, yet embezzled description. Among the few people assembled, one among them was a particularly pretty young man with a sweet smile and sharp eyes. What else Chrono noted about him at a glance, was how he made his long hair with jaggedly cut edges somehow appear dignified.

“That's him.” Tsuneto had whispered to him, unnecessarily.
“Right...” Chrono didn't dare ignore him. “Let's just go say hello.”

Michio took note of Tsuneto as soon as they approached him. “Oh, Tado! Hello!”

He appeared friendly and inviting, even if there was something particular about the look in his eyes. There was an intensity in them that did not fade.

“H-hey!” Chrono imagined his presence might have some effect on Tsuneto's nerves. Then again, he was always pretty jumpy. “It's, uh, great to be here!”

Before Chrono had a chance to introduce himself, or Michio had any chance to ask, Tsuneto spared them the trouble. “This is Chrono, by the way.”

“Hello, it's... nice to meet you.” Chrono hoped he wouldn't spend all night feeling like he was intruding.

“I know you.” The comment surprised him, as did the casual, sweeping tone. People still did recognize him sometimes, at least people he met on occasions like this. “Shindou Chrono?”

“Yeah, that's... me.” He hadn't intended to bring any attention to himself.

“Me and Chrono go way back,” Tsuneto interjected. “Right?”

He wasn't wrong. Chrono smiled. “Yeah, it's been how many years?”

“We've known each other since middle school. We used to hang out all the time, am I right?”

Things hadn't been all that peachy when they first met, but whatever. It was all good memories now. “Yeah, we sure did.”

“Well, it's great to have you,” The notion seemed sincere enough. “I hope you don't mind a fight later? We were planning to make some time for that.”

“Oh, that'll be fun.” Chrono certainly thought so. “I'm surprised you're all meeting up here though, and not at a shop or something.”

“Oh, silly!” Tsuneto berated him, jokingly. “You can't eat at a shop!”

Michio laughed. “He's right. But you can play vanguard anywhere. Isn't that the whole point?”

“I... I guess.” Chrono wasn't sure why he felt embarrassed, but hoped he'd at least contributed to breaking the ice.

It was then that the door to the establishment came open, and Tsuneto was called out to by his friends from school. He shot an agitated glance at Chrono, and looking a little pale he excused himself and slipped away.

“Tado mentioned he would bring a friend but he didn't tell me who. I don't think he's ever mention you before.” Chrono could already tell that Michio was a straight forward person who, while polite, spoke his mind.

“We don't have time to see each other that much anymore.” Chrono's response was perhaps a simplification, but regardless true. “We used to hang out at the same shop. But since we graduated high school, well, it's not the same.”

“I know how it is.” Michio appeared to sympathize. “That's why the club's so important.”
“Oh yeah. I totally get that.”

“Are you in school? Most schools have a club.”

“Yeah, uh, we have one, but I don't really have time for it I'm afraid.” It was the truth. Chrono still played outside of school, but a little less than he wanted.

“I see. Well, that's just how it is sometimes,” Michio didn't look like he was about to pry. “We'll see how much time I'll have after I graduate. I'm trying to make the most out of these last few get togethers we're having.”

“I assume you... already have something set up?” Chrono fumbled with his phrasing.

“Oh yes,” Michio seemed pleased to change the subject. “It's just an intern position, but they're a developer of different mobility aids.”

Chrono hadn't been sure what to expect. “Congratulations. That's... really interesting.”

“Honestly though, I'm more interested in enrichment. Things like vanguard for example. It can be great tool for many people, and it's not properly utilized. It already has great accessibility, but it can be even better.” Chrono could tell they'd breached a subject he was passionate about. “It's helped me so much, so I'm well aware of the potential.”

“I... I get what you mean.” Chrono's mind was racing a little. He had a lot of things to say, and wasn't sure where to start. “I... I worked for the Vanguard Association for about a year.”

“Oh? Really?” Michio seemed interested.

“Yeah, and even before I got the job, I volunteered a lot. So I know, the difference it can make. To give kids a place to be and just be themselves, you know? It's really something that should be an option for everybody.”

“Oh, yes. I agree so much.” Michio's eyes had lit up. Chrono hadn't expected them to have something like this in common and before he'd even realized it, they were holding a rather in-depth conversation on the topic. Before Tsuneto came back to try reclaim his place in the conversation, they'd yet to move on.

Eventually, the appointed time came along, and they all sat down to eat. Chrono wasn't sure how it happened, but he looked up to see Michio seated across of him.

“Truth is,” They'd been unable to stray too far from their initial topic. “I've always admired the work of the Vanguard Association.”

“Yeah, they're great.” Chrono felt a need to put his words in context. “I mean, way back they had some... bad times, but even then they had a lot of respectable side projects. I made use of some of it myself, and I spent a lot of time around there you know?”

The restaurant was a little noisy, and Chrono saw Michio nod as he listened.

“But since they changed management, they've only gotten better you know? I mean, since---” As cold sensation passed through him, Chrono lost track of his words, and had to rethink his sentence from the start. “The new management has really just improved things over the years and I know how hard they're working on things like accessibility and... finding and hiring the right people. They could do even more, but it's like, they're aware of it and are trying to get there.”
“I would love to have a chance to work with them in the future if I can.” Michio sounded earnest.

Chrono smiled, but still felt the chill.

Dinner ended, and drinks came in. Tsuneto discreetly elbowed himself into the seat next to Michio. They all talked, and it was a good time. After spectating a first round of games Chrono was challenged by Michio, who'd stood by his word. Accepting the offer, Chrono learned that Michio played Dark Irregulars. The choice appeared to clash with him at first, but as the game went on, the deck came to mesh well with him. Chrono understood something he couldn't quite articulate, but most noticeably he learned that Michio had the type of presence in a fight that over-shadowed luck or skill. Which was to say, he was the type of opponent that made games fun, regardless of how things played out.

“Aww, I lost.” Michio bemoaned his loss playfully.

Chrono had won. As for why, it wasn't that complicated. He'd been the better player.

“I... I had really fun.” Chrono admitted to him, not sure how to make his emotions shine clear and true to their full extent through his words.

“Me too!” With a smile, Michio extended a hand in thanks. Chrono took it, and it was pleasantly warm.

Their little audience had become quite captivated by the end of the fight, and Chrono was soon approached by more people. Tsuneto in turn managed to get Michio to agree to play with him, too. The hours passed them by, and as Tsuneto left to approach the bar, Chrono quietly left for the bathroom. After washing his hands, he came back to a mostly empty table. As he sat down, Michio spoke to him, his face rested in his hand.

“Do you smoke?” He smiled, and his eyes shifted, watching the back of his fellow club members who'd left their jackets and bags by the table and were lined up by the elevator.

Chrono didn't understand at first. “No, I... I don't.”

“Oh, that's a relief.” Michio smiled, running his thumb along his bottom lip. “See, I have asthma.”

Chrono was slow to realize what had just happened. As he felt his face take color, Michio laughed pleasantly. He was still powerless, powerless to find much of anything to say or do when a pretty boy would smile at him like that.

Afterwards, when all had been said and done, Tsuneto had cornered him outside a convenience store a block or so from the station once all of his friends were out of earshot.

“How could you---” His hands raised, he'd gone for Chrono's neck. “Do this to me?”

Tsuneto's hands fell limply on his shoulders, his voice having broken with sadness. Chrono did feel bad. “Look, I didn't do anything. He was the one who came on to me.”

Tsuneto sobbed loudly and dryly.

“Look, I get that you really like him. You can have his number if you want.” Chrono had... acquired
“And I'll just... not go out with him.”

“I appreciate it. You're a true friend.” Tsuneto sounded like he was crying for real now. “But I couldn't ask you to do that. It's not right.”

Certainly, Chrono wasn't sure if he'd able to accept that favor from anyone else, either.

“Take it! I mean you're not seeing anyone, are you?” Tsuneto's melodrama wasn't enough to lighten the blow of his assumption.

It was a cold January night. It was clear, and the air was fresh, while Chrono's mind was clouded. Maybe he'd thought he was seeing someone, for a while. He'd been wrong. That was what he'd been left to assume. Chrono hadn't heard from Ibuki in weeks. They'd seen each other every week since his birthday in September. They'd made plans to see each other again in December, but after Ibuki had canceled on him with short notice, Chrono had heard barely a word from him. Chrono had never stopped holding onto that sliver of hope, even as the weeks had passed and virtually nothing had happened between them. When they were apart, he'd been anxiously aware of how Ibuki would refuse to repeat the gesture of holding his hand, and how he'd often abruptly cut their goodbyes short. When they were together, he'd been certain, without a shadow of a doubt, that if he just gave him enough time, Ibuki would come around. The way Ibuki would look at him had been more than enough for him to feel so certain. So often Chrono would catch him watching his back, looking at his face, physically feeling the sensation on his skin. It had been more than enough, even when Ibuki refused to actually touch him.

In the end, he'd been left with nothing but doubts. The frustration had threatened to push him over the edge. The realizations that hurt the most were the ones about himself. How long had it been? How long had he felt like this? The fact that he wasn't fully sure unsettled him. When it came to Ibuki, he'd always been like this. Preoccupied. Obsessed. Unable to let anything go. A glance, a few words, a gesture, was it took, and he'd be ready to draw conclusions, making it all grow out of proportion. Perhaps he was simply delusional, caught up in his own wishful thinking, projecting. Perhaps his own selfish feelings would only ruin everything, if he allowed them to take control.

Perhaps it was time to wake up, and try to move on. He wasn't a kid anymore. Maybe Ibuki would never see him as anything but, and maybe that hurt more than it should be possible, but being dragged along by his far-fetched dreams would hurt more than just his feelings. Chrono wasn't concerned with dignity in matters of love, but he wanted to live his life and take the chances he got to be happy.

Chrono really had not planned to steal Tsuneto's crush right from under his nose, but the two of them had clicked and he'd had a great time tonight. He had Michio's number in his phone, complete with a confirmation text.

“It wouldn't be fair for me to ask you to do anything else, man...” Tsuneto was still in his own world. “Besides, I saw what was going on. He clearly likes you.”

“I guess I'll... think about it.” Chrono needed a little time to digest all this. “He was really nice, though.”

He'd admitted it sheepishly. Tsuneto glared. “Oh, you noticed?” He was understandably upset.

As they walked to the trains, Tsuneto spent most of the trip bemoaning his life. While he didn't spare him the details of his emotional turmoil, Chrono could hardly blame him. In return, he didn't say much. He had no advice to give. However, he did listen, and quite carefully so.
“I know it's not easy,” Chrono sighed as he watched the Tokyo cityscape drift by outside in the dark.
“You know... being in love. Not... getting your way.”

Tsuneto had his head laid all the way back on the head rest. The cart they were in was near-empty. The yamanote line was not very busy at this hour. “I'm surprised you know anything about that.” It was an invitation, not an accusation.

Chrono didn't respond.

Chrono and Michio stayed in touch via text. They had their first date two weeks after their first meeting. It was a simple dinner date, and a honest good time, even if Chrono felt a lot more self-conscious than he had the first time. Upon parting, Michio had kissed him, an action in line with his straightforward personality. What shocked Chrono more than anything, was the realization of how long it'd been. Oh, how good it felt to be kissed, to not have to guess, or doubt anything. It was quick, simple kiss, well suited for a first date, and it stayed with him.

It didn't take very long for their relationship to take form. Other than the attraction between them, Chrono also found many of their priorities in life align. Michio was easy to talk to, although hard to reason with once he'd made up his mind. He was an emotionally independent, opinionated and compassionate person. All things Chrono valued in someone. To make things even easier, Chrono's friends liked Michio, and Mikuru did too. As a communicative person, Michio never left Chrono in the dark about his intentions. Chrono figured this out quite early, but would still be surprised to learn how far this principle of his extended.

It had only been just over a month since they'd started seeing each other, and spring had come. Michio had graduated smoothly and had a few days to spare before starting his new job. Michio's apartment was small, but not without a proper bath and kitchen. They were making dinner together, when a moment of peaceful silence allowed Michio to breach a new subject.

“Since we decided you're staying over, I just wanted to make sure, but...” His tone was casual enough, but with a glance Chrono still caught that certain look in his eye. “How do you feel about sex?”

He had indeed expected something, and yet it hadn't been enough to prepare him for the question. “Well, I-I...” As much as he admired Michio’s ability to talk so brazenly about things, it still didn't keep him from becoming flustered. “I-I assumed that... w-well... If things happened, then they'd happen?”

While his response made him feel stupid, Michio gave no indication of thinking so. “Certainly I assumed that too, which is why I wanted to ask. Were you hoping we'd have sex?” This straightforward question appeared to affect even Michio, revealing him as the type who would smile just a bit wider and struggle to hold back a light laughter when embarrassed.

“Y-yeah, I...” Quietly, Chrono responded earnestly. “I was.”

Raising his arms to lay around Chrono's shoulders, Michio smile only grew warmer. “That makes me happy.”
While it might have been hard to convince Chrono at the time, the leading conversations and agreements did make for a much less awkward first time between the two of them. It set the tone for what was to come, and Chrono too would feel that it was an increasingly natural part of their relationship. Perhaps talking about sex would never be easy, but it didn't have to be impossible. All their other topics of conversation became all the much easier, too. As intense as he could get, Michio could be tiring to talk to, but Chrono still enjoyed their earnest and often heated discussions. They were both busy, but they both made time to see one another without it ever having to feel like anything was an obligation. Chrono had quickly shifted into that comfortable position where, if Michio wanted something from him, he knew he would ask. They were compatible, they had fun together, they had interests in common, they had good sex, their friends got along, and if they had a fight they could always talk about it.

Chrono would still think about Ibuki. In the weeks that passed in the rapid progression of their relationship, parallel to the passing of spring, he would think about him more than occasionally. He worried, mostly. They'd only had a few brief exchanges of contact, and Chrono couldn't help but wonder if he was okay. He would think to himself, that if he at the very least knew Ibuki had someone else, he wouldn't have to worry so much. He would think that, despite knowing that he was lying to himself. If Ibuki was to have someone else, someone to keep close and make sure he was okay, then that would mean there was someone else who understood him as well as Chrono did himself. Chrono knew he'd never be able to come to terms with that. He might pretend, for the sake of some peace, but in reality it would break his heart, but not before driving him crazy. Although these feelings came from a place of love, Chrono knew they were not good nor wholesome. He tried to forget, and some days he could. Others, not so much. He would eventually feel like things would be okay, and it was around that time he got a letter in the mail.

Chrono had applied to go abroad for an exchange program. He was certain he'd need the experience to grow, personally and academically. Waiting for the result of the application also helped him feel motivated, it helped him remember that despite how things felt, he was moving forward and trying to find his way ahead in life. He and Michio had already discussed the possibility of Chrono being accepted, and Michio had made his thoughts on the matter quite clear. Chrono had downplayed the possibilities of making it. He knew it wasn't impossible, but he also knew roughly where he was on the grade median compared to his classmates. Mikuru had been helping him keep track of the mail that came in, but what Chrono had been sent on such a day was an invitation of a different kind.

While it came to no surprise, it was still the first time Chrono had heard about it: as it turned out, that after all these years, Kai and Aichi were tying the knot. With the technicalities all taken care off, they simply wanted to celebrate with their closest friends and family. It was a semi-formal dinner, privately at a small venue. The invitation was plus one. Chrono knew Michio wouldn't hold it against him if he went on his own, but did not consider this. He wanted to include him in his life. When asked, Michio was naturally thrilled to come. With all the things going on his life, Chrono was still not clueless to realize what this would mean.

It was a spring afternoon, and they'd arrived a little late. They'd been asked to refrain from gifts, and thus arrived empty handed. Chrono wasn't so close to them that he would dare go against such a request, but others had. Aichi greeted them warmly. Kai was reserved despite the occasion, and Chrono could only guess how nervous he was. Shion and Tokoha were both there, both more so because of Kai than because of Aichi, and when he spoke to them he appeared to light up. It was all indeed quite informal and while Chrono kept himself quite busy introducing Michio to everyone he'd yet to meet, he stayed alert to his surroundings. Michio could take care of himself regardless, and was soon engaged in conversation with Mamoru after being introduced via Tokoha. After a few quick exchanges, Chrono was guilty of not paying much attention. He swept his eyes over the selected gathering of people. It was then that Chrono heard a familiar voice from behind him.
If Ibuki had just arrived, or if he'd already been here when they arrived, Chrono didn't know. They hadn't been here for very long, and inside the western-styled restaurant there was quite a bit of obstruction. He was quite certain though, that it would be hard to miss anyone coming in through the front doors as they'd be led along by the host to the table. When Chrono turned around, and indeed spotted Ibuki speaking to Kai, his mind emptied of thoughts. Ibuki typically held conversations in a slightly hushed voice, and it was hard to say what they were talking about. He was dressed up a little bit nicer than usual and the expression on his face was quite somber. When Chrono put one foot in front of the other and started walking towards him, he had no plan.

Chrono could see when Ibuki had spotted him. It was nothing more than a quick glance, but it was enough. Ibuki and Kai's conversation fell into silence.

“Hey, it's... been a while.” It was certainly not the warmest of greetings that Chrono opened with.

“It really has.” When Ibuki did speak, it somehow felt surreal. Chrono had no idea what he'd expected him to say. In reality, it was dull, and he appeared a little strange.

“I take it you've been busy?” Even without crossing his arms, and the vaguely condescending tone, it sounded a bit rude. With how he was, Chrono could get away with it.

“I'm afraid so.” Ibuki remained frozen in place, avoiding direct eye-contact. Chrono almost felt bad for him.

Now was not the time for a scene. Today was an important day of celebration for people near and dear to the both of them. They both understood that, and even during this short exchange, they were well aware of what they were putting poor Kai through.

“Oh, hello.” Pleasantly, Michio had interjected. He'd come up from behind Chrono, and as he placed a hand on his shoulder, he inserted himself into the conversation. “I don't think we've met?”

Chrono didn't doubt Michio knew who Ibuki was, but Ibuki didn't need to know that. “Sorry,” Ibuki excused himself with more genuine emotion than he'd previously been capable of. “It's Ibuki.”

“Call me Michio,” He smiled in his particular way. “I'm with Chrono.”

They shook hands, and Chrono felt his life culminate in this moment of the greatest discomfort he'd ever experienced. Ibuki did not reply, but eyed the two of them strangely.

“Chrono didn't tell me I'd be meeting with the chairman of the Vanguard Association today.” He said it in hopes to break the ice. It didn't work.

“Well I... am only here as a friend.” Ibuki did smile, and Michio did let chuckle slip, but that was the end of that. Addressing Kai, Ibuki excused himself, and left. Chrono hadn't been sure what else to expect. Getting anything out of Ibuki in a situation like this was a tall order regardless of the circumstances.

“He sure seemed... withdrawn.” Michio commented quietly as soon as they were out of earshot.

“He's a bit...” In the past, Chrono had always come in Ibuki's defense. Right now, he wasn't capable of that. “Withdrawn, yeah.”

“He's very handsome, though.” Michio added as an afterthought.

Chrono did not respond, not sure how to, but likewise felt that his silence was suspicious. He already felt really bad. “I... I guess.” He mumbled, failing in his attempt to sound absent minded.
This, for some reason, made Michio laugh. Chrono decided to not ask about it.

Eventually they were invited to sit down for the three course dinner. The interruptions started already during the appetizer. As she stood from her seat, Emi announced she had a few words to say in honor of the couple. Her short but richly detailed speech left her brother blushing madly and her mother in tears. Chrono, who had never been given the gift of any siblings, thought it was sweet. During the main course, Misaki, and later Miwa, took their turns to do the same. Misaki was to the point, simple, but nonetheless heartfelt and genuine. Miwa was witty and almost frighteningly insightful, warmth shining through with every word. The setting of the dinner had grown increasingly intimate, and Chrono felt it creeping up on him. As desserts were served, the high spirits at the table had perhaps diminished in favor of a more solemn type of celebratory atmosphere. The scraping of a chair did not register, but the silence that fell brought Chrono to attention. When he saw Ibuki stand by his seat, his eyes rising to meet with that of his tablemates, he shouldn't have been surprised.

“Like those before me,” Perhaps the person in the room most accustomed to public speaking, Chrono still thought he sounded so unlike himself, compared to when he'd speak on the job. “I'd like to dedicate a few words to our hosts.”

Ibuki stood with his glass in one hand and a single cue card in the other. “It has already been just about two decades since I first met Kai, Miwa.” He took a pause to find Miwa among the other guests. “And needless to say, I still consider those early days we spent together some of the happiest in my life.”

There was a slight rousing among the guests. Ibuki waited for it to settle. “Life isn't always easy, nor kind. However, despite the hardships they faced themselves, Kai and Sendou were always kind to me. Even when I thought it was superfluous, or when I thought it was unasked for, they were always kind.” Ibuki's voice was not very loud, and yet clear and well articulated. “They never passed up on any chance to show compassion and patience. It's easy to let things slip us by... and what we gain, is hard to keep. It's always easier to let things go, than to face them head on.”

A short, natural pause. Chrono didn't realize he'd forgotten to breathe.

“Life will twist us from our paths, and take us to unforeseeable places, provide us with many challenges, and occasionally with opportunities. Both Kai and Sendou have gone to many places, both in the literal and figurative sense, but they always found their way back to each other.” There was a slight quiver in his voice, but it never won him over. “Just like they refused to pass me up, they refused to give up on what they shared.”

The silence in the room was accompanied by a somber stillness.

“What is that, if not strength.” Ibuki's voice was rich with the meaning of his words. “And what is love, without strength.”

The focus in Ibuki's eyes had faltered at last. He appeared moved, sincere in his sentiment, but he did not smile.

“I am truly honored...” Ibuki raised his glass in a final toast. “To be your friend. Thank you.”

As the sounds of clinking glass settled, a gentle fuss arose among the dinner guests. Next to him,
Chrono heard Michio murmur. “That was surprisingly nice, don't you think?”

Nodding quietly, Chrono watched Ibuki who had sunk back into his chair with a distant look in his eyes. He looked emotionally exhausted, and unaware of the effect he'd had on his surroundings.

By the time they left to go home, it was quite late. They walked together, speaking of the evening, and Michio earnestly confessed to how glad he was to have been invited. Although he was happy to hear it, Chrono felt distant. Michio invited Chrono to go home with him, and when Chrono offered excuses he didn't push it, and they said goodbye. That night, Chrono came home to an empty apartment. Mikuru was not abroad, or in the next city over, but out with her coworkers. In the dark, as the door closed heavily behind him and as the lights came on with a slight buzz, Chrono realized he'd been in a daze.

Going into his room, his same old bedroom that had only changed so much over the years, he realized this daze too, was old. Sitting on his bed, and running his hand over the fabric of the covers invited to a familiar sensation. As stillness came over him in the safety of his room, his shoulders slumped under the jacket he was still wearing as tears pressed out fast and hard from his eyes. As soon as he realized, it was already happening. He cried, his hand clenching into a fist on the covers. He cried quietly at first, but the sobs soon came, and even as he tried to wipe his cheeks dry, he quickly gave up. There was no point in trying. His frustrations building as crying became both straining and painful, Chrono reached for his pillow and grasped the soft fabric cover tightly. Hauling it over his head, he threw it hard on the floor.

“What the hell---” Harshly, loudly, and smothered by tears, the words came out. “Do you even mean by---”

“It's easy to let things slip you by?” Still crying, his voice breaking, Chrono repeated the words as they'd been running through his mind. “And what you gain is hard to keep?”

Chrono had always been there, and in the past two years more than ever before. He'd held onto Ibuki as hard as he could. With his mind racing, it was hard to make sense out of anything, but certainly this meant that whether he'd realized it or not, Ibuki had let Chrono slip him by. It hurt. It hurt so bad, just like he had feared it would. Chrono had never cried over Ibuki before, but now it all came over him at once. Exhausted, he eventually laid in bed, wondering to himself: what was love without strength? Selfishness, jealousy, cowardice, indulgence? Chrono wondered what Ibuki would pick as his answer, or if it had only been a rhetorical question without deep meaning. Regardless, Chrono feared he would soon be there. He was running out of strength. In the end, it'd only taken a few words, a few glances, all after months' worth of silence.

Maybe it was for the best like this. Maybe his feelings for Ibuki had never been more than an indulgent, overgrown childish crush, anyway.

Chrono eventually got his acceptance letter. He was going to spend the summer in the U.S. Chrono
wasn't sure if Michio had been able to tell how detached and distracted he'd been in the past few weeks, but regardless, they had their talk like they'd promised.

“It's just... awkward. Considering where we're at.”

With his head rested in his hand, Chrono had known he would say something like that. Michio was not the type who did long distance. He just wasn't.

“Yeah, I...” Chrono shrugged, and felt disturbingly unlike himself. Maybe Michio wasn't the type who did long distance, and maybe he wasn't the type who was easily convinced either. Chrono, one the other hand, was he the type to just let him go after all they'd shared?

“Are you going to ask me stay, and wait for you?” Michio could ask such questions, and make it sound so casual.

Slowly, Chrono shook his head. “I couldn't... do that to you. It's not fair.” It would only be selfish and shortsighted to try and constrict someone in a relationship when he was still thinking about someone else. They'd only been together for about four months, and Chrono would be gone for three. That was yet another reason why it didn't feel fair.

All of his friends were happy for him, and frankly, Chrono was glad too, even if he felt unable to predict how the trip would impact him. Mikuru even took time off work to see him, and help him pack. A few days before the trip, his friends threw him a small send-off party. Late that night, when it was just the two of them, Michio kissed him goodbye for the last time. As the plane lifted from the airport a few days later, Chrono realized it was all for the best. He already had so much hanging over him. Maintaining a relationship back home on top of everything would've been too much.

School was tough. Being in a new city was tough. Chrono hadn't been abroad much. He'd taken trips to see Tokoha in Europe, but then he'd always depend on her for basically everything. He'd been to Hong Kong with Mikuru one time, but that had all been planned by her, too. The east coast climate was too mild, and the city was too foreign, and the English they spoke was too fluent, too fast and so, so far from anything he'd learned in the textbooks he'd studied so hard he'd memorized them almost word by word. It's easy to forget where you are coming from, and it's easy to lose your motivation when your efforts bring few rewards. Chrono had always questioned if he was cut out for school, and he'd never quite stopped. He'd press on regardless, but in isolation his constant focus made him dull and his goals felt detached from his labor. He texted his friends. Called them, too. Shion and Tokoha were as busy as he was, if not busier. It was hard to keep in touch, but he tried his best to be patient with them, and with the situation, but nothing much seemed to come of it. It wasn't anyone's fault. Going to school, studying, eating, sleeping, all in the same cycle, with no time or energy to make friends or have fun, Chrono would lie in bed at night and listen to the unfamiliar sounds outside. He remembered how he used to be, as a child. He used to be just like this.

Frustration gave birth to intervention. Chrono remembered how he'd been when he'd started middle school, and how he'd been again when he'd gotten into high school. He was there again now, but he just needed a push or two to change things up. If no one would be around to push him this time, he just needed to do it himself. The closest card shop was still about an hour or so from the dorm where he lived, which was longer than he'd ever had to travel back home, but he decided it would be worth to give it a try.

There was something about the interior, and the atmosphere, that made Chrono realize he'd made the right choice. Wherever you went in the world, places like these weren't so different. He'd grown to take it for granted, but he realized now how much he missed his old job at the Card Capital location back home in Sumida. Even when he worked for the Vanguard Association he couldn't get that sort of close encounters with people everyday. When he heard the voices of children, those memories
came back to him. In the afternoon on a weekday night, the patrons in the shop were mostly kids and teens. That suited Chrono just fine. If anything, it was what he needed. Here, he could be himself, and still be of use, and have fun. The kids had that effect on him. He could forget about everything else for a while. He'd return as soon as he could, and after only a few visits he felt like he'd found his place among the regulars, as the local kids had quite hastily latched onto him, as they would any adult who'd give them the attention they craved.

It was only so many weeks into his exchange program, but Chrono's everyday life had already settled into a schedule, good things and bad things alike blurring together into something akin to normalcy. Several times a week he'd make time to play with the kids, and as he came into the shop late one afternoon, he felt that something was different. Chrono's usual playmates were already distracted. In the next room, they'd already gathered around someone else. Though he was noticed as soon as he entered, Chrono too, was already distracted. He was an employee at the shop, as evident by his name tag. He was also tall, relatively built, with a strong brow that contrasted to his pulled back, well-kept hair. He introduced himself as Matthew, the resident regular turned employee who specialized in teaching kids and beginners, and Chrono found himself relieved of his coherency and intelligence. The language barrier didn't help.

Chrono stayed late that day. Once he warmed up to it, it was easier to talk without feeling like an idiot. Matthew was quite mellow and kind, and good with the kids. They had time to play a game together too, even if Chrono found it strained the loyalty among the shop regulars. Matthew, who ran Spike Brothers, was not a shabby opponent, though Chrono realized he was guilty of focusing more on the spectators than he did his plays. It was thoroughly charming, the way he engaged with the children. When closing time came around, they were short staffed and Chrono fell into old habits. It had already come up in conversation how he'd used to work part time at a shop back in high school, so he felt a little embarrassed by it all. Once the kids were safely on the their way home and the shop was locked up, Matthew smiled in a different sort of way compared to before and offered Chrono dinner as thanks for the trouble. While his offer did little to ease Chrono's nerves, he accepted readily.

Matthew was a college drop-out who still dreamed of the pro leagues and held decent results in the bigger tournaments that he had been in, both single and team fights. At the end of the day though, his heart was in the work at the shop. Normally he worked five days a week, but he'd been out of state for a few weeks to visit family. Chrono sensed something under the surface of his rather mellow personality, something that he liked, beyond just his looks. He lived in a small, one-room downtown rental, as Chrono found out that very same night, cramped in the space between the bed and dresser, kneeling on the floor. Chrono had never really formed an opinion on first date sex. It was more a matter of who or what he was comfortable with, which was something he recognized as a lot more complex. He was still aware, as he usually was, of the possible consequences. The next morning he still didn't have any regrets. If anything, he felt pretty great.

Chrono would keep going to the shop, to play and to see the kids. Depending on when his shift ended, he and Matthew would go out, eat, spend time together. Chrono realized he'd never done much actual dating. This was probably what it was like. They'd spend the night together when they could, and Chrono quickly found that he preferred to sleep next to someone, and that even Matthew's cramped apartment was better and allowed for more privacy than his dorm room. Growing up, Chrono had always envisioned himself as living alone, being alone. He'd often been alone, back then. As he'd gotten older, Chrono had realized he was actually quite bad at being alone. He still wasn't the most out-going person ever, but a lack of meaningful connections with others wore him down quickly.

It was such a date night, a Friday to be exact, that Chrono had been taken out to a local restaurant; nothing too fancy but a good place for a square meal. They'd talked about their day, but the
conversation came to a sudden stop when Chrono's phone buzzed on the table top. He'd been texting with both Shion and Tokoha earlier. Without thinking much of it, Chrono reached to check his phone. The exchange between them was mellow. Chrono's friends knew he'd be out tonight. Without saying anything, Matthew got up, his empty glass in hand.

For a split second, Chrono was still under the impression that it perhaps Shion, or going by the time zones, most likely Tokoha who'd messaged him. And for that split second, he thought it strange, because the message didn't fit into either of their conversations. The name on screen, as he read it, made his heart stop in his chest and his head empty of thoughts.

*I'm sorry I couldn't respond to you sooner. I've been quite busy.*

*I trust you to take care of yourself, but regardless I am glad to hear you are well.*

It was two texts, sent in succession. The second one came on screen as Chrono was reading the first and he felt his adrenaline kick into overdrive. The real question was why Ibuki was contacting him now after all this time. Chrono had texted him soon after arriving to the U.S, as he did all of his close friends, just to let him know he'd arrived and gotten settled in safe. Maybe there was no deep reason why, maybe it was just a coincidence, and maybe he truly did feel bad for whichever reason. Chrono would have thought about it, if he hadn't become so intensely focused on following up on this established connection. Ibuki was trying to talk to him now, and for whatever reason that was, Chrono couldn't help but feel a surge of desperate excitement.

He had to send something back right away, he didn't care that Ibuki had made him wait for weeks. Chrono didn't play games.

*It's been tough, but I'm ok! I've had a lot of fun so far, too*

*I know how busy you are, but make sure you also look after yourself, ok?*

As soon as he'd sent it, Matthew was back at their table and Chrono had to return to reality. He was clutching his phone in a vice grip.

“Who was it? Shion?” Matthew had a curious streak.

“Oh, uh,” Chrono suddenly had no idea what to say. He could never lie casually, or in good conscience. “No. It was someone else... um, someone I...”

Matthew was now looking at him attentively. “Someone I used to work with. My old boss.”

“Your old boss is texting you on a Friday night?” Matthew sounded amused. Maybe a little concerned.

“Yeah, but like he's... a friend, too. We go way back. I haven't heard from him in a while now, though.”

“It doesn't happen often in one's life, but you should value a boss who can also be your friend.” Matthew spoke with personal experience on the topic.

“Yeah, that's true.” Chrono's mind was elsewhere. He wondered when he might expect Ibuki to respond, and as he laid his phone back down on the surface of the table, the message stayed with him. Their short exchange might seem like only formal pleasantries, but Chrono felt differently about it. In the end, he did worry, and it was so hard to stop.

The response from Ibuki didn't come, but it remained at the back of his mind. They ate, and their
conversations drifted. Chrono’s thoughts did too, eventually. It got late. They went back to Matthew’s apartment, and as he was kissed, touched and undressed Chrono forgot all about it. Though an attentive lover, Matthew liked to take the lead. Chrono who had found himself flexible, and fundamentally a pleaser, let him, and enjoyed it. With his head pressed against the pillow, hot breath on his neck and large hands on his hip, Chrono laid with his eyes closed in the dark. The movement above him was slow and steady. They'd only just gotten started, and as Chrono allowed himself to breathe freely and let his thoughts empty from his head, it sounded. Matthew hadn’t heard it, but Chrono had picked up on it; from within the pocket on his jacket, discarded just outside the door in the minuscule apartment, his phone has gone off, buzzing twice in rapid succession. Chrono had shifted under his weight, and so Matthew stopped moving. Feeling his breath caught in his throat, Chrono felt panic rising from within him.

“Are you alright?” He was asked, and Chrono suddenly found it hard to process the words. He was too distracted.

“I... I’m okay,” He said, wanting it to be true. He needed to look at his phone. He needed to look at it right now. Had Ibuki responded to him? Did he have something to say? Something he wanted to ask? He felt more alarmed than he was comfortable with, and yet he knew, Chrono knew he could not leave bed during sex for something like this. It wasn't what he wanted. Ibuki had let him wait for so long, he could stand to not get an immediate response. Chrono had realized, perhaps in the worst moment possible, that he wasn't over any of the things that had happened between them. He wasn't over any of it, he hadn't even started moving on, regardless of how hard he'd tried.

“Really?” He hadn't been able convince Matthew just like he hadn't been able to convince himself.

“Yeah, I just... need a moment.” Chrono wanted them to continue. He really did.

Too distracted, too tired and too desperate to do anything else, Chrono forfeited to the situation. Even as they continued, and even as he relaxed and tried to get back into it, he couldn't enjoy himself. He thought about Ibuki. Wondered again how he was doing, if he was okay, if he was lonely, or if he had anyone to talk to. He thought about how he wanted to see him, talk to him like he'd used to. Hold his hand, or even just feel his gaze on his skin. In the end, it was such a simple feeling, and he couldn't let go. He tried, but only managed a half-hearted effort. Instead, he let his instincts take him away.

While Chrono didn't believe in the concept of good and evil, he well understood what it meant to do right and do wrong. He wasn't interested in questions of moral grayness without elaborate contexts, but he highly valued the integrity of himself and others. He recognized the effort to do right in others as well as himself. Even when he didn't have the time or capability to carefully study the possible cause and effect of his actions, both in regards of himself and others, his judgment hardly ever failed him. He had that sort of natural sensibility. If Chrono ever did something that was wrong, he was usually aware of it. He was aware of it now, too. He forfeited indeed, to his own indulgence, with a solution that in many ways felt ideal. To the rhythm of movement, Chrono felt Matthew’s hot breath on his back again, but his mind was still elsewhere. Chrono remembered well Ibuki’s scent. He also knew not only the touch of his hand, but the feeling of his weight in his arms. He knew how soft his hair felt on the skin of his face. Chrono didn’t need to know more than that. It was more than enough.

Chrono bit his lip. He held his breath, and buried his face in the pillow. It was still impossible not to make a sound, but that wasn’t the problem. He knew what he did was wrong, but thought it best not to risk saying Ibuki’s name while making love to someone else.

Afterwards, he laid in bed while Matthew took a shower. He’d gotten up to fish his phone out of the pocket on his jacket. It was Tokoha who had texted him. She’d replied to their previous conversation,
adding to her story of her latest conquests. Chrono was keeping tabs on her as much as he could, but of course he still valued her own words above all else. His response was more than a little absent minded. He hated feeling insincere talking to his friends, but he didn't feel like he had much of an option.

The next day, he went back to his dorm. The city and its scenery had started to grow familiar to him, and the public transport, trains and buses, were hardly busy. Yet again with a firmly detached feeling, Chrono watched the sky, which was blue. He knew that the stars were still there, even if he couldn't see them. Such was perhaps how he felt, too. He still longed, he still yearned, just like his efforts to try and forget Ibuki had been fruitless, his academical efforts felt about the same. Maybe his dreams were silly, too. His dreams of wanting to go to space. In the end, he just wanted to see his friends, his family. See their faces and hear their voices, learn of the stories and see the world that they lived in. Growing up, he'd always felt like he didn't quite belong anywhere. He felt differently about it now, but he still wanted to see that place from his imagination, the one place that had effortlessly felt like home.

Chrono thought about Mikuru. He thought about Shion and Tokoha too, and Taiyou and Kazuma, and all of his other friends, all of whom were unreasonably far away. Fundamentally, it wasn't so complex. Chrono knew this feeling. He'd come all the way here, embracing it. He wanted to go home.
His feet firmly in place, his palms slightly sweaty, Ibuki felt his disposition fail him. He'd done what he could to prepare himself mentally, but when faced with a situation this unpredictable, it wasn't an easy task. He could put himself through pretty much anything, for better or worse. In this case, it was different. There was more on line than just himself, or his wellbeing.

He wasn't sure how long it'd been. Maybe a full minute. He just had to ring the doorbell. Frustration pushed him to act. When he did press the buzzer, it rang out louder than he'd expected. Ibuki heard voices, unintelligible voices. It was Chrono who opened the door carefully to a crack, and when Ibuki saw him, he grinned.

"You're here." He said it as if he couldn't fully believe it.

"That I am." Ibuki wasn't so humored. To him, this was a serious matter. Chrono didn't quite share Ibuki's level of nervousity. Of course he didn't. This was his family, his home. Chrono's shirt, a deep red, caught his attention before he could say anything else. Ibuki knew it well, because he'd bought it himself. For himself. Chrono had... acquired it, with his permission. Not for this occasion, however. As Ibuki eyed him sharply, Chrono failed to take the hint. Already unnecessarily on edge, Ibuki knew he had to let it go.

When Mikuru came up to greet him, Ibuki made an effort to not appear so guarded. “Oh, hello!” She looked a little unprepared to see him too, somehow. Maybe it was just his imagination. “It's been a pretty long time. It's great to see you, though!”

She smiled, more than just politely. Mikuru was a kind and good person. Responsible but fun-loving, grounded but open-minded. Moreover, Ibuki knew she loved and cared for Chrono more than anyone else. Ibuki still remembered the first time he had met her. He'd apologized to her that day, and lowered his head as far as he could. Right now, he wanted to do the exact same thing. He knew he couldn't. That would have to wait for another day, a day when he was braver.

“It's... great to be here. Thank you for inviting me.” It sounded so stiff, but such were his honest feelings. Ibuki noticed Chrono's eyes shift awkwardly at his overly formal greeting. He'd have to try harder. “Here, it's... not much but...”
“Oh, why, thank you!” He had gotten her some alcohol, like Chrono had suggested. It was a nice and expensive bottle, but not overly so. Mikuru's enthusiastic gratitude was easy on him, and Ibuki was thankful she happily accepted it without any complaints.

Rive was here too, as expected. It was so strange to see him. He was so tall, taller than Ibuki himself, and despite the resemblance between them Ibuki could only look at him and think how unlike he and Chrono were in every single way.

“Hey, it's been a while. How are you?” Everything about the greeting was so casual. Well, that was Rive. In reality he was a fairly awkward man. That laid back approach was all he had.

“I'm good,” Ibuki had indeed not met Rive in person for a long time, at least not more than very briefly. They'd spoken, and Ibuki had acted in his stead, last time one year ago, and then the year before that. Ibuki had already wondered if Rive was going to ask him to pass on his birthday gift to Chrono this year again. Well, this year, he'd have to decline. “I take it you are as well?”

“Aha, well! I'd say so!” Running his hand through his rough head of hair, he laughed. He didn't elaborate further.

Ibuki knew this would be an evening of discomfort for him: above not being able greet Chrono like he used to, unable to hug him or touch him, it was strange to be in Mikuru's apartment with her there. Ibuki and Chrono had spent time here just the two of them more than a few times in the past, and Ibuki had always disliked doing so. It made him feel like he was intruding, as if he was going behind Mikuru's back, spending time in her home without her consent. Chrono had insisted it wasn't that deep, and that Ibuki wasn't even the first person he'd brought over without her knowledge. Mikuru was aware that Chrono had his own life and respected his boundaries. It only did so much to make him feel better. Right now, spending time with Chrono's father in his aunt's living room, Ibuki could only think about the times he'd been here without their knowing. The times he'd come by in the day just to spend an hour or two during his lunch breaks, the times he'd spent the night, the times he and Chrono had eaten together, conversed. The times they'd been intimate; embracing, kissing, making love here, in this apartment. It had been months ago now since last time, but how was he supposed not to think about it?

Chrono was naturally in charge of dinner. Mikuru was helping him, and Ibuki felt pretty useless when he had no way to put himself to use. Rive had already resigned, accepting his fate. They spoke, but it was a detached and lukewarm sort of conversation. Ibuki had no topics he could delve deeply into with Rive at a moments notice. As for topics he could delve deeply into with Rive at all, there was just one, and he was in the next room preparing their meal. Chrono hadn't said anything in particular about how he wanted Ibuki to approach or talk to his father. Perhaps that was because he himself didn't know Rive well enough to make that sort of judgment. They spoke of Ibuki's job, and there were always things to the said there. Rive didn't speak much about himself. Ibuki could only assume he didn't have much of anything to say. In reality, Ibuki was the same. He had his job. He occasionally saw his friends. He'd always felt out of touch with other people, felt that he shared little with others, with nothing much to say, even when he wanted to. With age he'd realized that perhaps it wasn't the end of the world. What made him so unhappy with his life had been much more tangible than that vague notion of isolation, which was only yet another consequence of a larger problem. For so long he'd yearned to be different, a yearning that more often than not had only lead him astray, further away from fulfillment. It had been like that with Chrono, too. He was still a little lost, but now he was here, and as uncomfortable as he was, he didn't want to be anywhere else. It was a peculiar feeling. Ibuki wondered how Rive felt. Was he here facing himself, too? Or would he keep playing oblivious to the role he had neglected for so many years?

Rive sat seated on the sofa, and Ibuki stood. He couldn't quite relax enough to sit down. “Oh, have
you seen the pictures from Chrono's trip?” He asked, suddenly.

Ibuki was confused, but not enough for it to show. “The pictures?”

“Yeah, from when he was in the US.” Rive sounded proud, as any parent would.

Ibuki had to second-guess himself. Of course he had seen the pictures, if Rive meant the ones he had up in his room. It had been a whole year, after all. It took Ibuki a moment to realize that it would be reasonable for Rive to assume Ibuki may not have seen them. “Oh. I might have...” He replied awkwardly.

Rive walked him to Chrono’s room. It was the same as it'd always been. Well, for the most part, anyhow. His wardrobe was fuller, the stacks of books on desk were taller and the board above his desk was fuller, too. “I missed it somehow when I was here last,” Ibuki didn't know quite how to interpret the slight wonder in his voice. It rubbed him the wrong way. “But Chrono showed me earlier.”

There was little decoration in Chrono’s room, but he had his board of photos. Rive gestured to a picture of Chrono and his classmates, taken shortly before his trip back home. Ibuki had seen it before, even if he now realized he and Chrono hadn't actually spoken about it. Below, there was another one, a picture taken in the community kitchen in Chrono's dorm, with him and his housemates. The third picture did not have Chrono himself in it. It was a picture of a group of people, mostly children, in what appeared to be a central city card shop. Outside the broad window in the background you could see streets outside.

“He said it was such a busy time, with his studies and all... but to me it looks like he still had time to make some friends.” Rive was just stating his mind. Ibuki still wasn't sure what to say.

“I suppose so.” Ibuki realized he had an opportunity of sorts. “Chrono is resourceful, anyhow. He is serious about anything he takes upon himself, and makes the most out of everything.”

“Yeah...” Uncertainty tainted Rive's voice. “Naturally... I'm very proud of him.”

“As you should be.” Ibuki said quietly. He watched the pictures on Chrono's wall. There were pictures of him and Mikuru from when Chrono was young, and many others with him and his friends. There was only one picture of the two of them together. Ibuki had taken note of it before. He hadn't been able to ignore it. It was a few years old now. Chrono had been 19 when they had it taken to be featured in the in-house Vanguard Association publication. It was back when he'd first been hired, and Ibuki realized he must have cut it out of the flimsily little magazine himself, and pinned it to his wall among pictures of his friends and family. Had he considered it proof of an achievement? Or had he simply wanted a picture of the two of them together? It was frivolous to wonder, and even more so to ask. It didn't exactly matter, and yet, Ibuki couldn't help but think about it, even now. In a sense, it was nothing new. Chrono had always been good at scrutinizing him, regardless of how he admired him. What Chrono saw when he looked at him, that had always mattered to Ibuki.

“Yeah, I should. And I am.” Ibuki listened, and realized he had already lost his grip. It had slipped away from him quietly, proving how fickle his resolve had been in the first place. Depending on what Rive said to him next, he wasn't sure what he might say. “Although I can take no credit.”

Rive was now looking at the picture of Chrono and Ibuki together, too. There were no pictures of him in Chrono's room. “At this point, you know him a lot better than I do.”

Rive said it somewhat jokingly, but Ibuki didn’t doubt that he meant it, nor did he doubt the truth of the statement. “Surely,” He could only agree. “That's not on me, though.”
The words passed though his lips stoically. Ibuki heard the cynicism of his own youthful self, twisted into a different form. Right now, it wasn't enough to make him feel bad.

“Well…” Rive clung to his dignity. “I can't argue against that now, can I?”

Ibuki knew he could only criticize Rive so much before becoming hypocritical. It had only been so long since he'd been curbed by his own cowardice. “Maybe not. There are still other things you can do, though.”

Rive sighed. “I know that,” The genuine emotion was somewhat jarring. “But, ah, well…”

Ibuki didn't want to look at him. He stared hard ahead, laying his eyes on the pictures Chrono had taken of himself, Shion and Tokoha at their middle school graduation. At 15, Chrono had already not seen his father for eleven years.

“As his father… it hurts to admit, but,” There was the faintest of joy present in his voice. “That boy, he scares me sometimes, you know?”

With Rive's shoulders slouching, Ibuki felt himself tense up in contrast. “He's so strong. And smart. And perceptive. He's so much more mature than I am.” Rive almost laughed, sadly. “He gets that from his mom, that's for sure. Not me.”

Chrono's mother. Ibuki could shamefully admit to never having thought of her in more than a passing. He'd seen her picture, as displayed in the living room. Her red hair and the slightness of height she had clearly passed onto Chrono, but what else he had after her, Ibuki had never thought about. “Is that so.”

Although he wanted to ask, it was hardly the time, nor the place. Ibuki was barely comfortable having this conversation as it was. Asking about Chrono's late mother, who had passed away before Chrono had been old enough to remember, was out of question. Ibuki didn't doubt Rive still mourned her; as such, Ibuki understood something new.

“He's not a kid anymore, either. There's nothing I can teach him that he doesn't already know, nothing he can't already deal with better than me. He doesn't need me, does he?” Ibuki thought it was a sad thing to say, sad in the context of something larger than just Rive's failure to raise his own son. For that reason, Ibuki hated the idea of playing into his expectations.

“You're his father.” He spoke without hesitation. “Of course he needs you.”

Perhaps Rive had hoped Ibuki would hear his words in jest. Perhaps he'd hoped he could vent some of his feelings without repercussion. Ibuki wasn't so nice as to allow himself to be used in that way. “You're right when you say Chrono's not a child anymore. He hasn't been a child in a long time, and even when he still was, he was always mature beyond his age. I if anyone knows that. He always... had clarity. Certainly it's true that there's nothing you can teach him at this point. Chrono knows how to take care of himself better than anyone else I know.” Ibuki had turned his head to look at Rive who did not return the gesture. “That doesn't mean he can do everything by himself. He still needs others, and that includes you.”

The distant murmur in the kitchen seeped through to them in the silence. Maybe he'd spoken out of line, but in this very moment, Ibuki felt a weight rise from his shoulders.

“I used to think the same thing. I used to think that he didn't need me.” Ibuki had no idea what Rive thought of his reasoning, or if it would be enough to make him understand. He still felt obliged to make the connection between them. “Well. I was wrong.”
“You too, huh?” Rive actually smiled, in his own way. He looked quite sad, despite of it. “In my case... it's been so many years. I've wasted so much time.”

“Perhaps,” Ibuki knew he was in no place to judge, but regardless he could only feel so sympathetic. Among the images in Chrono's room was one of him and Mikuru from long ago. Chrono looked no older than five or six years old, and Mikuru looked so young, too. She was yet but a girl, with her whole life ahead of her, yet already resigned to a life as a single parent of a child that was not her own. She held Chrono in a tight grip, and with the wide smile on her face, it was hard to imagine the situation she was in. The contrast between himself and Mikuru at that age made Ibuki feel deeply humbled. “But it's better to act late than never.”

“Well... yeah.” Ibuki hadn't expected much of an answer to that. There wasn't much that could be said. “It's just... I barely even know how to talk to him.”

“It helps if you see him.”

“...Does he want to see me?”

Ibuki felt fatigued by the question. How should he know? It was too earnest, too simple for something so complicated. Ibuki guessed Chrono himself probably didn't even have a clear answer.

“He barely knows you.” Ibuki couldn't hide the slight contempt he felt. Not for Rive as much for the turn the topic had taken. “If you let him get to know you, I'm certain it'll be obvious whether or not he wants to see you.”

Rive didn't respond fast enough, and Ibuki glanced on his face to see that he was thinking. Hopefully he'd gained a bit more perspective on the situation that he'd been running away from for almost two decades. Ibuki didn't have too much faith in that, but for Chrono's sake, he wanted to believe.

With the sound of approaching footsteps, Rive abandoned whichever he'd planned to say. “Hey, dinner's just about ready,” As he'd appeared in the door frame, Chrono quickly picked up on the particular tension in the room, without having heard a single word. “So... you should probably go sit down.”

“Sure thing, son!” Rive lit up like a light. He ruffled Chrono's hair, messing up the delicate balance of its ordered chaos. “It smells delicious!”

As Rive left in an upbeat and hasty sort of way, Chrono tried to fix his hair. Scornfully he looked at Ibuki as he leaned in to speak to him in a harsh whisper. “What were you talking about?”

Ibuki knew better than to take offense. It was not him that Chrono was upset with. “I'll tell you later.” He responded quietly on a breath. “Don't worry about it.”

“If you say so.” Chrono let it go as he let his hands fall back to their sides.

Ibuki had been too preoccupied with his conversation with Rive to notice that indeed, the food that had been cooking smelled delicious. Chrono had made them fish, miso and an assortment of vegetables served with rice. It was simple home cooking, but refined to an unusually high degree. Ibuki still felt spoiled eating Chrono's cooking as often as he did.

“Your miso soup is as good as always.” They'd all been complimenting the food, and Ibuki had
allowed his comment to slip out.

“...I'm glad you like it.” Chrono said, grinning. Ibuki felt the blood drain from his face.

“Oh, so you've had it before?” It was Rive who asked. He didn't sound too surprised.

“Yes... luckily I've had the opportunity to... try it in the past.” Ibuki replied bashfully. Chrono tried, and failed, to wipe the smile of his face.

“It's worth making it from scratch once in a while.” Chrono said, filling in the conversation. He didn't always have the time to do so, but it happened. “Don't you think?”

“Y-yes...” Ibuki replied somewhat anxiously.

“You don't cook much, do you?” Rive asked him. He was right, but the assumption still rubbed him the wrong way.

“I'm afraid not.” Ibuki said quietly.

“I've tried teaching him a little...” Ibuki was surprised Chrono would admit to that.

“Really?” Mikuru sounded curious, and Ibuki felt vaguely fearful.

“Yes, although... I'm not sure it's been of much use.” Ibuki said it as he saw it.

“Don't say that.” Chrono berated him gently. “You've gotten better.”

Ibuki wasn't fully comfortable holding this conversation, but he let Chrono set the bar where he wanted it to be. “A little, I suppose.”

“Well, you're busy, aren't you?” Mikuru took him in defense from himself. “It's the same for me. I like to cook, I still can't find the time for it.”

“That's... true.” Ibuki wouldn't have made that excuse himself, but he found it easier to agree when it was Mikuru who said it.

“Hey, sure, but, a grown man should still be able to cook for himself, you know?” Chrono wasn't as laid back about it.

“There's a lot of things a grown man should be able to do, Chrono, but world isn't always that simple, is it?” Though Mikuru's tone was forgiving, her words were harshly multi-layered. To Ibuki, it was a first to see Chrono be shut down so fast.

“By the way,” When Mikuru addressed him, Ibuki was once more on high-alert. “We saw the blurb they did on the news about the press conference.”

“Oh.” Mikuru was smiling, but Ibuki still wasn't sure what to say. “I see... well, I haven't seen it myself, so...”

“That sounds like a good way to stay sane.” Mikuru laughed. “Chrono said you'd been awfully busy though.”

“Yes...” Ibuki tried to stay focused. “It's always tough around this time of the year. We pull through, though. I have... a lot of good people working under me, luckily.”

“I always tell him I think he could reassign more of his work.” Chrono wasn't afraid to bring up this
topic of conversation again. Ibuki prepared himself for a few harsh words, but instead, Chrono
smiled. “But he keeps insisting he wants to do it himself.”

“Well, I...” Mikuru was staring at him now, curiously. Ibuki struggled somewhat to speak. “It's not
that I don't trust anyone else with it, but... as a representative, it feels important to be as involved as I
can.”

“Oh, yeah. I get that.” Mikuru grinned. “It's easy, or unavoidable, when you're a small business. But
it's important to retain what you can, even as you grow bigger. It's about you know, responsibility in
that way. To put yourself in a position where you're accountable.”

Ibuki couldn't help but feel relieved. They were having a good conversation. Maybe he'd worried
needlessly. He was still stressed out after the conversation with Rive, but it was wearing off.

“Could you please...” Ibuki felt a true, genuine smile come on his face. “Tell that to Chrono for me?”

Mikuru laughed. Chrono wasn't as humored. “It's---” He grumbled. “It's also a matter of being
reasonable, you know?”

As the four of them had a good meal, the conversations remained lighthearted. Mikuru served the
liquor Ibuki had bought her, and he had a little himself, too. He wasn't driving home tonight,
anyhow. He didn't want to stay too late, and had feared the hours would creep by mercilessly slow.
In the end, it hadn't played out quite like that. Ibuki realized Chrono had been right, somehow, about
his presence not being nearly as awkward as he'd feared. It was reassuring. Eventually, as night fell,
Ibuki saw it in his best interests to leave. As he excused himself, Mikuru insisted he could stay longer
if he wanted, but not in such a way he felt bad to decline. Rive nor Chrono said much of anything,
certainly for wildly different reasons.

When they said goodbye, once more, it was strange. Ibuki didn't dare to hug Chrono, even as he
realized he might be able to get away with it. Mikuru thanked him again for the gift, and Rive put a
hand on his shoulder as he reaffirmed how good it had been to see him. Chrono watched them
somewhat wistfully. He looked almost proud. It was a little too much, and thus Ibuki felt that it was
urgent to leave.

It was still warm when he came outside. He'd gotten halfway to the taxi station before he realized he
couldn't feel his phone in his pocket. He'd been in a hurry to leave indeed; too much of a hurry.
When he'd left Mikuru's apartment, it had still been laying on the kitchen counter. Turning around to
retrace his steps, Ibuki saw Chrono just two blocks away, raising his hand over his head to catch his
attention. They met halfway, and it was a quiet block behind the school tennis courts, void of people
at dusk. Without exchanging a single word, they hugged, and as he felt Chrono press himself against
him and put his head down against his shoulder Ibuki thought about how little they'd actually spoken
today.

“Here,” Chrono put the phone in his hand. “I realized you'd forgotten it pretty much as soon as you'd
left. Luckily I could catch up with you.”

“Sorry...” Ibuki apologized quietly.

“I wasn't aware you could let go of your phone long enough to forget it.” Chrono had taken a jab at
him, and Ibuki had little to say in his defense.

“I was a bit... distracted.” A simplification perhaps but nonetheless the truth.

“Yeah, I get that.” Smiling, Chrono was fixing the collar on Ibuki’s shirt. “You know, you got me
wondering if maybe you didn't do it on purpose. But I guess not, huh?"

“I'm flattered you think I'm that innovative.” Their exchange was anything but stilted, but quite
constructed nonetheless. Ibuki realized it could be considered flirting. How sweet, he thought, and
how fascinating it was that it could be so easy. Chrono was still smiling at him, and Ibuki thought
about how badly he wanted to kiss him. He hadn't allowed himself to think about it before, but now
he couldn't help himself.

Kissing in public was uncomfortable. It took something special for it to happen. Ibuki, reserved as he
was, had been surprised to learn that Chrono was actually even more averse to it than he was
himself. There was something about that fact that made Ibuki feel conflicted. It didn't quite fit, yet at
the same time, all it took was a slight change in perspective for it to fit all too well. It was also a
matter of coming to terms with the idea that there were still things he didn't know about Chrono,
despite his usual transparency.

Ibuki decided to give it a try. After all, it was already quite dark, and there was no one around who
would see them. As he leaned in slowly, Chrono turned his face away. Ibuki hadn't meant to look so
stumped. Like the mother of a spoiled child, Chrono sighed, and grabbed his wrist. “Alright, fine.”
He said, and pressed their lips together. It was a bit of a fumbling kiss, and even as Chrono pressed
against him hard, it didn't last for very long. After they parted, they soon said goodbye.

“You should call me after you get home.” Chrono had said, and Ibuki had nodded obediently. Once
he was in the cab home, he thought about the kiss again. It reminded him of the first time they'd
kissed, which had been on a night not unlike this one. It was comforting in a way to think that they
could still share a kiss like that, even after the time that had passed.

Not many signals went through before Chrono picked up the phone. As the dishwater in the sink
drained and the plates clicked into place in the the dishwasher, the sounds carried into the
microphone.

“You're doing dishes at this hour?” Chrono asked him. Indeed it was quite late. Bedtime, considering
Ibuki had work in the morning.

“I left them to soak is all.” Ibuki replied. “It's not a lot when it's just me.”

“What did you make?” Chrono asked, and Ibuki could hear he was pleased. Pleased that Ibuki was
cooking and eating properly even when he wasn't around. It hadn't always been like that.

“I just used some leftovers to make fried rice.” Ibuki indeed wasn't much of a cook, and he probably
would never be, but he was trying. It had been a decent lunch. “It was fine. Not how you make it,
though.”

“Well, just keep practicing. You'll get better and better. And then, I'll have you cook for me.”

Ibuki wasn't very confident, but he didn't want to let that spoil their conversation. “Sure. Just don't let
your expectations delude you...”
“Come on, let me have some expectations...” Chrono replied, and his slightly sullen reply became muffled as he rolled over. He was already in bed, speaking in a hushed voice. Ibuki could so easily picture it. Chrono, in the dark, in his room, alone, taking this not quite secret phone call.

“Are you going to bed?” He asked, checking.

“I am,” Ibuki insisted, “I just wanted to get the dishwasher running.”

Ibuki's bedroom was dark, too. He was already mostly undressed, and had already brushed his hair and his teeth. He laid down, letting the thin covers only cover so much of the lower half of his body. The AC was running, but it was still quite warm.

“So,” Chrono was changing the subject, before Ibuki could. “What were you talking about with my dad?”

Ibuki knew he would ask. He had nothing to hide, but he wanted to spare Chrono any stress he could. “You, I suppose...”

Chrono sighed. “Really, huh?” He didn't sound surprised. “...What did he say?”

“He said that he feels like there isn't anything he can do for you.” Ibuki laid with his arms by his sides. The bed felt really big now whenever he had it to himself. In his earbuds, he heard Chrono's dissatisfied tone.

“What does he know about that? He hasn't even tried... doing much of anything for me.” Familiar words that Ibuki couldn't forget.

“I tried to... tell him something to that effect myself.”

“You did?” Chrono sounded a little surprised, even if pleasantly so.

“Naturally I did...” He replied very quietly. “It was the only thing I could say.”

“And?” Chrono inquired.

Ibuki tried to remember the details of their exchange. He hadn't quite realized then, how on edge he'd been. Sometimes, that adrenaline made it hard to remember things clearly.

“I said that... if he was around, then things could be different.” Ibuki tried to paraphrase it best he could. “And he asked me, if you even wanted that. If you wanted to see him...”

“He really asked that?” Ibuki had intended to continue, but didn't blame Chrono for interjecting. “That's dumb.”

“...Do you want to see him?” Ibuki hadn't planned to ask. Now it felt like the natural thing to do. He wanted to affirm something.

“Geez, I don't know?” Chrono was about as irritated as Ibuki had expected, but he knew the irritation wasn't directed at him. “He always shows up out of nowhere. And when he leaves it's the same. If anything, it makes me wonder if he wants to see me... and that doesn't make me very, I don't know, happy to see him?”

“I thought so.” Ibuki admitted.

“So? What did you tell him?” In his flaring irritation, Chrono had forgotten to keep his voice down.
“I said that you don't know him.” Ibuki remembered that, at least. “Implying that only after getting to know him, you could make that sort of decision.”

Chrono was quiet for a moment. “Yeah,” His voice was soft. “I guess.”

“He's funny though,” Chrono said tiredly. “He's never talked to me about any of this. It's like him and you are a lot closer than him and me. Which I guess shouldn't come as a surprise.”

“Sometimes it's easier to talk to people you aren't as involved with.” Ibuki didn't have many such experiences himself, but he was not unfamiliar to the concept. Incidentally, when he had been young, he'd met a stranger in his travels, with whom he'd opened up to about his burdens. Today, Rive had perhaps only returned the gesture, although they were strangers no longer.

“Yeah but, we're barely involved, aren't we?” Chrono made sure to miss the point. Ibuki knew he understood.

“I'm not his son.”

“...Play your cards right, and you could be.” Chrono's comment caught Ibuki so off guard he didn't know what to say and lost the capability to speak. Only a strangled gasp of surprise left him, embarrassingly.

Chrono scoffed, burying his face in his pillow. Ibuki heard the microphone smother against the fabric. “He'd be happy to have you as family.”

“Are you certain about that?” Ibuki sounded deeply skeptical. He asked because he really didn't know quite what it was that Chrono was implying.

“Sure?” Chrono responded so lightly, it was very unlike him. “Why wouldn't he be?”

“Chrono...” Ibuki guessed he was burned out by his father's presence, but regardless couldn't help but become unsettled. “How can you be so certain?”

“I guess I'm not that certain. But I know my dad likes you a lot.” Ibuki didn't know how to feel about that.

“He likes me? How can you tell?” It felt like new information to him. It's not like he and Rive had ever spent a whole lot of quality time together.

“He looked really happy to see you today. And whenever I mention you he always latches onto it and gets all talkative and asks a lot of questions.” Chrono paused to think. “Then again, maybe it's just cause you're someone we both know. I dunno.”

Ibuki couldn't pinpoint exactly how he felt. He'd never considered that Rive though of him outside of whenever he needed something from him. Then again, Ibuki knew he was prone to think that way about most people he met. Naturally, he wanted Chrono's family to like him, but like this he felt like he was deceiving them.

“Honestly though, it's not like I have any idea how he'd react if he knew about us. ‘Cause again, I don't even know him that super well. He'd... I don't know. He might be super weird about it. Or he'll wonder why I'd even tell him, like as if just because it's you it's suddenly his business. I never told him about anyone else.” Chrono was letting his thought out freely. Ibuki appreciated it.

“It's not like you are obliged to tell him.” Ibuki assumed Chrono knew that, but he also knew that sometimes you needed to hear it from someone else.
“I know, but... I do wanna tell him.” Chrono sighed. “But I also don't wanna tell him, like, at all. I don't know.”

Ibuki didn't know either, but he did feel the same way.

“I guess I want him to know... But I don't wanna tell him.” Chrono shared his reasoning with that an edge of frustration in his voice. “But on the other hand, when I think about him learning about us in any other way than it being through me, I kinda wanna die so...”

Ibuki let a laugh escape him. “It's not easy.”

“It's really not...” Chrono mumbled. “Thanks for coming today though. And thanks for talking to my dad.”

Ibuki didn't feel like he should be thanked, but knew it was best to just accept it. “You're welcome.”

“I really don't know what to do about all this. For a while it felt like maybe I could do it. But then I just... I don't know.”

It was hard to hear Chrono sound so troubled, and Ibuki wanted to encourage him, but he knew it would be hard to do so when he hardly knew how to deal with the situation himself. No matter how well they treated him and no matter what Chrono might say, Ibuki himself still felt deeply uncertain of whether or not Chrono’s family would ever fully accept him as one of them.

“Sorry. I don't mean to say it like... it's your fault or anything like that.” Chrono apologizing to him was the last thing Ibuki wanted right now.

“I know that's not how you meant it.” Ibuki would never assume that. “So don't apologize.”

“I... I dunno...” Chrono sounded unsure. “Or like. I do know, but... well...” It didn't sound like it was something that made him happy. Ibuki waited for him to elaborate.

“It's 'cause we tend to keep stuff to ourselves. We don't always talk about it, if there's something bothering us. I mean, I speak my mind. But I'm not that good at talking about myself.” Chrono, upset and frustrated, held his breath against the fabric of his cover. Ibuki couldn't hear him move. “And I know my dad's like that too. And I hate that about him. He never talks about himself. He never tells me what he's thinking. And... I know, you're like that, too, and... I hate that about you, too. I hate it when I feel like I don't know what you're thinking, or if you're hurting. When I feel like you won't talk to me or let me help you.”

The frustration and sadness in his voice has only accumulated. It was almost breaking. Ibuki knew better than to get upset. This was not about him.

“I... I guess.” Chrono didn't argue against him. He was still upset, but had calmed down. “Thanks.
For listening, too.”

“I'll always listen whenever you need to talk.” Ibuki assumed Chrono knew that by now, but he also knew he had to continuously keep working to uphold that trust.

“I know...” Chrono's voice had grown distant. “I know.”

Where he laid, sunken into his mattress, Ibuki let go of his preconceptions. He realized that it was possible that there was something else Chrono hadn't told him. Ibuki wasn't sure he agreed that Chrono was like himself, or like his dad. Maybe in certain ways, or to an extent, but it felt like such an unfair comparison. However, he trusted Chrono to know himself, and took his concerns seriously. If he didn't ask him now, he wasn't sure if he'd get another chance any time soon.

“Is there anything else you want to talk about?”

“I... well...” The hesitation in his voice was enough to tell Ibuki he'd been right. He took no satisfaction in that fact. “I don't know. I guess I still feel like I dunno what to do with myself.”

“You doubt yourself?” Ibuki knew Chrono struggled with school sometimes, that he wasn't all too confident in his academic abilities despite how hard he tried. Yet, he didn't want to assume that was what this was about.

“I guess I still feel... childish. Or indulgent. In everything I do.”

“Really?” Ibuki didn't know what to say. He was so surprised, he almost laughed. “Why in the world would you feel like that?”

“All my friends are doing such... normal things. Tangible things. I don't know. I feel like I'm wanting too much.”

“I don't think there's anything wrong with wanting a lot. It takes courage to have dreams.” Ibuki had struggled so hard to ever dare to dream, himself. To him, Chrono made it look easy.

“I... I guess... yeah...” Chrono sounded a little less hesitant, a little more certain.

“I also don't think there's anything you can't do, if you put your mind to it.” It was easy to say such things, when he believed them so wholeheartedly. “So you are right to have big dreams.”

“...Thanks.” Chrono's voice had become so warm, Ibuki could almost feel his breath against his ear. In his room, Chrono had pulled his blanket over his head in embarrassment. “Like, I know you believe in me and all, but...” His voice quivered. Chrono was bad at taking compliments. He never knew what to say. “...Thanks.”

“I don't want to leave you guessing. I know I'm not the best at... being transparent, but I want to do better.” Ibuki thought about the comparisons Chrono had made before. “I can't make your dad open up to you. But I can... be open with you myself.”

“Hey,” Chrono sounded like he'd started recovering from his slump. “Don't worry about it, okay? I mean, I know I just said those things but... you're not like my dad, so don't worry about it.”

“I'm not,” Ibuki wanted so badly for that to be true. He didn't want it to be something Chrono just said, or something Chrono simply wanted to be true. “Am I?”

“Yeah, I mean...” Ibuki could hear him smiling. “You're here.”
Ibuki smiled too, somehow. He hadn't always been there, or anywhere Chrono needed him. “I am now.”

“And you will be. Right?” Chrono was only kidding. Ibuki would allow him to do so, on his expense. “You're not going anywhere, are you?”

“I'm not.” Ibuki still laid with his arms by his sides. The bed still felt too big without Chrono there. “I couldn't.”

“Yeah, okay.” Chrono laughed. “By the way...” The tone of his voice changed. Ibuki felt a shiver.

“Are you... okay?” Chrono asked him, implications in his voice. “You're... going to sleep after this?”

“That was the plan.” Ibuki quickly got defensive. Defensive and flustered.

“Okay? I could, you know... stick around. If you want me to.” Ibuki knew what that meant. They'd done it before, even if not more than a few times.

“Chrono. Your aunt and your father are in the next room.”

“So? It's not like they'll know... I'll just, you know, listen...” There was something teasing about his suggestive tone. If Chrono could see Ibuki's expression, he'd know his answer.

“I'm sorry. I don't think I could.” Ibuki felt too distracted, anyhow. It had been a long day, and his mind was still very full of things that made Chrono's suggestion feel inappropriate.

“Hey, it's fine. I'm just asking...” Ibuki couldn't blame him for doing that.

“I know.” He missed Chrono suddenly, more than he had before. “Did your father say how long he was staying?”

“He didn't, at least not yet.” Chrono sounded a little perplexed about that. “And I don't wanna ask. Feels wrong. It'll sound like I want him to leave or something.”

“I understand.”

“Knowing him though it probably won't be too long. If he stays through the week, then well, I guess I'll just try to think of some excuse to get away for a bit.”

They were so used to seeing each other often now. Ibuki knew the core problem here. If Rive and Mikuru knew about their relationship, it would all dissolve. They were in an uncomfortable situation.

“If it comes to that maybe I could come over again another time.” Ibuki suggested. Right now, he was tired, and didn't want to think about that in detail, but he didn't think it was a bad idea in itself.

“I mean, yeah sure?” Chrono sounded humored. “Of course you could. But, like, I wanna be alone with you?”

“I-I know... I just wanted you to know I am open to that idea, as well.”

“It could be fun, yeah.” Chrono didn't sound so burdened by the suggestion. “I had a good time today anyhow. I got a bit stressed when I realized you'd been in my room with my dad but, other than that...”

“Yeah. I... I had a good time. Your aunt is very easy to talk to...” Ibuki admired her quite a bit. “You were right.”
“I was right?”

“It wasn't as awkward as I thought it would be.”

“Oh. Okay. Well, that's good to hear.” Chrono sounded pleased. “I'm glad you had a good time.”

It was getting late. They eventually hung up. Tired as he was, Ibuki laid in bed and thought back to the events of the day. The many trivial conversations and the few non-trivial ones. He still needed a little more time, too. He thought about the photographs in Chrono's room, the one with the two of them in it, and the many others that featured Chrono and his friends. The pictures taken with Chrono's old phone, at his middle school graduation, of himself, Shion, and Tokoha, their smiling faces had made a certain kind of impression on him. Chrono was an adult now, and back then, Ibuki had barely known him. Ibuki had no such memories from that age. He had never had any such experiences. Similarly, he had never had anything resembling Mikuru's dedication and sense of responsibility at the young age she had displayed it, either. So many years had passed him by, without him gaining anything. Surely, Ibuki thought, as he was falling asleep, even now he was still missing something. Something important. That's what it felt like.

Surely, he thought, he still had time left. Time left to find it.
Waking up to the sound of Mikuru's familiar voice, Chrono still took a moment to fully register where he was. It was dark outside, but his sluggish mind still somehow knew, that it was not morning. The sun had set, leaving only a residue of light lingering across the rooftops in the city. Chrono only had a few days off to shake the jet lag before it was time to go back to school. That he'd spend the first day at home sleeping was inevitable, and waking up at dusk only made him want to stay in bed, go for another eight hours or so of sleep. He would have, probably, if he hadn't woken up hungry. His things were still mostly unpacked, and he came out of his room feeling a little less alive than normal. Mikuru was on the phone. She sounded upbeat, but catching a few words here and there, Chrono knew she was working.

Truth was, he had plans. She knew that he did, too. Mikuru still took the phone from her ear to check on him when she saw him get ready to go out. With a few words exchanged, Chrono left the apartment with the promise of a hot meal in a familiar place with his best friends.

Card Capital had already closed, but the Okonomiyaki restaurant below would be open for a few more hours. Shion and Tokoha were already there when Chrono arrived, and food was frying up. Shion and Tokoha had made sure to make enough for Chrono to eat once he showed up, suspecting he'd most likely oversleep. Tokoha was back in Japan too, taking some much needed time off. Henceforth she wouldn't be as busy, and Chrono looked forward to seeing her around.

It felt good to be home. It felt good to eat familiar food and speak in his native language with his friends, people he could effortlessly be himself around. Chrono knew better than to take it for granted, but it was still easy to forget the many small comforts of living the life you were most accustomed to.

“You didn't send that many pictures. I thought you were going to show us a lot more of the city.” Shion commented.

“I was too busy for that stuff. I mean yeah, when you're planning the trip you think you're gonna have all the time in the world, but in reality I barely had the chance to do any sightseeing at all.” Chrono had come to terms with this quite early into his trip. “And then when you do have the time,
“I like to go sightseeing whenever I’m in a new place. But I guess not everyone likes to rush around…” At least Tokoha was aware not everyone could uphold her tempo.

“Well, yeah.” Chrono was in no condition to be thinking about that right now, it was enough to make him tired. “I mean, I got around. Not just as much I thought I would.”

“You still found time to hang out at that shop.” Tokoha didn't mean anything by it, and Chrono knew that.

“Yeah, ’cause it wasn't that much of a detour. And since you, know... it's nice to get to meet people outside of school...”

“It really does.” Shion agreed. There was a solemn singe to his voice. He worked a lot, and was more often than not stuck in the company of people he did not choose.

“So, what happened with you and that guy you met?” Tokoha asked. “Did you break up?” Chrono couldn't help but feel as if his friends were too concerned with his romantic life. In reality, it made sense for them to ask and he knew he was just touchy. Right now more so than he'd been previously.

“Yeah, we did.” Chrono confirmed her suspicion, tiredly. He quickly felt detached. He hadn't told them, because it had all been a bit of a mess. A mess that there was little to say about.

“How's so? He seemed nice enough, as far as I could tell. But then again, you were going back home, so...” Shion had quizzed Chrono on the topic in the past. He was always oh so very curious. As averse as Chrono could be to sharing private matters, he usually came through. He did want to talk. It wasn't that. He just had to overcome his self consciousness.

“Honestly,” Chrono readied himself to tell the story. “If it'd just been that, then it would've made a lot more sense.”

Tokoha held back a laugh. “What? What happened?”

“I'm still not sure exactly, but like,” Chrono tried to recall the events, the aspects that'd actually, probably, mattered. “We were spending a lot of time together, and I dunno, I needed some space. I was stressed out about school and all that. Things went pretty fast between us anyhow.”

There was more to it, and Chrono had been unable to feel at peace with the situation. He wouldn’t go so far as to say that it had all been a mistake, but the circumstances of their relationship had been far from ideal. “We were seeing each every other day and I felt a bit overwhelmed by that. But I guess that didn't fly with him.”

Now, Tokoha and Shion both looked concerned.

“He got pretty upset about it, ’cause like... I guess he thought it was more serious between us.” Chrono was still confused by the whole ordeal. “And I... well, I stood my ground. And he acted like I'd played him.”

“What?” Tokoha sounding so genuinely confused felt good. Chrono hadn't realized how badly he'd needed that validation of his experience. “Seriously?”

“Yeah, it was... weird.” Chrono had known he would end up telling this story sooner or later, but it
wasn't as bad as he'd imagined. “And then he was like, asking me if I loved him, and all that, and I was so surprised I had no idea what to say.”

“What?” Tokoha’s reactions grew more high pitched.

“You'd been seeing each other for how long?” Shion asked, curiously.

“A few weeks.” Chrono hadn't realized how much he'd slumped in his seat. The frying plate was still sizzling away with a second batch. “So yeah. Who the hell asks something like that after a few weeks?”

“I’m glad you managed to weasel your way out of that relationship early.” Shion said, and Chrono felt conflicted. Surely it had been a red flag, but Chrono couldn't help but blame himself. Matthew had been such a nice guy otherwise. It all felt so disjointed.

Yeah... I guess so...” Chrono let his doubts color him. In the end, engaging with someone so whimsically had been too unlike him, which should have been enough a hint that it hadn't been a relationship meant to last. Or maybe he really hadn't been able to be serious enough about it. Perhaps, he thought, he wouldn't be able to build any relationships as long as he was like this. Chrono had learned how to dream, and how to yearn. Now he had to teach himself how to stop living with his head in clouds dreaming of the impossible. It was too bad, that as good as his imagination was, he couldn't imagine that happening anytime soon.

Chrono sighed deeply, tipping his friends off that something about his story still bothered him.

“Hey, look, what he did to you was really shitty. Don't blame yourself for it, okay?” Tokoha had slid her torso down on the table and reached to touch his arm.

“I'm not... or, maybe I am...” With his own tangled thoughts laid bare, Chrono struggled to make sense out of things. “I don't know. I guess that's what bothers me.”

“He sounded like quite the loony to me. I'd say you're good.” Shion sounded confident.

Chrono looked at him tiredly, wishing his own reasoning could be that clear cut. He had nothing to say, for he didn't want to argue about this when there was so little to argue about. Thinking about it from Shion's point of view, Chrono could only think that he was right to be confident. His friends were only looking out for him, and putting himself in their shoes Chrono knew he'd absolutely say the same thing. “I suppose so, but... things were otherwise good between us. So his reaction really surprised me.”

“Well, you'd only known him for a few weeks.” Tokoha reasoned. Chrono found it in himself to agree.

“So,” Shion's inquiring tone put Chrono on alert. “I'm assuming you were sleeping together?”

Chrono had known he would ask. There was no way Shion wouldn't ask. “Well, yeah...” Chrono tried to not sound or look so flustered.

“Maybe he thought that made it serious?” Tokoha always just spoke her mind, even if clumsily at times.

“I don't know,” Chrono replied earnestly. “He never said anything that implied that, anyhow.”

“Well, at least this means you got something out of it." Shion sounded pleased, and Chrono was less so.
“Hey, don't... say that...” He hung his head, though he took no offense. “I mean, it wasn't like we had a bad time together. Just weird how it ended.”

“It sounds to me like he would've been ready to stick with you even as you went back home.” Tokoha's reasoning made sense, Chrono realized. He'd never thought about it like that. “Not that I mean to make you feel bad.” She added.

“Look, with what happened, I doubt it would have worked out anyhow.” Chrono admitted.

“That's what I assumed.” Shion made a point of not having brought it up.

Chrono tapped his fingers against the surface of the table. The next batch of Okonomiyaki was soon finished. He was still hungry, and as food was served their conversations eventually drifted elsewhere.

“Hey!” Tokoha slammed her hand down suddenly. “What do you wanna do for your birthday?” She'd been meaning to ask.

“Oh, right. That's soon, isn't it?” Shion pretended he'd only just remembered.

Chrono, on the other hand, honestly had forgotten. It had already been almost a whole year. Thinking about his birthday left him disillusioned.

“I haven't really thought about it.” He admitted. “I dunno. Nothing big. Maybe we could do something just the three of us? Or like, us, and maybe a few others, like Kazuma, and Okazaki...”

“Isn't there anything you wanna do?” Tokoha didn't sound nor look surprised, but he could tell she'd hoped for a different answer.

“If you want, I could book a venue for us.” Shion suggested, and Chrono somehow felt increasingly fatigued.

“No, no... look,” He wished he could be more grateful, but right now he wasn't fully capable of that. “I appreciate it, but... let's keep it simple. Maybe we could just hang out at Capital, then go grab something to eat. Feels like we haven't done that in forever.”

“Alright then, if you say so.” Shion smiled. It was one of his mischievous smiles. Not thinking too much of it was Chrono's first mistake. “Just leave it to us. We'll fix something.”

“Yeah!” Tokoha bounced up somewhat excitedly. “So don't worry about it!”

Chrono did as they said and decided not to worry, at least not about his birthday.

He was running a little late that night, classes had dragged on and he'd gone home on his way to the shop to get changed. Mikuru wasn't home, but would be for the weekend. Summer's darkness lingered as did the weather, heavy rain was on the forecast but the night of his birthday was luckily clear. It was only past five PM when Chrono walked up the stairs to Card Capital, but through the glass door he saw that the lights were off. For a moment, Chrono did consider walking away. He
considered it, and realized how much of a jerk he'd have to be to actually do that. He heard a slight murmur, and he couldn't help but smile. Oh, how silly he'd been. He'd become depressed missing his friends, and now he had childishly wanted to walk away from it all. He braced before he swung the door open. Naturally he was a little embarrassed. Shion and Tokoha knew he hated this sort of attention, and yet, that only made them want to shower him in it all the more.

“Okay, I'm here now, so you can all come out—” Chrono had hoped to take the edge of the welcoming he knew awaited, but as the lights came on with a blinding flash to the sound of a roaring chorus of voices he still jumped out of skin.

“Surprise!” Kamui had hopped up on the counter. Carl, Kei and Tsuneto had all jumped out from just behind the door to his right. Kazuma, Kumi and Taiyou had stood up from behind the chairs and tables closest to the door, and before Chrono could comprehend anything else, he heard the shutter of a phone camera go off. The lights flickered on in the back, by the windows. It was Rin, snickering at the picture she'd just taken. Shion and Tokoha were soon hovering over her shoulder to have a laugh as well. Where they'd appeared from, Chrono wasn't fully sure, and he was stunned, frozen in place, unable to do anything but watch things unfold.

“Congratulations, heartbreaker!” Tsuneto had almost flown at him. “You finally come back home after being gone for god knows how long... and then you say I can't see you for your birthday?!” He was more worked up that upset.

“It's... great to see you.” Still in shock, Chrono had backed up against the door that was now closed behind him.

“Hey man, it's been forever.” Kazuma had come up to them, holding his hand out. Chrono took it, weakly. He still felt faint.

“Happy birthday!” Taiyou filled in.

“Yeah, it really has... and thank you.” Just as those words left him, Chrono felt Kumi hook his arm with hers in a vice grip. He felt slightly fearful.

“Now!” She announced, sweetly. “Let us deliver Shindou, front and center!”

She pulled him along, and he didn't dare struggle. Tokoha and Shion watched him with glimmering eyes, and Rin's eyes were still on him too, through the screen of her phone. The shutter went off again.

“I can't believe you'd do this to me...” Chrono said to them in defeat. This was a lie. He could absolutely believe it, because they'd done it to him before, and he'd helped them plan doing it to others as well.

Tokoha pinched his cheek. “Did you think we were just gonna let you mope?”

“You're a strange one, you know that?” Shion sighed theatrically. “You call home, talking about how lonely you are, and how you miss us, and how you want to go home. Then, once you do come home, you act all anti-social and depressed.”

Tokoha pulled his cheek harder. The shutter went off a third time. “Pathetic.” Rin commented. Chrono struggled in Kumi's vice grip.

“I'm sorry,” He moaned. “I'm really sorry, so... please...”

They laughed, but not at him. As Tokoha and Kumi both let him go, Chrono tried to pull himself
back together. He felt a pat on his back. “Come on, is that what you think we wanted? An apology?” Kazuma looked at him funny, and Chrono realized his mistake.

“I... I guess not.” He felt silly, a feeling he struggled with. He'd been thinking so much about himself, not realizing that his friends has missed him, too.

“Well, then if we're all here, let's go!” Kamui was still seated on the counter.

“Go?” Things were happening in rapid succession. Chrono wasn't quite following. “I thought we were gonna hang out here? Have some fights and...” He hadn't realized until now, but the shop was indeed empty, and things had been packed away. Things were in shape for lock-up, and yet everyone was all smiles.

“Come on, you were late so we're kind of in a hurry!” As everyone started grabbing their stuff, Kamui chased everyone out of the shop. Still in a daze, Chrono was in the center of the group that was buzzing with excitement.

“So, where are we going?” He had an inkling, considering the direction they were headed.

“Oh, we're gonna fight alright!” Tokoha sounded pumped, which only seemed to confirm Chrono's theory.

“Why are you getting excited?” Kazuma asked, humored.

“For Tokoha I suppose it's nothing special. But it's been a long time for me, now...” Shion was almost overbearingly wistful. “A long time since I last used GIAS.”

“So? We're really doing this?” Chrono has indeed suspected it, although he thought it implausible. “We're lining up for GIAS? At this hour?” The Tokyo Sky Tree GIAS was popular, too popular to just get an open room just like that.

“You underestimate us, Chrono...” Kamui was herding the group from the back. “We have... outsourced personnel tasked with setting things up for us.”

As those words sunk in, Chrono felt his senses fade away. As he realized what was happening, he decided to not take anything for granted. Whatever happened, he would deal with it when the situation materialized. As they passed through the streets, and over the little bridge across the stream that led into the river, the excitement had never dimmed down, and Chrono found it contagious. It had been a long time since he’d used GIAS too, and he was looking forward to it. He was glad that his friends had decided to do something like this for him, despite how gloomy he had been. It would take a lot to ruin today, he thought.

Inside the lobby, it was somewhat crowded. The line for GIAS was only so long, but the time slots were long and the rooms were few. The group steered as one, and Chrono had only barely become anxious. Near the front of the line, standing with his posture sharp and his eyes cast downward, Ibuki’s hair was draped across his face. He was on his phone, typing, and Chrono could only assume he was working. Expected, yet unexpected, the sight of him made Chrono slow in his steps and his thought similarly freeze in wonder. He really was here. He almost couldn't believe it, and yet, why shouldn't he? This was where they'd met for the very first time, and it had been on this exact day, one year ago, that everything had started to become so incomprehensibly complicated. Maybe that was why, it somehow felt natural, that Ibuki would be here, despite everything.

The others called out to Ibuki before he could, and Chrono watched him raise his head and search for them among the people coming and going before spotting them across the hall. Kamui made a run
for it, for some reason, apologizing as he went. It was almost time, but there was no need to hurry that much. As everyone caught up to him, making their way into the line, Chrono straggled a bit behind the group.

“Hey, um,” There was chatter all around them, and yet Ibuki had picked Chrono's voice easily, and turned at the sound. “Thanks for going out of your way like this... you must've been stuck here for awhile.”

“Oh. Don't mention it.” Ibuki's voice was quiet. Chrono strained himself as hard as he could to hear him, which was yet another reason to feel lightheaded. “Then again, I felt like I didn't have much of an option when Anjou and Kiba asked me to.”

Ibuki smiled, carefully, and his eyes appeared to light up. Chrono saw the paleness of his skin, and the faint line under his eye. He looked worn, but with the light returning to his face, he was still so handsome. Chrono felt no different than he had a year ago. He felt as in love as he'd ever been, which was more than he'd ever thought was possible. His own imagination had run wild in Ibuki's absence, an absence he still direly wanted some sort of explanation for, but when Ibuki smiled at him, he felt ready to let it all go. As indulgent as he knew it to be, he still couldn't help himself. It would take a lot to ruin today, and even with Ibuki here, Chrono still felt that way.

“It's good to see you.” He said, without really thinking. It came out awkwardly, more so with the bustle around them. Now was not the time to talk, but Chrono couldn't hold back.

“...It's good to see you too.” With his voice faintly emotionally strained, Chrono knew it was the truth, and he realized Ibuki was like him. Awkward, thoughtless, painfully aware of their surroundings. Oh, that faint connection between them felt so good. It got to his head, and Chrono felt that he was in so deep, he could never get out.

That brief moment was all the time they had to talk. The queue had been moving along, and once inside the spectator booth Chrono was quickly surrounded on all sides. No one needed to coerce him onto the field, but his friends sure looked like they wanted to try. As his deck uploaded to the GIAS module, Chrono allowed himself to feel genuinely excited for the games to come.

“Okay, who'll be the first to play me?” As he asked, he knew his friends would be more about using GIAS than fighting him.

“Oh, me, me!” Tokoha was ready to burst out to join Chrono on the field, but her proposal was an unpopular one.

“Not you!” It was Tsuneto who rejected her the fastest. “If anyone, it should be m-”

“How about,” Shion's calm, projected voice cut through to them before any bickering could ensue. “We let the one person who wasted the last few hours to give us all a chance to play go first?”

It took Ibuki a second to understand Shion was talking about him. “Do you mind?” Shion asked, before Ibuki could say anything else.

“Well, I...” He did sound pleased with the suggestion. “I suppose I don't.”

Chrono really hadn't thought this was what he would be doing today. No one had any complaints, and as Ibuki entered, Chrono felt a layer of tension he hadn't detected leave him. His brief registration finished, Ibuki raised his face to see Chrono watch him, and he too, seemed aware of the implications of the situation. Chrono had once felt like he knew what to expect from Ibuki, but after the year that had passed, he couldn't feel that way anymore. Then and there, in the wake of the
situation, he made a decision of sorts. Regardless of what had happened and what was to come, he wanted to enjoy this. If he didn't, he knew he would regret it. Whenever he and Ibuki fought in the past, during those key moments of his life, it always seemed to bring upon something new. It had been like that when they first met, and he could've sworn it had happened the year before, too. Maybe it would be like that again this time, or maybe it would just be another game, another friendly competition between them. He was about to find out, but before he did, he wanted to have a good time. It had been a long time since they’d played together, and Chrono felt a longing he’d almost forgotten he could feel. A longing to bask in the relentless intensity that Ibuki would embody during a fight.

“Are you getting any practice?” He could have made a more hard-hitting jab at Ibuki's absence in his life, but Chrono decided to let him live. For now.

“...How much could I possibly need?” Ibuki sighed. He was decent at trash-talking. Chrono was better at the sort of deeply upsetting and possibly life-changing insults, so honestly Ibuki had the upper hand when it came to banter.

Chrono had gone first, giving Ibuki the first stride. Perhaps it was only his imagination, but despite their time apart, Ibuki's deck was not too different. As he was considering it he quickly got sucked into an excelled state of concentration. He hadn't played Ibuki in so long. He didn't want to waste this game. Hitting four damage hurt, more so when a critical trigger forced him to guard a rear guard attack he otherwise would have yielded to.

During his own first stride, Chrono tried to save his resources, and opt to gain defensive advantage. He couldn't defeat Ibuki this turn, but he had ways of surviving the next. He couldn't let this game end just yet. Time leaping Mesh-kia onto the field during the main phase gave him an extra draw, as did putting Transit Dragon in the soul after boosting, and he got yet another in the end phase by time leaping out Lishma with a skill other than her own. Dran's skill also gave him the extra grade three he needed for the next turn. The drive check yielded him a critical trigger, Upstream Dragon, and finally, Arlim. The single trigger was not enough to make any difference; Chrono rose his eyes from the field to see Ibuki pensively watch him add the perfect guard to his hand.

It would indeed become Ibuki's turn once more. He too had been pushed to four damage, but which in and of itself wasn't out of the ordinary. He appeared focused, and without hesitation he discarded an extra grade three from his hand. “I stride. Genesis Dragon, Harmonics Neo Messiah.”

Chrono knew what this meant. In his hand, Arlim would become obsolete against the vanguard's attack.

“Alter Ego Neo Messiah's skill.” The effect was no cost. “I call Metallia Messiah. I lock Vlastos, and...”

There were only two rear-guards on Chrono's field. Lishma behind the vanguard, and Mesh-kia in the left back row. Ibuki had already flipped Vlastos, who laid alone in the back row, opposite to the circle open behind Metallia. He considered his options for a second. “Mesh-kia. That's plus six thousand to Metallia.”

An odd choice, Chrono thought, albeit frustrated regardless. As he turned Mesh-kia face down on the field, Chrono recounted Harmonic's skill. With Metallia on the field, whichever card he locked would not matter, at least if he wanted to meet the proper conditions.

“I call Beloved Child of Superstring Theory. She goes in the soul. Plus three thousand to Metallia.” He'd need some soul for the end phase, and yet it felt like overkill. “I call Lady Bomber of the Magnetic Storm, and put Awaking Messiah down as a locked card. Plus three thousand to Metallia,
Awaking Messiah behind Metallia made Chrono feel a nostalgic sort of dread mixed with anticipation. Yet again, he remembered the fight they’d had exactly one year ago.

“I call Blink Messiah.” As soon as he'd drawn it, Ibuki put the new card in his hand down on the field. “I activate the skill of Prayer Child of Steady State Cosmo in the drop zone.”

The sentinel Ibuki had used in the previous turn against Chrono's vanguard attack appeared face up in Ibuki's bind zone. “I lock Blink Messiah and Lady Bomber. Plus six thousand to Metallia.”

All rear guards on Ibuki's side of the field except for Metallia were now turned face down, locked. Ibuki had met the conditions he needed. “Metallia attacks the vanguard. That's 27 thousand.”

Chrono could guard it with what he had on hand. It was only two triggers' worth of shield that he needed. However, Harmonics Messiah's attack was regardless coming up. He also needed to think about his next turn. The drive check had yet to happen, and with the second column opening up, there was no saying quite what would happen. Chrono was aware that Ibuki knew he had a sentinel in his hand. However, Chrono had more than that.

Revealing Uluru in his hand, Chrono then discarded her. “Highbrow steam, Raphanna. I return Lishma to the deck, and call Ur-watar. Raphanna gains ten thousand shield.”

At 36 thousand shield, it was only barely overkill. Putting Lishma back in the deck hurt. Chrono couldn't help but feel strangely wary. Had Ibuki predicted this? He shouldn't have known, not about the second heal trigger that still sat in Chrono's hand.

“Harmonics Neo Messiah attacks the vanguard.” Chrono braced. “All locked units on the field are unlocked.”

All four locked units on Ibuki's side of the field became unlocked, as did Mesh-kia in Chrono's back row. “All unlocked units gain five thousand until the end of turn. Harmonics gains five thousand for each card that became unlocked.” Continuing to resolve the skill, Ibuki eyed Chrono's hand. “Since five cards were unlocked, grade one or greater cards can not be called from the hand to the guardian circle until the end of this battle.”

Ibuki had more skills to resolve. “Blink Messiah's skill. It goes in the soul, I draw one, and Harmonics gains five thousand power. Vlastos' skill. It gains four thousand. Awaking’s skill. Metallia stands, and gains two thousand.”

“Since five cards were unlocked, Metallia gains 15 thousand.” Ibuki smiled, and he sought Chrono's gaze. “Harmonics attacks for 56 thousand. Now, what will you do?”

“Generation Guard,” Chrono smiled too, if tensely. Oh, he wanted to win. He wanted to win real bad. He always did, but now more so than in a very long time. “Time Maiden of Eternity, Uluru.”

With a counter-blast, and turning Highbrow Steam, Arlim face up in the G zone, Uluru appeared on the guardian circle. With five thousand extra shield for every card face up in his G zone, and with Raphanna and Arlim adding to a total number of four it still wasn't quite enough. “And I guard, with Steam Gunner, Kadash.”

Together, Uluru and Kadash adding their numbers to Chronojet G's base eleven, it amounted to 67 thousand. The drive check would decide his fate. Chrono wished it hadn't needed be that way, but Metallia standing once more, this was his only chance of surviving.
“Very well.” It had been a long time since Chrono had seen Ibuki so pleased with himself. It relieved him, despite his conflicted feelings. All this time, he hadn’t seen Ibuki, and how he’d worried. How he’d missed him. In reality, Ibuki appeared quite fine. Had Chrono’s absence in his life affected him at all?

“First check.” Chrono hadn’t registered how worked up his friends had gotten in the spectator’s booth. The top card in Ibuki’s deck was turned over.

“Critical trigger, Blink Messiah.”

Oh. That was bad. Chrono let the tense smile stick to his face. Ibuki stared hard at the revealed card. He’d need another one to get through, and surely he hadn’t forgotten about Arlim. “I...” In an unusual turn of events, Ibuki appeared to hesitate. “I give the power and critical to Lady Bomber.”

A sane choice. The obvious choice. But was it the choice that breathed Ibuki’s usual way of playing? Chrono suddenly wasn't sure. Maybe it had already been too long for him to remember.

“Second check...” GIRS made the second card flash into position before their eyes. Chrono clutched the fan of cards in his hand. It was a grade two, Lady Fencer of Matter Transmission. Ibuki appeared to relax somewhat.

“Third check.” For the third and final time, a card was turned over. The card art was familiar, more so for he’d just seen it a moment ago. Chrono registered it before Ibuki spoke. “…Critical trigger. Blink Messiah.”

Ibuki breathed a sigh, his eyes sliding shut, a smile glowing faintly on his face. He had hesitated, and refused to gamble. Victory had flashed by him, and he’d been unable to grasp it.

“I give the power to Lady Bomber and the critical to Metallia.” The guard was successful.

Chrono released the breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. Uluru smiled at him gently, her face shining with age-old wisdom. She faded, and disappeared. Her likeness was only capable of so much, her likeness which was no more than an approximation in every meaning of the word. She came to rest next to Arlim, Raphanna, and the two History-build Dragons he'd used in the previous turn. Depicted on the card's shiny, radiant surface, Uluru was still smiling. She always was. Lined up next to her allies in the G zone, it only felt appropriate. Chrono had come to think that maybe that smile was for him, too. It was hard to think otherwise. She was so close to him, and yet, so far away. He knew her, and yet he didn't know her at all. Realizing he’d been distracted for a moment, Chrono lifted his gaze across the field. Laying his eyes on Ibuki, Chrono realized he felt the same way about him. This entire fight he'd been trying to read him, yet unable to conclude anything.

Lady Bomber would swing for 35 thousand. Chrono guarded the attack with one more Kadash, and one Heart-thump. Metallia attacked for a hefty 41 thousand. With Arlim getting to work, the power increase amounted to nothing. Soul charging with Vlastos and drawing with Alter Ego Neo Messiah, Ibuki’s turn came to an end.

Chrono had indeed survived. He hadn't been wrong to aim to strengthen his defenses. If he hadn't, he never would've been able to stop both of those last attacks. However, this next turn would be different. His second stride, and he had already hit generation break five. He had to push for it. It was now or never. Chrono discarded one copy of Steam Breath Dragon. “I stride,” It was time, yet again, to revisit an old friend. “Chronodragon Gear Groovy!”

The stride skill would go off. “I call Upstream,” The order was important. “And time leap Ur-watar to Causality Dragon.”
Causality appeared behind Upstream in the left column. “Ur-watar's skill. He goes back in the deck, I draw two, and shuffle one back into the deck.” He would need the extra cards. “Causality's skill. Upstream gets plus two thousand and ‘time leap’. The two face up History-build in my G zone makes that an additional six thousand power.”

Ibuki was following his line of thought well judged by his expression. The time leap deck would poke at you with low numbers, but not only did History-build make those low numbers not quite as low, the additional skill gained by Causality meant being punished by letting those attacks hit.

“I call Melem.” With her familiar face, optimistically smiling, she appeared in front of Mesh-kia in the left front row. He had four units on his field. With the turn he had ahead of him, he might as well go all out. “I call Ka-lanma.”

A vanilla critical trigger behind his Vanguard was enough of a tell-tale sign that he intended for this to be his final turn. “Groovy's generation break three. I turn one Chronodragon Nextage in my g zone face up, and my vanguard gains five thousand power.” The flip was the cost, not the effect, as backwards as it may seem. “Groovy's generation break two.” The persona flip served the further fuel his g zone. “I choose Nextage and History-build. Groovy gains their AUTO skills until end of turn.”

This was setting up for a long turn. Chrono felt a surge of nervosity putting him on edge. He could win. As long as he didn't mess up, he could win. Oh, he wanted it so badly. Chrono didn't realize how sharp his gaze had become, as he stared hard at Ibuki across of him.

“Upstream attacks the vanguard.” With the skill, and the extra power and boost, it was 28 thousand.

“I call Melem.” With her own skill and the additional power and boost, it was 26 thousand. A magic number, just above the threshold. Ibuki would need another 20 thousand to not take the damage.

“Guard.” Ibuki sounded focused, his voice deep. He'd dropped another two triggers to guard the attack.

“I call Melem...” With her own skill and the additional power and boost, it was 26 thousand. A magic number, just above the threshold. Ibuki would need another 20 thousand to not take the damage.

“Guard.” Ibuki sounded focused, his voice deep. He'd dropped another two triggers to guard the attack.

“I call Melem.” Melem faded, returning to the deck in a flash. “In her place, I call Ur-watar.” The switcheroo was yet again complete.

“Groovy attacks.” It was only 40 thousand. However, Chrono had already hit generation break eight, with seven upturned cards in his g zone. “History-build's skill. I turn one more History-build from my g zone face up, and I can time leap as many cards on my field as I have upturned in my g zone.”

As GIAS registered the skill, all five of Chrono's rear guards were neatly piled in the bind zone. In the left row, Ur-Watar once more became Melem, who had only left the field for a few seconds. Behind her, Mesh-kia became Sharrum, as did Causality in the back row opposite of her. In the right front row, the second Causality had been exchanged with History-maker. Behind the vanguard, Lishma had once more reappeared in Ka-lanma's place. With Ur-watar's skill, Chrono once again
drew two and shuffled one back into his deck. Upon losing two thousand power each, both Sharrums in the back row instead gained boost. Lishma and History-maker, both naturally possessing time leap, gained nine thousand power each as of the stacking effects of the Histoty-builds in the g zone. Similarly, the vanguard gained another three, hitting another threshold at 43 thousand.

Chrono saw Ibuki cast his eyes down to his fan of cards for a short moment. At four damage, he could always hope to take this attack head on and survive. Ibuki had at this point learned that Chrono ran three different types of critical triggers. Since he also ran at least one stand trigger, Ur-watar, Ibuki would be able to calculate that Chrono likely ran somewhere between nine and eleven critical triggers. The correct answer was, in fact, ten. Furthermore, time leap thinned and could even manipulate the contents of the deck. Surely, betting his survival on Chrono's trigger outcome would be a dangerous move.

“Perfect guard,” Ibuki discarded one card from his hand. “Prayer Child of Steady State Cosmo.”

Chrono felt reasonably pleased. This was far from over.

“First check...” Chrono had completely forgotten about their surroundings, his eyes fixated on the radiant form before him. Alter Ego Neo Messiah still stood proud and tall. She was always a sight to behold. Obscuring her form and flashing into Chrono's field of vision, the first card revealed Upstream Dragon.

“Second check,” Across of him, Ibuki appeared unaffected. Chrono wondered, if he wanted to win as badly as he did himself. Chrono wondered, if he too was replaying the events of the years gone by in his mind. “Critical trigger.”

Heart-thump Worker, another old friend. It was a card he'd used since the early days when he'd first picked up Gear Chronicle. “I give all the effects to Melem.”

Five thousand power and one critical stronger, Melem was grinning broader.

“Third check...” The third, and final card flashed by them. No trigger. Chronojet Dragon G went to Chrono's hand with the other two cards he'd checked.

“Nextage's skill.” Chrono discarded three cards, counter blasted one, and flipped another Nextage face up. “Groovy goes to the g zone. My vanguard stands.” The heart card was now the vanguard once more. Chronojet G, with Lishma backing him up, was ready for yet another attack.

“Melem attacks.” With the boost and the trigger effect, it was 28 thousand, and would deal two damage if it hit. Chrono didn't intend for the attack to hit. He was forcing Ibuki to drop cards from his hand, all to avoid him getting any damage triggers.

“Generation Guard,” Of course. Chrono had more or less expected this. “Darkness that Lights Up Demise, Lacus Carina.” Ibuki turned one card in his g zone face up, and one card in his damage zone face down.

“I lock Vlastos and Awaking.” The two cards in Ibuki's back row were now face down once more. It was a nasty skill. Chrono knew it well. “Now, choose two cards in your back row, and lock them.”

They choice was easy enough, but still hard to go through with. It would limit his playroom. Chrono locked both his Sharrums; Carina's shield was only 15 thousand on her own, and without the boost, Melem's attack would not hit. Regardless, he had avoided the worst outcome. Ibuki knew, just like Chrono did, the events that would unfold. After boosting, Lishma's skill would still activate, and
chain into multiple attacks. She could time leap herself into Upstream, and swing for another 13 thousand. Then, the skill would call a rested grade one. History-maker could then swing, and use his own skill to time leap the grade one to another History-maker to continue the cycle. Had Ibuki forgotten? If he hadn't intercepted, he might have been able to lock Lishma as well.

After her attack had failed, Melem once more went back to the deck with a flash. Chrono had wanted to call Tick-tock, but with his back row sealed, he had little reason too. “...I call Kadash.”

His fourth and last Kadash appeared, rested in the front row. Unconcerned with the situation she was in, she was determined as always. Perhaps she too, could see Ibuki's hand thinning out. He had only four cards left in his hand. Chrono felt his adrenaline rushing.

“Chronojet G attacks...” Resting the unit, the words came out sounding focused despite his racing mind. His vanguard would gain power with each two face up g units, and already during his second stride, that number was ten. Chronojet would gain 25 thousand from his own skill alone, and additional nine from his time leap skill. “With boost from Lishma. Kadash activates... she moves to the soul, Chronojet gets plus ten thousand, and I draw one.”

With the boost it was 71 thousand. Chrono eyed the cards in Ibuki's hand. What would he do? What could he do? If he had another sentinel, Chrono hadn't seen it. Ibuki was poker faced, hard to read. He didn't appear to have given up. Chrono stared at him, and though he surely just imagined it, a faint smile still lingered on his face. He rose his hand, and with a trained movement, he discarded a card from his hand.

“Oh, Chrono thought. Interesting.

“Generation Guard...” Now, Ibuki was unmistakably smiling. “Large Wheel of the Cosmos, Cosmo Wreath.”

The last and fourth card in Ibuki's damage zone was turned face down. “Choose one card in your back row, and lock it.”

“Oh. Chrono smiled, too. So, he hadn't forgotten. He really hadn't. Humored, Chrono turned Lishma face down, his full back row now locked.

“With the skill, he gains an extra five thousand shield.” With the base eleven, it was only 31 thousand. Chronojet's attack had been shaved down to 55 thousand with Lishma locked, but the breach of power was still a tough leap to make, more so with the twin drive in mind.

Closing his eyes, Ibuki sighed. “If you get a critical trigger, you win. If I get a damage trigger, I'll survive.” A playful sort of cynicism had crept into his voice.

“Oh?” Chrono almost laughed. “You need a damage trigger?”

“I'm sorry,” Ibuki was wryly amused. “I'm afraid my guarding hand isn't what it's cut out to be. As for you, well... you made sure to thin your deck of triggers, didn't you?”

Kadash had gone into the soul a short moment ago. Chrono knew there was also a risk in calling his criticals to the field, but he hadn't been able to resist the temptation of the extra ten thousand.

“Well, we'll see about that, won't we?” Chrono admitted to losing his composure with how his voice wavered. Truthfully, he wasn't so sure a critical would show. He really wanted it too, though. He craved victory, more so now when he could almost taste it. Oh, when had he last wanted something this bad? Watching Ibuki across of him, Chrono felt his heart flutter, and he dared to embrace that feeling, welcoming the familiarity of it.
The attack would hit. But would it finish the game? Chrono raised his eyes to the visage of the messiah once more, her radiant form still standing unshaken.

“First check,” With the announcement, the first card flashed before them.

Steam Battler, Ur-watar. What were the chances? Chrono found it intriguing.

“Stand trigger. Plus five thousand to History-maker.”

Having been reduced to nothing but a beat-stick, History-maker was at least hitting some decent numbers. Chrono eyed the top of his deck. In his mind, it was easy to draw the image he wanted to see. It was easy to imagine the future he wanted, now and from here on out. Maybe the outcome of this game would change something, just like previous games had changed things between them in the past. Or maybe, Ibuki’s role in Chrono’s life had already been decided a long time ago.

It was instantaneous in the end. Chrono’s image meshed with reality. Maybe, it was just a game, and maybe he could just be happy for what it was, for this moment alone. Chrono had always enjoyed playing with Ibuki, regardless of who won and who lost. When they played, he could always indulge himself, forget about everything else.

“Critical trigger...” Chrono spoke on breath, reality still catching up to him. “Steam Scara, Kakanma.”

“I...” He needed to stay focused. “I give the power to History-maker, and the critical to the vanguard.”

Ibuki didn’t look surprised, either, as if he’d imagined the same outcome as Chrono had. Out of the two additional cards that fell into place into his damage zone, neither were triggers. His fate had been sealed from the beginning. Ibuki didn’t look surprised, but he didn’t look too displeased either. As was right of him, Chrono thought. He’d made a clever play under dire circumstances. The image of the messiah had shattered, and as the visuals as constructed by projector faded away, as did she, her bright outline having burned into his vision.

As the visage remained in his mind even after Ibuki left the field, Chrono’s friends had lined up to fight him. He wasn’t allowed any time to breathe, or think. The excitement that the fight with Ibuki had brought him had left him feeling high. Tokoha was next to take on the challenge, now with no real protests. It was a good fight, and even as she refused to play around him, she came swinging harder and cutting deeper each turn. He caved after a third stride, his resources exhausted. She used cards he hadn’t gone up against before, all while displaying a deeper understanding of his deck than he could of hers. It had been a good game, and maybe with some additional luck he could've won. Tokoha recognized as much, but it was a win well deserved. Shion brought much of the same old to the table, something that helped little when the Royal Paladin signature early rush was one of Gear Chronicle’s few weaknesses. In the end, a few damage triggers too much sealed the deal, and Chrono still managed to push through, and get a win. The other games were similarly eventful, and no one was going easy on him. Chrono had assumed at least, maybe one or two games he could bear to sit out, but no. No one would let him. A loss against Kazuma after consecutive g assists was counter-balanced by a win against Taiyou. Similarly, his honor was salvaged by a win against Kamui after Rin wore him down into nothing. He was allowed no win-streak however, not after Kumi defeated him with her signature first stride triple crit. Tsuneto snagged the last game, and it was a stupid win Chrono hardly earned, considering his own trigger turn up. Frustrated as he was, Tsuneto still managed to enjoy himself, and all was well. Having faced so many opponents in a row, Chrono took some well deserved time outs for the last couple of minutes they had left.

“Good games.” Chrono had only just about collapsed on the couch in the spectator booth as Ibuki
spoke to him. There was slightly peculiar look in his eye.

“Thanks...” Chrono replied, somewhat halfheartedly. Only so many of the games had been good, but then again, that was life.

“I'm obliged to say that, after you beat me.” He said that, but he didn't look too unhappy.

“Hey, you can always get a rematch if you want.” Chrono offered. It felt like the natural thing to say, and yet, it felt like he'd implied something, perhaps unnecessarily.

Ibuki smiled. “Sure. Why not.”

Maybe things could be like this, just like they'd used to be. Maybe, they could still talk like this, spend time together like this, as if nothing had happened. Perhaps they could. It felt like it. However, Chrono still wasn't sure how he felt about that. He wasn't sure if that was what he wanted at all.

In the meantime, Tsuneto had challenged Carl and they were putting their last few minutes to good use. Kamui stood by the door, still tirelessly engaged. Shion and Tokoha soon cornered Chrono on the couch, smothering him in the way he'd only ever let them do. Eventually, the timer ran out. Chrono more or less expected everyone to scatter. They didn't. Tsuneto, Carl and Kei went home, everyone else stayed; Shion overtook the group leader role. He had a restaurant reservation for them upstairs.

It was a western styled restaurant, and they had to be seated across more than one table. They ate, and it was a fairly rowdy time. Food was shared among everyone. People came and went, leaving their seats to sit elsewhere, someone else filling in for them. Although he enjoyed himself, Chrono couldn't help but feel slightly disoriented. He was tired, even if in a good way. Soon, it got late, and more people started dropping off. Kamui left, citing work early in the morning. Hiroki showed up, told Chrono a disdainful happy birthday, and then left with Taiyou soon thereafter. Kazuma and Kumi left around that time, too. Chrono noticed, of course, that Ibuki was still around. They hadn't had much chance to talk during dinner. Chrono did want to talk to him. There was little that could ever change that, even if he wasn't sure exactly what to say.

Returning to the table after a refill, Chrono saw to his surprise that Mamoru had arrived. He saw him speak to Ibuki at their table, and went to have a seat himself.

“Hey, it's been a while!” Chrono greeted him.

Mamoru lit up. “It really has! Hello! And happy birthday!”

“Thanks, really! Though I'm surprised to see you here.” Chrono wasn't surprised to see him in theory. It was more the timing.

“Oh, I came to pick Tokoha up. She said she needed a ride.” Mamoru said that, but he looked like he was planning to stick around. “If anything I'm more surprised you're still here, chief.”

“Well, I...” Ibuki barely had time to respond.

“Not that I mind!” Mamoru added. “You need to get out of the office if anything. It's been a busy few weeks.”

“It really has.” Ibuki spoke quietly, his voice burdened.

“If you start talking about work, I'll make you leave.” Tokoha directed the comment at her brother, but Ibuki looked guiltier than he did. Tokoha grabbed Mamoru and brought him to the counter across
the restaurant. It looked like they were staying around a little while longer, and Chrono assumed they were ordering more snacks. Behind him, he heard Shion and Rin coolly converse about the state of their lives. You could say they were catching up, but they were both quite particular about it. Chrono didn't quite understand their relationship, but he assumed they were friends.

With a tap, Ibuki's glass came down on the table. Chrono realized he'd been stuck staring in the direction Mamoru and Tokoha had disappeared off to.

“So, you've... had a lot of work?” Chrono didn't mean to sound accusing, but he didn't know how else to phrase it.

“I'm afraid so.” Ibuki didn't look directly at him. Surely he worried what Chrono would say next, and for good reason. In reality, Chrono hardly had the energy to discuss something like that right now.

“Just take care of yourself, okay?” At best, Chrono would say he felt uncertain about Ibuki's ability to value his own health. If only he could make Ibuki realize how much people cared about him, maybe that would change.

“...I try.” He sounded a bit let up. Chrono didn't feel like pursuing the subject much.

Ibuki took a discreet glance around them, one which only Chrono could notice. “By the way...” He sounded a little more focused, which served to make Chrono concerned. “I was... instructed to give this to you.”

Ibuki had reached inside the inner pocket of his jacket. The envelope that he put in front of Chrono at the table looked awfully familiar. Undoing Ibuki's attempts to be stealthy, Chrono recoiled with an audible groan. “Really?” He asked. He sounded vehemently unimpressed.

“Your father wanted me to... wish you a happy birthday.” Ibuki sounded, and looked, ashamed. Presumably in his father's place, but also in general.

“Is that why you're here today?” Chrono didn't hide his disappointment in him.

“In part... yes.” Ibuki responded carefully.

“In part?” Chrono had collected the envelope. He wasn't about to open it, but he didn't like looking at it. He put it away.

“...I wanted to tell you that I'm sorry.” The words felt worn before he'd even said them.

“You're sorry?” Ibuki had apologized to him before, that summer. Chrono hardly let that count. “For what?” Chrono wouldn't let him get away with throwing words around ambiguously. When Chrono saw the strain on Ibuki's face, saw him think and saw him hurt, he only felt so satisfied. He wasn't enjoying this.

“I'm sorry I didn't see you for so long.” As genuine as his apology sounded, Chrono still wished for something more.

“Why didn't you?” Chrono hadn't intended to sound so hurt. His feelings got the better of him.

“I'm afraid I... I don't have any real excuse.” That wasn't what Chrono wanted to hear at all. Regardless, it indeed sounded like something Ibuki might say. He was probably not lying. That didn't necessarily mean it was the truth.

“So... you just did it for no reason?” Their voices had become hushed, despite the storming turmoil
that was building. Chrono hadn't fully forgotten about their surroundings, but it wasn't enough to hold him back entirely.

Ibuki had become distressed himself. “I was... not well. At the time.”

If he had been capable of it, Chrono might have rolled his eyes.

“I didn't want to... put you through that.”

“Really? 'Cause, it's just... I thought... we were...” Chrono found it hard to speak. “Friends, you know?” He hadn't planned to say anything else, but he still struggled to get the words out.

This hit Ibuki a lot harder than Chrono had expected. He was visibly upset. “Chrono... of course we're friends.”

“So...” Chrono sighed, tiredly. “Talk to me.”

“Right,” Ibuki spoke on a hushed exhale, shaken up. “I'm sorry I couldn't... talk to you.”

“Yeah... and you sure picked a great time to finally do so.” Chrono could have swung at him a lot harder. Above all else, he just sounded let down. “But I guess you're sorry about that too?”

They both knew there was nothing much Ibuki could say to that. He looked defeated. “I can't say I expected you to forgive me easily. It really was good to see you today, though.”

Chrono felt a little bad. He hadn't meant to imply he hadn't wanted to see Ibuki. “Yeah.” He admitted. “It was... good to see you too.”

If Ibuki was under the impression Chrono had only just said it greeting before, hopefully he got the hint now. It seemed to work. He smiled a little. “…I had fun.”

“It looked like you did.” Chrono had indeed thought so. He couldn't help but stare at his face, even as Ibuki looked away.

“I just hope that after all these years, you still get some satisfaction out of besting me.” Ibuki had taken a shot at lighting up the situation. Chrono let him.

“Are you kidding? I love it.” He wasn't lying or exaggerating, although he knew it might sound like he was. “It was the best thing to happen all day.”

“Well, in that case, I'm glad.” Ibuki sounded like he understood, at least to an extent. Chrono allowed himself to feel satisfied with that.

“...It's good that you're back home.” Ibuki hadn't let the silence fall for long. He reached for his glass to have a sip.

“Well, it's good to be back.” Chrono shrugged. “I guess.”

“How's so?” Ibuki still spoke quietly, but he sounded a little intrigued. “Did you not have a good time while you were away?”

“I did,” Chrono had to say that. Anything else would be a lie. “But I guess I also sort of didn't. It was pretty tough.”

“...School?” Ibuki had hesitated.
“Yeah. It gets hectic. At least when you're like me.” Chrono could feel frustrated with himself, even though he knew better than to let it affect his self-image too much.

“I'm sure you do fine.” Ibuki sounded quite sure indeed.

“I get by...” Chrono had some to drink, too. He sighed. “It's just a lot when... you know, everything is so different. With the language and all, too. I also, I mean... I missed everyone a lot more than I thought I would.”

Chrono realized that maybe Ibuki hadn't realized that about him, about Chrono indeed not being so good at dealing with being alone. That he quickly felt isolated if he couldn't be around people he felt fully comfortable around. As much as they'd shared, Chrono wasn't fully sure if Ibuki had ever made that specific connection. Chrono also realized, that it was possible Ibuki had heard about him dating while abroad. Whether he knew or not, few things would surprise Chrono as much as Ibuki bringing it up. He hated thinking about it. He hated it more because he could never stop.

“It's always hard to predict such things.” It was a good, general response.

“I guess.” Chrono could only agree. Despite everything, he hadn't been able to predict that at all. “I just wish I could have dealt with it better.”

“...You pulled through though. Didn't you?”

Chrono raised his head. As soon as he heard those words, he realized he'd been thinking about this all wrong. “You're right.” He felt a bit lighter. “I mean, I did.”

“And next time, I'm sure it'll be easier than the last.”

Chrono smiled. “Yeah, I... sure hope so.”

“Anjou told me it seemed like you'd been quite busy. You were working... at that local place?”

“Oh I didn't work there... although it might have seemed like I was.” Mamoru must have heard bits and pieces from Tokoha. “It was a good time. Helped me stay sane. I guess I miss working a lot more than I realized.”

“It's a line of work that suits you.” Ibuki's word rang true to the both of them.

“Yes...” He became lost in thought. “Getting to be out there and... make a bit of a difference. At least that's what it feels like.”

“When you were with us you absolutely made a difference.” It didn't sound like something Ibuki had realized only just now. “We always... need people like you.”

Chrono didn't know what say. He was flattered, of course, that Ibuki would say something like that. He also knew already that he'd been valued by both Ibuki and his other co-workers while he'd worked for the Vanguard Association.

“I can miss it sometimes.” It sounded like a confession. Chrono, who had let his gaze rest on the moving figures by the bar beyond their seating in their restaurant, felt Ibuki's words pass through him like a sigh. Without saying a word, without moving an inch, Chrono thought to himself that he missed it too. It had been a less complicated time. Things had been well between them. The future had been uncertain to him, and Chrono had focused way too much on that back then. He'd still been unable to fully live in the moment, only pursuing the future.
His chin rested in his hand, lost in a brief revisiting of the past, what crept up on him was a familiar sensation. Thoughtlessly, acting only on reflex, Chrono turned his head. As soon as he did, his suspicion was confirmed true. Ibuki was watching him. A searing feeling rose inside him, and his mouth became dry, because Chrono recognized that look in his eye. Ibuki casually adverted his eyes, as to not make it too obvious, but it was a little too late. Face still in hand, Chrono felt his lip twitch against his thumb. He'd been so certain. He'd been so sure that Ibuki had feelings for him, too. Then, he'd been sure of nothing but his own delusions, delusions that served to only drive him mad. Here he was again now, thinking, hoping, that surely, that look in his eye meant something. Awkwardly, their conversation had fallen into silence. Ibuki's last few words lingered. Chrono reexamined them with a different pretense. Through his frustration, the conclusion was inevitable. Chrono refused to believe that he was crazy.

It was then that Tokoha and Mamoru got back to their table, and Chrono realized just how long they'd been gone. “Are you guys getting food or what?” He asked, trying to snap out of it.

Tokoha sat down next to him. “Sure, it should be getting here soon enough.”

“I heard you got a win against Ibuki, Chrono. Congratulations.” Mamoru had sat down opposite of Tokoha.

Before Chrono could respond, Tokoha cut in. “Yeah, and then I got a win against Chrono.” She smiled devilishly. “So that means I might as well have beaten Ibuki, too.”

“Oh... I don't know about that.” In turn, Ibuki's smile was somewhat wry.

“I wouldn't mind seeing that match up.” Chrono admitted.

“What do you say?” Tokoha asked. Ibuki looked less than eager. Mamoru laughed.

“It's late.” Ibuki said, somehow capable of not making sound like an excuse.

“Were you planning on leaving?” Mamoru asked, no harm intended.

“Well, I...” Oh, now he was a little caught off guard.

“Hey, it's fine. Leave him alone.” Chrono said. He didn't want them to scare Ibuki off. “We've all had a few anyway. Would that really make it fair?”

“I guess you're right,” Tokoha spoke with laughter bubbling up into her voice. She'd probably had more to drink than anyone here. “It just wouldn't be fair for me to beat you when I'm not at my best.”

Their snacks did come in soon thereafter. Already before then, Shion and Rin found their way to their table. Ibuki and Mamoru made some effort not to talk about work. They were mostly successful. Tokoha talked about her life, Shion asked what no one else thought to, and Rin offered some pretty scathing commentary. “Do you want to see the picture I took of Shindou before?” She eventually asked, unprompted. Shion and Tokoha were giggling before she even took it out. Chrono would have happily climbed the table and wrestled her phone out of her hand if only that wouldn't embarrass him even more.

Shion and Tokoha had already seen it. They'd both been there when it happened. When shown the picture, Mamoru laughed heartily. “They got you, huh?” He asked, and Chrono had to fight the urge to bury his face in his hands.

Ibuki had actually adverted his eyes. He didn't particularly enjoy this sort of thing, either, but as he had Rin's phone showed in his face, he could do little about it. Chrono saw him try not to laugh, only
to fail. A light, melodious laugh left him, and Chrono realized how long it'd been. When glancing at him, Ibuki looked a little guilty.

“I'm happy my suffering can give you all so much joy.” Chrono said, not managing to be quite as mad as he wanted to be.

“We only do it because you get so worked up, you know?” Shion was smiling pleasantly.

“Yeah, and why do you think I get worked up?” Chrono threw back at him. Tokoha just laughed. They eventually scrambled to leave. It was indeed late, and tomorrow would be a new day. Shion had asked Iwakura pick him up, while Mamoru had his car parked nearby. They said goodbye, Chrono, Shion and Tokoha all with hugs and promises of seeing each other again soon. Rin thanked him for a good time in a way Chrono couldn't fully take to heart, and Mamoru offered him warm goodbyes of his own.

As Mamoru and the girls were off, Iwakura pulled up just outside the restaurant. “Do you want a ride to the station?” Shion asked, the question clearly directed at Ibuki.

It was too late to take the train home, but taxis were available by the station. “Oh, I appreciate the offer but it's quite alright.” It would be a detour for Iwakura to take Ibuki there. “I'll walk.”

As the car drove off, Chrono was aware that the two of them were alone again. The thought of a late night walk together made him feel jumpy. “I hope you don't mind.” Ibuki had said to him then, and Chrono thought was it was a weird thing to say.

“I don't.” He responded, laying his overanalyzing mind to rest. They'd had a good conversation before, so he shouldn't be so anxious. Passing by Mikuru's house on the way to the station took a few extra minutes. It was faster to just cross the bridge closest to the Sky Tree, but when Ibuki stuck with him those few extra blocks Chrono wasn't about to ask.

“I hope this didn't get too late for you.” Chrono was glad Ibuki had stayed as long as he had, but felt compelled to ask.

“It did get a bit later than I thought.” Ibuki had work the next day. This fact didn't seem to burden him. “It's quite fine, though.”

They didn't speak that much as they walked, but the silence was not unpleasant. Chrono realized the deep-rooted feelings inside him had never given way. Ibuki was right next to him, but he longed. As they drew closer to Mikuru's house, Chrono realized how much he feared to part. He didn't know when he'd next get to see Ibuki again. If it would be another few months, he wasn't sure what he'd do. It begged the question if he was right to feel like this. Watching Ibuki as he walked by his side, Chrono thought to himself, that this would be it. It came to him calmly, despite the anxiety that rose from his gut.

“You know, I'm surprised you showed at all.” Chrono said it jokingly. He smiled, for it had been a pleasant surprise despite everything.

Ibuki was silent for a moment. Maybe he didn't find it amusing. His expression left Chrono guessing. If anything, he looked like he wanted it to be funny.

“I thought about you a lot while you were away.” The response came late, detached, unexpected. “I wasn't sure if you wanted to see me, but when your father asked me, and then your friends, I thought I... should at least find out in person.”
Feeling like he'd been struck over the head, or perhaps doused with cold water, Chrono's mind had emptied of thoughts. The eye-contact upheld between them was fragile, but it held, without breaking.

“Right,” Chrono spoke on a breath, finally, after a moment's silence. “I'm... glad you did.”

Relieved, a smile tugged on Ibuki's lips. There was no more than a minute or so left before they'd reach their destination. Chrono wanted to say something more to him, but what could he say, that wouldn't require him to unravel years' worth of pent up feelings? If anything, he felt concerned. Ibuki had looked fearful to speak with him now, as well as before. Chrono didn't like that. Of course he'd been mad. He had the right to be. That didn't mean he wanted Ibuki to be afraid of him. Chrono had already had more than enough of that in his life.

Reaching out, leaning in, Chrono slid his hand up against Ibuki's back. Though he twitched at the touch, Ibuki didn't shy away. “Did you really think I wouldn't forgive you?” He asked, warmly. He could feel Ibuki's side against him. Like this, it would be even harder to let go.

“I don't...” Ibuki was smiling weakly, amused with his own shortcomings. “I don't know what I was thinking.”

For those last few moments, Chrono just watched him, and said no more. In front of the apartment building, familiar to Chrono as home still after all these years, they came to a stop. As Ibuki slipped away from him, Chrono knew he had to think of something to say, as a simple goodbye would not suffice. He had little chance to try. As they stood close, but not touching, his eyes leveled with Ibuki's shoulder, Chrono had raised his face to see Ibuki lean towards him. The street was quiet. More so now, when Chrono's breath got stuck in his throat and his heart had stopped beating in his chest. Ibuki hesitated, giving Chrono enough time to wonder if perhaps all of this was just happening in his mind, too. There was always a chance of that. Such was life. However, things were much different now compared to the year before. Maybe it was nothing but sheer desperation, but Chrono had since long tired of guessing. In the end, he needed to show what he wanted, too.

Where Ibuki had first hesitated, Chrono had not. Where Ibuki had reached down, Chrono had met him halfway. It was an awkward, fumbling sort of kiss that lasted way too long for something so simple. They parted briefly, but it was only so different a second time. Ibuki had grabbed a hold of Chrono's arm, as if in lack of anything else. His lips were quite dry, and while Chrono felt Ibuki press hard against him, so were his lips tightly pressed together. Chrono could not find it in him to care. It was a long time since he'd felt so alive.

As they came apart, Chrono let his eyes slide shut as he laid his head on Ibuki's shoulder, putting his arms around him. To feel Ibuki reciprocate, to feel his arms around him too, holding him tightly in an embrace in which he fit most naturally, was relieving beyond words. Feeling Ibuki's hands on his back, his face in his hair, Chrono sighed quietly. Even his heart, that had been beating so hard in his chest, had settled down. This was where he wanted to be. He didn't want to let go. Ibuki was the same. He held Chrono tighter, tighter, until he finally seemed to relax, too. All the times in the past that he'd wanted nothing more than this, and yet it'd always felt like too much to ask for. At peace, Chrono allowed himself to drink it all in, and become saturated with this feeling, letting the moment last for as long as they needed.

Though they did part, in time, it was not soon. With Ibuki's hands still over his shoulders, Chrono felt so warm, his body heating up, pleasantly, without the rush, without the fear or nerviosity that'd previously plagued him. The trace of touch on his body would remain. On Ibuki's face, Chrono saw his own feelings reflected. As they looked at one another, the intimacy of the situation did not sting.

“I suppose this would be... a bad time to say goodbye.”
Chrono felt the words as Ibuki spoke them. He still didn't want to part, either. Maybe they didn't have to.

“Yeah, I... I guess so.” Like a crack formed on thawing ice, the content stillness between them was already threatening to erupt into something else. Chrono wasn't sure what Ibuki wanted him to suggest, but it was clear he was laying the decision in this hands. “You could... come upstairs for a bit. If you want. I mean, Mikuru's not home, so...”

Ibuki looked like he needed a few seconds to process the information. “Sure.” He said quietly, like Chrono had expected him to. His voice was fragile, but there was energy surging under the surface.

Coming indoors, and going up the elevator, Chrono realized he'd been on edge all night, ever since he'd first seen Ibuki hours earlier. It had let up, replaced by something else. Like he had out in the street moments earlier, Chrono moved to put his hand on Ibuki's back, slipping in under his arm. Ibuki let him, unmoving, and as Chrono watched his face admiringly he seemed to grow restless under his steady gaze. He'd try to hide it, but was only so successful. Chrono enjoyed watching his face heat up. He didn't know what would happen from now on, but he honestly did not care.

Chrono got the door to the apartment open. It was still so warm out, the transition from outside to inside only did so much difference. Chrono realized Ibuki had barely been inside Mikuru's apartment before. He'd met him up outside, picked him up for work once or twice, but this was probably the first time he'd been inside the threshold of the front door. Ibuki had excused himself to the bathroom, but Chrono only heard the tap running. As he followed Chrono in to the kitchen, he looked around the room. The lights were on in the next room, and under the kitchen fan. Chrono opened the refrigerator. “Do you need anything?”

“No, I...” Ibuki said quietly. “I'm good, thank you.”

Chrono had his back turned to him. He'd considered offering a drink, and was now considering any possible alternatives. It wasn't like they were that drunk, and Mikuru had some beer stashed away in the back of the fridge. “You sure?” Chrono asked, turning around to see Ibuki standing by the counter, right next to him. It was a little dark, and Ibuki's backlit face was a little hard to read. He realized however, as soon as Ibuki reached for his arm, that his question would remain unanswered. As Ibuki drew close to him, Chrono's unassuming approach had left him unprepared. It wasn't so hard to shake it off, not when Ibuki was pressed up against him, looking at him expectantly. Raising his hand to run it through his hair, Chrono watched him for a few seconds before caving in. As their lips met again, Chrono felt Ibuki tense up against him, his fingers curling to clutch the fabric of his clothes. His lips were still stiff, even as Chrono leaned onto him. It felt way too soon when they parted, and with Ibuki's shaky breath on his skin, Chrono kissed him again, pressing his lips against his face, the corner of his mouth and then his lips once more. Ibuki failed to fully give in to the shape of the kiss as formed with Chrono's lips on his own. When Chrono parted his lips, Ibuki did the same, and as he pressed to deepen the kiss, Ibuki stiffened in his arms. Chrono stayed relaxed, hoping he could pass it on to Ibuki. It didn't work. When they parted, Chrono was confused. Not fully cooperating, Ibuki had turned his face away. Chrono could still feel Ibuki's hands on him, and realized they were trembling. Breathing calmly in Ibuki's arms, he still had his hand running through his hair. “You know,” His was voice soft, just above a whisper, but still sharply audible in the silence. “I'd prefer it if you didn't just shove your tongue in my mouth like that.”

“Also,” Chrono pulled himself closer, speaking directly into Ibuki's ear. He swore he could feel Ibuki's face heat up against his own. “It's easier if you relax. When we kiss.”

Ibuki made an effort to calm down, but Chrono still felt his hands trembling through the fabric of his
clothes. Chrono held him a little tighter, kissing the side of his face. He pulled away, just enough to see Ibuki's face. In the dimly lit room, Ibuki first hesitated to look him in the eye. Once he did, the expression on his face was satisfying. Ibuki's boldness, his shyness; they were both there.

“Try and do it like I do.” Chrono knew Ibuki wanted to, and the satisfaction he took in that knowledge filled his words with warmth. “Let's try that again. Okay?”

With his actions speaking for him, Ibuki took a chance on another kiss. Chrono put both his arms over his shoulders, pulling him close. This time as his lips parted, though Ibuki's hands still trembled, the kiss was less stumped, less rigid. Ibuki still fumbled, and Chrono allowed himself to take the lead. When he rolled his tongue against Ibuki's he followed, and tried to do the same. It was a slow kiss, gentle, if not naive. Though unlike those before it, it lasted. They shared a shaky breath, inhaling in unison. Fulfilled, yet unfulfilled, they refused to part.

As soon as they found their pace, the way they fit together, things picked up fast. Ibuki pushing against him hard, pressing him against the counter, served as a wake-up call for Chrono. His heavy heartbeat, the heat rising to his head and the escalating excitement felt like something he could impossibly stop. Ibuki smelled so good, and the taste of him was the extension of which he'd yearned for all this time. Ibuki's deep kiss was still a little stilted, still a little awkward, but Chrono hardly cared. Breathily, needily, Ibuki kissed him, and he let that proof of his feelings be known even beyond that, with his hands on Chrono's body and his fingers in his hair. Chrono was ecstatic. All this time, he'd been right. He hadn't just been imagining things. Maybe things were escalating too fast, maybe this was all too much, or maybe this was the only way things could possibly be. Chrono had waited for so long, and when he felt the way Ibuki kissed him, he could only assume it'd been a long wait for him, too.

Even as they parted, Chrono couldn't rest. He smelled Ibuki's hair, kissing the skin just below his ear, down to his neck. He kissed him hard, and quickly became lost in the sensation. As he felt Ibuki's hair on his face, his scent so rich and close like the touch of his skin, Chrono felt another rush wash over him, stronger than before. He had since long loved Ibuki's scent. It was hard to describe it, but it was somewhat tangy, and surprisingly sweet; refined but underlined with something definitely masculine. When he'd been younger, nothing had made him more self-conscious than realizing how attracted he was to men like Ibuki. Men who wore nice clothes, and more so took good care of their hair and skin. Men who smelled good, courtesy of that routine. He'd struggled to come to terms with it, despite how obvious it had been. May it be so that Ibuki embodied much of that which attracted him, but in the end, what drove Chrono crazy was something as simple as the scent of the skin of his neck that hid away under his hair.

With those kisses, Ibuki squirmed ever so slightly, and Chrono felt the intensity of his breath build in his chest as he inhaled. With quivering lips and those still trembling hands, a quiet moan left him on a breath, and feeling both the sound and the sensation against his ear, the feeling transferred to Chrono, too. The edge of the kitchen counter was digging into his backside, but Chrono had barely noticed. Their struggle to be closer and closer led to movement, and with Ibuki pushing against him, Chrono had to brace against the counter with one hand. They wobbled a little where they stood, but did not stop. Gently, Ibuki brushed his hand through Chrono's hair, and with that nudge their lips met again. Steadied, Chrono let his free hand slide in under the back of Ibuki's shirt, tracing the hem of his pants, and feeling the shiver that rose below his skin.

It was already hard to think, but as he caught his breath, Chrono thought it was up to him to speak. He didn't want to stop, if anything, he wanted more. “Do you wanna,” He spoke with his mouth against Ibuki's face. “Sit down for a bit? We could... do this in the living room.”

“Y-yeah...” He was a little surprised to get such clear, quick answer. With his hand on his face,
Chrono kissed Ibuki again, lightly.

Going from the kitchen to the living room was a bit awkward. Just behind the threshold, they kissed more, and Chrono grabbed Ibuki's sides to pull him along. Ibuki sat down on the couch, but had no more than a second to breathe as Chrono had paused to pull the shirt he wore over his head, stripping down to only a tee. Joining Ibuki on the couch, he slipped right into his lap. As they kissed once more, it took no more than a light push for Ibuki to crumble under Chrono's weight. He leaned back, laying down on the surface as Chrono pressed down on him harder, continuing to kiss him. With mere adjustment of his position making Ibuki shiver under him, Chrono felt his confidence build alongside the excitement he felt. For a while he'd been able to feel it, feel how excited Ibuki was too, and now it became all the more obvious, feeling each of his little movements under the weight of his body. Lifting himself upwards, shifting his weight to his hips, Chrono heard Ibuki inhale sharply. Even as he'd raised his head to watch Ibuki's face, he couldn't fully stop moving, slowly rolling his hips to the shared rhythm of their breathing. With his mind emptying of deep reaching thoughts, Chrono could only watch Ibuki's face and think over and over how pretty he was. Leaning down once more, his hand on his face, Chrono kissed him gently, something Ibuki only allowed for so long. He reached, if weakly, yearning for something more.

Indeed, Ibuki had been hard for a while. Chrono had felt it already when they had kissed in the kitchen. He'd second-guessed himself then, but now, there was no mistaking it. He knew Ibuki could feel him, too. He had nothing to hide. As satisfying as it was, it made him happy above all else. It felt good to be right, better to be here. As he felt Ibuki's hand in his hair, kissing his neck once more, Chrono thought to himself that dreams do come true. His body had grown hot with arousal, but the warmth that fueled his beating hearth was something else. So far, being with Ibuki, kissing him, holding him, had been little like he'd always imagined it. He didn't care, frankly, which in itself told him held many answers. This feeling wasn't infatuation, what he felt for Ibuki wasn't just a crush. He was in love.

Chrono let his hand rest on Ibuki's chest, running down the length of his torso. His shirt riding up, exposing a good chunk of skin, Ibuki's body trembled terribly as the touch of Chrono's hand reached his abdomen. Chrono noticed, of course. As much as he enjoyed the sensation, he thought it noteworthy, if not a little strange. He let his palm linger there, carefully rubbing the same patch of skin just above the hem of his pants, and Ibuki's breathing became awfully rugged, his body still reacting to the touch. As a moan escaped him at last, Chrono watched him, unable not to stare. As innocent as the touch in itself was, Chrono could tell he was pushing Ibuki's limits. When his expression appeared almost pained, he stopped.

As Ibuki tried to catch his breath, Chrono leaned down to kiss him more. Ibuki invited to it, his hand pressing down on Chrono's back. His hand moving back up along Ibuki's body, now under his shirt, pulling it up along Chrono's wrist. When his hand reached his chest, his thumb passing over his nipple, Chrono felt Ibuki gasp against his lips. They parted, and Chrono asked according to his reflexes, "Are you okay?" Certainly, things has escalated pretty quickly. Anyone would get worked up, kissing, touching, like this. Still, Chrono hadn't been able to quite predict Ibuki's reactions.

"I'm," Ibuki spoke hard, his voice strained and deep. "Fine."

Chrono wanted to believe him, unwilling to assume Ibuki didn't know what he wanted, but more so, he didn't want to push him. Ibuki pulled at his shirt, impatiently. Chrono could only comply. They still hadn't tired of kissing, and it felt like they never would. Chrono's hand hadn't moved, and with only so much adjustment he used his thumb again, this time rubbing Ibuki's nipple more gently than before. While he still shuddered underneath him as a result, Ibuki had hooked Chrono's neck in place with his arm, refusing to part.
Eventually, it still came to that. Chrono felt like he'd been searching for some sort of turning point, or breaking point, but he'd been unable to find it. Ibuki was so on edge, he felt bad. Watching him try and catch his breath, Chrono saw something new in his expression.

“I--” Chrono had been leaning in to kiss him when Ibuki spoke, his voice strained still but refined with resolve despite how he adverted his eyes. “I've never...” Chrono could hear how hard he tried to keep his voice from shaking, but Ibuki was only so successful. “Been with anyone before. Like this.” Chrono heard him hold his breath. It sounded painful. “Ever.”

Maybe Ibuki expected it to be a shocking revelation. It wasn’t. Chrono hadn’t thought in those terms, but it fit. It made sense. “Okay,” His voice was a whisper. It was as if Ibuki's anxiousness had drained that very same feeling right out of him; Chrono was calm and secure when he couldn't be. The hand that had held Chrono's back had fallen back down, awkwardly resting by Ibuki's chest. Chrono took it, held it gently in his hand, intertwining their fingers. “That's... that's fine.”

It was fine. Chrono thought so, and it looked like maybe Ibuki had come around to consider it as well. Chrono realized that Ibuki had been nervous all along. Chrono knew what it felt like. He'd been in that situation himself. It hadn't even been that long ago, just a few years. As Ibuki returned the gentle grip of his hand, Chrono leaned down to brush his lips against his face. Ibuki wasn't calming down. Not quite. Chrono knew there wasn't that much he could do. This was going to be pretty awkward, not matter what. Still, awkward didn't have to mean bad.

“We don't have to continue if you don't want to.” His voice hushed, Chrono wanted to give him that option. With his previous words, Ibuki had only implied what he wanted. Right now, maybe Ibuki wouldn't understand why Chrono would ask and put him through drawing the whole thing out further. Hopefully, he'd be thankful later.

“I... I do.” Ibuki sounded like had to coax the words out of himself. He articulated more stubbornly than before, his voice coarsely quiet.

Still holding Ibuki's hand, Chrono heaved himself up just a little. Where he laid, head turned on the side, tension on his brow, the steeled look in Ibuki's eye contrasted to the color that'd risen to his face. Chrono moved his free hand to brush the hair out of Ibuki's face. Ibuki closed his eyes, still overwhelmed by how flustered he was, the strain on his face transferring to a twitch in his lip. Even with his heart beating hard and heavy, Chrono felt strangely light. “So, you wanna, like,” Chrono strung the words together as he spoke, putting more care into his tone. It wasn't easy to ask, but being straight-forward might make it easier. “Get off, right?”

Ibuki had not made a sound, but Chrono saw him swallow. He still couldn't quite look Chrono in the eye. He wisely gave up on words, or they'd be stuck here all night. He nodded. The excitement creeping up on him more and more, Chrono thought how brave Ibuki was, reaching out to him like this despite how anxious he was. Certainly though, he also knew Ibuki wouldn't care much for that sort of description, least of all right now. “So, what do you want?”

The follow-up question didn't land on Ibuki any easier. Chrono was still gently running his fingers through his hair. “Like, I could blow you. Or... I could just jerk you off.” Chrono gave him options. He wasn't sure they'd get much of anywhere if he didn't, and thought it the best course of action. As raw as the questions were it made the situation feel all the more real now, and Chrono thought he saw Ibuki realize the same thing, too. Maybe it would give him some courage, or it would be what made him realize he wasn't ready after all.

A few seconds passed, and Chrono wasn't impatient as much as he didn't want Ibuki to feel like he had to rush into anything. “Or we could not---”
Ibuki inhaled stiffly. “Either's... good.”

Chrono didn't really like that answer, even if it was true. “Are you sure?” He asked because he wanted to know. If Ibuki really didn't have preference, or if he preferred for Chrono to pick, that was fine in and of itself. However, as soon as Chrono had asked him, genuinely laying value in his choices, Chrono saw Ibuki doubt himself.

Ibuki looked like he was inching closer to the breaking point. Chrono knew what that felt like, too. In reality, there was no breaking point beyond that wound up feeling, no matter how strongly you might feel like there was. “I—” His voice had become weak. He squeezed Chrono's hand hard, and Chrono had an idea. He squeezed Ibuki's hand right back. He laid down flat against him.

“Do you want to... hold my hand, like this?” He whispered, feeling Ibuki try and control his breath, breathing slow and shakily. “Or do you want me to be able to kiss you?”

Ibuki still held his hand firmly. Chrono hoped he would understand, when given a moment to think. Eventually, he felt Ibuki inhale to speak. “I'd prefer it if you... held my hand... like this.”

Unable to stop the smile that came onto his face, Chrono too felt a shiver deep inside of him, a raw, white-hot feeling. “Okay,” He said, his voice hot against Ibuki's ear. “...That's what I hoped you'd pick.”

It only felt fair to admit as much. Ibuki turned his face away, but when Chrono sought to kiss his lips, he again fumbled to return the gesture. Ibuki was nervous, feverish, shivering with expectation, and Chrono wanted to do nothing more than relieve him of it all. Their kiss was different now. It was slow, even as it deepened, and even more full of anticipation than any shared between them before. When their lips parted, their eyes met. As ready as he'd ever be, Ibuki's longing had won over his doubts and his self-consciousness. Chrono kissed his cheek, his neck, his collarbone. Normally he would love to linger there, but now he moved on. Ibuki's shirt still exposed most of his chest, making his conquest easy. Chrono eased Ibuki in on how he kissed him, starting of gently, lightly, making him shiver, before attempting to do more to satisfy him. He had to move eventually, sliding down Ibuki's length as he reached to kiss him lower and lower. The touch of his hand paved way for his lips, the patch of skin on Ibuki's lower abdomen still a place fresh in his memory and already close to his heart. Ibuki reacted much like he had before, but the gasp that left him at the initial touch sounded much more satisfying. Some of Ibuki's nerves had rubbed off on him, sooner and more so than Chrono had realized. He'd thought only of Ibuki, but naturally he had his own desire. Chrono had to struggle and adjust himself more than once to get comfortable where he laid, but once his lips made contact with that same tender part of skin just above the hem of Ibuki's pants, it almost overwhelmed him. Ibuki's hand had gone lax in his grip for those short moments, but now he squeezed Chrono tightly again. From where he was, Chrono could still hear and feel Ibuki's breathing, slow, and shaky. Chrono kissed him harder, using both his tongue and his lips, and the slightest hint of teeth. The reaction was instantaneous, a moan again passing through Ibuki's lips as the twitch that passed through his body jerked his hips upwards.

It was all so close now. Chrono could feel the blood rushing hard to his head. He was already imagining the sensations to come, and it was enough to make him feel lightheaded, and yet it was far from enough. Oh, he loved this. Thoughts of Ibuki filled his mind, past and present. He felt like he wanted to stay here forever, right here, his face buried in this spot, so close to Ibuki's core and center, closer to his most vulnerable place, all while able to feel the inner workings of his body just below the surface. His breath, his heartbeat, his rushing blood. It took him a while to realize how distracted he'd become. Ibuki, pushed to his limits, had become desperate enough to reach to grasp Chrono's head of hair- but no more. Chrono yanked his head upwards, and he felt Ibuki's hand lightly trembling in his hair. It would be unfair to make him wait any longer. It was time.
With his free hand, he only struggled so much to undo the button on his pants. The zipper came undone easily. Before he did anything else, Chrono kissed the skin that'd now become exposed. Trying not to become distracted again, Chrono decided keep his mind on track. This proved to be easier than it had previously been. He made an effort to pull Ibuki's pants down, an ordeal made easier as Ibuki moved to help. In the end, he only needed so much space to work with. Unable to help himself, Chrono pressed his full face against the soft, thin fabric of Ibuki's boxer shorts, feeling the intense warmth that radiated from underneath. Ibuki jerked against him, and the sound that escaped him was louder than anything Chrono had heard yet, his legs falling open invitingly. There was little left to his imagination, especially after making Ibuki wait for such a long time. Chrono had no options left in terms of buying time. He heard Ibuki struggle, going between deep-drawn heavy panting and holding his breath. Ibuki's underwear had already become a line of fabric around the top of his thighs as Chrono was gently stroking him with his free hand, kissing his base. Now, every breath escaped Ibuki with a sound, and below him Chrono felt his deep rooted tension start to come undone. Chrono didn't take long before he took Ibuki in his mouth, lightly, mostly just to feel the shape of him. Taking in the sensation, Chrono felt dizzy, his steady heartbeat becoming heavier. Ibuki relaxed somewhat, and as Chrono moved slowly he held his hand in a strong, but less desperate, grip. Chrono couldn't help but wonder how much, or how long, it would take. It was Ibuki's first time. Whether or not he'd let his nerves get the better of him wasn't that easy to say. Though at this rate, Chrono guessed he was a lot more likely to finish early than not at all. For that reason, he didn't want to rush. He wanted Ibuki to enjoy himself.

Chrono still didn't move very fast, but he slowly brought Ibuki deeper and tighter each time he went down in a new movement. Ibuki wasn't huge, if anything he was average. It was a good, comfortable size. Chrono could only barely see from where he was, but Ibuki had brought his free hand to his face. As much as he enjoyed being where he was, Chrono still wished he could watch him. As he continued to take it slow, Chrono still wanted to be reasonable. He could do more, perform better, but it felt out of place. It felt inappropriate. He'd pushed Ibuki around enough as it was. While he'd felt lightheaded when they'd started, Chrono had grown focused. He usually did. The fact that this mattered so much to him only made that focus all the more sharp. The surging heat within him couldn't change that, and even less so now when Chrono knew how effectively he was passing on that heat to Ibuki. Before long, he had started moving faster. Chrono had already been able to taste it, the wetness that was not his own; faint but distinct, it was only a few drops. No doubt, Ibuki had more to give. Chrono quickly became engrossed. Ibuki had become worn down, and certainly now it wouldn't be much longer. Ibuki still tensed as the waves of sensation passed through him; Chrono could feel it every time, and it gave him goosebumps. Ibuki moaned weakly with each enforced movement that Chrono made, and even as he appeared to relax his body, Chrono could feel his thighs, one on each side of his head, trembling stronger and stronger each time. It was time to finish this, Chrono thought. Slowly, he raised his head one final time, stopping by the tip. With his free hand, he returned to stroke Ibuki again, going faster and gripping harder. Vocalizing his pleasure with another audible moan, Ibuki arched his back, his thighs closing in on Chrono on each side. Chrono felt Ibuki hold his hand so hard, it almost hurt.

It happened without warning. Chrono could taste it before anything else. He hadn't exactly expected Ibuki to say anything, which was to say he was needlessly surprised by it. Chrono had pulled away, inhaling sharply through his mouth. That was a mistake. Rising the back of his hand to his face, he coughed. Appalled, horrified, Ibuki had sprung himself up to a sitting. “I-I'm sorry,” He said, his hushed voice breaking, louder than he'd wanted it to be. “I'm so sorry. A-are you alright?”

Chrono nodded despite coughing a second time. Ibuki had let go off his hand, and had reached to grab him, unable to actually come through with it. Chrono wiped his mouth with the t-shirt he still wore, discreetly spitting what he could into the fabric. Luckily it wasn't a shirt he cared for in particular. He'd just have to remember to wash it before Mikuru got home. Ibuki's hands eventually
fell onto his shoulders, and when Chrono looked up at him he looked painfully ashamed of what'd just happened. To Chrono, it was only natural to reassure him. He pressed himself closer to Ibuki, kissing his cheek. “I'm fine. Don't worry.” He murmured against his skin. He smiled, and he knew Ibuki could hear it in his voice. “Just warn me next time. Okay?”

Chrono heard Ibuki's breath get caught in his throat. Still smiling Chrono ran his fingers through his hair. Ibuki didn't hesitate to kiss him, and while Chrono hadn't been sure if Ibuki at all wanted to kiss his lips, he heartily kissed him back. Surely, there would be a next time. Right?

Awkwardly, Chrono helped Ibuki shuffle back into his clothes, but did paradoxically refuse to stop touching him. Chrono pushed him down, leisurely kissing him, weighting him down. Ibuki was still so warm, the heat that'd risen between them was still sticking to his skin. He moved a little, adjusting himself, restless. Before he could let it get to him, Chrono put his hand on his face, snuggling him close. They kissed more, and as soon as Ibuki leaned into Chrono his response became sluggish. Chrono indulged him, letting their kisses become lazy. Ibuki laid his hands on Chrono's back. He could feel his chest rising and sinking slowly, and even after Ibuki's eyelids slid shut, Chrono laid and watched him. It would be easy to assume that Chrono was dissatisfied. He wasn't. He really couldn't ask for much of anything else.

The residue of the excitement remained, his beating heart, his thoughtless mind, and the searing feeling in his chest. It all came to mingle with the deep-settled reassurance brought by Ibuki's embrace, that only seemed to become lighter and lighter as Ibuki breathed slower, deeper. Laying with his head on his shoulder, face rested against the side of his neck, Chrono wasn't sure exactly when Ibuki had fallen asleep. As late as it was, Chrono didn't feel like he was capable of sleeping. Laying awake, in the ambience of the night, isolated from his every worry, accomplished and at peace, he could hardly care. He never started feeling uncomfortable, and as Chrono closed his eyes too, their bodies seemed to silently mesh as one.

His consciousness slipping just as he'd gained it, Chrono didn't have the capacity to question the situation he was in. Ibuki's scent, which he'd now marinated in, and claimed for himself, still gave him a clue. Movement, disjointed from it's source, only to become stillness. It was too late. He was already awake, and he'd realized that Ibuki was too. Although he clearly remembered feeling unable to sleep, he'd apparently been wrong. How long it'd been, it he had no idea. It felt like it'd been no more than a few minutes, and yet, his body ached with sleep as if it'd been countless hours. It was still dark outside, which served a good enough hint. Ibuki moved again, more carefully this time. Chrono had no intention to pretend that he was still asleep.

He slid off Ibuki, but the couch was only so broad. Sitting up had to be collaborate effort. Their legs were more entangled than Chrono had realized, and he had to awkwardly climb out of Ibuki's lap. Putting his feet down on the floor, Ibuki rubbed his face. He looked about as tired as Chrono expected him to be. With his legs folded under him, Chrono leaned against his side.

“...What time is it?” Ibuki asked, his voice a quiet mumble.

“I... I'm not sure.” Chrono had just woken up, too.
Ibuki sighed lightly. They stayed like this for a while.

In the kitchen, Chrono poured Ibuki a glass of water. Things were somehow ordinary despite the extraordinary things that’d just happened between them. The digital watch on the oven read 04:45. Even without them speaking of it, Chrono understood that Ibuki had to leave. His mind had cleared strangely fast in the end. Ibuki hadn’t brought a lot of stuff, and didn’t need much time to put himself back together. By the door, Chrono felt melancholy threatening to grab a hold of him. The very same feeling he’d felt hours ago, when he’d first assumed they would be saying goodbye. As soon as Ibuki had slipped his shoes back on, Chrono laid his arm around him. When their eyes met, there was a strange familiarity to the feeling they shared. Chrono was barefaced, and as the apartment was lighting up ever so slightly, he reached to kiss Ibuki goodbye. It was never only a light brush of their lips. As soon as they came together, they both gave into the sensation. It felt like they were already replaying the events of the night before. As satisfying, and as alluring as it was to kiss, they both eventually came to their senses. Ibuki had work. It was in less than a few hours, and, all things considered he should really go home.

Stumbling away from Chrono, Ibuki had become a bit erratic. “I... I'll be in touch.” He said, struggling a bit with the words.

“Yeah,” Chrono responded quietly. He trusted it to be the truth. “I'm not... going to be that busy.”

“Right,” Ibuki looked nervous again. He was collected enough, but Chrono saw through it. “I'll let you know when I... can see you.”

Ibuki had put his hand on the door handle but had struggled a bit to get the door open. Chrono couldn't help but smile as he watched him. It was cute. “Take care now... make sure to get some food.”

“Y-yeah... I will.” Ibuki sounded serious enough about it. He was out the door, but Chrono strayed by the entrance. A final goodbye, a final smile, and that was it. Ibuki had left. As soon as the door shut, Chrono felt that the peace still remained with him, and somehow, the joy he felt only seemed to grow.

Oh, how tired he was though. Luckily he had only afternoon classes today. He could sleep a bit longer. Well, at least after clearing his head. Which shouldn’t take very long. Chrono had a quick snack and brushed his teeth before going to bed. Once he was under the covers, the sun had started to rise outside. He still wore the same shirt, and it still smelled like Ibuki. Certainly it would make things easier. Not that he really needed it. Chrono had fantasized about Ibuki many times in the past. This time, it would be different.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

I've been quite busy this week and as a result I'm a little behind schedule. I'm probably gonna take a break from uploading next week, so expect the next chapter to be up on the 21st.

In the end, Rive had only stayed for so many days. Mikuru had a business trip scheduled later in the week, so it was probably for the best. Chrono hadn't been very eager to spend the week alone with his father. Just hours after Rive had left the country, Chrono had packed a bag with some clothes and books and headed to Ibuki's apartment. That evening, Chrono was doing his readings while Ibuki took care of the kitchen. It'd only been a few days worth of disturbances. Like Ibuki had wanted him to, Chrono had talked to Rive, asking him a little about if or when he would be visiting again anytime soon. It turned out, he was coming back for Chrono's birthday, which was only so far away. Whether he'd planned that from the beginning or if he'd made those plans just because Chrono had asked, there was no way of knowing. Ibuki had meant to ask Chrono more on the subject, but he'd let it slip from his mind during the duration of dinner.

Ibuki had finished his chores, and just as he'd sat himself down in the living room, his phone buzzed where it laid on the table. He read the message, and Chrono must have heard the dissatisfied sound that left him and seen the look on his face, for he asked “What's that about?”

“It's...” The same harsh irritation could be heard in his voice. He didn't know where to start. “It's quite the ordeal.”

“What is it?” Chrono didn't look too bothered to put his book down.

“You were busy this week with... your family, so I didn't have the chance to tell you about it.” Ibuki would have certainly liked to vent to Chrono, if only he'd gotten the chance. “Occasionally we still... obtain documentation on old assets.”

“Assets?” Chrono looked at him strangely.

“Yes.” Ibuki was typing on his phone, wanting to respond to the email he'd gotten as soon as possible.

“Like... what, for example?” Ibuki had been planning to tell him in a moment. He put his phone back down.

“It's all bits and pieces of the old organization.” Ryuuzu had run things differently, in more ways than one. “Most of these matters have been made intentionally hard to look into.” Naturally, or there
would've been little point.

“Oh yeah.” Chrono had heard about this, a long time ago. Ibuki remembered talking about it with him before, on more than one occasion. “You could have just said that, then. I'm surprised you're still finding stuff, though.”

“In the past... I kept thinking there couldn't possibly be any more. Nowadays, I don't know what to think.” Ibuki could admire the spirit of hard work. This was still something else. Investments, sure, but he'd had to deal with much more than that. “I never told you this... this happened last year, when we weren't... talking.”

Across of him, Chrono had crossed his legs were he sat. He was listening.

“We got a call from some people up north in a city in Akita. About a plot of land near the coast. They were prospectors and had painstakingly traced ownership back to us.” Even now, Ibuki still felt a bit unsettled as he thought about it.

“And you... had no idea what any of this was about?”

“I did not.” Ibuki was still frustrated by it. “I inquired about it anywhere I could. Enishi didn't know anything about it, and neither did Kanzaki. That is, when we finally got a hold of him. By then, I was already on my way up there myself.”

“Oh wow...”

“That didn't make me any wiser, either. In the end, I had to get Christopher Lo come all the way from Singapore to have a look.” As frustrated as he was by the memories, at least it made a decently entertaining story.

“What was it? I mean, since you needed to get Chris and all.”

“It wasn't that long after I took over that we found much of their old facilities. Most notably, where they'd operated their...” Ibuki felt drained just thinking about it. “Their very... ambitious space program.”

“I remember that.” Chrono had still been in high school at the time. “I remember hearing a lot about it from you guys, and Tokoha too. Sounded like a whole big mess.”

“Indeed it was. What we found up in Akita wasn't nearly as... accomplished. It was probably just a back-up site. Still, it was... a delicate ordeal.”

“Sounds like a lot of that stuff could easily be very, uh,” Chrono sought his words. “Illegal?”

“Yes.” Ibuki sounded exhausted. “Luckily we've been able to absolve these matters decently well so far.”

“So, what is it this time?” Chrono asked. Ibuki realized he hadn't even gotten to that part yet. “Not another abandoned satellite launch site?”

“It's nothing much this time.” Thankfully, Ibuki thought. “It's two smaller buildings in Kanagawa, so it's not very far. We don't know much about them, or what they were used for. I'll still have to go down and have a look at them.”

“I guess you can't send anyone else?”
“As long as I don't know for sure what it is, I can't.” Ibuki couldn't blame Chrono for asking.

“At least it's not a long trip this time.” Chrono tried offering an optimistic viewpoint.

“I suppose not.” Ibuki couldn't complain too much. Work was a bit lighter than usual; or it would be, if he wouldn't have to take time out of his work day to drive all the way to Kanagawa and back.

“I'd offer to come with you, but I sorta don't know if I can.” Chrono had leaned back where he sat.

“That's fine.” Ibuki was aware. He'd thought about it too, just now.

“What are you gonna do with the place?” Chrono asked. “I mean assuming it's not too much trouble to clean it out.”

Ibuki had in fact already thought about it. He was always thinking about such things. For better or worse, he always carried work with him, even if only at the back of his mind. “Preferably we can use it for something. If not the main organization then for something else. It's too far away for anyone stationed in Tokyo to commute to, but maybe we could work something out. If not, we could try and find local prospectors.”

“Selling it seems like the easiest solution to me.” It wasn't a statement made to convince Ibuki of anything. Ibuki could tell Chrono wanted to hear his thoughts.

“Perhaps it is the easiest. Assuming it's anything anyone would want to invest in.” He couldn't take that for granted before he'd seen the place. “But that feels dissatisfying. There's a history attached to these buildings. I want to be certain they end up in good hands. If we can do something for the local community, then that would make ends even.”

“Oh, really?” Ibuki made the mistake of glancing in Chrono's direction. He was grinning. Ibuki looked away, flustered. “It... feels like the right thing to do.”

“I didn't say it wasn't.” Chrono got up, and crossed over to sit in Ibuki's lap. His face still turned away, Ibuki only allowed Chrono to kiss the side of his face.

“Are you done with the reading?” Ibuki asked. He knew he sounded a little annoyed.

“Uh-huh.” Chrono said into his ear, making Ibuki shiver. How unfair. “More or less.”

Ibuki wasn't going to berate him. His mind was already elsewhere. Chrono had draped his arms around his shoulders. “...Let's go to bed.” Chrono mumbled, and it was little more than a suggestion. It wasn't that late just yet. Ibuki thought to formulate a response, but Chrono was already kissing his neck. He hadn't needed to do that convince him, but it sure made matters easier.

“What day are you going to Kanagawa?” Chrono asked, leaning his head back.

“...I don't know yet.” Ibuki's voice was comparatively steady. “I'll need to reschedule things to make time. I'm going to make plans as soon as I get to the office tomorrow.”
“Right...” Chrono exhaled.

“I was thinking I should try and do it while... you're away.” Ibuki spoke quietly. He had to rearrange his words. There were certain things he didn't want to talk about right now.

“Yeah, I... I'm not sure when that'll be. Probably... later this week.” Chrono's voice only became rougher. Soon enough, surely he'd be too lightheaded to talk like this.

“I'll let you know when I know.” Ibuki replied. He wasn't as distracted. He'd already finished. Chrono often refused to do anything else before making sure he did. It made the pay back all the more satisfying.

“Y-yeah...” Chrono's voice quivered, and his body braced against the mattress, pressing the two of them closer. Still breathing steadily, he leaned his head back further until it rested on Ibuki's shoulder. Behind him, Ibuki closed his eyes.

“If things get too hectic I might have to post-pone it to next week.” With Chrono pressed up so close to him, Ibuki voice was audible to him as only a whisper.

“Uh-huh?” In Ibuki's arms, Chrono had so far laid comfortably still. Now, Ibuki could feel he was starting to become a little restless. “And what're the chances of that happening?”

“Pretty slim.” Ibuki admitted, without really reflecting. He was fixated on the notion of movement under his touch. “But honestly... it might be the more... convenient option.”

“Yeah...” Chrono replied, and Ibuki could hear he'd more or less stopped listening. Ibuki felt the rush transmit to him, too. His strokes still weren't very fast, but Chrono had regardless been pushed along, little by little. Ibuki thought it was time to pick up the pace. “Oh---” Chrono reacted pretty much immediately. “Th-that's good...”

Ibuki forgot about work, and he forgot about the Kanagawa trip, too. Chrono was now steadily moving his hips against Ibuki's touch, matching his rhythm. Past his own climax, Ibuki still savored it. As Chrono's breath became increasingly rugged, stifled only by a shiver passing through his body, Ibuki could only assume he was close. His voice was deep in Chrono's ear when he spoke to him, quietly. “Are you coming?”

It'd sounded a lot more innocent in his mind, a mere extension of his curiosity. Once voiced, the words seemed to resonate between the two of them, together, adding an extra edge. “Y-yeah, I... I'm about to...” Ibuki savored the sound of the emotion that burned hot in his words. As Chrono tensed up, Ibuki turned his head to lightly brush his lips against his face. Smothering the breath in his throat, gritting his teeth, Chrono became quiet. It would be just a moment.

Most of it got on Ibuki's hand. It was a bit uncomfortable to wiggle up from where Chrono laid on his arm, but he managed. Ibuki didn't bother to leave the bed. Drying off with a tissue would have to do. He would shower tomorrow morning, anyway. As soon as he laid back down, Chrono was curled up right next to him. He sighed heavily and Ibuki moved to pull the covers back up over them. Laying on his back, with Chrono's head on his shoulder, he felt at peace. Leaning to kiss him where he could reach, Ibuki settled for his temple.

“Are you okay?”

Ibuki hadn't expected to be asked, but he took no offense. “I am.”

Rubbing his head against Ibuki's shoulder, Chrono became more at ease. “You seem to be... doing better.”
He'd thought about that, too. He wasn't sure what to make of it. “I suppose so.”

Putting his hand down on Ibuki's chest, Chrono raised his head. “Well? Are you?” He asked.

“I... I think so.” It was easy to forget how things used to be. Too easy. “I mean, I... I can't say for sure if it'll remain like this, though.”

“Well, if things get bad again, just tell me, okay?” Chrono mumbled.

“Oh, I'll,” Curling his arms around him, Ibuki squeezed Chrono close. “Let you know.” Chrono struggled weakly in his grip, and as he gave up, Ibuki buried his face in his hair and let a light laugh escape him.

“Promise me you won't go around worrying about that.” Ibuki spoke quietly.

“Alright.” Chrono's voice was somewhat muffled by their embrace. “I won't.”

Ibuki was tired, and he wanted to go to sleep, preferably right like this. There was still something on his mind. “Can I ask you something?” He asked, as Chrono moved to adjust himself in his arms.

Chrono must've heard the tonal shift in his voice, because he sounded already tired when he responded. “What is it?”

“You mentioned that your father would be in the country for your birthday.” It pained him to ask, because he knew Chrono was already thinking about it. “...And I just wanted to ask what you... had in mind.”

He could have waited to ask, but they only had so much time. Chrono groaned quietly. Ibuki knew how displeased he was with the situation. “...I'll talk to him.”

He sounded like he'd given up. Given up bargaining, perhaps. “You don't have to.” Ibuki reminded him.

“I sort of have to.” He mumbled. “If I want things to, like, come together the way I want. I'm tired, anyway. Tired of all this.”

“That doesn't mean you have to tell him.” Chrono was a person of principle. Ibuki was too, so he knew how hard it could be to allow yourself to see things from a different perspective. You didn't always have to do things the way you'd always done them.

“I might as well.” He sighed. “I don't know, but...”

As they still embraced, Ibuki felt Chrono fiddle with the hair that laid on his back. “I don't know what's changed. I used to feel like I didn't have to tell him. I knew I'd have to tell Mikuru, sooner or later. But I thought I could deal with all that whenever. Now I'm... I'm just tired of it.”

“I see.” Ibuki responded quietly. He wasn't sure what had changed either. Regardless, it was Chrono's decision in the end.

“I guess it's cause I pretty much always used to be out and about when Mikuru wasn't around, at least since I got older. So where I was exactly or what I was doing didn't feel like it mattered that much.” Ibuki assumed Chrono had made similar arrangements in the past for previous relationships. It was strange to think about. “But now I feel like I'm living some weird double life. And it's so tiring.”
“I can see how it could be... bothersome.” Ibuki said, and Chrono moved to wiggle out of his grip.

“If I'm gonna tell Mikuru I might as well talk to my dad, too.” Chrono looked him in the eye, and unlike before, he looked like he'd made his mind up. “I wanna do it... before my birthday.”

“It's not very long until then.” Surely he didn't need a reminder.

“I know.” Vaguely irritated, Chrono let him know. “I know, but it's a decent opportunity. Not ideal, but when is it ever gonna be? Besides I don't wanna...” Chrono put his head down on the pillow with a pained expression. “Tell him, and then not know when I'll see him next. Now I know when he's gonna be back, so I'll just do it.”

Ibuki raised his hand to Chrono's arm. “I understand. If you really feel that way, then...”

“I thought...” Contemplative, Chrono looked barely hesitant. Ibuki didn't realize right away, but he was a little bashful. “You could be there, anyways. For my birthday.”

“Oh.” Ibuki hadn't assumed Chrono had wanted that. “If... if you want me to, then...”

“I just said I wanted you to.” Chrono didn't look at him. Things had suddenly become awkward. “Did you not want to?”

“I...” Ibuki caught himself feeling like a child, like the little boy he'd once been, who'd just been asked a leading question by his crush. “I'd... like to. I'd be happy to.”

Chrono had soaked that feeling right up. He looked even more embarrassed than before, and was still averting his eyes. “Right. In that case, you're welcome.”

Was this the reason Chrono was so intent on telling his family? Ibuki didn't know. He thought it best not to ask, at least not right now. He could always bring it up later. Yeah, sometime in the future when it was no longer a touchy subject that made them both feel like fumbling idiots. Sometime when it would be a precious memory.

It wasn't that late yet, but they both silently agreed it was time to sleep. Ibuki thought how easy it was to fall asleep like this, with Chrono right next to him, thinking only of the words shared between them and with the residue of his touch still on his skin.

When Chrono's phone sounded, it was too early. Too late, or too early. It was either of those. Ibuki wasn't sure. It was ringing, and several signals went by before Chrono had managed to rise from where he laid and crawl across the bed, climb over Ibuki and reach for it on the nightstand. Unable to think much of anything, and wanting to go back to sleep, Ibuki rolled over. He felt like he would fall asleep as soon as he closed his eyes, but as he heard Chrono's voice, colored with distress, that feeling shattered into nothing.

“Hello?” Chrono sat on the edge of the bed. Ibuki could faintly hear Mikuru's voice at the other end of the line. “It's alright. What's... what's wrong?”
Where she was it should still be daytime. Ibuki doubted she’d call if it wasn’t an emergency. “I... I see.” Chrono had quickly become focused, despite having woken up less than a minute ago. Ibuki tried to overhear the other end of the conversation, with little success.

“I... I'm sorry, I can't...” He'd hesitated, as if he'd processed the situation slower than the words that formed. “I'm not home. I can't check it for you right now. I could...”

There was a ghastly pause, and Ibuki felt his heart stop in his chest. “...I'm at Ibuki's place.” He'd been speaking quietly from the get-go, in respect for Ibuki. His voice was even quieter now. “Sorry.”

Slowly, Ibuki came to a sitting. He watched Chrono's back in the dark, his shoulders slouching despite the tension in his voice. “I could go back home, I could like, get a cab or something.” Chrono suggested, and Ibuki could only assume Mikuru probably didn't want him to do that.

“It's... yeah, but...” Most likely, yes. Standing up, Chrono didn’t look at Ibuki as he slowly made it out of the room. “I could get Ibuki to drive me in the morning. Before school.”

Chrono left the bedroom, but didn't turn to close the door. Ibuki laid back down, snatching his own phone from the nightstand. The screen lit up, hurting his eyes. It was just past three in the morning. Whatever was going on was no doubt more distressing for Chrono than it was for himself, so Ibuki rejected any semblance of self-pity. From the kitchen, he could still hear Chrono talking on the phone, but could not make out much of what was being said. When a few minutes passed, and Chrono did not come back in, he got up. The lights in the kitchen were still off, and Ibuki let them be. Chrono glanced at him, but no more. He stood by the sink, back against the counter, with the phone still to his ear, one arm crossed against his body. Ibuki could still hear Mikuru on the other end.

“Yeah,” Chrono was still clearly in the middle of something. Ibuki poured himself a glass of water. “Let me know if you need help re-booking it.”

“I see. Okay.” Though his voice remained steady, the energy had only seemed to drain out from him, judging by the expression on his face. “Don't worry about it... yeah, I will.”

“Bye. Take care. I'll call you again tomorrow.” He paused. “...Me too. Bye.”

Bringing the phone from his ear, Chrono hung up. Closing his eyes shut, he sighed. “What... was that about?” Ibuki asked. “It sounded serious.”

“Yes...” Chrono looked tired, indeed. It'd been a while since Ibuki had seen him like this. “Kind of...”

“Do you need to go back home?” Ibuki asked before he could get back on track. “I could take you.”

“No...” Chrono declined, as Ibuki had suspected he would. “Not... now. Let's go back to bed. Mikuru said... we could go in the morning.”

“I see...” Certainly she had. Ibuki still wanted to ask. “What does she need?”

Chrono was already making his way back to the bedroom, and Ibuki stuck with him. “Some documents she got tucked away. Legal stuff.”

“Oh.” That sounded bad. “What happened?”

Chrono climbed back into bed and pulled up the covers. “They got this... new contract. A lease. And Mikuru's away on this conference at the moment, but her people here were gonna deal with it.
‘Cause they're expanding... hiring some new people. It was all gonna come together this week, but...

“But something happened with the lease.” Ibuki had laid down next to him, flat on his back.

“Yeah. They were supposed to pay the rent for September and extra for the last days of August. That was today. Or yesterday, I guess...” It was indeed way past midnight. “They're supposed to move in by the end of the week, but they're not getting... a hold of this guy who signed the lease.”

“They're not... getting a hold of him?”

“Yeah, like... I don't know all the details but, like... they had an address where to meet him and he just never showed.” Chrono sounded as if he himself was in doubt of the plausibility of the story.

“That doesn't sound very... professional.” Ibuki wasn't sure what else to say.

“You don't say...” Chrono mumbled, not really capable of any more cutting edge commentary.

“So the legal papers she needed was... the contract?”

“No, they got copies of that.” Ibuki wasn't so surprised to hear that. “She wanted to... speak to a lawyer I guess.” Chrono sighed. “They need to move out on time, if they don't they'll be fined. The new people won't be able to start working the promised hours, but either way Mikuru's doesn't wanna cut their wages, so...”

“Just consulting a lawyer will cost her.” Ibuki realized where the issue laid. “Which will not resolve the other problems as soon as she needs, either.”

“Yeah...” Chrono sunk deeper into the pillow. He turned on his side, turning his back to Ibuki. “The problem's always... money, ain't it.”

Ibuki watched Chrono's back for a moment. He felt like he'd been whipped awake and alert with the introduction of this problem into their lives. A problem which he thought had a reasonably easy solution, if approached in the right way.

“How much does she need?”

For a moment, Chrono didn't move. Slowly, he rolled onto his back, and turned to look at Ibuki disdainfully. “…I didn't ask.”

Ibuki didn't get the hint. Not fast enough, at least. “Could you ask her?”

Chrono narrowed his eyes at him. “No?”

Ibuki wasn't sure how to proceed. “Would you... consider asking her?”

“I'm not going to ask her.” Chrono resisted the idea without flinching.

“I don't see why you couldn't at least ask.” Ibuki didn't want to coax him, but he realized it was perhaps already too late.

“Why?” Chrono, who'd looked so tired, had snapped awake. “Why do you want to know?”

It was a leading question for sure, and it was certainly what Chrono thought Ibuki deserved. “I... I thought...” Ibuki decidedly collected himself. “If it's within my boundaries, then I... I wouldn't mind offering her some help.”
Chrono, who already knew what he'd suggest, shot him down without hesitating. “Well. You're not.”

“Why not?”

“Because,” Chrono drew a deep breath. “Because you're not. Do I really have to explain that to you?”

“You could at least ask her how much it is, so if it comes to that, then I'll know.” Ibuki was quite firm in his proposition. Chrono wasn't having it.

“I'm not asking her.” He insisted. “I'm not, okay? So don't ask.”

“Could you at least ask her about the legal fees?” While trying to bargain, Ibuki failed to hide how frustrated he'd gotten.

“No?” Irritated, Chrono rose from where he laid. “I'm not asking. And even if she tells me, I'm not telling you.”

“You wouldn't tell me even if you knew?” Ibuki couldn't help but feel insulted.

“Not when you're acting like this.” Chrono had gotten quite agitated. Neither of them had realized how heated their argument had become. Now, it was too late.

“I'm simply saying that...” Ibuki wanted to salvage the situation.

Chrono wouldn't let him. “You're saying that you want to solve this situation with money. And I'm saying I don't want you to do that, and that's final. You don't even know how much money she could possibly need.”

“Yes, because you're refusing to ask.”

“Because I don't want you to get any ideas.” Chrono made an attempt to calm himself down. It was late. “You don't have that much money either. I don't want you to give that all away. What if you need it?”

“I wasn't planning to simply hand it over. She could borrow money from me until she has it all figured out.” Ibuki followed Chrono's example.

“Yeah, and then what is she supposed to do? Just say thanks and accept?” Chrono offered an effective counter argument.

“I... I thought, if it came to that, then I'd at least offer her that option.” Would Mikuru be able to accept such a favor? Ibuki didn't know, but he'd rather find out than let her become indebted under less than ideal circumstances.

“I don't want her to be indebted to you, in whatever which way.” Chrono had fallen back down into bed. “Is that really so hard to understand?”

“I do understand. But we can't always get quite what we want.”

Ibuki felt Chrono stare at him. “...You're really pushing this, aren't you?”

Perhaps he'd crossed the line. Perhaps he'd gone too far. “You're unbelievable.” Ibuki stared at the ceiling as Chrono muttered to him in great distaste. “What do you even want me to say?” Chrono challenged him.
“I... I wanted you to consider my viewpoint as well.” He said, quietly.

“Well, I did.” Chrono spoke back so quickly, snappily. Ibuki often thought it was unfair. He was so clear-headed. He always knew what to say. “And the answer's no.”

Ibuki knew how unhappy he looked, and he was displeased with that as he was with how they'd argued. Chrono saw it, and could only sigh once more. “Could we... not do this right now? It's late. I'm tired. And you should sleep, too.”

They only had a few more hours before morning, before Ibuki's alarm would go off. “You're right.” Ibuki admitted. He looked at Chrono, who laid next to him, but not as close as he normally did. Trying to amend this, Ibuki moved closer on his own accord. When he raised his arm to place his hand on Chrono's side, he appeared to disapprove, shifting uncomfortably.

“Can I... not touch you?” Ibuki asked, stingily. Surely the argument hadn't been that bad.

“You're fine,” Chrono simmered down, even as he still sounded irritated. “You're fine.” He repeated, more sincerely.

“I'll take you back to the apartment first thing in the morning, alright?” Ibuki decided to focus on the things he could do, for now.

“Yeah.” Chrono's voice was already a bit distant.

“We'll sort this out.” Ibuki thought to reassure him.

Chrono took longer to respond. “...Yeah. We'll... figure it out.” He sighed.

A moment's silence, and Ibuki thought of the day ahead. He still felt a rush of sorts, or perhaps it would be better to call it a disruption. He was used to that, but he'd prefer to get some rest. Chrono appeared to relax. Ibuki just hoped he wasn't putting too much effort into it.

“Oh, by the way...” Chrono already sounded like he was about to fall asleep. “Mikuru says hi.”

The words, simple as they were, felt like they would seep into his skin. Ibuki had tried not to think about that aspect of the situation, but now it would surely be impossible.

“...I see.” He said quietly. In part, he wished Chrono had told him sooner. He could have returned the gesture. Perhaps it was the least of his worries right now, but he'd rather not appear rude.

“Next time... tell her I said hi, too.”

He'd said it so seriously, it made Chrono curb a laugh.

“Sure.”

While falling back asleep proved hard, waking up proved harder. With little chatter they arranged for the morning's agenda. It was just past six AM when Chrono slammed the door to the passenger seat
of Ibuki's car. Driving was only so much faster than commuting, but at least it was still relatively early.

As soon as they were on their way, Chrono was texting Mikuru. “She's coming home early to deal with all this. She got her plane ticket re-booked.”

“Could they sort that out?” Ibuki asked.

“I dunno. I hope so. She said she got it re-booked so hopefully she could get a refund but I don't know...” Chrono sounded rightfully distracted.

“When is she coming back?”

“She should be home by the day after tomorrow.” Chrono lifted his head to glance out the window. “Unless something else goes wrong.”

As soon as Ibuki pulled up outside Mikuru's apartment, double parking out on the street, Chrono got out of the car. “I don't need more than a minute.” He said. As he slammed the door shut and left, Ibuki was left alone with his thoughts. The drive to campus was mostly quiet. Chrono had packed the documents Mikuru had asked for in his bag, and had planned to study before his classes. It was still too early to call Mikuru, so he'd have to wait for that, too. During their drive, the pensive atmosphere was a symptom of something more than the early hours, or the situation Mikuru was in. Ibuki wasn't so clueless.

Soon they were parked, tentatively, just outside campus. The roads were quiet here, in the shadows cast by the western-styled 19th century buildings. Chrono waited a moment. Barefaced, he turned to look at Ibuki.

Ibuki knew he had to say something, but refused to grow restless under Chrono's gaze. “I... I hope you understand I only meant well.”

“Sure,” Chrono said, sourly. “I get that. Doesn't really change anything, though.”

“Really?” Ibuki spoke with a certain amount of genuine disbelief. “Does it not mean anything? I mean, I'm... sorry, if I... overstepped my boundaries but I want you to understand that was not my intention.”

“You're always...” Chrono struggled to stay calm. “You're always sorry. Maybe try and not... put yourself in that situation in the first place, okay?”

Ibuki realized his apology had only sounded so sincere. However, right now, he felt like it didn't matter if he tried to do it over. Chrono didn't feel like he was receptive to that. “...I just wish you'd see things my way, is all.”

“Your way?” That didn't sound like it'd helped. “This isn't about you.”

“I didn't mean to imply that. You're the one making this a matter of principle.” Ibuki thought he might get him there. Whenever he thought he'd ever made a point in argument with Chrono though, he was usually wrong.

“Money,” Chrono raised his voice. “Is not a matter of principle!”

Ibuki was still gripping the steering wheel, even as the car had long stopped, and with no intention of going anywhere. “We could... talk about this.”
“No,” Chrono retorted, quickly. “We're not! I already said that, I already made my mind up.”

“I think you're being too stubborn about this—”

“I'm being stubborn?!” Ibuki’s fumbling attempt to calm him down backfired. “You're the one who's being... obstinate.”

Obstinate. Really. The word seemed to bore into him. Ibuki sighed. Chrono took that the wrong way, too. “Moan about it all you want. I'm not changing my mind.”

Chrono rustled to get out of the car. Ibuki would’ve preferred for the conversation to not end like this, but he wasn’t sure what he could say to make it better. Indeed obstinate, Ibuki didn't want to offer a halfhearted apology or any equally insincere agreement. However, as Chrono indeed got out of the car and slammed the door, Ibuki felt himself panic.

“Chrono,” Even if quietly, he called out to him. “Chrono?”

Having stopped just where he stood by the car, Chrono wasn't storming off just yet. Ibuki realized he'd been given a chance to speak. “Let me know if anything happens, or if you learn anything new. Alright?” Chrono didn't look at him, but Ibuki saw on his face he was listening. “I'll come pick you up any time if you need it. Just call me.”

It was a rare offer, and they both knew it. “Chrono?” Ibuki asked once more when left without a response as the seconds ticked by.

“Sure,” Chrono said finally. “I'll call you. If there's anything.” He turned to look at Ibuki, and while he was still mad, he could hold a conversation. Knowing Chrono, Ibuki could trust him to keep his word.

“Go.” Chrono said, shortly. Still upset, he crossed his arms, and stared back in the direction they'd come. “You'll be late for work.”

“Right.” Ibuki still let his eyes linger on Chrono for a few more seconds before he actually accepted the situation he was in. Chrono was right. “I'll... see you.”

“Yeah.” Chrono shrugged. He gave Ibuki one last glance. “I'll see you.”

As he drove off, Ibuki still couldn't quite shake the feeling that preoccupied him. He'd have to try and do something about that, he just wasn't sure what just yet. Obstinate as he was, he still hadn't given up on trying to find a way to help Mikuru. He just had to think of a way that Chrono would approve of.

Ibuki could only focus so much on work. While trying to reschedule to make the Kanagawa trip possible, Ibuki wasn't sure what to do, which was so unlike him he didn't know quite how to proceed. He'd been provided pictures. Two small, sad looking two-story buildings, looking like they’d been built some 30 years ago, never renovated, fit only to be used as store locations, with gas and plumbing on the first floors only. They were hardly inspiring, at least at this stage. Regardless,
the property documentation soon distracted him. When his co-workers clocked out for lunch, he
looked at his phone somewhat cautiously. Chrono hadn't gotten back to him. Surely he was still
upset. Ibuki couldn't stand not to know, and only hesitated for so long before calling him. Chrono
should be free at the moment, regardless.

When he picked up, Chrono sounded disdainful. Ibuki hadn't worried about him not picking up.
Chrono wasn't that immature, no matter how mad he was.

“Have you heard anything?” Ibuki asked, not needing to elaborate his question.

“Not really...” Chrono voice sounded against a background of noise. A lot of people were moving
around during lunch time, as was he. “The situation hasn't really changed. Mikuru's got people here
trying to find a new place short notice, but they haven't found anything yet. At least nothing that fits
their budget.”

“I see.” Ibuki had more questions, but frankly he didn't want to ask. Not like this. “When do your
classes end today?”

“Uh,” Chrono sounded thrown off. “Should be around four. Why?”

“I thought I'd leave the office early and come pick you up.” He'd suggested it before, but he'd come
to realize Chrono might not take his offer. “There's something I want to talk about.”

“...Sure.” Chrono didn't sound so sure, despite his words. “I'll be at the gate. Also...”

“Yes?”

“Shouldn't you be eating like, right about now?”

“I... I am.” Ibuki hadn't thought to work through lunch, but he realized it sure sounded like he did. “I
am.”

It had been a turbulent 12 hours. Ibuki knew he had to eat, and he also knew that despite the sour
tone of his voice, Chrono was only looking after him. After they hung up, he felt a little better. He'd
gained some resolve. Ibuki had faith, that even if they argued, even if they disagreed, they could
always talk. Before heading off to eat, Ibuki collected the folder he had laid out on his desk, and
tucked it under his arm.

No rescheduling was made that day. Half past three, Ibuki locked his office and left. For once, he
didn't have much of a plan in regards of work. When he stopped outside the gates, right where he'd
dropped Chrono off early that morning, it was a few minutes before four o'clock. It had been about
eight hours, but it didn't feel that way. Ibuki’s mind had lingered in this place all day. People came
and went, and when Chrono showed, it had been about ten minutes. When he leaned down to peer
inside the car, Ibuki recognized the frowny look on his face. Reaching for the door handle, Chrono
swung the door open, and Ibuki felt the hot rush of air flowing inside the car.

“How are you? Did you hear anything more?” Ibuki asked before Chrono could give him the silent
treatment.

“I'm... fine.” Chrono sounded irritable, probably because he was. “And I haven't really heard
anything new. Just more of the same.”

“I see.” Ibuki watched him carefully. Chrono raised his eyes, and was undoubtedly aware. “I've
been... thinking.”
“Uh-huh.” Chrono had his back leaned again the passenger seat. Ibuki could tell he was already disapproving.

“There's something I want to ask you.” Ibuki was paving way as carefully as he could.

Chrono crossed his arms, and turned away, looking out the window. “If it's about money, the answer is still no.”

“Could you at least hear me out?” Ibuki spoke quietly. He was not mad. He didn't want to be.

Chrono sighed deeply. His head came to rest against the side window. “I just don't wanna hear you say something stupid that'll make me mad again.”

“I have an idea.” Ibuki hoped Chrono would spare him some patience. “It's not about money. However, I'll still need to... ask you a few questions.”

Chrono was thinking, irritated as he still was. Ibuki worried, naturally. The feeling had crept up on him.

“You know,” Chrono said, finally. “I've been real upset all day after what happened this morning. And like, I've been thinking... that maybe I overreacted and all. So I thought that when you showed up, I'd make an effort to not be so mad, but like...” The tension in his voice was breaking. “The first thing you do is the exact thing I didn't want you to do. And honestly, I don't know what I expected.”

Ibuki adverted his eyes, staring ahead. He hadn't realized, but he'd been upset as well. It was hard to think about anything else when Chrono was unhappy, more so when he was unhappy because of him. “When I apologized to you this morning, it was... really insincere of me. I realize that, and... I'm sorry.” Ibuki felt a chill when Chrono's words from that morning rang through his head. “I know I always apologize. But sometimes I...” In that moment of heated emotion, Ibuki successfully connected the dots. He was always so bad at figuring out his own feelings, but he was getting better. “I don't know what else to do. I wanted to help you, but instead I made you upset. And frankly I... I still don't understand why. That... hurts. I wanted to help you, but you won't let me.”

“You are helping,” Chrono, who had been patient and silent, snapped to attention. “You are helping, you're helping right now!”

As Chrono turned in his seat, Ibuki felt his hard gaze on him. It made him feel exposed. Inhaling sharply, Chrono tried to control himself. “This isn't about that. This isn't about that at all. You took me all across town early this morning, you left work hours ahead of time just to get me... that's helping. And I really appreciate it, and I know you'd happily do that and more.” Hearing these words with so much anger and frustration in Chrono's voice made Ibuki's head hurt.

Chrono was running out of steam, which was unlike him, but whatever else was eating away at him. “You're so...” Chrono shook his head. “When I say it's 'cause of the money, I really mean it. It's not that I don't want you to help. And when you don't listen... that hurts... to me.”

“I understand...”

“Do you?” Facing Chrono, the weary look in his eye was more than he'd expected. “Do you?” He asked again, quietly, and Ibuki realized that maybe he didn't.

“Mikuru's worked hard her whole life just to take care of me, you know.” Chrono had slouched in his seat, despite the sharp look in his eye. His words layered together, sparking new meaning. “Just so I could live like, a decent life. And she did it all on her own, 'cause she never had anyone. And in the end, it was all about money.”
Hearing the cracks in Chrono's voice, and seeing the shiny look in his eye, Ibuki felt his heart sink to the pit of his stomach. “Whenever I think about it, it's...” Chrono's voice faded into nothing. With the palm of his hand he wiped away a tear he'd yet to otherwise acknowledge. “Maybe to you, it's just... money, but... I just, I don't want to... put her in that situation. Give her no choice, to... accept someone else's money, be it mine or yours or... anyone's.”

Ibuki wanted to hold him, but didn't feel qualified to. “I didn't realize.” He said quietly. “I should have have, but I didn't.”

Chrono didn't cry more than a few tears. He breathed shakily, and he dried his cheek with the edge of his sleeve, rising in his seat. “You were right.” Ibuki told him.

“You can't... know what I don't tell you.” Chrono replied tiredly.

“I suppose not.” Ibuki admitted. “I could have asked, though.”

Chrono shrugged. “You sort of did.”

“I want to... be a part of your life.” Ibuki watched the traffic go by. “I want to be someone you and by extension, your family can rely on, but I-”

“You are.” Chrono's voice, still colored by his tears, grew stronger. “You are. So stop worrying about that.”

“I worry,” Ibuki matched him. “I naturally worry.”

Ibuki reached to hold Chrono's hand, and Chrono let him with a bothered sigh. “I understand this is a sensitive subject. More so now than I initially knew. It worries me.” With a greater clarity of mind, Ibuki spoke.

Chrono raised his head once more. He looked like he didn't know what to think. “It's like you said.” Ibuki spoke to him carefully. “It's difficult. To ask for help. To talk about yourself.” Having grown aware of where the conversation was headed, Chrono's lips thinned, and he adverted his eyes.

“It's difficult, but I want you to trust me. I want you to be able to talk to me.”

“I trust you.” Chrono replied with the same clarity Ibuki experienced. “I guess some stuff is just... I don't know. It's always been there. How am I supposed to...”

“I should have asked you.” Ibuki didn't want to lay all the responsibility on Chrono. Quite the contrary.

“I don't know if it would have made any difference.” Chrono admitted. “I mean... you did sort of ask. And I just snapped at you.”

Ibuki wasn't sure what to say. “It's fine.” All this time he'd been frustrated, confused, not mad. He hadn't felt like he had the right to be. In the silence that followed, Ibuki heard Chrono quietly sniff before leaning himself forward. Ibuki invited to it, adjusting himself, letting Chrono lean against him, putting his hand on his shoulder. With his face against his hair, Ibuki thought it was best to say nothing.

Ibuki thought about what Rive had said to him days before. Chrono was always so strong, but Ibuki knew, he knew he still needed support from people around him, just like anybody else. With a moment's passing, Ibuki put his arms around him. It was a little awkward, a little uncomfortable where they sat, but Ibuki hardly cared.
“I’ve been really worried.” Chrono whispered, eventually.

“I know.” Ibuki replied, quietly.

Chrono was usually so resilient, it was easy to be deluded, easy to assume he didn't also need to be comforted sometimes. Ibuki was so used to being on the receiving end of his encouraging words, of his comforting embrace. Ibuki held him tighter. “It'll be okay.” At the sound of his words, Chrono relaxed in his arms. “I promise.”

People would pass them by outside, but Ibuki was oblivious to it all. He'd wanted to help, but had missed the most fundamental part of it all in his eagerness. Chrono needed him. He needed his support, emotionally. They embraced, and did so until it was too uncomfortable to bear. When Chrono slipped away from him, he still looked worn, but less burdened. As a result, Ibuki felt the same way.

“Take me home,” Chrono said, quietly, firmly. “We can talk after we get home.”

“To...” Ibuki was about to respond, but Chrono caught himself before he could. “Your place. I mean.” He looked a bit embarrassed by it all. Ibuki hadn't assumed anything else.

“Sure.” He responded lightly.

They took a moment to collect themselves before leaving. Things were still tense, strange, delicate. They would be for awhile.

With his face in his hand, elbow propped up on the table, Chrono had watched Ibuki open the white paper spreads on the tabletop. With a ball point pen in his hand, Ibuki gestured to the mapped layout on one of the double spread A4.

“It's a three story building. Two separate properties.”

Chrono pointed at the stairwell that divided two segments, clearly marked on the blue prints. “And this is?”

“There's two spaces on each floor. They share one stairwell, and elevator.” Indeed, there were two doors marked on each side. The elevator shaft was remarkably small. “So there's twelve spaces in total. They're all about 200 square meter each.”

Chrono was thinking. He remained pensive. Ibuki was thankful he listened, but maybe this was all a bit hard to put into context for him. “It seems really big.”

“In all, yes.” The building was a small office building. For the purpose they had in mind though, it was big. “For now, none of it is being used. We've used it as tentative spaces during reconstruction and changes in organization. There was... talks of using it to house an organization-wide procurement department last year. It's not yet in the works. Probably won't be for a while.”

“That sounds like something you guys might need, though.” Chrono's didn't lay too much weight
into his observation.

“Frankly, we won’t know until we try. It eats time for people stationed at the main branch to deal with overseeing funds for every little order. If it’s enough to justify a reorganization... is currently under discussion.” Ibuki feared he’d be sidetracked. “Even so... I hardly doubt we’d need more than one floor to set that up.”

“So? What happens if you need it during constructions again?” Chrono had sat with his gaze resting on the table. Now, he lifted his head to look Ibuki in the eye.

“We have nothing scheduled.” Ibuki said simply.

“And if something urgent happens?” Chrono made an effort to not sound like he was challenging him.

“We hardly use all of it. In the case of that event, we have other locations.”

“Other locations, some of which I’m sure you’re not even aware of yet.” Chrono smiled, although wryly. Ibuki allowed himself to smile too.

“Presumably.”

“Where did you say this was?” Chrono asked, revealing how much he’d been paying attention.

“It’s in Nakano. Not ideal, perhaps, but communications are good.” It was on the other side of town compared to where they lived.

“I don’t think the location’s a problem.” Chrono said admittedly. “The commute’ll be about the same. Probably better... for well, others.”

Ibuki wasn’t going to take anything for granted. Chrono still looked contemplative, if vaguely uncertain. He was aware of that much himself. “I'm surprised you... just have something like this laying around.”

Ibuki stared at the layout blueprints for a second. “We have a few places like this. We pay for basic upkeep. We rent some out. It's a decent source of income. Most of it's in use. Much of the programs Ryuuzu set up are still operating with few changes over the years.”

“...How much do you charge?”

“About that...” Ibuki knew he could easily mess this up. He thought to word his next sentence carefully. “I... wanted to ask about... the budget. Your aunt's budget.”

Chrono didn't look very surprised. He seemed a little guarded. “How’s so?”

“We don’t... charge that much. As you know, we're not a corporation.” Chrono did know. Money was needed for things to go around, but the goal of the vanguard association was not to make money. They ran charities. They partially relied on donations and other types of funding from sponsors. “I want to know roughly what range she's in, so I can offer a suitable price. I don't want her to think I'm making an exception because it's her.”

Chrono was looking the other way. “Right.”

“Besides, this is... as temporary a solution as it needs to be.” Ibuki wanted to make that clear, too. “To avoid the high price of having to find something on such short notice.”
Leaning on the table, Chrono held his breath, a hard stare laid on the blueprints. Ibuki watched him, watched him consider and cave. It wasn't satisfying in and of itself. “Sure.” He said, finally.

“You don't have to agree to it.” Ibuki had already detached himself from any response he'd get. He had to, if he wanted Chrono to be able to be honest with him.

“It's... not ideal. But none of this is. And... I think... I think Mikuru would appreciate it. If you talked to her.” With the words leaving him, Chrono looked like he'd managed to come to terms with something. Having regained his sharpness, he looked at Ibuki with a piercing gaze. “You'll have to ask her yourself, though.”

That was fair. “I... I will.” It was something he'd yet to really think about. It was a little exciting, but also incredibly scary. Above else though, it was not about him, or his feelings.

“You should be able to call her right about now.” Chrono added, having no intention to go easy on him.

“Right...” Ibuki became stressed before he could try and collect himself. This seemed to please Chrono. Indeed it served him right.

“I'll send you her number.” Chrono had his phone next to him on the table. Ibuki's palms were suddenly sweaty.

Afternoon had turned into evening. Chrono started preparing dinner in the kitchen. It would be a simple meal tonight. In the bedroom, away from the hum of the kitchen fan and the sputter of the frying pan, Ibuki stood by the window. He only had so much time to prepare himself. He could only make the call and hope for the best.

In his life, Ibuki had done a number of stupid things. Stupid, in the sense that they were dangerous. Maybe he hadn't outgrown those tendencies as much as he had built a life that hindered him from ending up in those situations. His time, his health: it was all expendable. His recklessness should thus not be mistaken for bravery. Ibuki was not careless, not fundamentally, but fundamental was his disregard for himself. Whenever he realized he was nervous, anxious, fearful: he had to try and figure why. It was usually because he did care. Over the years, he'd had to learn how to recognize that feeling. It still passed him by sometimes. He was nervous because he cared, because he had something to lose. In reality, it was a wonderful thing. However, they payoff wouldn't come until later. Now, he had to focus.

When Mikuru picked up the phone, her voice sounded in slight disarray. It was early, and she'd just gotten a call from an unknown number. “Hello?”

Ibuki had never heard her like that before. To him, it felt strange. Before him, she'd only ever showed a strong face. “Hello,” With a breath, a pause, he knew she might not recognize him just by hearing his voice. “This is Ibuki.”

“Oh. Hello...” She didn't sound less confused.

“I hope I'm not calling you at a bad time. Are you... available?” He'd made these sort of calls a hundred times before. That didn't make it easier. He wasn't sure how reserved he should be.

“I should be able to talk.” She didn't sound very busy. “I'm mostly waiting to hear from people back home.”

“I see.” That made sense. “I... heard about your situation from Chrono.”
“Yeah, I... assumed.” She sounded a little bothered. Maybe a little guilty. “Thank for taking him, by the way.”

“That's perfectly fine.” Ibuki became timid. “You're very welcome.”

“Is he with you?” When Mikuru became concerned, perhaps worried, it took Ibuki a second to connect the dots.

“He's fine. I'm calling because... I wanted to make a proposition. Have you heard anything new since you last spoke with him?”

“Things are... kind of on a standstill right now.” Mikuru sounded like she was keeping her chin up, despite everything. “I have people back home looking into things. But we haven't made much progress.”

“I see. What appears to be the problem?” He wanted to ask first and foremost. Hopefully he wouldn't be wasting her time.

Mikuru sighed melodiously. “It's hard to negotiate when you're so hard pressed for time.” She spoke dryly. “Our budget isn't even that strict. We're just not finding anything fast enough that wouldn't be a huge compromise in either space or budgeting.” She sounded like she needed to vent. Ibuki thought he might as well invite her to continue.

“And your original contractors?”

“Can't get a hold of him. And at this point, I kinda don't want to. He'll hear from a lawyer before he hears from me.”

“That's fair.” Ibuki smiled as he spoke. Mikuru was easy to talk to, so natural and secure in herself. She was like Chrono in that way. “I hope you don't mind me asking.”

“That's fine.” Mikuru was unassuming. “You said you... had a proposition, was it?”

“I do.” Ibuki's nerves had mostly calmed. “I don't want you to feel obligated to anything, though.”

“I'm kind of desperate, honestly.” Mikuru admitted to it, in her very own let-down, realistically optimistic way.

“We have an office building in Nakano we're not using. Currently unlisted as well. It was last leased over a year ago. It's by no means run down, but it's in need of some cleaning up.” Ibuki wanted to keep the information basic. “It's two separate facilities, one building. Three floors, each is two times 200 square meters.”

“That sounds... like a lot just for us.”

“You'll just use as much as you need.”

Mikuru was quiet for a second. “…Place we had signed for was just over 620 total, one floor.”

“I see. Like I said, you'll only use as much as you need. We'll use the rest for tentative office spaces, as we have in the past.” Wanting to remain professional, Ibuki still spoke carefully. “Would you... mind considering? I can send you the details.”

“You know, I...” She sounded uncertain, but clarity seized her. “Sure. Why not, it can't hurt.”

“Thank you.” He thanked her without really thinking. Perhaps it was strange.
“What range are you in?”

“I wanted you to make an offer.” Ibuki hadn't been sure how to bring it up. “Based on your budget.”

“Oh…” Hopefully it wouldn't be a deal breaker.

“I don't want to undercharge you. We usually do. We can't... make too much money.”

A lighthearted scoff. “Oh, I see...”

“I hope you understand.” It was a bit of an unusual situation, and hopefully she could accept an unusual solution.

“I know.” She appeared to come to terms with it. With a sigh, she sounded somewhat relieved. It was contagious. “I know a bit... about your line of work, I mean. Chrono always used to talk about it. A lot more than he ever talked about school. But I suppose it makes for a better topic of conversation.” Mikuru laughed lightly.

Ibuki wasn't sure what to say. “Hopefully he had good things to say.”

“Oh, he only ever had good things to say. About you, too.”

He'd only tried to small talk, made an attempt that'd arguably failed. In the dark, in his bedroom, Ibuki still stood by the window. He realized he felt slightly dizzy, and it'd become a little hard to speak. “I see.” He said, eventually, after a lingering silence he hoped and prayed was not too suspicious.

“Thank you.” Mikuru had finally let the fatigue shine through in her voice. Ibuki hoped she hadn’t been trying too hard to hide it.

“Don't mention it.” Ibuki replied quietly. “Please take your time and look at the documents. I'll send you the material right away.”

“I will.” She responded, a slight tension in her voice. “I'll get back to you as soon as I can.”

“You can contact me at any time.”

“Sure. I'll try not to wake you up too late, okay?” As she actually accepted his offer, Ibuki felt lighter still. “Oh, and...”

“Yes?” Ibuki was a little on edge.

“Say hello to Chrono for me, will you?”

He'd been on edge rightfully. “I... I will.”

After they hung up, Ibuki lingered for a bit. In the end, it didn't feel so bad. It felt quite good. He thought about what Chrono had told him the night before. It all seemed to clash. There were things however, that indeed were not his to deal with. He had Mikuru's number saved as a contact in his phone now. A connection, or at least proof of one. To Ibuki, it was something.
It was in the afternoon, perhaps at an awkward hour, that Ibuki and Mikuru had made plans to meet up. It was too late for lunch, and too early for dinner. She'd been back in the country since that morning. Chrono had slept at Ibuki's apartment, woken up and gone to school like normal. He'd been a bit reserved through it all, and Ibuki could only assume that was his way of dealing with it. He'd asked to come, in the end. He wanted to see the potential new office, too.

They drove out ahead of time. There were only a few reserved parking spaces, but it would have to do. When Ibuki commented on it, Chrono said, flatly, “I don't think any of their previous places had any more than this. Don't worry about it.”

Ibuki had requested some simple cleaning up. Mikuru was on time, parking her car next to Ibuki’s and lightening up the mood as she emerged from her car with a headstrong expression on her face. When she saw Chrono, her eyes seemed to light up. She hadn't assumed that he'd be here. Beyond the double door entrances of the adjacent building, the walls were white and empty. In the hollow building any sound resonated with slight reverb. Chrono stayed behind, not intent on being part of much of anything. When Ibuki and Mikuru went deeper inside, he stood by one of the windows in the first room, pretending to look outside. Ibuki noticed, but gave him no more than a passing glance.

“I hoped one floor would've been enough, but I'm afraid not.” Mikuru was transparent with all her thoughts. Ibuki preferred it that way.

“The layout is... decently efficient.”

“Yeah... it's not bad.” Mikuru noted.

“Like I mentioned, you'll rent as much as you need. I understand it's more... convenient to be localized on one floor, but the central stairwell makes it a bit easier.”

“That's true. Honestly...” Mikuru had stopped to look at him. Somehow, speaking to her on the phone and speaking to her in real life didn't feel that different. “It's by far our best option right now. I mostly came here as a formality. Just in case, you know?”

“I see. I'm glad to hear it.” Ibuki hadn't quite expected that, but when he heard her say it, it wasn't surprising in and off itself.

“It was very thoughtful of you.” The sincerity in her voice was amplified by her cheeky smile.

Ibuki refused to be awkward. He smiled. “Well, it's a business opportunity.”

“I should... thank Chrono, too.” She'd turned away, acknowledging he was not there.

“Please do, but...” Ibuki held his breath for a second. “Keep in mind I had to request his blessing to do this. It wasn't his idea. Quite the opposite.”

“Oh, well...” Mikuru shrugged lightly. “That sure sounds like him.”

Within the next few minutes, they were leaving. Still waiting by the first window, Chrono looked strangely surprised to see them. He looked like he'd been in a daze and only just now come to. Ibuki thought it was endearing in and of itself. Largely he appeared to ignore Mikuru and Ibuki’s
conversations, as he was still clearly preoccupied.

Stepping outside, Mikuru held the door. “Hey, how about we grab some food? I saw they have a gyoza place by the station.”

“Sure, I’d be up for it.” Chrono replied.

“Would you mind joining us?” Stupidly, Ibuki didn’t immediately realize the original question had included him. “Do you like gyoza?”

“Oh, he likes it.” Chrono responded before he could. “And I’m sure he doesn’t mind. Right?”

Now, he had to say something. “If you insist.”

Chrono looked at him disapprovingly. “I mean. I’d... I’d love to.” Ibuki corrected himself. Mikuru laughed.

As Mikuru opened the car door, she turned her head to see that Chrono has already passed her. Chrono realized as well, and Ibuki watched the scene unfold, as Mikuru had become confused, and Chrono flustered. He’d gone to Ibuki’s car without thinking, and now he was torn. Torn, between the woman who raised him and the man who he’d come to share his life with. It was just a few minutes, so it wasn’t like it actually mattered. It was symbolical if anything. This did little to ease him.

“I uh, got my bag in Ibuki’s car, so...” Ibuki rarely wished Chrono was better at handling this sort of situation.

“Sure.” Mikuru responded, without making too much of anything out of it.

At the restaurant, a station side family chain, Mikuru offered to pay. Ibuki didn't dare suggest anything else.

“You know, when we first met, I never would've thought... we'd be doing business together.” She said jokingly.

“Well, I...” Ibuki could only think about the things she didn't know about him. “I could say the same.”

Mikuru smiled. The dissatisfied groan Chrono made was barely audible, but she turned her head at the sound, her smile stiffening. “Why?” She asked, nicely enough. “Is there something you want to say?”

“N-no, but...” Chrono muttered defensively.

“Then, don’t act like it.” Mikuru lectured him, and Chrono seemed to absorb it... somehow. As Chrono crossed his arms and looked the other way defiantly, Ibuki watched him play a different role than usual. It felt strange to be part of the their bickering. Strange, but fascinating, if vaguely uncomfortable.

“I guess I just wish things had turned out differently.” Chrono said, not quite unable to let things go.

“Well, we all do.” Mikuru said, in a factual manner that Ibuki thought was a bit unlike her. Perhaps Chrono thought so too, because he let his shoulder slump where he sat in his seat. “Right now, I'm just thankful I got this opportunity.”

“Please don't mention it, I...” Ibuki realized he had no idea what to say. “I... thought seeing as there
was something I could do, I should.”

He’d grown a little precarious. “Regardless, I'd prefer it if you'd see this as nothing more than another business deal.”

Ibuki saw Chrono draw a silent sigh. He was listening, and he looked unhappy still. Mikuru wasn't paying him any mind, not at the moment. “Oh, I'm afraid you might be asking for too much there.”

Her light demeanor was so effortless, Ibuki didn't process what she'd said for a full second. Before he could say anything, Chrono did, chipping in with his head turned sharply. “She's obviously thankful, so why can't you just accept that? And stop being so uptight.” His tone was dull, unlike his words.

“...You’re right.” Ibuki felt a bit lighter. Chrono looked like he did, too. Instinctively, he wanted to apologize. However, the situation called for something else. “Thank you.”

“You're fine, and also very welcome.” Mikuru shrugged it off with a smile. “Don’t be so stingy about this now.” She said to Chrono. “It's not very nice.”

The look on Chrono’s face might have made Ibuki laugh, if he hadn't been afraid to. “Right.” Chrono replied, clearly still agitated, now also perplexed, looking like he had about a million things he'd rather said.

The food they'd ordered eventually arrived. It was still hard not to talk about work.

“Whenever I ask Chrono about you he usually just says you're busy. How are things?” Mikuru asked.

“I don’t just---” Chrono interjected before Ibuki could think to form a reply. “I tell you stuff, don't I?”

“Well, it depends I guess, but you usually just talk about how busy he is, don't you?”

“...Things aren't quite so busy at the moment.” Ibuki made an effort to keep them on track. He wasn’t sure how to keep up with the two of them during conversation. They had their own pace.

“Ibuki's going to Kanagawa to check on some old buildings.” Chrono said, as if to prove him wrong. “It's quite the trip. When are you going again?”

“I haven't... decided just yet.” He'd yet to decide. He'd yet to have the time.

“You're going to Kanagawa to check on some old buildings?” Mikuru asked.

“It's a bit of a long story, but yes. They were used by the old organization and we have to figure out what to do with them now.”

“Tell her the story you told me, about the place up in Akita.” Chrono seemed to have returned to his usual self for the most part, but his tone was a bit more demanding than usual. Ibuki didn't think the story was quite that interesting, and perhaps that was why Chrono's interest in it was endearing.

In the end, it got quite late. When Mikuru said goodbye to him then, she shook Ibuki’s hand with both her hands. Chrono just touched his arm, but when his eyes lingered on his face for a bit too long, it still felt too intimate. Ibuki let them both get in the car, and let Mikuru pull out before him. It had been some ten, 15 minutes since they parted when Ibuki received a text from Chrono. At a red light, Ibuki glanced at the screen of his phone.
So, she won't shut up about you now. I hope you're happy

Ibuki let the message sit for a while. It was several minutes before he had the chance to reply, and by then he'd had time to think of what to say.

Very
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

I had a really hellish week so this chapter is a day late. Sorry about that. I will probably keep updating bi-weekly from now on, I'm starting to catch up with the chapters I have written ahead of time, and I'd like to be able to keep updating on a regular basis.

Also, to top my terrible week off... the preorders for the VEB07 LJ clan set that I was eyeing sold out in like 12 hours, so I missed it. Maybe it's a hint I should save my money instead of building another deck, but I've yet to become discouraged. I did manage to nab preorders for the VSS01 cards I wanted, though. The set came out yesterday in English, so I should get them in a few days. Now I'll actually be able to use the cards I've (so far) written all the fights in this fic around... In general I'm really excited to finally build Gear Chronicle in premium.

Anyway, here's the new chapter.

The white, starchy bed sheets were only so wrinkled. Ibuki was getting dressed. He'd left his shirt hanging over the back of a chair. Sitting with his legs over the side of the bed, Chrono watched him button it up. Ibuki hardly ever wore a tie. It wasn't part of his image. It was too formal, and as he himself had said, would give people the wrong idea. Today was like that, too. The morning conference hadn't been that formal, either. The room was quite small, the sunshine behind the drapes telltale of the nice weather they were having. Chrono was still just wearing his tee, the carpeted floors under his feet serving as a sensory reminder that he was not at home here. He was feeling a little lightheaded.

"The idea was... that we'd have lunch." There was a hall mirror, and though his eyes were directed towards it, Chrono could tell Ibuki wasn't paying much mind to his reflection. "However... I'm afraid I can't. Something came up."

Chrono hadn't really assumed anything. He knew Ibuki was busy. "Hey, don't worry about it."

"I'm sorry." His jacket had been laid out on the bed. Before grabbing it, Ibuki buttoned the cuffs on his shirt. "We have this troublesome sponsor who's very... particular about seeing me in person."

"Like I said... don't worry about it." Chrono didn't want to be too dismissive. "It's not like it's your fault."
Ibuki said nothing in response, and Chrono knew it meant he didn't agree. “...I'll make it up to you.” He said, eventually. “I'll... make some time.”

“Sure.” Ibuki was so pensive, and so serious. It made Chrono smile.

“Do you have to be anywhere?” Ibuki asked him as he emerged from the bathroom a few moments later. He was getting ready to leave. “I could arrange something.”

“What? No, that's fine.” Not only did the idea make him uncomfortable, he actually didn't have anywhere to be in particular. “I had a meeting with one of my teachers this morning, and my other class was canceled. I'm just gonna head home anyways.”

“I see.” Ibuki accepted the answer.

Chrono heaved himself up from the bed as Ibuki was putting his shoes back on. He turned around to Chrono putting his arms around him. Their lips met lightly. It was a somewhat clumsy start to a kiss that lasted the better part of a minute. It was still hard to let go, and still easy to get caught up in that feeling. Chrono swept Ibuki away with him without trying.

“...I'll be in touch.” Ibuki said before he left, quietly, as if someone could overhear them. The words had become familiar by now. Chrono thought that fact should be more reassuring. Then again, they kept meeting with short notice.

In no real hurry, Chrono laid back on the bed. He'd stick around for a little while, probably. Surely there were still people lingering in the hotel lobby after the conference, and he'd rather not run into anyone. His pants were... somewhere, and he should probably take a shower, anyhow. Grabbing his phone from the nightstand, Chrono checked whatever he might've missed in the past hour or so. The bed sheets were outstandingly clean. There was no residue of Ibuki's scent on them at all. Maybe he'd wait until tonight to take that shower.

Ibuki contacted him only hours later. By the next day they'd made plans. Ibuki worked late most days, but he'd asked, specifically, if Chrono could see him that Friday after work, and if he didn't mind if it got late. Chrono did not hesitate to respond affirmatively.

Alright, then. I'll pick you up. Ibuki had responded, and the entire situation felt outlandish. Chrono wondered if he should be excited. The feeling crept up on him, in the end, and he tried to keep himself preoccupied and not think about it too hard.

Friday night, Mikuru was home. Chrono had told her he'd be going out, and that she shouldn't bother staying up waiting for him. She didn't really ask much, at least no questions he couldn't answer without lying. He lived his own life, and she was respectful of his privacy. In the past, he had felt somewhat awkward about it, as if she assumed he had something to hide. Currently, he was incredibly thankful. He did absolutely not want to talk to her about his relationship with Ibuki. Partially, because he yet did not have much of anything to say. They'd seen each other a lot over the past few weeks, but they'd yet to actually talk. As Chrono got dressed, headed out the door, and down the stairs to head outside, the questions that lingered surfaced in his mind.

The cab was parked right outside the house. Chrono caught himself turning his head around, checking his surroundings as he approached. It was quite dark, but on a Friday night like this, there were regardless people around. It was already way past 9 PM. He peered inside the car and knocked
lightly on the window before reaching for the door handle. “Hi,” Having just seen Ibuki’s head turn in his direction, Chrono smiled. “I didn’t realize you were in a cab.”

“Hello,” It wasn’t very surprising. “I couldn’t be bothered to drive.” Though Ibuki returned his smile, he failed to uphold eye contact. His was somewhat rigid. There was something under the surface. Perhaps he was nervous. Perhaps he was excited.

Fair enough, Chrono thought. He didn’t feel too different himself. “I don’t blame you. I mean, it’s nice to be able to get a drink.”

“That too.” Leaning forward in his seat, Ibuki spoke to the driver. “We’re ready to go.”

With his arm on the windowsill, Chrono watched the silhouette of the driver in the front seat for a moment. While realizing that he’d never quite been in this situation before, Chrono felt a certain sense of unease creep up on him. He couldn’t help but feel self-conscious. He would have preferred it if it could’ve been just the two of them. Still, Chrono didn’t want to let that bother him. It would surely, but he had other things he should be concerning himself with. After all, the root of his unease was a more complex matter.

“I don’t recall you telling me where we’re headed.” It didn’t take long for Chrono to bring it up.

“Oh, you’ll find out.” Chrono wasn’t sure what to make of the response. Ibuki appeared pleased with himself. It wasn’t unlike him to be secretive.

“Hey, come on…” Surely it was a non-issue, but Chrono didn’t always like being surprised.

“I got us a table at a restaurant we occasionally book for work. It’s not too far.”

“Uh-huh?” Chrono thought of it even as he struggled to concentrate. He couldn’t help but think that everything they said was being heard. He wondered what the driver, or any other potential third party, could potentially assume about them. He wondered if it was possible to piece together the nature of their relationship. As he allowed himself to watch the downtown scenery pass by, Chrono realized he wasn’t kidding anyone. Of course it was possible. If anything, it was relatively obvious. That hurt a little. Maybe it was obvious, but Chrono still wasn’t sure what to expect. He was glad Ibuki made time to see him like this. Tonight, he’d try to ask the questions he had on his mind, and keep his head on straight while he did so. It was hard not to watch Ibuki, and wonder what he was thinking. Surely he had his own idea of their relationship, and as that was quite overwhelming to consider, he tried not to.

Chrono had already made his own decision. He was going to take this one step at a time, and make the most of it in the meantime. Frankly, he was a little worried. Or, perhaps more than a little worried. He didn’t want to push Ibuki away. He didn’t want to be demanding, or overbearing. Relationships were meant to come together naturally, at least at this stage. He had Ibuki now. He had him close. He could see him often, once every few days, even when his schedule was unforgiving. He could kiss him, touch him. He didn’t want to get greedy.

“I hope it didn’t get too late.” Outside, the lit up windows passed by slowly. They were moving through inner city roads.

“It’s fine.” Chrono assumed he was talking about dinner. “I had a little to eat before. I’m not too hungry.”

“I see…” While Ibuki wasn’t necessarily the best at making conversation, Chrono wondered regardless if there was something else holding him back.
“How about you?” Chrono had been meaning to ask. “You're working awfully late. Aren't you hungry?”

“I had to... go out with some people from a construction business we're working with.” He sounded a little bothered.

“Go out? To drink?” Ibuki didn't look like he'd been out, then again he was hardly the type who did. “I didn't drink... much.” Ibuki had a suppressed smile on his face. “It's been a long week, anyhow.”

“Seems like it.” They'd still had time to see each other a few times. It made him feel giddy to think about, and it seeped into his voice. Ibuki smiled earnestly, his eyes locked on the road ahead. Chrono felt strongly that he wanted to say something, flirt with him, but he didn't know how to. He stared for a bit, it would have to do. It worked, and Ibuki got a little fidgety.

“I'm sorry it's taken me so long to... see you, like this.” Ibuki had spoken after a minute's silence, and his voice was quiet with that sincere fragility of emotion that so often made Chrono feel quite bothered. It gave some frustrating insight into the world Ibuki lived in.

“Yeah, but like...” Chrono tried to not let that frustration get to him. “We're doing this, right?”

The words twisted their meaning as they left him. They resonated differently than he'd intended. Chrono felt a light chill travel up his spine with the realization, and slowly Ibuki turned to look at him. Darkness, a shadow cast on his face from the warm light outside mystified his expression, making Ibuki's eyes appear as if glimmering.

“I suppose we are.” His voice was collected, warm. It was voiced realization he hadn't made at this moment. He'd carried it with him. Chrono felt wondrous, if not truthfully stunned. He wanted to talk about it, badly, but now was not the time.

The drive dragged on a little. The buildings soon became taller, and the lights brighter and the sidewalks broader. Chrono did a double take as they turned a corner. He'd suddenly realized where they were. He seldom drove in the city. If he did, he would've realized sooner.

“Are we...” His mind was reaching conclusions faster than his mouth could follow. “Ginza? Really? Ginza?”

Ibuki had looked away. Perhaps he'd though Chrono had already noticed. “It's a place we use for meetings occasionally.”

“You hold meetings at Ginza restaurants?” Chrono was baffled.

“Occasionally. When we... want to go someplace nice.”

Chrono was bothered, and he didn't hide it. “It's not... that kind of place.” Ibuki clarified. “You'll like it.” He added, quietly.

“I...” Chrono felt like he'd missed the point. “I didn't mean to imply I wouldn't... like it. It's just... you didn't have to, you know.”

“I know.” Ibuki remained calm. “I suppose I didn't want to take you to...” Chrono saw Ibuki's eyes dart from one side to the other. He too would become self-conscious. “Any of the same places we usually end up at.”

They'd toured the restaurants in and near Asakusa in the past year. A bunch of them near the Tokyo
central station as well, all the spots where they could easily meet up. “I wouldn't have minded.” Chrono shrugged. The slight shock of the realization was wearing off. “But... it's not like I mind going to a new place, either.”

Chrono knew Ibuki well. He did, and admittedly he was sometimes quite strange. He was adamant about doing things good and proper, at least to the extent of his abilities. Chrono admired that. He admired it, even if it often seemed to complicate things. Surely, the reason he always worked so much and so late was at least partially due to this. Now, they were in Ginza, just for dinner. Maybe Ibuki indeed wanted it to be good and proper. Maybe this was his way of trying to make it feel more like a real date. Chrono felt a bit conflicted. Ibuki didn't have to try so hard. Then again... he seemed to forget. He seemed to forget that Ibuki hadn't done this before. Their touches and kisses weren't quite so awkward anymore, and their encounters had somehow become integrated into their regular lives in the past few weeks. Still, it only amounted to so much.

“I'm sure you'll like it.” Ibuki repeated, and Chrono had reason to believe him. Reaching out, Chrono did something he'd wanted to do since he first got into the car, and lightly laid his hand on top of Ibuki's next to him on the seat.

“If you say so.” He'd leaned in just a little bit. Ibuki turned away. He was embarrassed, and Chrono felt accomplished.

As they exited, Ibuki paid, and told the driver to be back once their time slot at the restaurant was over. It cost extra, without a doubt. Chrono decided not to think about it. It was reassuring to know they had a ride home but there were cabs loitering around in Ginza more so than most parts of town. The restaurant was located in a tall building, a skyscraper. Going up the odd 30 floors they needed to get to their destination, people came and went in and out the elevator. Chrono couldn't help but notice a few patterns.

“If I'd known we'd end up here I would have worn something nicer.” Chrono commented quietly. It wasn't like he had that much to choose from in the first place, so it was mostly a formal complaint.

“You're fine.” Ibuki said, unable to hide a smile. “Besides, it's not that sort of place.”

“Foreign?”

“Australian.”

Chrono whipped his head around. “Really?”

In the end, Ibuki's assumptions rang true. The restaurant was nice, but not too formal. The atmosphere was relaxed and the menu was relatively short. Foreign was regardless a good description. They were seated by the window, far from the elevators and from the bustle of the kitchen entrance. The view would have been more stunning if they weren't surrounded by equally tall buildings on either side, but the rows of shimmering windows was still quite captivating. Chrono asked about work, and Ibuki wasn't shy on the details. It could keep them preoccupied for a while, as it served to be interesting. Chrono liked hearing Ibuki talk about his day. He appeared to appreciate the questions as well.

“How are you, recently?” Ibuki returned the favor, eventually. “I meant to ask.” Surely he meant earlier tonight, or earlier this week.
“I'm fine...” Chrono didn't really reflect too much before answering. He was still high with wonder. He had been, for the past few weeks, at least for as long as he kept moving. “Mikuru's back home for now, so that's nice.”

“Oh,” Quietly, Ibuki voiced his genuine surprise. “I didn't realize.”

“Don't worry about it.” There was nothing to be concerned about. “She's probably in bed by now, anyway.”

Likely, Ibuki had expected Chrono to talk about school, his friends or his family. He didn't have much to say about any of that. He couldn't be bothered, not when the one thing that'd been troubling him this whole time was Ibuki himself. Surely, he was just being overly concerned with the situation. Previously, things had fallen into place by themselves. That was the authentic process. What else was true however, was that to Chrono, Ibuki wasn't like anyone else. It was all different, and not only because they'd known each other for so long. It was strange, to know him in such new ways, to have learned so many new things about him, and still not know exactly what he was thinking. It was unlike himself not to ask, is what he'd thought, but then again, was that really the truth? All these years, and he'd yet to ever ask. Already in the past he'd been so sure, and then he hadn't been sure at all. How could he be certain to know anything? Chrono's paranoia raged on under the surface, obscuring what he suspected to be a fairly simple truth. Ibuki had feelings for him. That wasn't really the issue. He had other questions left to ask.

He knew he was afraid to. Afraid they wouldn't match. He'd thought to wait, see if things became clear with time. Currently, that seemed unbearable. He couldn't fully relax, and he hated it.

“I've been a bit, uh, preoccupied I guess.” As Chrono said that, Ibuki had lifted his eyes from his plate. They'd been served their food moments earlier. He remained silent, but attentive.

“I mean, it's... it's been great. To see you so much, but... I-I guess I've been thinking, and...” He'd become awfully nervous. It was somehow unexpected. For a prolonged second of silence, Chrono's fearless need for clarity and his relentless self-consciousness tried to settle their differences. He'd come this far. It still wasn't where he wanted to be. Grounded in that, Chrono readied himself. He saw Ibuki wait for him to speak patiently, and he stopped hesitating. “I... want to know where we stand. What you're... thinking.”

Ibuki did not look surprised. Quite the contrary. He'd been expecting this, sooner rather than later. “I'm sorry.” He'd adverted his eyes. “I know I haven't been very... transparent.”

He sounded saddened, and Chrono felt it corrupt him, making him uneasy. Heavyhearted, even. “Well, we're...” Chrono found that he could not quite sit still. “We're just... starting out.” It was almost painful to say. He hated that, too.

Ibuki looked like he didn't know what to think. It wasn't very reassuring. “I... meant to do things differently.” He admitted. “I've been... awfully selfish.”

There it was again. His overbearing sentimentality. Words that hardly made sense. Chrono didn't know where to start. “Why's it gotta be like that, though?” Chrono heard his own voice bleed with confusion. He worried, hearing this, and he worried for Ibuki above all else. Ibuki had tensed up considerably. His gaze darted to the side as he shifted uncomfortably. Luckily, no one was watching them. “Don't... worry.” Chrono's reassuring words only seemed to have so much effect. He reached to lay his hand on top of Ibuki's, comfortably on the window side of their table.

“I wish I knew... what to tell you.”
The words lingered and faded away. Their impact did, too. Chrono had absorbed the atmosphere, but he refused to let it get to him. “...It's not like you have to lay it all down.” It was time to ground the topic at hand. “Maybe you don’t know exactly what to say. Honestly, I'm not sure I know either.” The dissonance in his voice grew by the end of his sentence. Chrono did have a lot of things on his mind. He also had a lot things that he wanted, craved. Could he, or should he, say them? That was a different story. Ibuki didn’t seem so convinced. In a way, Chrono thought it to be fair.

“But, I mean...” Chrono drew a silent breath. “I know what I want. And right now, that's enough.”

It took about a second. Ibuki's appeared to take the words in. Chrono rubbed his thumb over the top of his hand, patiently. Surely, it wasn't often easy to know what to say, but he felt like he'd managed to make things a bit easier. “I want to... see you. Like this.” Ibuki relayed to him quietly, his gaze fixated on Chrono's hand where it laid on top of his own.

“Yeah,” Chrono said in agreement, his heart swelling. “I know.”

The smile that came onto Ibuki's face was precious. He laughed lightly. “I suppose I can't blame you for wanting to hear me say it...”

Chrono left his hand where it was, and thought to himself that perhaps they'd both needed it. In the end, he was perhaps only so much wiser, but he felt less anxious. It was a start, and above else proof of Ibuki's efforts. Their emotions mellowed out with the hours as they passed, but the words that'd brought them lingered.

It was past midnight when they got up to leave. They'd almost forgotten the time. Almost. When the tab came in, in place of his wallet Chrono took out a familiar looking brown envelope. Ibuki, stressed, paid before Chrono could even get a glance at the total. The cab was where the driver had promised it would be. As Ibuki recounted his home address next to him in the backseat, Chrono had already become distracted, thinking only about how he wanted to kiss him. He knew he wouldn't have the courage to do so, but feeling the freedom to fantasize about it was more liberty than he was used to. They spoke, now more upbeat compared to their previous ride. Indeed they did not kiss, but as the ride dragged on they'd drawn closer. Seeing Ibuki in a lighthearted mood was so unusual. It made everything harder. As Chrono retold a story that had been circulating at his school, he'd grown bolder, bold enough to place his hand on Ibuki's thigh. The message was quite clear. It hadn't needed to be underlined, but here they were, unable to stop the magnetic pull between them.

Ibuki's apartment was in a tall Shibuya building. It had a doorman's counter and framed double doors in glass. Chrono had never been here before, and he was a little late to realize this was where they were going to end up. It was a switch-up from meeting at Mikuru's apartment whenever Chrono had it for himself, or meeting at a hotel. Unaware of what to expect, Chrono had grown considerably curious. They hadn't had that much to drink, but Ibuki still appeared to struggle for a short second with his keys before getting the door open. People's homes tended to retain their scent, but as the door closed behind him, Chrono did not immediately make any such connection. If anything, the apartment smelled like it had recently been aired out. Upon entering, there was a short hallway. A first impression Chrono had was that the apartment was relatively large.

“Mind showing me around?”

Ibuki looked like he’d expected the question. He smiled. “Feel free to... help yourself.”
Just ahead, a kitchen, complete with a dining table and chairs. The counter tops appeared unused rather than clean. Naked in a sense, they were devoid of any appliances, or anything else for that matter. The microwave was installed on the wall, admits cabinets. To his left, a living room, which was also a dead end. Windows lined the wall, generously sized. Two couches, a television, a small coffee table. It was equally lacking in ornamentation. There were no drapes, no cushions. They only thing resembling clutter was a short stack of newspapers.

“I'm afraid it's quite... dull.” Ibuki hadn't been unable to ignore Chrono's silence. He sounded a little ashamed, but not surprised.

Chrono wasn't sure what to say. It's not like he had much of any right to criticize. “...It's also quite big, huh?”

“It's too big.” Ibuki replied. By the sound of it, the thought had passed through his mind many times. “It's... an apartment I got through work, after I was first promoted. I suppose it's expected for someone in my position to... not live on their own.”

“Huh. Well, I... I guess that's a fair assumption.”

“All these years I thought I should try and get someplace a bit more suitable. I never quite had the chance to get to it.”

“Well, if you don't like it...” Chrono didn't think it necessarily had to be a problem.

“I don't dislike it. But it's... too big just for me.” Ibuki sounded bothered. “I've thought about it many times, but it's... never gotten anywhere. I haven't even... redecorated since I moved in.”

“It was like this when you moved in?”

“Yes. It was a furnished apartment, I'm afraid.”

“Huh...” That made sense. An awful lot of sense.

“I'm sorry it's not very... homey.”

“Hey, it's... it's fine...” Chrono was humored by the possibility that Ibuki had hesitated to take him home because his apartment was simply just too boring for words.

Down the hallway to the right, there were a number of doors. Ibuki appeared undisrupted as Chrono approached the first one, so after looking at him for approval, he opened it. He couldn't help but be curious, more so with the good mood he was in. The room was a little dark, and as Chrono reached to turn on the lights Ibuki became a little shifty. “It's just... my bedroom.”

It was somehow the least dull room in the apartment so far, with a few objects strain on the nightstand dresser and with a carpet under the bed. The windows were draped, unlike in the living room. The wall opposite the bed was lined with closets. The room wasn't very big, but more than spacious enough for the double bed it occupied. “Again, it's... it's more or less as it was when I moved in.”

“Well it's... a lot of closet space for one person.” Chrono decided not to say anything about the bed.

“I use... some of it, at least.”

“Unlike the kitchen?” Chrono asked, and while playful, he knew he was putting Ibuki on the spot. Ibuki had nothing to say in his defense. Chrono had reached for the handle on the closet door, and
again, Ibuki hadn't stopped him. It revealed itself to be surprisingly full. Ibuki had a large selection of
dresses, most of which were white, many others in light, muted colors. Light blue, faded violet, muted
pinks. Some carried simple patterns.

“Oh,” Chrono had spotted a single shirt, boldly colored, clearly standing out. He neatly pulled it out
on the hanger. “I don't think I've ever seen you wear this one.”

Chrono would have remembered it. “For a reason.” Ibuki mumbled bitterly.

Holding it up in front of him, Chrono mentally dressed Ibuki in the shirt. “It brings out your eyes.”

“Unfortunately.” The shirt was a deep red. Ibuki was clearly not very fond of it.

“I don't think it's so bad.” It was his honest opinion, and the expression Ibuki gave him was
unsurprised.

“I think it'd look better on you.” He replied quietly. It wasn't an all too serious notion, but Chrono
still turned the hanger over in his hand and approached it with that reasoning in mind.

“You think?”

“Yeah.” Not was a noncommittal enough a reply. “If you want, you could have it.”

“Really?” Chrono thought it looked like it had been relatively expensive. Then again, he didn't know
a lot about clothes.

“I'm not using it, anyhow. And I already have too many.”

“...I'll think about it.” Chrono admitted.

“Alright, then.” Ibuki let a smile slip.

Chrono wasn't about to rummage through each and all of Ibuki's closets. He wasn't that intent on
invading his privacy. The door across of the bedroom was the bath, and the second door to the left
was the water closet. Neither of these were very hard to figure out. However, there was one more
door in the hallway, on the same wall as the bath. Chrono had approached it without really thinking.
Before he touched the handle, Ibuki spoke to him. “That's, well-”

Chrono turned around to look at him. “Huh? What is it?”

Ibuki had closed in on him. “There's, not, well,” He looked displeased, but not with Chrono. “Much
of anything in there.”

“Like the rest of the place?” Chrono teased him, as he let the door swing open.

There was a distinct scent of dust. The room was dark, but from the double windows facing the
street, the warm yellow streetlight stretched the shadows into comprehensible shapes. Which was to
say, was indeed not much. Chrono looked at Ibuki, disdainfully, but not before he'd recognized
towers of moving boxes and an undressed single bed and a dismantled desk. It was less a room, and
more a project left unfinished to never be completed.

“Really?” Chrono mustered. He wasn't that surprised, once it had all dawned on him. If anything, he
was vaguely humored.

“I'm not…” Whatever Ibuki would say next, Chrono knew it would all be excuses. “I'm not using it,
and... I thought I should at least clean it out, but... I never...”
“But you never did. I can see that.” It was a little sad, honestly. “How long did you said you'd lived here?”

Ibuki had to think on that one for a moment. “About six years.”

“Now, doesn't that feel...” Oh, how should he put it. “Wasteful?”

“I---” Ibuki was about to retaliate. “I really intended to get it fixed up. I really did. But I didn't... know what I should even do with it. I... I have enough rooms, and even then I'm barely home as it is.”

“You could've made it into a study. Where you could work from home in peace.”

“I... never work from home. And if I do, I just sit in the kitchen.” To Chrono it sounded like more excuses.

“It could be a guest room, then.”

“I never bring people over.”

Chrono sighed. “Yeah, I can see why.” He looked inside the abandoned second bedroom again. “You'd bring people over more often if you had a place were people could feel comfortable, I'm sure.”

Ibuki raised his arm, resting it on the door frame. “I've never really... had anyone else over before.”

“No one?” Chrono asked, innocently baffled.

“No one.”

“I'm the first?”

Outside, a car carried on by, and the headlights reflected in the window glass of the skyscrapers all around, flickering like a wave across the room. Ibuki breathed lightly his response. “I'm afraid so.”

Ibuki's hair was soft to his touch, and Chrono kissed him slowly. It had been a bit of an awkward agreement, in the end, to go into the bedroom and shut the door behind them. They'd both understood they'd end up here. The anticipation had come and gone, building throughout the night, but rather than caving in a bout of passion, they'd awkwardly touched for a bit under the door frame before making a verbal agreement. It didn't matter, Chrono thought, sitting on the end of Ibuki's bed, feeling his hands carefully move in under his shirt and their lips moving against each other. They still couldn't get enough of kissing. He couldn't imagine it any other way. Patient, Chrono waited before he moved to kiss Ibuki's neck, before he slipped his hand into his lap, stroking the inside of his thigh. He heard Ibuki breathe, sharply inhaling in response, and it made his heart beat faster. They'd repeated these actions before, and yet there wasn't anything repetitive about it. Chrono had thought about it, regardless. It was a noteworthy that their conversation at dinner had left things to be desired, and yet here they still were, physical. Chrono had expected this to happen, it was a pattern at this point. Still, he had things on his mind.

Pulling away, Chrono felt Ibuki's eyes on him, watching him adoringly. It felt so good, it jumbled up his thoughts, making it hard to speak. “I... I was going to ask, if you... wanted to try something
different?"

As Ibuki absorbed the question, Chrono grew slightly restless. “I mean, only if you want to.”

Maybe it was too early to talk about this. Chrono wasn't surprised if he'd get a no for an answer. He was prepared for it. There was nothing wrong with what they'd done so far, but he wanted to give Ibuki options. He felt strongly that bringing it up was his responsibility. Beyond kissing, touching, Ibuki was still reserved, especially when it came to words.

“...Did you have anything in mind?” When Ibuki eventually spoke, his voice was breathless, ghastly quiet, and his eyes adverted.

Until now, they'd only ventured so far from the events of their first night together. Even if it was too early to expect anything else, Chrono thought it wasn't too early to have the conversation. He didn't want to assume what Ibuki wanted, even if the question now had effectively been thrown back at him. “I-I thought...” He could only be honest. “Maybe you wanted to, like, do me? Or, I mean...”

Perplexed, Ibuki turned his face away. A tension had struck his brow, and the slight twitch in his lip looked almost like a smile. Chrono wasn't sure if he'd imagined it. “Oh, I... don't know about that.” Ibuki spoke on a shallow breath.

“R-right... that's, that's fine.” It was fine, but Chrono knew he had to think of something to say next. It was like returning to basics in a way. As for why, it was fairly obvious, and unsurprising in and of itself.

“How about...” After a short moment of collecting himself and fiddling with the hem of Ibuki’s shirt, Chrono thought to speak another suggestion. “You let me... ride you? I'd, I mean, I'd... like that.”

He hoped that revealing his own desire would make Ibuki feel more invited to do so himself, rather than have him feel pressured into agreeing with something. Ibuki was thinking. He allowed himself to glance at Chrono once more, and Chrono thought he saw something shine behind his eyes. He felt his heart beat heavier, faster. “I'd... like that, too.”

“Alright... we'll try it, then.” Having suspected the answer, Chrono spoke without hesitation. He'd leaned in, their faces lightly touching.

“...Yeah.” As they kissed once more, Chrono pressed himself hard against Ibuki. As if it was at all possible for them to get much closer, he hooked his arm around his waist, holding him tightly. Ibuki accommodated, he let Chrono fit into his lap, never fighting the weight on top of him. Chrono moved against him, toppling him eventually. With his back against the covers, Ibuki caught his breath for a moment before Chrono leaned down slowly to kiss him. They reentered with a light kiss, but it was only light for so long.

As he raised his head, arms bracing against Ibuki’s body, an uncomfortable realization came upon Chrono. The stress hit him hard, accumulating quickly. “I, um...” He'd indeed agreed with himself to take things one step at a time. In reality, it was usually best to plan ahead. Ibuki had quickly picked up that something was wrong. Laying on his back defenselessly, he said nothing, his face flushing as the awkwardness caught up with him. “I might've forgotten that, um...”

Chrono inhaled, composing himself. He had gotten winded up. “You don't... have any condoms, do you?” As soon as he'd asked, before Ibuki could even react, Chrono knew it was a stupid question. There was no way he did. Even if Ibuki had foreseen this, there was no way he did. Perhaps the slimmest of chance still made the question worth it, even if only as a way to make the problem known.
Ibuki looked horrified. “I... I don’t.” His voice was stilted, but words fell out of him as if on reflex. He’d paled further, somehow. “I'm sorry.”

“That's, I mean,” Awkward, Chrono didn't want to minimize Ibuki's role in this situation, but that was also totally what he wanted. “I should've known better.”

Ibuki said nothing, but he didn't need to. Chrono saw how disappointed this development made him. Ibuki realized as much, but it was too late. “That's fine, I...”

Chrono rolled off of him, and scrambled to get up. “I'll, I'll... go out get some.” He'd become slightly manic in his desperation to fix the situation. “There's a convenience store down the street, right?” They'd passed it in the cab before. Corner stores in the city were open 24/7 with next to no exceptions.

Ibuki slowly pulled himself up to a sitting. “There is, but...” He was not quite in tune with him, but he didn't look like he was about to stop him, either.

Chrono tried to rationalize his actions. It was late, sure, but they hadn't even started taking their clothes off. “I'll, I'll be just a minute.”

Already making his way out the bedroom, towards the door, fumbling in the dark to find his jacket and shoes. With a click from further down the hall, Ibuki had turned the lights on. “Chrono?”

“Just--” Chrono threw his arms forward, gesturing for Ibuki to stay in place. “Wait here. I'll be back in a minute.”

It was no more than a few seconds later that Chrono slammed the door behind him. Unable to stop him, Ibuki had just stood in the hallway, still trying to digest the situation. Out in the street, in the dark of the night, Chrono walked briskly, rushing ahead while the thoughts in his head were reduced to nothing but continuous strings of curses. The convenience store was like a beacon of light in the dark of the night, and luckily he hadn't needed to rely much on his hazy memory from the cab ride to localize it. It sure would’ve been wonderful if he'd gotten lost on top of everything else.

Even at this hour, there were some people littered around. Chrono thought nothing of it, and had in fact quite successfully- if not unintentionally- shut out his surroundings. Perhaps that was why, once he was a single block away from the store, he didn't quite catch his name being called.

“Chrono!” Ibuki's voice rang out a second time, and in a daze, Chrono felt himself snap to attention. He stopped, and upon turning around, he saw Ibuki sprinting towards him at top speed. Floored at the sight, all he could do was stare.

Within seconds, Ibuki caught up to him. Chrono stood frozen as Ibuki tried to catch his breath, giving up on his pride and doubling over, reaching for the railing that lined the sidewalk. “...Are you okay?” Chrono asked him, utterly astonished.

“I'm fine.” Ibuki replied darkly, still panting, raising his face to reveal his steeled expression. Now, this was the Ibuki that Chrono knew; the Ibuki he knew from pressed, dire situations. “I thought... I should pay.” He explained, trying to recollect himself.

“That's fine.” Chrono hadn't considered it. It wasn't like it was a lot of money. “I got cash...”

“You, are not...” Ibuki sought his words, raising his hand to point at Chrono accusingly, his stance still wobbling. “Using the money your father gave you to...” Ibuki hadn't realized he would be unable to finish the sentence before it was too late. He clammed up, his face pale. Chrono felt bad for him, even if it was also pretty funny.
“I mean... if you insist...” He shrugged lightly. It wasn't worth arguing about, not when Ibuki was this upset.

“I'll buy it.” Ibuki said it quietly, but with a fair amount of resolve.

Chrono wasn't sure that was a good idea. “Can you?” He asked, earnestly.

“...I'll buy it.” Ibuki repeated. His eyes were now fixated sharply ahead. Not on Chrono, nor on the entrance to convenience store, but ahead. It wasn't very convincing.

“Alright...” Chrono wasn't about to tell him what he could and couldn't do. Normally, he wouldn't have hesitated to disagree. However, there are certain things in life that you have to figure out on your own.

Chrono stood waiting just outside the entrance, just far away enough not to trigger the automatic doors. As Ibuki stiffly made his way inside, Chrono felt a gust of the cool AC hit his face. He crossed his arms, and waited. Honestly, he was a little worried. Just a little though. The ideal would've been for the two of them to go in together, he thought, but he realized that merely suggesting it could potentially kill Ibuki on the spot from the stress alone.

A minute or so passed. Then, another. Chrono watched the people pass, but no other people entered or exited the convenience store. Eventually, Ibuki came out. Slowly, he walked out, one step at a time. Chrono looked at him unassumingly. With strengthened resolve and a strained, sharp look in his eye, Ibuki raised his arm slowly. He held a card up against Chrono's chest. “It's 7219,” He said, sharply. “If they ask you to sign, just do.”

Before anything else, Chrono did a double take. “...This is a credit card.”

Not debit. Credit.

Fixing his posture and standing up at his full height, Ibuki looked down at him. “Just use it.” He said darkly.

Chrono would have argued against him on any other occasion. Using a credit card for a convenience store purchase under one thousand yen was ludicrous. The need to point it out quickly melted away. Ibuki was in no condition to argue. Chrono took the card from him. As he did, Ibuki looked vaguely guilty, if not ashamed.

“Just... stay here.” As Chrono approached the doors, they opened with a jingle going off. Ibuki had rigidly positioned himself off on the side, by the recycle station. He nodded, trying his best not to appear distraught. “I won't be long.” Chrono reassured him. It had a minor effect. Ibuki let his arms fall to his sides, but the cold sweat remained on his brow.

Without raising her head, the woman behind the counter welcomed him. Nothing strange about that, but a lady at the counter most likely hadn't helped Ibuki's nerves much. Chrono had entered a calm kind of focus, no doubt to contrast Ibuki's state, and he aimed to casually navigate the aisles to find what he was looking for. Passing the small frozen food section, Chrono suddenly realized something.

As the doors slid open and the chime sounded once more, Ibuki whipped his head up violently, an expectancy nervous look in his eye. “Do you, uh,” Ibuki's expression was frozen in terror despite Chrono's calm tone. “Want ice cream?”
It was slightly cool outside, a nice temperature. In the end, they'd gone for the same coffee ice cream with dark chocolate covering. Ibuki had recovered from the worst of his shock. “Why,” He said, quietly, holding his breath. “Are there so many different kinds?”

Chrono gave it a thought, but ended up shrugging. “I dunno. I guess different people have different preferences. I mean I haven't really, you know... tried much of any out.”

Ibuki bit into his ice cream with a distant, hardened look in his eye. “I see.” He replied, eventually. “I mean... I doubt there's that much difference. Or if there is, then I've never heard much about it.” Chrono bit into his ice cream, too. Ibuki had taken their purchase and stored it in his inner pocket. Chrono had planned to apologize, but frankly, he didn't feel very bad. The rush appeared to have mostly settled. Whatever obstacles they'd face here on tonight, they felt a lot less daunting.

“I hope you didn't mind an evening walk.” Chrono realized his mistake. “Or run.”

Ibuki sighed. “It's certainly a way to clear your mind, I suppose.”

Chrono found an opening to tease him. For a moment he considered letting it pass him by, but wouldn't it be a waste? “...Hopefully you still have some steam left in you.”

In truth, Ibuki had always been pretty easy to get a reaction out of, despite the stoic image many had of him. Ibuki hacked as he almost choked on his ice cream. Turning away, he failed to response, but when Chrono slid in under his arm he didn't shy away. They were just a block away from home, and no one was around.

Back in the bedroom it felt as if something had changed. Something had lifted, and it was easier to speak to one another. Things had dragged on but they were still patient, a little fumbling, with no sense of urgency. After they'd kissed and touched awkwardly, and then less awkwardly, Chrono excused him to browse Ibuki's toiletries cabinet in the washroom. He was content with what he discovered, if not baffled. Ibuki actually had what he needed. It would've been awkward to come this far without realizing that, but Chrono was more preoccupied with how this additional information changed his perspective of Ibuki as a person. He didn't want to draw too many conclusions, but it sufficed to say that maybe he was a little less clueless than expected. One might argue that it didn't quite fit, that it was contradictory. Chrono knew better than to assume. Ibuki had the same needs as anyone else, and it was a private matter.

Before making it back into the bedroom, Chrono had relieved himself of his pants, but not much else. Beyond the door, Ibuki sat pensively at the end of the bed, still fully clothed. As Chrono came in, he snapped to attention.

Sitting in Ibuki's lap, Chrono felt his arms press him down as Ibuki reached to kiss him. Ibuki held him tightly, tighter than before, and Chrono savored it. Maybe, if he stopped to think, he would realize how tired he was and how late it had become, but as long as they kissed and touched, as long as the adrenaline kept him going, Chrono knew that wouldn't happen. This time when Ibuki laid back on the bed, he took Chrono with him. With their bodies coming together with a thump, Chrono struggled to find any point of support, and below him Ibuki had been smothered. Laying together on the edge of the bed proved to be impossibly uncomfortable. With Ibuki's arms still laid around him, Chrono had no choice but try and wiggle away and slip off him. Ibuki, now frustrated, pulled himself up as soon as Chrono's weight was off him. Chrono watched him lay down in bed with a smile on
his face. Ibuki wouldn't have that, and as soon as Chrono drew a bit closer he grabbed him and pulled him close. Chrono touched his face and neck, pushing aside his hair. It always made Ibuki so bashful, and Chrono enjoyed it more than he could say.

Unable to bear Chrono's gaze on him much longer, Ibuki pulled him into another kiss. Ibuki's lips were hot with the heat that'd risen to his face, and with his lips parting he pressed up against Chrono invitingly. They'd already kissed so much tonight. A slow, savory kiss only felt tolerable for so long. The intensity was building between them, rising from below the surface. Chrono soon pressed himself down on top of Ibuki again, and between their wild, messy kisses, he could feel Ibuki's panting against his face. Now, they could both clearly feel the effect of the friction between them. Chrono moved his hips, struggling to hold back. Below him, he felt Ibuki's chest rise and sink faster, and as he kissed his neck he felt his hot breath against his ear. The quiet moan that soon left him would've otherwise been impossible to hear, and Chrono became more focused as he could feel Ibuki getting more and more excited. Chrono was already aware of his tendency to push Ibuki around. He enjoyed it a bit too much. Tonight though, he wanted to go easy on him if he could. Things would yet again be new for him, after all.

When Chrono tried to pull away to speak, Ibuki wouldn't quite let him. With his arms hooked around his neck, he pressed their lips together again. Surprised by his eagerness, Chrono at first struggled a little to return the deep kiss. He was already engrossed with Ibuki's touch, his scent, his taste, and the softness of his skin. Getting distracted was so ridiculously easy. As a result they lost another few long minutes to the sensations of kissing, and touching each other through the fabric of their clothes.

Chrono eventually pulled himself up. His heart was beating hard and fast, and below him he saw Ibuki struggling to control his breathing while trying to compose himself. Chrono wondered about the possibility of him trying to buy time to brace. Chrono stared at him, admiring him, and while Ibuki quickly grew restless, Chrono didn't look away. Ibuki's hand had slid off him, laying on the mattress. Chrono took it, gently, letting his fingers touch the inside of his upturned palm. They were still connected by the hip, and though the heat between them was intense, the touch of their hands felt more intimate than anything else. It was too much, and Ibuki turned away, closing his eyes.

“You can always change your mind, you know?” Chrono asked him, leaning down just a little. He was still gently holding Ibuki's hand.

“I haven't.” Still turned away, Ibuki spoke with a quiet sort of confidence that left Chrono a little surprised.

“Well, you never know...” Chrono replied, wanting to be as forgiving as possible. “I mean, I gotta ask. I don't want you to feel obliged to do anything just because you said yes before.”

Ibuki seemed bothered by this. Or, perhaps it was more accurate to say he was embarrassed. Chrono wasn't about to skip having this talk, and they both knew it. “I...” Ibuki struggled to speak. He knew he had to say something. “I'd let you know. If that was the case.”

Chrono leaned down to kiss him lightly. As he did, his body weight shifted. His hips pressed down against Ibuki's harder, and Chrono heard him tremble as he inhaled sharply. With his other hand sliding in under Ibuki's shirt, Chrono spoke with his lips brushing against his skin. “Do you wanna get started, then?”

Under his touch and at the sound of his words, Chrono felt Ibuki shift and turn his face away once more. Chrono feared for a second that maybe he had been too forward. He hadn't intended to be, but he had become caught up in his own feelings. When Ibuki spoke, rather than clamping up, Chrono felt relieved. “Yeah,” His voice sounded rich with his swelling feelings. “I do.”
With Ibuki's shirt riding up on his torso, Chrono touched him, running his hand down his side and across his stomach. Ibuki shivered, but gave in to the feeling, freely sounding how good it made him feel. Chrono thought that there was little reason left to keep teasing him. Ibuki had been touching him too, and was now more insistently interested in Chrono's lower back than before. Despite his increasing boldness, he only managed so much. Chrono knew it was up to him to start. Using both his hands, Ibuki's pants came undone easily. Chrono slid them down just past his hips, before deciding it was best to get rid of them entirely. Ibuki helped, though his hands trembled. Returning to sit on Ibuki's lap, Chrono touched him gently through the fabric. They'd done this sort of thing before. It wasn't all that new. And yet, the anticipation in and of itself changed everything.

Rising up on his knees, Chrono meant to peel off his shorts down on one leg. As he struggled a little with it, Ibuki came to a sitting under him. A little startled, Chrono looked up at him. As their eyes met, Ibuki looked at him expectantly. The look in his eye was so serious, it made Chrono smile, warmth welling up inside him. As Ibuki held him steady, Chrono easily made away with his undressing. He'd already made himself ready in the bathroom before. He'd considered doing it in bed, with Ibuki there, but he feared it would only further complicate their already dragged out evening. In reality, he was embarrassed to do it as well. He thought he'd gotten used to this sort of thing, and indeed he had, but with Ibuki he couldn't help but feel more vulnerable.

Ibuki's abdomen was warm when Chrono felt his now-bare flesh press against him. It made them both exhale with a sigh, and Chrono felt Ibuki brush his lips against his face, his neck, lightly. Somehow, it already felt like they were closer than ever before. Slowly, they kissed, and as they did, Chrono reached to pull at Ibuki's shorts. He could still feel the heat of his skin through the fabric, but again it was a little difficult to undress. Ibuki's hands slid off Chrono's body, and as he lifted himself up to slide out of his underwear, Chrono held onto his shoulders. As Chrono came back down, he felt Ibuki breathing heavier against his neck. Chrono felt caught up in it too, and realized he was already dizzy. He felt his lips tremble and his mouth water as he imagined the sensation to come. He realized he was a little nervous, as excited as he was. Hopefully, he thought, hopefully, Ibuki wouldn't be able to tell.

Brushing against each other felt good. Ibuki sought to kiss Chrono again, but he was clearly distracted, and the kiss didn't last for very long. They were both ready to move on, and in the dimly lit room, Chrono reached for the nightstand. Ibuki had left the packaging there, unopened. Sliding down to sit on Ibuki's exposed thighs, Chrono struggled to get the plastic cover off.

"I... probably should've opened that." Chrono had hardly ever in his life heard Ibuki speak so quietly.

"I-It's fine." He said, still struggling a little. As he did get it open, he put it aside. Getting the singular packaging open was much easier. Leaning in to lightly kiss Ibuki as his hands traveled up his thigh, Chrono found that the slight delay hadn't appeared to affect him. Chrono had seen him nude from the waist down a number of times already, but touching that smooth, hot flesh still made him feel so very tender. Ibuki pressed his face against Chrono's neck, and Chrono heard him swallow with anticipation. The rubber was cool, but it would absorb body heat quickly. When Chrono lifted himself up with his arms over Ibuki's shoulders, Ibuki steadied him with his hand on his hip. Their eyes happened to meet just as Chrono's hand touched Ibuki through the thin layer of rubber. With a quiet gasp on his breath, Ibuki closed his eyes.

"Are you okay?" Chrono whispered, and Ibuki nodded shortly.

"I'm fine." He replied, the quiver in his voice betraying him slightly.

With a reminder to himself to relax, Chrono guided himself as he lowered himself down, pressing close to Ibuki as he did. The hand that held his side was gripping him even tighter than before.
Feeling the first connection finally, Chrono's heart fluttered. Ibuki inhaled slowly, and without thinking, Chrono did as well. All it took was a little pressure. A notion of a moan left Ibuki, his face still buried in Chrono's neck. Suddenly impatient, Chrono could only think about how he wanted to go deeper. All this work, and this was still just the beginning. Sliding down slowly, he only became more eager. It was exciting, and yet, comforting. Chrono wondered if Ibuki felt the same.

While fighting the urge to slide down to the base, Chrono still held onto Ibuki for support. “I'm gonna move a bit, okay?” His voice came out breathier than he'd thought, and he felt his nerves stir up.

“So...” Ibuki replied, the anticipation clear in his voice.

Steadying himself, Chrono found his balance to move, only using his hips. He moved slow, and allowed himself fairly little to work with. Rubbing up against Ibuki felt so good too, with the situation in itself arousing him than the sensation. Chrono raised his hand to Ibuki's face, hoping to kiss him gently, but it was hard. Hard, because Chrono moved, and hard because they could only focus on so many things at once. Regardless, Chrono loved to watch him. Ibuki did manage to return his gaze, even if not for long. Under his disheveled bangs there was a strangely focused look in his eye, one he was struggling to uphold. Chrono thought it was so cute, he couldn't keep the smile off his face.

Caving in, Chrono slid down further, moving faster with longer strokes. He could feel it now; he could really feel it. It was hard to hold back, and as the slowly building heat became a raw searing feeling, he slipped up. He groaned against Ibuki's lips, and together they made another attempt at a kiss. Feeling Ibuki's tongue in his mouth only made it harder to hold back. Pulling away, panting, Chrono wondered if he should ask for permission to go faster yet again. Just as the thought floated into his mind, he felt Ibuki press the two of them together tight with his arm looping around his body. Pressing his face against Chrono's neck, Ibuki rested his head against his shoulder. Chrono felt Ibuki lean into him as he came unwound in their embrace. He was breathing more freely than before, giving into the sensation. Running his hand through Ibuki's hair, Chrono felt accomplished. To think that he was able to make Ibuki feel good, to make him feel comfortable and safe enough to truly enjoy himself, that was what made him happier than anything. To hear his voice bleed through into his labored breathing, to hear his light moans on every breath, oh, that was enough to drive him crazy.

Chrono decided he was at liberty to move on to the next step. “Hold on...” The words left him on an exhale, perhaps a bit more urgently than he'd intended. Without question, Ibuki pulled away a bit.

Coming to a stop, Chrono cast his eyes downwards as of by reflex. Slowly, he slid down to a sitting, feeling the hot skin of Ibuki's thighs against his own. They'd come together, fully. To Chrono, it felt like a perfect fit. Oh, how satisfying. A sigh left him, and he relaxed, but before he could think much else, they were kissing again. Unmoving, there was less keeping them distracted, despite the searing heat. They kissed each other forcefully, making up for their past, flimsy kisses. However, Chrono could only bear to stay still for so long. Before they parted, he was moving again. Shorter strokes, but faster, using Ibuki's full length. Working from the base, there was that distinct sound of skin against skin. It caught up with him, and Chrono stopped. He'd quickly tired. He'd been a bit too greedy.

As he did, Ibuki pulled away a little bit. “Can you move?” He asked, quietly, sincerely.

“You...I...I can...” He wanted to do nothing but. Chrono moved his hand to Ibuki's hip to steady himself. “If I could brace against you, it'd be easier...”

Chrono thought of how he usually preferred to do this. “Maybe you could... lay back down for a
bit?"

Without really responding, Ibuki leaned back, raising his knees up slightly behind Chrono's back. It was a little awkward once more, and Chrono rose a bit to accommodate. Once Ibuki laid down on his back, Chrono felt himself sliding into place. Leaning forward just a bit, he arched his back as his hands found Ibuki's sides. Now, he didn't waste any time to move. He'd longed for this. Even now, hearing the sound of the bed below them, the sound of them moving against one another, was enough to make him blush. The searing feeling built, passing through him like a wave, making it harder and harder to think. He couldn't kiss Ibuki, not like this, but he could watch him, which he did, unable to turn his eyes away. To him, it was the most enticing part of all. While staring might make him feel self-conscious, he couldn't help it. He'd dreamed of making love to Ibuki, but there was little point in it if he couldn't watch him, or see his face. With his breath heavy, Ibuki had let his eyes slide lightly shut. With Chrono moving on top of him, his hair had quickly become a mess, but Chrono thought he seemed more relaxed, more engaged and in touch with him. He'd come to generously respond to Chrono's movements, with his voice, with his expression. Curiously, Chrono wondered how much longer he would last.

Shyly, Ibuki's eyes did slide open. His gaze adverted, he appeared to slowly build the courage he needed to meet Chrono's eyes. The eye-contact between them felt raw, intimate, fueling the pleasure Chrono felt pass through him with a shiver; enhanced when he saw his feelings reflected on Ibuki's face. Chrono saw Ibuki watch him, his eyes slowly passing over his face, his body, with his lips moving, opening. Brimming with even more excitement, and wanting to reward his boldness, Chrono pushed himself, moving faster. Below him, Ibuki shuddered, and as his eyes slid shut, his body tensed into a stretch, and as he thrust his hips upwards, a moan loudly passing through his lips. Panting heavily, Chrono did not stop or slow down. This would be it. It had to be. A smile came onto his face as he continued to watch Ibuki, who threw his head back as another moan left him. Chrono heard himself do it too, the heat getting to him more and more. On a breath, with his eyes tightly shut, he heard Ibuki call out to him. "Chrono,"

As the sound registered to him, Chrono felt wondrous, ecstatic. He hadn't thought Ibuki was capable of any such thing. It felt like a dream, yet so real, it was overwhelming. With his lips trembling, Chrono's mind appeared to slip away from him. He'd been pushed over the edge. He was so close now, too. So close, although Chrono knew he wouldn't make it.

"Chrono, I..." Ibuki called out to him once more, his voice weak. "I, I'm..." Though he struggled, he lost his words.

Chrono leaned in to speak to him gently. "Are you coming?"

"Y-yeah," He appeared almost relieved to admit to it. Chrono fed on his anticipation, moving tirelessly. Within a moment, he heard Ibuki groan, his body jerking upwards, rising inside him, before exhaling with a sigh and falling back on the mattress.

Chrono came to a stop. He touched Ibuki's face, and Ibuki in turn placed his hand on top of his, his eyes closed. They both struggled to catch their breath, together. Though his mind was still buzzing and his body still so hot, Chrono felt at peace. After Ibuki had managed to collect himself somewhat, Chrono lifted himself off him proper. Carefully, he used his hand to keep the condom in place before he could take it off without making a mess. Ibuki let him do it, simply watching him uneasily. Sliding off to the side, Chrono cast his eyes on the nightstand, and found that he didn't have a lot of options. He didn't want to leave the bed, so after tying it up he put it on top of the package it had come in. It would have to do. As he laid back down, Ibuki's hand came to his waist as he pulled Chrono into a kiss. It started soft, but as Ibuki pressed against him harder, pushing him over, Chrono became
startled and they pulled away.

Just above him, Ibuki stared at him hard. He looked a bit troubled. Chrono could only assume there was something on his mind. “I... I thought... since, you didn't...”

Oh. “D-don't worry about it?” Ibuki’s nerves rubbing off on him, Chrono caught himself stammering a little. Though as soon he’d said those words, Chrono realized it could be a bit patronizing. “But, I mean... if you wanna try something...”

Ibuki had yet to be much of an active part of the sex they had. Chrono hadn't thought much of it, but realized now that Ibuki had probably become frustrated. “You don't have to.” Chrono adverted his eyes. “But if you want to, then...”

“I want to.” His voice was quieter, but his response came without hesitation. “Like... you do it for me.”

Chrono hadn’t really thought about it, but now that he had, he felt strangely on edge. “Alright.” He spoke on a breath. “Sure.”

Chrono let Ibuki kiss him again. Chrono thought he’d already passed his most ecstatic state tonight, but with Ibuki's full weight on top of him, pressing down against him hard, he felt a deep, almost primal yearning rise quietly like a whisper from his gut. When they parted, Chrono was a little dizzy, and forgot for a moment that they hadn’t really settled on anything specific. So when Ibuki moved down to kiss his stomach, then his abdomen, he was surprised by it. “Hey, um, you could just...” Ibuki had stopped to look at him, and Chrono regretted his clumsy wording a bit too late. “Jerk me off or something, you know?”

Chrono saw Ibuki advert his eyes in silence, his mouth pressed tightly shut, a stubborn look on his face. “I-I mean... it's up to you. But, uh...” Oh, how did you casually tell someone that oral sex is actually pretty hard to pull off if you haven't tried it before and that you should probably start with something else without sounding patronizing and/or completely ruining the mood? “Let me try.” He muttered, somehow understanding the implication. At least, to an extent.

“Okay.” Chrono decided to drop it. It was not worth getting worked up over, it would only make Ibuki more anxious and insecure.

With his face pressed against Chrono's skin, Ibuki breathed in his scent quietly. He took his time, kissing him very lightly, as if treading gently forward. Chrono became calm. He was patient, and surely, he would need to be. Feeling Ibuki’s lips so faintly on his skin was ticklish, but pleasant and comforting. He laid his hand down gently on Ibuki's head as to not startle him, and played with his hair. Ibuki glanced up at him, and became a little flustered when he realized Chrono had been watching him this entire time. Without a word, Ibuki shut his eyes, and kissed him harder. Chrono could always feel the heat of Ibuki's skin the way he laid on top of him, but as he moved lower he felt the anticipation building slowly. Chrono was calm, but he'd grown curious. When Ibuki kissed the inside of his thigh, he sighed and made sure to move and open his legs a bit further.

Ibuki raised his head, and Chrono could feel the softness of his hair brush against his skin. Chrono watched him, and in turn, Ibuki had his eyes fixed downward in a confounded stare. He looked like he'd only just now realized he wasn't sure exactly what to do. He leaned in slowly, pressing his lips lightly against the tip. Chrono felt his warm lips, with the slightest hint of tongue, and it was no more than a light tickle. Chrono felt only a notion of movement under his hand. Ibuki pulled back, and as if making a reassessment, he went in again. This time, Chrono clearly felt the passage through his lips. He pushed further down, but didn't get very far before reverting the motion, slowly. Leaving a
residue of heat and saliva, he'd pulled away, the expression on his face intently concentrated. Chrono felt his breath on his skin, a sensation he knew he wouldn't soon forget, much less so in combination with the endearing look on his face. Clearly thinking hard, Ibuki tried again, leaning in to apply some pressure with his tongue, followed by his lips. Gently, he sucked the tip, and Chrono felt the sensation accumulate into a light sort of smoldering pleasure. Pulling back, Ibuki expression had grown from concentrated to frustrated. His eyes flickered upward, catching Chrono just as he'd smiled at the absurdity of the situation. It was not well received. Clearly hurt and humiliated, Ibuki turned his face away.

“I'm sorry?” Chrono's first instinct was to apologize, though he feared it wouldn't sound genuine enough. “Look, I don't mean anything by it, it's just...”

In truth, Chrono thought it was downright adorable. He couldn't tell Ibuki that; surely he'd just be upset rather than flattered. Ibuki had nowhere to hide his face, nor the frustration displayed upon it. Chrono stroke his hair. “It feels good, okay?” Chrono reassured him, thought the outright statement seemed to embarrass him, as if it needed to be said. Chrono knew what it felt like, and yet, working around it proved to be hard.

In the end, rather than keeping it vague, more hands-on tips were more useful. “It felt good, that last thing you did... but you don't have to be... quite so, um, careful?” Chrono cast his eyes aside for a bit. He couldn't help but blush, and Ibuki surely needed the breathing room. “Though, I mean, the light stuff also feels good... and, you can use your hands too, you know?”

Ibuki was listening. He wasn't shutting him out, despite how distressed he'd been. “I mean, it's pretty hard you know, to finish a guy off with just your mouth...” He hoped to put it all into a greater context.

“Though if you want, we could do something else?” Chrono suspected what the answer would be. Ibuki was stubborn. Still, he was subjectable under the right circumstances.

“That's fine.” Ibuki replied quietly. He was regaining some focus. “I'll try again.”

“Alright.” Chrono spoke to him gently. “Don't... push it though.”

With less hesitation, Ibuki lowered his head again. He appeared a little more relaxed, but Chrono recognized the determination on his face, just like he could feel the heat of his lips. With more investment, more boldness, Ibuki applied pressure and a light sigh passed through Chrono's lips. Ibuki moved slowly, not taking Chrono very deep, but sucking harder than before. Chrono watched him, mesmerized by the tension on his brow and the focused look on his face. Feeling Ibuki's hand on his leg, Chrono moved again, exposing his inner thigh. Ibuki took the hint, and stroke him firmly, noting the slight tremor just below the skin.

“That's good...” Chrono let the words slip past his lips. He owed it Ibuki. He wanted to give him some confidence. Chrono let his eyes slide shut for a short moment, relaxing into the sensation. It was light, soothing, enticing. He wouldn't at all mind staying just like this, just to seep up this feeling. It felt like a waste to let it grow into something else just yet.

Feeling Ibuki pull back, the warm fingers of his hand curling around him, Chrono opened his eyes. Ibuki had glanced up at him then, just as he'd started slowly stroking him. This time, things seemed to fit. Even as he made himself vulnerable, Ibuki powered through it. Chrono smiled. He couldn't help it. He moved his hand to comb it through Ibuki's hair, holding it back from his face. Ibuki was blushing, and it was surely for more than one reason. Their tender eye contact lasted for a moment, before Ibuki looked away, closing his eyes. Chrono was still riding the slow rolling waves of the sensation when Ibuki went down on him again, as he continued to stroke him with building
confidence. When he started going faster, it felt somehow sudden. Chrono had never stopped watching him, and now he could feel the heat slowly rising to his head. He hadn't realized how he'd started gripping Ibuki's hair tighter. Sighing, he released some of the building tension, allowing his breathing to become a bit more rugged.

Ibuki appeared to notice, and did not stop. He took Chrono's feedback, and let it lead him along. With his grip tightening, Ibuki struck him faster. Chrono let a moan slip before he could detect it. Oh, that felt good. Indeed, Ibuki could tell. Without pulling back, he'd thrown a glance at Chrono's face. Their eyes only met briefly this time, but Chrono felt his face burn. In the moment that passed, he felt himself slip away. When he realized, it was already too late. Chrono was weaker to Ibuki's touch than he'd realized. Despite his slow start, Ibuki had become fairly bold. As he watched him, Chrono dizzily wondered exactly how much Ibuki had been paying attention to when he had touched him in the past. Probably more than he'd realized. The thought alone was exhilarating. With building friction, and the constant warmth of Ibuki's mouth and lips, Chrono felt himself cross the threshold. Lightheaded, the sensation washed over him, and as it did, it hit him hard. He was close again now. It'd happened sooner than he'd thought. Ibuki was going to make him come. That had never happened before, not like this. The realization shattered his clouded mind, and through the searing pleasure he felt a dissonant, scrambling panic surge from the back of his mind. It was too late now. He couldn't stop now. He didn't want stop. He didn't want to, but he felt himself lose control. The unpredictability that came with losing the soundness of his mind to the overwhelming sensation scared him.

“I, I'm coming.” Quietly, breathlessly, he spoke. It would have to do. With his approaching climax hitting him fast and hard, Chrono grit his teeth, bit his lip, and held his breath, effectively strangling any sound.

It passed, shaking his body with a shudder. It'd been a long time since he'd felt anything like it. In the end, he'd squeezed his eyes shut, still envisioning Ibuki's face, letting his name pass through his mind. Quickly, then slowly, it faded away. Chrono allowed himself to breathe again. His grip fastened in Ibuki's hair had loosened, and rising slowly, he registered the sound of Ibuki trying to strangle a cough. Too caught up in his own sensation, Chrono hadn't realized that until just now, Ibuki hadn't pulled away.

In his lap, Ibuki had his lips tightly shut and his eyes adverted. Still a bit disoriented, Chrono regardless sighed tiredly. “Here, come on.” He tried to goad him, grabbing a tissue from the nightstand. “Spit it out.” With his hand coming to Ibuki's mouth he most uncomfortably felt like he was dealing with a disobeying pet.

Ibuki decided they were not doing that, and grabbed the tissue from Chrono's hand himself. With a bit of a grimace, he pressed it against his mouth, and Chrono heard him cough weakly. “Sorry,” Chrono said quietly as Ibuki steadied himself a bit. “You really don't have to do that, you know?”

Ibuki folded the tissue up. “I know.” He replied weakly.

Chrono watched him, stroke his hair. He leaned in to kiss his face. “It was good, though.” He whispered, and Ibuki sat still, letting Chrono put his arms around him. “It felt really good.”

Ibuki didn't respond, putting his head on Chrono's shoulder. Chrono didn't really expect him to. It didn't matter. What mattered was that he knew. Chrono wanted to kiss him again, proper, and Ibuki let him. The distinct aftertaste was familiar, and it gave him a rush. In his empty, tired mind, it was impossible for him to articulate, but sharing this with Ibuki was so special. The body heat they'd amassed and shared was still so hot between them, and yet they didn't part. Laying down in bed, the sheets felt comparatively cool. On his side, Chrono pulled closed to Ibuki, but when he put his arm
around him again, Ibuki pushed his arm away. He thought it strange, but before he could wonder, Ibuki pressed against him. Chrono got the hint, and while on his back, he let Ibuki put his head on his chest. Embracing him tightly, they laid in silence.

Chrono wondered if he should say something more, but as the words slipped away from him he lost sight of anything meaningful to say. The long hours had finally caught up with him. He was tired. He waited for sleep to come, listening to Ibuki’s breathing, and realized he was still awake. Chrono laid his hand on his head, and Ibuki moved a bit. Ibuki breathed a deep, shaky breath, tension passing through him. A chill pierced through Chrono's tired body. Opening his eyes in the dark, he stroke Ibuki's hair gently. It was the fatigue, surely. It was making him paranoid. It made him fear even the vaguest notion of unrest. They'd had a great time tonight. They had, even if things had been awkward, even if they'd had their detours. Even if they hadn't been able to conclude much of anything.

Laying awake as night turned into early morning, Chrono held Ibuki tighter in his arms. He appeared to fall asleep eventually. Chrono worried, but managed to find solace in a promise made to himself. They would talk more soon. They would sort it all out, whatever it was. Surely, there was nothing to worry about. Surely, they both just needed some more time. Surely... everything was going to be alright.
Chapter 9

The usual drive from work didn't require that much focus. It wasn't very late just yet, so he'd managed to avoid the worst of the commuter traffic. Ibuki kept a glance on his phone, which laid somewhat precariously on the dashboard. Chrono wasn't the type to make last minute plan changes if he could help it, but Ibuki was absolutely the type who wanted to know as soon as possible if anything like it happened. In the end, he had gone to Kanagawa while Mikuru had still been staying in Tokyo. She'd only stuck around for two nights before leaving to go back abroad. She had unfinished business and had left the move in the hands of her people in town. Ibuki had spoken to her on multiple occasions about it regardless. Perhaps that was her way of showing gratitude, dealing with him in person instead of delegating the work to someone else. Ibuki appreciated it.

It was another Friday night. It was a little astounding how much could happen in such a short time, but Ibuki welcomed it. Well, most of it. Despite everything, he liked eventful days. Work was always eventful. Now, he had more things to do, more things to look forward to. It made the days longer, and the weeks did not seem to fade from his memory as fast. Nor did they seem to just zip him by and leave him wondering why he'd failed to make use of his time to improve his quality of life. Now, he could never say he wasn't trying. Six months ago, he would've thought that it was all thanks to Chrono. Now he knew better. He knew to recognize his own effort, even when it seemed like he was stuck in one spot.

TU wasn't far from where he worked, but the roads were somewhat finicky. Coming up on the road to the gate, Ibuki kept a close eye on the sidewalk. Chrono was supposed to be waiting for him here. He indeed spotted him, by the gate as promised. However, he was not alone. It shouldn't be so strange, all things considered, but it still took Ibuki a second to register Aichi's presence. When he pulled up, Chrono had already seen him. As they approached, he rolled down the windshield.

“Oh, hello!” Aichi greeted him cheerfully. “It's been too long!”

It had, more or less. Ibuki smiled. “Indeed. Kai said you were out of the country, but I see you're home. I take it you're well?”

“Oh, yes, I'm fine. A little busy, but otherwise fine.”

“It sounded like it.” These days, Aichi was busier than Kai was, thought it was easy to be misled. Kai always spoke more about Aichi than he did himself.

“It's good to see you! I just happened to run into Chrono, and he mentioned you'd be picking him up. Are you going out?” Aichi's had been an innocent question. How he'd phrased it bothered Ibuki more than it should.

“We haven't really... made plans.” Chrono interjected. In reality, they were just going to head to Ibuki's place for a night in. “And hey. You're pretty early.”

“Traffic wasn't too bad.” Ibuki explained. “Luckily.”
“So... you're not going anywhere in particular?” Aichi asked. It was a leading question. Ibuki was suddenly nervous.

“Not really, no...” Chrono replied. Surely he'd noticed as well, but he was too kind to play around it.

Aichi glanced at his phone. “I was just about to head out to meet up with Kai. We're having dinner with Miwa and Kamui. Oh, and Misaki's gonna be there too, I think... if she could manage to get away from work.”

“Oh. I see...” The old gang. The old gang that Ibuki was not quite part of.

“Do you wanna come?” Aichi wasted no further time to ask.

“I... I'd love to.” Chrono had hesitated only to glance at Ibuki. While somewhat hesitant- only because this wasn't what he'd had in mind for tonight- Ibuki didn't actually consider saying no.

“Sure. Why not?”

Aichi clapped his hands together. “That's great! I'll let the others know!”

“Do you need a ride?” Chrono asked, before Aichi could start fiddling with his phone.

“Kai was gonna pick me up, but I guess I'll just let him know I don't need it.” Aichi reached for the backseat car door. He wasn't bold enough to assume a place in the front seat. Glancing in the rear mirror, Ibuki saw Chrono do the same and close the door behind him.

“This is gonna be so much fun...” Aichi appeared excited. He'd been abroad for a while, certainly he was looking forward to seeing all his friends again.

“Could you give me the address to the restaurant?” Ibuki asked. He was parked in a bit of an awkward spot, and Aichi was a little distracted.

“Sure, hang on...”

It was some ways to go. Aichi rang Kai up right there after. In the front seat, Ibuki could hear Kai's deep voice on the other end, a distinct and slightly confused murmur. Kai was not exactly the most spontaneous person on earth, but he usually warmed up to any such ideas his friends might have. Ibuki did always enjoy seeing him.

Once he hung up, everything seemed perfectly settled. “We'll be there a bit early, but that shouldn't be a problem. I'll text the others and let them know...”

When Ibuki cast a glance at Aichi through the rear view mirror, he was still smiling to himself. “We made plans a bit last minute, but hopefully everyone can make it.”

“I'm sure they will.” Chrono reassured him.

“I hope so.” Aichi sounded preoccupied rather than worried. “I'm lucky I ran into you two, though. And like this! What a coincidence.”

“I mean, we do see each other around at campus sometimes.” Chrono said, and Ibuki knew it was true.

“We do. But I don't get to run into Ibuki quite as often, do I?” Aichi's response was lighthearted. It was fairly obvious what he'd implied. Ibuki wondered if he should say something.
“I’ve been planning to get in touch... but this time of the year is quite hectic I'm afraid.”

“Oh, I know.” Aichi sympathized. “Kai said you were on TV.”

“Oh, he was.” Chrono sounded vaguely smug, and Ibuki frankly, did not care for it.

“It's the same as always, every year. Nothing special.”

“I don't think I could ever do that. I'd be so nervous!” It was a scenario easy to imagine.

“Ibuki gets pretty nervous too. He's just good at hiding it.” Chrono's smile was more a smirk. Aichi laughed. Ibuki still dared to look forward to the night he had ahead of him.

They had a table at Japanese-styled restaurant. Somewhat old-fashioned, perhaps rustic was the word. They were seated by a sitting table in smaller lounge that was one of many. There was a bar though, and unlike most restaurants of this type, orders weren't made electronically. Just as they were seated, Aichi ordered some spirits. Chrono got something lighter, but still alcoholic. Ibuki had to remind them he was driving. An order of sides each on top of that, and they chatted as they waited. Kai was first to arrive, struggling to locate them with a befuddled look on his face until Aichi called out to him. They greeted each other affectionately, but in the end it was only a hug. It always was. Kamui came in soon thereafter. It turned out that he and Chrono hadn't seen each other in a pretty long time. Despite the excitement, Chrono only ever got so rowdy. Kamui was a different story. When Miwa and Misaki arrived, they'd all started ordering some food. They'd gotten stuck working late, and Miwa looked tired, but greeted his friends cheekily. Misaki was still snappy somehow, even with her hair tied into a mess on her head and her hands buried deep in the pockets of her jacket.

The food was good. It was mid range in terms of price, good but nothing you'd describe as fancy. Ibuki sat with Chrono next to him, Kai and Aichi across of him, and their conversations were level-headed and easy to follow. Halfway through a second order of food, Aichi left the table to order another round of liquors. No one said anything, but Ibuki felt vary. When offered a refill of his glass, Kamui, who sat next to Kai, responded enthusiastically. Chrono had some too, but he was drinking more slowly. Which was to say, responsibly. Regardless, it was usually a bit hard to notice when he got drunk, Ibuki had learned. He was a quiet, somewhat skittish drunk. A little alcohol might improve his courage, but too much and it would have a reverse effect of sorts. No doubt he was aware of this himself, hence the limited intake. Ibuki didn't like drinking very much. He could enjoy a little, and he liked the taste of it. However, he disliked being drunk. Which was to say, he disliked the person he became. He was a cranky drunk. A cranky, abrasive and emotional drunk.

Aichi was quite the opposite. He became mellow, and in good spirits. Their conversations had slowed to a stop, because he'd left to make the order, but also because he'd become preoccupied with Kai. It was just across the table, but Ibuki couldn't hear what they said to one another. The sound volume in the restaurant was a little loud, but more so because Aichi would whisper directly into Kai's ear. There was a smile on his face, his lips brushing against Kai's skin. Kai would turn to him, and as he spoke Ibuki could hear the faint notion of his voice. There was a serious, questioning expression on his face. Aichi suppressed a laugh. With his hand on Kai's shoulder, Aichi leaned in. Ibuki couldn't be certain for sure, but he could only assume Aichi had kissed him. Not his lips, but his cheek or neck. It was a rare sight. Ibuki could barely ever remember seeing them kiss. Whenever they were together they were usually side by side, but kissing was a different matter. Maybe they'd become bolder with the years, but it served as a reminder to Ibuki, a reminder that he was still jealous.
It was nothing new. He'd always been. He was happy for them, but he had still been jealous of what they had. He knew things hadn't been easy for them. He knew they'd struggled to find each other, and to make things work out. Still, it'd often felt so unfair. Leaving his teenage years behind him and becoming an adult, Ibuki had gained more friends, more confidence, and found his own sense of purpose. Which was perhaps why he'd come to feel so awful about his jealousy. Rooted in something very specific, in a yearning for something he did not have, he'd cultivated the feeling for many years. He'd stopped being lonely and isolated, he'd found his place among others. However, as the years passed, it had become harder and harder to ignore his complete lack of any sort of love life. In and of itself it felt shameful. He ought to have just found someone, like others did, without necessarily having to try so hard. That wasn't how things had happened. Even now, when he shouldn't have reason to be jealous, that outright, if shyly tender, display of affection still seemed to rub him the wrong way. It made him feel terrible.

Ibuki had let his eyes stick to Kai, even as Aichi pulled away. As if by some sixth sense, Kai appeared to realize they were being watched. When he turned his head, it was already too late. He appeared disdainful, but Ibuki knew he was just embarrassed. Ibuki looked away gingerly, but didn't feel particularly guilty. He found Kai's reaction silly. It had been so long. Their relationship had been a constant in their friend group for almost a decade. Maybe it was time to get over it. It was hypocritical. Ibuki knew he was the one who needed to get over it. He was the one who needed to move on. He'd had more than enough time to mull over his situation. He'd had almost a year to digest his relationship with Chrono, and come to terms with it. His bitter feelings for Kai and Aichi's involvement, he'd had ten times as long. Ibuki had been forced to realize over and over that he wasn't very good at being honest with himself. It'd taken him way too long to realize the additional variables as to why it was so hard for him to digest Kai and Aichi's relationship. Ibuki had often been focused on Aichi. He was a sweetheart, and being around him would always put him at ease. At some point, he'd considered if that meant he had some shred of romantic feelings for him. In hindsight, it made him feel incredibly idiotic and naive. The truth was so much more obvious, if uncomfortable.

With Aichi loosely latched onto him, Kai was visibly a little overwhelmed. Still, he let his eyes rest on Aichi's face, and he smiled. While the childhood they'd spent together was a distant but precious memory, it was more so some of the most formative years of Ibuki's life. Ibuki had spent a lot of time during their years apart thinking of him, but Kai probably hadn't thought of him in turn, at least not in the same way. Kai had moved on. He'd found someone else. The melancholia of it had faded away, but when he saw Kai like this, he'd always remember. Now, most of which remained was that frustration, always feeling like he was missing out, left behind. That was the truth, which he'd failed to realize for most of his life. Next to him, Chrono was focused elsewhere, engaged in a lively conversation with Kamui. When they were kids, Kai had been such a bright and open-minded person. Ibuki had always thought he didn't exactly have a type. He still wasn't sure if he did. Regardless, he couldn't help but make the connection. When he smiled, with that sharp look on his face, Chrono's eyes shone with certainty, clarity. It was a little hard to explain. Ibuki felt that being with him made life more rewarding. He had felt that way back then too, with Kai; even if he'd had even less chances of articulating it at that young age. He knew now what it meant, despite for how long he'd struggled to understand. When Chrono turned to look at him, Ibuki instinctively smiled. He knew he was in love, and no longer did it feel like such a burden.

Chrono had seen Ibuki watching him. As his smile had been returned, Ibuki felt his hand on his leg under the table. Surely, proof enough that the night had become late, and that Chrono was perhaps a little drunk. Ibuki found it amusing, but before he could let any affirmation of such pass onto his lips a voice rang out across of them.

“What are you two smiling about, huh?” Accusingly, and with a finger pointed vigorously in their direction, Kamui had called attention to them. Ibuki barely even had the time to be shocked. “Are you making fun of me?!”
Ibuki’s face contorted into a state of confusion. Chrono couldn’t keep the wry smile off his smile. “What are you even talking about? Calm down.”

“Yeah. For your own sake you really should try and not be so high strung.” Miwa was always a voice of reason.

Kamui let both his fists hit the table. “I don't wanna hear it from any of you.”

“Hey man, we're just trying to help.” Miwa wouldn't be shut up so easily.

“It could do you some good to not just hear, but actually listen for once.” Misaki was much harsher.

Ibuki hadn't been listening in too closely, but he knew what they were talking about. “You're the ones who're not listening!” Kamui retaliated.

“You're just shutting us out because we're not telling you what you want to hear.” Miwa appeared to pinpoint the problem. Chrono visibly winced.

Kamui buried his face in his hands. “It's so easy for you all to criticize me, huh.”

“Do you really think there are any girls who'll ever like such a self-pitying guy?” Keeping his cool, Miwa kept talking. “You gotta change the perspective is all we're saying.”

Ah. Ibuki wasn't very comfortable with this particular topic, but what could he do? He sipped his non-alcoholic beverage quietly.

“I don't want any girls to like me---” Kamui expressed his frustration. “I just, I want...” He hit his head on the table top. He was vague enough, but it wasn't as if anyone doubted what he was on about.

“Things come to a certain point, in which you need to ask yourself what's reasonable, you know?” Ibuki could agree with Miwa. Regardless he could also relate to Misaki, who'd rolled her eyes tiredly. Chrono had on the other hand become quiet.

Kamui rolled his head to the side. “It's just so unfair.” He complained quietly.

“You think life is fair?” Misaki sounded more than a little jaded herself.

“You shouldn't, I mean...” Chrono spoke carefully in contrast. It was a little unlike him. “Get yourself so down about it.”

“How's it feel, huh?”

“...I'm sorry?”

“You've been single for a while now, huh?” Kamui was targeting Chrono now, his voice dripping with ill intent. “It's a first for you, huh? Must be tough.”

Chrono almost appeared to shrink in place, his expression unreadable. He said nothing.

“Must be nice...” Kamui goaded. “To be popular...”

“I thought you just said you didn't want to be popular?” Miwa sounded genuinely confused.

“It would still be nice!” Kamui slammed his glass down. Meanwhile, Ibuki wasn't sure if the situation of his relationship with Chrono made the situation more or less awkward for the two of
them to endure.

“Chrono's not popular. He's just got tact, unlike you.” Miwa said.

“Don't pay any mind to him.” Misaki said to Chrono who appeared vaguely thankful for the gesture.

Kamui, a whiny drunk and easily abbreviated, was still looking to twist the conversation his own way. “Oh, okay! Right! He'll be fine! I bet he's already... working on someone.” He'd been quick to misunderstand, too. Misaki sighed.

“That's... none of your business.” Chrono had retorted, now properly irritated. He was flustered, anger brewing under the surface.

Ibuki knew it was not his call to make, but as Kamui looked strangely delightful, he thought it might've been best for Chrono to say nothing. “You're not denying it, huh? I wonder what type of guy it'll be this time. Who knows? Maybe you'll surprise us.”

Miwa didn't stop himself from snickering. Kai and Aichi had been ignoring the conversation so far, but Ibuki caught Aichi try and hide his grinning face in his hands. Knowing Chrono, he was surely near death already at this point. Jealousy, Ibuki thought as he felt his soul slowly leave his body, truly is an ugly thing. Between outright humiliation or silent, all-consuming self-pity, Ibuki wasn't sure what was worse. Either way, it wouldn't particularly make him feel better about the situation.

“Could you...” Chrono struggled to find his words. “Like, grow up? You're not being very mature.”

“Oh you'd like that wouldn't you?” Kamui retorted.

Miwa snorted. “Hey now, don't say something you're gonna regret.”

Chrono had diminished in his seat, too embarrassed to speak. Ibuki would've been concerned for him, if Kamui hadn't turned to eye him down next. The emotion Ibuki felt rushing through his veins was pure, distilled fear.

Leaning in just a bit and lowering his voice, Kamui spoke. “Watch yourself.” Visibly recoiling, Ibuki dreaded what would come next. “Or he's gonna come after you next. Once he's bold enough.”

Dumbstruck, Ibuki stared at him. It should have been a far-fetched statement, surely. For that split second, Ibuki was led astray by the implications. What did Kamui know? Surely more than Ibuki had ever expected. Though whatever grain of truth hidden in his warning, it was all too late.

“Hey, just don't go saying whatever.” Chrono spoke dryly, having found his voice again.

“What?” Kamui asked casually. “You always liked him.”

Had it been a year prior, surely the comment would have killed Chrono on the spot. Now, it almost seemed to make him bounce back more effectively. Chrono sighed. “Like I said... just don't go saying whatever.”

Ibuki couldn't shake the chill, and more so the situation felt increasingly unreal. He had never expected Kamui to be so privy, then again, he'd always been close with Chrono. Moreover, he was certain to wonder what the banter had been like over the years in his absence. Was this normal? Had he missed the memo, the consensus that it was okay to go this far teasing Chrono? His eyes flickered in Misaki's and Miwa's direction. They were already running out of steam, and he doubted they were still fully listening in.
“At this point you're just trying to get a rise out of me.” Chrono successfully pinpointed the turn the conversation had taken.

“Well, I'm sorry, but---” Kamui raised his voice again.

**Katsuragi.**” Kai put his drink down. He'd just about had enough.

Kamui sunk back down on the table. He mellowed out. Misaki halfheartedly patted his back. “There there.”

Miwa poured him a glass of water. “Here you go.”

Ibuki dared to relax. Hopefully this was all over with. As stressed out as he'd been, Ibuki couldn't find it in him to hold it against Kamui. He didn't feel like he had the right.

“You know, if you just put yourself out there, I'm sure... I'm sure you'd find that there's a lot of great people to meet.” Aichi wasn't the first to try and genuinely comfort him, but he was the first to actually succeed. “You're a great guy, too. So I don't think you have anything to worry about.”

“Maybe you're right...” Kamui sighed. He rolled his head to the side.

“Besides, you're getting too hanged up on all this. You're still young. There's no reason to rush.” Aichi reassured him calmly. His intake was making him more mellow, more open. His words were sweet and soft, comforting in an inexplicable sort of way.

“It just... would've been nice... to have a youthful, aspiring romance...” Kamui slurred.

Kai sighed disapprovingly. It was barely audible, and Ibuki could only assume Kamui hadn't heard him, or surely he would have snapped at him. Kai's tired expression said it all. It was Chrono who gave Kai's thoughts words, in the end. “It's not all what it's cut out to be, you know.”

Ibuki wouldn't know. “That's easy to say when you've had it yourself.” But he could agree with Kamui in theory.

“Not a lot of people get that chance, either.” Aichi made a reasonable deduction. “Like, having your first relationship, or even your first kiss... many people don't get to experience it until they're a bit older.”

“Out of all of us,” With his pointer finger, Miwa passed everyone around the table, stopping at Kai and Aichi. “You two are the only ones to do any of that stuff before graduating high school.”

“I had my first kiss in high school, too.”

“*What?*”

“What?” Kamui had repeated Ibuki's question, which had left him without thought.

Chrono looked innocently confused. “*What?*” Everyone was quietly eyeing him now. “Is that really so surprising?”

“Oh, I guess not.” Kamui said bitterly.

Ibuki wasn't quite over the exposition just made. It'd thrown him off. He'd never heard about this before. Chrono turned to look at him, and Ibuki couldn't keep the baffled look off his face.

“I thought... I mean, when you dated Yanagi, that was...” Kamui was the first person on the case.
They were all thinking the same thing. Well, except for Kai. Kai looked like he wanted to go home.

“That was later…” Chrono raised his glass to his mouth. He looked like he was starting to regret his reflex to correct Miwa’s assumption.

“Who was it then? Who was your first?” Miwa asked smugly, and Ibuki realized he was listening tensely. At the end of the table, Misaki looked less than humored. Suddenly, it was if they were all kids at a sleepover, and she wasn’t fully having it.

Chrono, usually not quite so subjectable to such a change in atmosphere, still caved to it. At this point, he had to walk the road he’d paved. Additionally, Ibuki couldn't help but notice Chrono wasn’t looking at him. “If you have to know,” Chrono tried to hide his embarrassment behind some gusto, and did an okay job at it. This was, as far as Ibuki reckoned, the effect the drink had on him. “It was Shion.”

The surprised sound that left Ibuki was drowned out by Kamui's outburst. “What?! Really?!”

“Oh?” Miwa followed up. He looked less alerted to the news, but nonetheless curious.

“I had no idea you two-” It was Aichi who made Chrono sort of, snap out of it.

“It wasn't like that.” He said, soberly, despite himself. “It wasn't--”

“But you kissed?” Miwa asked him, inquiringly.

“Yeah, but, like--” Chrono had lost his words with a glance at Ibuki. He hadn't meant to look so befuddled. It wasn't as if Chrono had betrayed him. In truth, it wasn’t that shocking. If anything, it was strange that they were only hearing about this now.

“Like what?” It was Misaki who attempted to cut a path through the confusion.

Chrono sighed, somehow agitated. “We were never like. Going out. Or anything like that.”

“You just kissed?” It was Miwa again, taking the same tone.

“Yeah, ’cause,” Chrono sounded like he was now formally regretting this. “Look, we were... teenagers, and... both going through all that stuff...” Now this, Ibuki knew what a bit of a touchy subject, as it would be for anyone. Maybe other people would learn to power through it, but for Chrono, it was still uncomfortable to talk about his sexuality, regardless of how confident he might otherwise seem.

“And... I might've... said something to the effect of, you know. It'd be easier to know if I’d at least kissed someone.” Chrono's voice had grown quieter, but he was holding on. It wasn't so hard to see where the conversation was going. “And he offered. So. We kissed.”

Ibuki didn't know Shion like Chrono did, but it was easy to imagine. It absolutely sounded like something he would do.

“So?” Kamui asked.

“What do you mean so?” Chrono sounded more than a little annoyed, still agitated.

“What was it like?”

Kai sighed. Misaki groaned.
“It wasn’t... I mean... it was okay?” Chrono didn't sound like he had too much to say on subject. “We kissed for a little while. But it started feeling weird so we stopped.”

“So it was awkward huh?” Kamui sounded a little smug.

“I guess, but... it’s not like I regretted it.” Chrono shrugged. “If anything, I'm glad we did it. I'd rather it have been with him than just... anyone. Like, in the long run.”

That made sense. Ibuki couldn't blame him for feeling that way. Ibuki felt his lips twitch when he realized that he and Shion shared the connection of having had Chrono as their first kiss. The circumstances were so drastically different it was hardly even possible to compare them, which was probably for the best. Still, it wasn't something Ibuki had expected to learn today. Served as a reminder that indeed, there were still things he didn't know about Chrono. It wasn't disheartening, nor should it be surprising, but it left him feeling a little ruffled up. Ibuki could sometimes be bad at absorbing new information, as he had a tendency to overthink it.

“That's such a sweet story.” Aichi said, and it sounded not like an exaggeration but his genuine, if elevated, feelings.

“Yeah...” Kamui agreed, somehow. “I wish I'd had something like that.” It was still implied he'd somehow misunderstood the story.

“Oh, you still can!” Aichi encouraged him. “Don't give up!”

“Alright!” Revitalized, Kamui burst up from his seat. “Who wants to kiss me?!” He eyed his friends at the table. Miwa laughed. Misaki turned to her drink. Chrono and Ibuki looked at one another to avoid eye-contact.

“Katsuragi.” After getting up quietly, Kai had put his hand on Kamui's shoulder and looked him hard in the eye.

“It was already late, but they were somehow not quite done yet. Ibuki was starting to get tired. He'd had a good time, even if things had sort of gone out of hand after dinner. After Ibuki saw Kai and Aichi conversing across of him, their voices inaudible but Kai clearly venting while looking all the more exhausted, it would still be a while before they all decided to wrap things up. Picking up the tab was hard. Easiest would be to just split it evenly, but it was hardly fair, with Chrono and Kamui being students and full-time workers like Aichi and Misaki doing most of the drinking. Ibuki had attained a habit of just paying for everything when he and Chrono went out, and caught himself assuming as much would be obvious. In the end, Aichi offered to pay for all of it for simplicity’s sake, with his friends all promising to pay him back.

Eventually, they'd all shuffled towards the entrance. By the bar, Aichi had stopped, and Kai was gone. Misaki and Kamui were already headed outside into the stuffy evening heat, Miwa not far behind.

“Here,” Ibuki had turned at the sound of Chrono's voice. He'd come up from behind him, handing him his jacket. He'd stuffed it under table first thing, and promptly forgotten about it. He only bothered with it to uphold something resembling a dress code at work. It was too hot to wear. “You forgot.”

“Oh, thank you.” Ibuki replied without thinking.
“Where's Kai?” Ibuki asked Aichi, who'd been watching them.

“Oh, he went to the men's room.” Aichi said, his eyes slowly drifting in the direction of the bathrooms.

“Oh, it's over there?” Chrono handed Ibuki his own jacket, too. “I'll just be a moment.”

He left. Aichi sighed, happily. “Tonight's been great.” He said.

“Yeah, it's...” Ibuki hesitated. “Been fun.”

“It's been too long. Especially since I saw you and Chrono.”

“Yeah...” Surely it was just the way Aichi had phrased it, but Ibuki wasn't sure how he felt about him and Chrono being treated like a unit. He didn't dislike it, but he wanted to figure the feeling out, and get used to it.

“You know,” Aichi spoke to him almost dreamily. He wasn't sobering up just yet huh, Ibuki thought. “It really great to see the two of you keeping in touch? Sticking together, seeing each other...”

Ibuki was ready to zone out. All night, and this was the fist time he readily wished he'd been drunk, too. “Well, we... we do see each other quite a bit...” There was no point in down-playing that, at least. Ibuki didn't want to lie.

“I got the feeling Kai's been worried about you.”

Really now? Ibuki felt a little moved, a little upset, a little out of it. Maybe Kai should just mind his own business, actually, and not cause Ibuki the trouble of knowing he'd worried him. “He shouldn't... I mean, I... I'm fine.”

“Oh, but you know how he is...” Ibuki suddenly wasn't so sure. Though he trusted Aichi to know Kai better than he did.

Truth was though, this time last year, and in the spring and winter months of that year, he'd been doing less than great. If anything, he'd been miserable. He'd tried to hide it, returning to old, dangerous habits. In the end though, he knew he hadn't been able to fully deceive everyone, lest of all from the people who knew him best.

“Either way, I'm glad. He's... always been looking out for you.”

Ibuki took in the words. Aichi had become a little sluggish. He was looking in the direction Chrono had left.

“Chrono, I mean.” He added, after a few second's worth of silence.

_Oh._ The words echoed in Ibuki's head. Suddenly it made a bit more sense. Regardless, it all overlapped. Ibuki was tired. “I know.” He replied quietly. “You all... care.”

“Yeah, we do.” Aichi wouldn't get emotionally overwhelmed so easily. “But, you know. Out of all of us, it was always Chrono who'd get through to you.”

Ibuki knew it was true. He felt self-conscious to hear Aichi drop that observation on him so casually. Regardless of how drastically their relationship had kept changing, it had always been true. Chrono had always gotten through to him, even when no one else could. Chrono had always inspired him.

“Take care of each other, okay?” Aichi hadn't waited for Ibuki to respond. His addition only made it
“Don't worry. We... we are.”

Ibuki had made a sincere effort to reassure him. He owe Aichi as much.

Outside, Misaki gave a round of goodbyes before taking off. Aichi made Kai offer to take Kamui home. As Chrono recalled where they’d parked, Miwa intruded on their conversation.

“Mind giving me a ride? Just to the station.” It was in their direction. Ibuki didn't want to say no, but he also didn't feel too pressed to say yes. He'd been hoping to get to talk to Chrono a bit, undisturbed.

“Sure!” Chrono had said, giving Ibuki no real choice. Not that he had much of any in the first place.

Miwa assumed a place in the front seat, and Chrono was demoted to sitting alone in the back. They drove slowly through the city. The traffic wasn't very heavy, but the red lights were many.

“Kamui sure put you through some stuff tonight, huh?” Miwa asked, amused.

“Sure, I guess...” Despite his smile, Chrono didn't sound too eager to breach this topic of conversation.

“Leave him be, Miwa.” Ibuki sighed quietly.

“Sure?” Miwa sounded a little surprised. “If you say so?” He'd probably realized the topic was worn out already.

“It was fun though,” He added after a short moment's silence. “Tonight, I mean.” Miwa clarified.

“Hey if you enjoyed Kamui making a fool out of me, you're very welcome.” Chrono said, exhausted.

“Why, thank you.” Miwa was always so clever. It make Ibuki sigh once more.

“As for you, you could lighten up a little, you know?” Miwa targeted him. “I barely heard you say a word all night.”

Ibuki knew he was right.

“It's still good to see you though. Don't get me wrong.” Ibuki hadn't managed to respond, but Miwa never made him feel bad about it. “I just hope you had fun.”

“He had fun.” Chrono imposed his thoughts on the matter. “Right?”

“Sure, I did.” When Ibuki heard the smile in Chrono's voice, that made him smile, too. “For the most part, anyway.” He added. Miwa laughed.

Ibuki pulled up by a garage entrance about a block from the station. “Thanks for the ride, man.” Miwa said as he was getting out of the car. He was rushing a little, not wanting to miss any more trains.

“You're very welcome.” Ibuki said, his voice sober in clear contrast.

“Take care now.” Miwa waved his goodbyes before he was off, disappearing down the street. Ibuki breathed a sigh of relief, as Chrono slowly got out of the car to relocate to the front seat.
Sitting down next to Ibuki with a thump, Chrono shut the door behind him with a sound smack. They looked at one another, and in the comfort of their twosome state, they both sunk into their seats.

“I am like, so sorry.” Chrono said decisively, and while Ibuki had no clue what he meant specifically, he knew exactly what Chrono was talking about.

“It's fine.” Ibuki replied quietly, both hands on the steering wheel.

“How are you?” Chrono asked him, a bit expectant.

“Tired.” Ibuki said. “I... I did have a good time, though.” He wanted to make that clear.

“You did.” Chrono said somewhat sourly. “You did, huh?”

Ibuki was a little thrown off by this. “Was it that bad?”

“Sort of.” Chrono replied. “But I'll live. If anything, I... I don't know. It could've been worse, I guess.”

“I suppose.” The words left him without much conviction. Ibuki hadn't expected to feel Chrono's hand on his thigh again.

Turning his head, Ibuki saw Chrono looking at him. Things were obvious just from reading his body language. Ibuki complied, and allowed himself to lean in for a kiss. Chrono turned in his seat to give them both a little better access. It was rich, but temperate, kiss. It didn't last for more than a moment. Instead of pulling away, Chrono leaned onto Ibuki, and pressed his hand firmer onto his leg. With his arms over Chrono's shoulders, Ibuki stroke his back calmly.

“Would you have preferred it if we'd just gone home?” Ibuki asked him quietly.

“I dunno.” Chrono replied. “Probably not. Like I said... it wasn't that I didn't have fun, I just, I dunno. I kept thinking I wanted to be alone with you.”

Had he really now? Ibuki found it a little baffling. He wondered if Chrono would've been as quick to admit it under normal circumstances. He was happy, though distracted, distracted enough to not quite register how hard Chrono was pressing against him, not until Chrono had already halfway pushed himself into his lap, as uncomfortable as it was, with his hand slipping from the top of Ibuki's thigh to the inside of his leg. Chrono's lips pressed firmly and hotly against the sensitive surface of the skin of his neck, and alerted with the feelings invoked in him, Ibuki struggled a little to move.

“Chr-” About to question him in a gasp of his breath, Ibuki was silenced with Chrono's lips on his own.

Unable to complain, Ibuki was molded under Chrono's touch, by his kiss. They kissed hard, Ibuki quickly getting caught up in Chrono's pace. He didn't feel like he had much choice. With the taste of alcohol unusual for a kiss shared between them, it brought some distinct memories to surface in Ibuki's mind. While Chrono was only an inch or so away from straight up grabbing at Ibuki's crotch through his pants, he hooked his other arm around his neck, using his body weight to pull him closer. Ibuki was tired, too tired to fight his own rush, his own desire. Chrono's last words to him still occupied his mind.

It was Chrono who was frozen by the sound, which Ibuki's mind had not quite registered. Yet, it needed not repeating, as the perpetrator himself realized. As the sound of fingers tapping glass had resonated in the cabin, Chrono slid off him, and Ibuki's mind was about as empty as it'd ever been. Smiling awkwardly, incessantly, Chrono had rolled down the window to the passenger seat on the
It was dark inside the car, compared to outside, which bathed in the lights from surrounding stores and streetlights. Ibuki knew that with the lights reflecting off the windows it made it hard to see inside, but as close as he'd leaned to the car, he didn't doubt that Miwa had seen more than enough.

“I, uh,” His eyes pointed directly at Ibuki, Miwa's gesture was meant for Chrono. “Must've dropped my phone. I think it fell out of my pocket. Do you mind looking under the seat for me?”

“Oh, sure.” Chrono complied, somehow managing to carry a conversation.

Miwa still looked past him. His expression was flat, if a little sour. Ibuki could not blame him. This didn't keep the blood from draining completely from his face. He could only accept the shame upfront.

“Oh, here... here it is.” Chrono had been successful in locating the lost article.

“Thanks.” Surely Miwa would've been more relieved if he hadn't been so preoccupied.

“No problem...” Chrono replied, sounding like he was struggling to be normal.

“I gotta run, but thanks again for the ride.” Miwa still had that look on his face, a hesitant sort of doubtfulness and disbelief. “I'll, uh, leave you to it.”

He didn't have to say it like that. Ibuki physically felt the discomfort on his skin.

“So, uh, bye.” Miwa backed away from the car.

“...Take care.” Chrono managed to respond.

Ibuki sat frozen in his seat, his eyes slowly moving in his skull. Staring ahead, a short moment passed in silence. Chrono looked at him, and appeared more than a little guilty. As the situation dawned on him, Ibuki felt panic rise from his gut, a panic so intense it felt like it was going to strangle him. Breathlessly, and with only a vague notion of a plan in his mind, he threw himself towards the door.

As he swung it open, Chrono, who'd been bracing to speak, jumped to attention. “W-where are you going?!”

While struggling to rush out of his seat, Ibuki's voice was strained and coarse. “Just wait here.”

Ibuki went around the car, maneuvering as smoothly as he could while hurrying. He knew which direction Miwa was headed, and he knew he couldn't have gone too far. Ibuki hadn't thought of much to say, but at this point he didn't think it mattered. What mattered is that he said something, anything at all.

_I don't think there's ever gonna be a perfect time or place. Some things you just gotta do._

Ibuki remembered what Chrono had said to him the week before. He'd felt reluctant to agree then. Now, he felt truly how right he'd been. Ibuki hated compromising. He could've just let Miwa go, but now, his conscience wouldn't let him.

“Miwa!”

Ibuki called out to him as he spotted him, about a block from where he'd parked. Despite his expressed urgency, Miwa was walking at a slow pace. Ibuki couldn't blame him. Anyone would've excused themselves from the previous situation with the use of any excuse.
He did stop, sharply halting. He turned slowly in the direction of Ibuki's voice.

It hadn't been a long run, and Ibuki was barely out of breath. Miwa looked tired, but he appeared to shake himself out of it. He looked at Ibuki plainly. He knew why Ibuki was here, and he was ready to listen.

“Sorry to... hold you up.” The words slipped out without a thought. Ibuki clung to his sanity.

“That's fine.” Miwa said plainly.

“I... I'm really...” Jumping straight to apologizing was easy, and it felt like it would erupt out of him like a reflex, but Ibuki managed to stop himself. He tried to think. “I want you to know that... I didn't intend for you to find out like this. I meant to... or we, we meant to... let you all know.”

“Uh-huh?” Miwa looked like he was struggling to take it in.

“Which is to say... I'd like to...” The conversations that had followed through the evening only made the situation so much more awkward. “Properly explain myself... like I'd planned to.”

“Look, I...” Miwa let a sigh pass through him. He let his guard own, and appeared to return to his usual self. It was comforting. “Sure. I don't know... what's going on, except, well...” He didn't need to finish that sentence, so he didn't. “But if you wanna talk, then, I mean, what am I supposed to say?”

“Thank you.” Ibuki replied, the relief clear in his words. Miwa looked a little concerned for him, even.

“Could you please... not tell anyone?” Ibuki thought it was perhaps a tall order. He felt guilty to ask.

“Hey, uh...” Miwa looked a little uncertain. “Sure?” He sounded like he wanted to make the promise, but hesitated for other reasons. Ibuki had some good guesses why. “I'm just so, I mean. I really didn't expect this, is all.”

Ibuki could understand. “I won't make you keep it to yourself for long. I promise.”

Ibuki was good at keeping promises. He at least had that going for him. Miwa appeared to relax.

“Alright. If you say so. I won't tell anyone.”

The atmosphere between them was still strained. Ibuki hadn't expected that to change. Miwa was still eyeing him somewhat precariously. “So, uh,” Miwa broke the awkward silence, and Ibuki felt dreadful. “You and Chrono, huh?”

Ibuki felt nauseous. He knew it would feel like this. He'd known it would feel awful, embarrassing. He'd known it, and yet, it did nothing to ease him. “I... I honestly didn't expect things to turn out this way, either.”

Ibuki could only hope Miwa believed him. “Look, man... we'll talk, okay?”

“Yeah.” It was a fair response considering the situation. “I'll... I'll let you know when I can see you. I was thinking we could... go out, somewhere. With Kai, too. The three of us.”

“Sure.” Miwa shrugged. “Why not? It's about time anyway.”

“Yeah...” Ibuki did not yet dare to relax. He felt like it would be long before he could.

“I'm gonna get going, okay?” Miwa indeed looked like he would like that.
“Of course. Thank you for...” Ibuki realized he didn't know quite what he wanted to thank Miwa for precisely. “Giving me a chance to explain myself.”

“Look, we'll talk, okay?” Miwa did smile, if somewhat stiffly. “Bye for now.”

They said goodbye, and Miwa left. Ibuki stood in place for a short moment before turning around to walk back to the car. Getting back in the driver's seat, he sat down heavily as Chrono looked at him expectantly.

“What did he say?” He asked carefully, unable to mask his concern.

“He didn't... say much of anything.” Ibuki had slouched where he sat. “But it felt like... like he listened.”

“What did you say to him?” As Chrono asked, Ibuki had let his face come to rest in his hand. He took a short moment to collect himself. Chrono waited patiently.

“I... I said I wanted to talk. Though to him, I can only assume that sounded... inane.” Reality was rushing away from him. Ibuki was quickly becoming paranoid.

Chrono appeared to realize. “So? Did he accept?”

“Yes, but...”

“He accepted. So don't worry about it.” Chrono readily came into his role as a voice of reason.

The dread crept up on him. Ibuki hadn't been able to predict his reaction, and that in itself made him anxious. It was hard to put into words. Chrono put a hand on his shoulder. “I understand you're upset. But they're your friends. So don't worry about it.”

Ibuki tried to squirm out of this feeling, even if just enough to allow himself to gather his thoughts. “They'll think I... I kept it from them for a reason.”

“Yeah? 'Cause you weren't ready to talk to them.” Chrono said, without hesitation.

Without a word, Ibuki shook his head. With a sigh, Chrono leaned in closer to him, putting his arm around him. “Hey, look... look...” The embrace was so different from the one moments before, despite being much of the same. “We'll go home, and you'll get some rest. And then you'll make some plans in the morning. You'll see each other in a few days and sort everything out.”

Ibuki wasn't sad as much he was frustrated. In fairness, though, his anxiety steeped from a fear he'd yet to fully deal with. Ibuki drew a hard and deep breath. “I don't want them to think I... I somehow, planned for this to happen.”

They'd talked about this before. “Why would they think that?”

Chrono was repeating familiar words. “I... I'm just... saying.” Ibuki's voice was shaking a little.

“Well I'm saying you shouldn't worry about it.” Chrono told him stubbornly.

His body heavy, Ibuki raised his arm to grip the steering wheel. Chrono had lightly slipped away from him, giving him a little space. “Let me worry. Let me worry at least a little!” He raised his voice only so much, letting out the frustration he'd built up.

“You're not worrying a little!” Chrono retorted.
They weren't fighting, and they both knew it. They were both venting their frustrations. Ibuki sat up straight. He dared to feel a little better. “They know you.” Chrono said to him, still firm with his words. “Sure, like... no one expected this. Or maybe they did expect it.” The nights conversations were still fresh in memory. “But like... you never... did anything wrong. You had the opportunity. But you didn't.” Chrono shrugged, sounding conflicted. “And if they know you and they know me, then, they'd know as much.”

“You can't tell me I never did anything wrong.”

“You know what I mean.”

Ibuki had tried to sort his feelings out. He wouldn't always feel the way he did right now. He'd been able to commit to a more reasonable way of thinking. If he wanted to be with Chrono, he'd had no choice but. He was afraid his friends would misunderstand their relationship. Moreover, he was afraid that he was the one who'd misunderstood it. If that feeling was rooted in his own insecurity and overt self-criticism, or if he wholly was guilty of some misconduct, he still didn't know. In reality, with a sober and steady mind, Ibuki knew the answer was a bit more complicated. He knew he had to earn the trust and faith of others. It was the same for anyone, but the burden was a lot for his fragile self-conception. For a moment, they both sat in silence. Ibuki had a lot of words that were simmering in his head, but he thought silence suited them best now.

“It's too bad things happened like this. I'm sorry.” Chrono was gazing out the passenger seat window.

“It's not your fault.” Ibuki replied. He truly didn't blame Chrono.

“You know how... I don't like...” Chrono struggled a little with his words. “Being all in our faces when we're out, but,” That was an understatement. Chrono would barely hold his hand in public. “And then, the one time I let my guard down, this happens.”

Ibuki stifled a laugh. “It's not like you could have known.”

“I guess not.” Chrono sounded tired.

“You were... pretty touchy before.” Ibuki spoke under his breath. It wasn't like him to bring it up.

Chrono still didn't look at him, but squirmed a little. “Y-yeah, I... I don't know what I was thinking...”

“Really? I thought you made that clear.” Ibuki let the words slip out of him breathlessly. Maybe he shouldn't have, but it was hard to resist.

Chrono looked at him sourly, embarrassed. He knew he had no right to be mad. “It was 'cause... I dunno. It felt unfair, 'cause Aichi and Kai were being all touchy. I guess I got jealous.”

Ibuki hadn't realized. Then again, he'd been absorbed with his own thoughts. “You too, huh.”

Chrono let himself slide down a little in his seat. He looked at Ibuki, who felt like he'd managed to collect himself reasonably.

“Are you okay?” Chrono asked him, for good measure.

“I'm better.” Ibuki replied.
“Good enough to take us home?” Chrono sounded a little tired.

Ibuki smiled carefully. “Sure.”

Again, it was late. Ibuki wanted to rest this weekend if he could. Surely he needed it. The trip home would take a little while, and with a comfortable silence between them, Chrono had come to rest his head against the window.

“Your aunt said she'd be back home Wednesday next week. I... I'd prefer to see Kai and Miwa before then if that's alright with you.” Ibuki didn't want to come home to an empty house that night if he could help it.

“Sure.” Chrono replied. “She didn't tell me that though.”

“I spoke to her earlier today. She probably didn't have the chance to tell you yet.”

“I see...” Chrono sounded like he was thinking. “So, you're keeping in touch, huh.”

“We're having a short meeting next week is all.” It sounded like an excuse somehow.

“That's fine.” Chrono spoke with the faintest of smiles on his face. Ibuki decided not to say anything. Rather, there was something else on his mind. “As we were leaving, Sendou spoke to me, briefly.”

“Yeah?” Chrono indicated he was listening.

“I didn't know what to say to him, I felt... quite uneasy. He said it was nice to see us.” Ibuki felt like he needed to clarify. He tried to remember how Aichi had put it. “That it was nice to know we're... on good terms, and... spending time together.”

Ibuki stopped at a red light. There were little people out and about. “Surely I'm over thinking it.”

Ibuki mostly just wanted to share with Chrono what had happened. “Though, I, well...”

He'd glanced to gauge Chrono's reaction. Ibuki's slight concern, which he'd convinced himself was nothing more than his paranoia, came to flare into dread. Chrono had turned his face away, quiet.

“Chrono?” Still not quite ready to give up on his sanity, Ibuki still dared to hope he was just imagining things.

Slowly, Chrono faced forward. With his lips pressed tightly together and his gaze unfocused, Ibuki knew that was the face Chrono made when he had been caught hiding something.

“Chrono...?” Ibuki asked him again, now quieter.

Chrono had paled. Ibuki knew he would come around, and let him mellow out in silence. It made him wonder though, fatigued, how many revelations would they be having today?

“I'm assuming you have something to say.” Ibuki said, plainly. He wasn't about to assume Chrono
had been hiding something from him in ill will.

“It's probably, I mean, something he just said, you know, generally.” Chrono said, and while Ibuki had certainly though so too, it didn't explain Chrono's reaction at all.

“Is that what you think?” Ibuki asked.

Chrono had let his gaze rest on his lap. “It was a long time ago, now, so... it's, well.”

The stoplight had turned green, and they were moving once more. Ibuki kept his eyes on the road.

“So it's probably just, you know. He was... just being nice.”

Oh, Aichi was usually that. If anything, he was never not nice. Ibuki didn't question that. “And if not?”

“Like I said, it was a long time ago.” Chrono spoke quietly, and appeared a little jittery. Ibuki felt all the more unsure of what to expect. “But, well. For a while, I was pretty lost.”

The words phased through him, and Chrono's reaction started making sense. Ibuki felt a little lightheaded. “... If you don't want to talk about it, then...”

“It's fine.” Chrono replied. “It's not a long story, or anything.”

“That's not what I...” Ibuki didn't know how to put it. The words had failed him, failed him utterly. Chrono was quiet, too.

“You don't have to tell me if you don't want to.” Ibuki said to him, finally.

“I might as well.” Chrono sounded like he'd resigned to the situation. Then, with a sigh, he appeared to lighten up, pull himself out of the worst of it.

“I felt like I had to... talk to someone, I guess. And he felt like the best choice, I thought I could put it like it was about like, school and stuff...” Being in the same field surely would've made it seem natural. “And I did wanna talk about that, too. But I also, really, wanted to ask about... other stuff. Even if just a little.”

Chrono had always been resourceful, even when he was met with hardships or discomfort. Ibuki couldn't help but be awed. He never could have imagined his own younger self doing something like that. Then again, he'd never had anyone to turn to.

“I did ask him a bunch about school, like, where and how to apply and it was a great help, honestly. I tried to... ask about him and Kai like, in a casual sort of way, but that didn't really work out. I'm pretty sure he saw through me from the get go, honestly.” Chrono held his breath, and Ibuki wondered again, if it was okay for him to be hearing this. If Chrono wanted to tell him, he saw it as his responsibility to listen. On the other hand, the circumstances made things a bit ill fit. Surely it had been a long time ago, but it still didn't feel like long enough for Ibuki.

“He didn't make any assumptions or ask me anything. I was really thankful for that. But the way he talked to me, I mean, it made it pretty obvious he understood why I'd asked. Besides, we all knew about them. So it wasn't like I could play dumb.” Chrono sounded like he'd though about this a lot over the years.

“It was good that there was someone you felt comfortable talking to.” Ibuki said, hoping to sound genuine.
“Yeah... though I mean, back then, it felt super weird. I felt really awkward about it for a long time, but at the same time I... I was happy I’d talked to him.” Ibuki imagined that must’ve been how it felt. “And I know that.. not everyone gets that chance.”

Ibuki knew that was true.

“H-he did ask me...” Unprompted, Chrono continued his story. “If... if there was anyone I liked.”

Ibuki felt his heart sink in his chest.

“And... I said that I thought so. But that I wasn't really sure.” Chrono sounded distant. “He didn't ask me anything else after that, but... you know.”

Ibuki didn't know. Frankly, he didn't know at all.

“In the end, we saw each other a few times. I had more questions about school, and I didn't really dare to ask about anything else, but he'd still talk pretty freely about himself. So that was, well, it was helpful.” Ibuki had then shot Chrono a quick glance. He looked more relaxed than Ibuki had imagined him. “We ended up talking about you a bunch. Or more like, I'd vent about you. Afterwards I felt so stupid. I just... I knew he'd figured it out.”

Chrono sounded like he still hadn't fully gotten over it. Ibuki felt burdened by this. He didn't want Chrono to feel bad, less so for something that he'd done in an attempt to try and take care of himself.

“He didn't say anything. He was super nice about it. But like... there was a transparency to that too. So I never doubted he knew, even though I never outright told him.”

Unable to think of much of anything to say, Ibuki allowed himself to think.

“Like. There's no way he doesn't remember. I dunno if he still thinks much of any of it, though.” Chrono reasoned.

“There's no way of telling, I suppose.” Ibuki said. “Though, like you, I'd assume he remembers...”

Ibuki was surprised about all this. He'd never imagined learning something like this.

With a pained sigh, Chrono had fallen back with the back of his head against the window. Ibuki felt his eyes on him. “Do you really not have anything else to say?”

Ibuki wasn't sure what to make out of that question. “I... I'm not sure what you want me to say.” He replied hesitantly.

“I guess not, huh...” Chrono replied.

“You didn't have to tell me.” Ibuki said after a moment's silence.

“It sure seemed to me like you wanted me to, though.” Chrono retorted, vaguely irritated.

Ibuki knew that was true. Above all else, he didn't want to fight. Not about this. “I know. I'm sorry.”

“I wanted to tell you.” Chrono said, quiet. He was upset now, and Ibuki was regretful.

“It was very brave of you.” Ibuki commended him, matching the slightness of Chrono's voice.

“I guess.”
“I'm sorry you went through such a tough time.” Ibuki struggled to come to terms with his role in Chrono's story, but that was his own problem.

Chrono was silent for a moment. He was, until Ibuki looked at him, concerned. “Chrono?”

“What are you...” He sighed. “Always missing the point?”

“I'm sorry?” Ibuki again, did not know what to say.

Chrono ran his hand through his hair, still relaxed where he sat. “It was tough, yeah.” He muttered. “But like, it was for you, too.”

The words, in regards of Ibuki's role in Chrono's story, made no sense. It wasn't as if Ibuki had ever suffered due to the one-sided feelings Chrono had developed for him way back then. Just as Ibuki started to understand, Chrono broke his train of thought with his words. “I mean, when you were growing up, it's not like any of this stuff was easy for you?”

As Ibuki, suddenly pressed, emotional, tried to shape a response, Chrono kept talking. “That's why I wanted to tell you. ‘Cause we both went through it. I thought... you should know, like, it was tough for me. Just like I know it was for you, too.”

Ibuki had been focusing on all the wrong things. He'd been way off this whole time. “But like,” Chrono continued, quietly. “If it's awkward for you, I'm sorry. I... I get that. Since like, I mean. For me, it was a lot... about you.”

Chrono pulled himself up. “I mean, it wasn't only about you... but you know.”

Ibuki knew. Though, he didn't want to get distracted thinking about that now. “I don't want you to be sorry. You only meant well. I was the one who...” Ibuki realized there was no reason for him to finish what he was about to say. “You're right. I tend to misunderstand.”

“You do.” Chrono smiled. “You don't have to be so stiff about it, you know? It was a long time ago. And I mean... it was a pretty big deal to me then, but, really. It was just a crush.”

“Oh, I see.” Ibuki allowed himself to smile, too. “That makes sense.”

“It does, huh?” Chrono sounded a little thrown off.

“I didn't... really know me, anyhow.” Ibuki reasoned, quietly.

“I knew you... maybe not all of you but, I absolutely knew you.” Chrono sounded humored.

“I used to think...” Ibuki felt the words pour out of him almost involuntarily. “If you knew the real me, you wouldn't... feel that way.”

“That sounds like something you'd think.” Chrono said somewhat flatly. “You were wrong, anyway. 'Cause for starters, you were already the real you. And secondly, it didn't matter anyway.”

“I suppose not.”

“I always knew the real Ibuki.” The calculated way Chrono said it made Ibuki laugh. “He was always stubborn, and he never knew how to talk to people. He blows up when he gets angry, but despite that he has a shy side... and when he gets flustered, it's surprisingly cute.”

Ibuki sighed. If Chrono was trying to tease him, he was on the right track.
“What?” Chrono asked. “Am I wrong?”

“I... I suppose not.” Ibuki might as well play along. “I’m surprised, though.”

“About what?”

“About Katsuragi.” Ibuki wouldn’t let Chrono forget about it.

“Oh. That.” Chrono said it with some distaste in his mouth.

“Did you talk to him, too...?”

“What? No, no. I’d...” Chrono sounded more than a little thrown-off. “No offense. ‘Cause he’s always been a huge help to me, and Kamui is great but, I... I could never...”

Ibuki could understand. “I wasn't ever... that privy to your relationship with him.”

“We used to hang out like, literally all the time...” Chrono reflected on the times gone past. “Honestly though. He used to... tease me a little about you. But he never took it very far. Pretty sure he said just to get a rise out of me. It always used to work in the past.”

“In the past?”

“Yeah, when I was like,” Chrono groaned. “15 years old and super uptight and insecure about everything.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.” It felt like their conversations had eased Chrono up. “I don't think he gave it that much thought back then.”

“I see.” That sounded reasonable.

“He might've... pieced things together in hindsight, though.” Chrono sounded bothered by the implications of this. “For sure though, I thought you were gonna ask about me and Shion.”

He hadn't thought of that, actually. “I'm assuming there wasn't anything more to know.” Everyone had been demanding answers, Ibuki didn't want to do the same.

“You'd be right to assume.” Chrono said. “There's nothing more to say, really. I just thought you might ask, seeing as I'd never mentioned it before.”

“You don't owe me that.” Ibuki replied simply.

“Sure, but you looked like you'd been startled scared.”

Ibuki was aware of that. He was not proud of it. “I... I was surprised. That doesn't mean...”

“I know, I know...” Chrono reassured him.

“Whoever you've been... involved with, it's... not something I can demand you to talk about.”

“R-right.” Chrono had stammered a little as he spoke. Ibuki’s mind was now on high alert, again, for what felt like millionth time this evening.

“I-I mean... true I don't have to, but... it's not like I intend to hide anything from you.”
Ibuki felt himself sink deeper into the seat, gripping the steering wheel tighter. The drive had been very uneventful, in terms of the streets, the traffic. Meanwhile, here they were, somehow about to cycle through yet another heavy topic. There wasn't any way Chrono could've made it more obvious, really. There was someone, for sure. Someone Ibuki didn't know about. Was he supposed to ask? Ibuki surely didn't need to know, but he got the feeling Chrono wanted to be asked. They way he'd become jittery in his responses had yet another layer of implications.

“...Who was it?” Ibuki asked, tired.

“Right. So... you gotta promise me you won't tell anyone about this.” Always a good start, Ibuki thought. He wondered if he'd regret this.

“I promise.” Ibuki probably wouldn't have told anyone either way.

“So. This was in the summer, two years ago...” Chrono started his story, and Ibuki didn't know what to expect. “Do you... remember when you invited me to that event at the Dragon Empire branch? I'd started school but, you invited me?”

“Wait,” Ibuki hadn't expected the story to take such a turn. “When was this?”

“It was in May, I think?” I had merely been one of many such events. Maybe a little bigger than average, but that was the Dragon Empire branch for you. “It was like, a late night event with some catering, and you had some of the clan leaders do those exhibition games.”

Ibuki tried to place it in his memory.

“Anyway,” Chrono continued. “You'd asked me to come. But in the end you were too busy so I couldn't see you. Shion and Tokoha were gonna be there too... but Shion, I don't know, I think he left before I could really talk to him. And Tokoha couldn't make it.”

“I... I see.” Ibuki wasn't fully sure where this was going.

“But, uh, Kazuma was there. I'd asked him if he could make it, but he could only stick around for a bit.” Chrono paused almost a bit ominously.

“Yes?” Ibuki asked, growing a little impatient.

“He uh... brought his brother with him.” Chrono tried to causal when he said it. It didn't work.

Fatigued, Ibuki still wasn't very surprised. “You slept with him.”

“I... I did,” Nervosity seeped into his voice, yet Chrono didn't hide anything. “I did, but... it's not like I planned to? It just... I mean, I won't say it just happened, but...”

Ibuki had little trouble imagining it. It would be wrong to say it bothered him, but as he glanced at Chrono who appeared a little self-conscious with his life choices, Ibuki heard Kamui’s issued warning echo in his head. It was too late, he realized then. Ibuki's image of Chrono had already shifted, even if barely. Maybe he shouldn't be surprised. Ibuki if anyone knew what Chrono was capable of. Did he do it on purpose? Probably not. Regardless, wherever he went, there would always be someone charmed by Chrono. In the dullness of his mind, Ibuki was slow to realize this included himself.

“Look, it was like...” Chrono was still in the midst of justifying his actions. Ibuki didn’t really need to hear it, but listened with a certain amount of curiosity. “We hadn't seen each other in a pretty long time. He'd been out of the country so we had lots to catch up on. And it turned out he wasn't doing
so well... he was back home because of some family stuff, and was really messed up about it.”

Ibuki didn't know Kazumi like Chrono did. Well, he most certainly didn't, considering what he'd just learned. Ibuki still hadn't been unable to avoid hearing about his unfavorable relationship with his family.

“So, in the end, he got pretty drunk. I helped him get out of there okay. He'd had a fight with his dad and didn't want to go back home, so he'd been staying at a hotel. I asked him several times if he wanted me to call Kazuma for him but he declined every time, ’cause he didn't want to worry him.” Chrono sighed at the memory. “I stuck around to make sure he didn't do anything stupid. He sobered up after a while... and we stayed up talking for the longest time. And, well…”

“And you slept with him.” Ibuki filled in.

“Yeah…” Chrono admitted. “It was really awkward the next day, he kept apologizing to me, saying he liked me but that he wasn't really in the position for a relationship, and saying how Kazuma was gonna kill him if he found out.”

Ibuki felt bad as he was unable to completely strangle the laugh that escaped him. “Would he?”

“Look, if anything he'd be pissed with me,” Chrono didn't sound very uncertain. “Like, at least with the circumstances. Either way,” Chrono drew a breath. “It'd be super weird. So we both decided we wouldn't tell anyone, and just, move on like nothing happened. Which well. Didn't go that well, considering... we hooked up again the following weekend, but... after that, we decided it would be final between us.”

Ibuki had naturally never been in that position himself, but he assumed “moving on like nothing happened” wasn't something that was actually possible. Or if it was, it took considerable effort.

“So like. Don't tell anyone, okay?” Chrono repeated his request from before.

“I won't.” It wasn't something Ibuki could see himself casually bringing up in a conversation, anyway. “So don't worry.”

Another red light. They were minutes away from home, now. Ibuki looked at Chrono, who saw his smile, and worked himself up. “What?” He asked, pointedly.

“I can't believe Katsuragi was right about you.”

“Excuse me?” Baffled, Chrono turned sharply in his seat. “How could you say that?”

Again, Ibuki tried, and failed to stifle a laugh. Chrono sunk into his seat. “I'm too tired for this.” He said, throwing his head back. “I wish we were home already.”

“It's just a few more minutes.” Ibuki reassured him. Getting home from the restaurant had taken a lot longer than they'd both expected.

“It’s so late.” Chrono complained. “Maybe we should have left earlier.”

“You could have told me in that case...” Ibuki said quietly.

“I tried... hinting at it, but I guess I should've been more obvious about it.”

Ibuki hadn't been aware of that. “You did?”

“Yeah?” Chrono looked at him. When a second passed, and Ibuki still didn't get it, Chrono leaned
towards him for a bit, placing his hand on his leg.

“You could've just... said something.” Ibuki said quietly, a little put off.

“Oh yeah?” Chrono asked sarcastically. “I should have just said, ‘Can we go home? It's getting late and I want to have sex’ in front of everyone.”

Ibuki barely sighed. “I... I guess not.”

Chrono’s hand had slipped off him, and he turned to sulking a little by the window. In a way, it was refreshing to see him like this. He'd been fairly wound up lately. Tonight, Chrono had been as upfront and emotional as he ever was.

“It's late but, after we get home... if you want to, we could still...” Ibuki fumbled a little with the words, staring ahead.

“We could.” Chrono said, quietly.

Ibuki had reflected on it many times before, and thus it was like a shortcut in his brain. Right now was not the time to bring it up though, lest of all. However, the question still occurred to him. Were they having too much sex? He knew Chrono had told him not to worry about it, but it was still something he thought about. Surely it was just the stress, but as of late, he'd felt some of his old problems coming back to haunt him. He'd yet to bring it up, hoping it would pass. Either way, he knew Chrono had noticed. He'd mull over it, but his thoughts came to halt as he felt Chrono's hot breath on his ear.

“We could... if you want to.”

Ibuki felt the inside of his mouth singe with anticipation, as he felt a searing heat rise gently from his gut.

“I was thinking you weren't gonna be in the mood after all that went down tonight.”

Ibuki turned his head, and they were face to face. “I suppose I wasn't, but...” His voice was a whisper. In the back of his mind, he still thought of the appointment he had to make with Miwa and Kai. Chrono leaned close to him, and Ibuki felt his breath, then his lips, on the skin of his neck. “But when you say you want to, it's hard to... hard to ignore.”

As Chrono kissed him a little harder, Ibuki felt him exhale deeply, inhaling his scent. In his light-headed state, he barely flinched at the sound of a car horn behind them, ripping through the comfortable silence of the night. The stoplight had turned green a second ago.

Slowly, Ibuki tore himself away, glaring at the car behind them in the rear view mirror. With an amused expression, Chrono sat back properly in his seat, and Ibuki felt his eyes on him. Their long night wasn't over just yet.
Wednesday night I was working on a future chapter that contains some dialogue referencing the circumstances of Chrono's family before his mother's death. I thought to myself "It's fine, I can write whatever I want because we'll never know what things were like back then anyhow." Then I went to bed early to wake up for the Bushiroad TCG product stream which proceed to reveal an anime season set during that exact time period.

(Also, I'll able to keep updating bi-weekly for now, so updates should keep coming up Fridays once every 2 weeks.)

Mikuru was back home, and the apartment was thus brighter, livelier than usual. Outside, rain was hanging in the air, and as the afternoon turned into evening, the clouds kept on amassing, heavy in the sky. A haze covered Sumida, obscuring the tall, high-reaching buildings where they stood, and even the rainbow lights of the sky tree struggled to shine through the thick fog. Chrono had spent most the day shut away in his room with his books, but unable to concentrate and growing increasingly restless, he eventually felt as if though he was going to suffocate. Putting on a jacket, and getting into his shoes, Mikuru caught him on his way out. Without really thinking, he said he was taking a walk.

Outside, the stuffy air was at least cold, helping to relieve the headache he'd suffered from as a result of the accumulating tension in his body. Chrono didn't get very far. Though he walked the streets without a plan, he still ended up by the river. The thoughts in his mind felt as if though they were crushing him, and his head felt unbearably heavy on his shoulders. A light sprinkle of rain was falling as he stood by the railing, staring into his phone. A few minutes passed. He'd thought things couldn't get much worse, but they had. At some point, it had to be enough.

He'd hesitated until the last moment, but once he finally heard the signals going out, he felt his heart come to a hesitant rest.

"Hello? Chrono?"

He'd lost his voice at some point down the line.

"H-hey..." As the weak response left him, Chrono realized how transparent he was.

"Hey, what's up?" Hesitation, or perhaps, confusion. "Are you okay?"

"I guess... I guess not." He replied. Chrono hadn't thought of what to say. He usually didn't have to
think too hard about how to express himself. When he was at a loss for words, it could be hard for him to handle.

“What's wrong?” Tokoha was now worried. “Did something happen?”

“I...” The chain of events from the past weeks, months, and the past year rushed through Chrono's mind so fast he felt faint. “I guess.”

“...Do you wanna talk?” He could hear by her quiet surroundings that she was at home.

He did. That's why he'd called. Yet, there was something, something holding him back. He knew he couldn't give in to it. “Do you think... we could meet up?”

“Sure.” Tokoha didn't hesitate to say so, despite sounding unprepared. “Of course. Where are you?”

“I'm by the river.” Chrono raised his face to the drizzling rain. The sensation on his face eased his heart. Tokoha was coming to see him.

“We're just about to have dinner, but I should be able to head out. Where do you wanna meet?” Chrono hadn't thought that far, so even when Tokoha asked him, he wasn't sure.

“I... I dunno.” He felt sick, rather than hungry. Despite this, Chrono knew he should eat.

“How about the yakiniku restaurant at station department store? We should be able to talk there.”

“Sure.” It was private enough, though perhaps a little pricey. Chrono didn't really care.

“Head over there, I'll throw on some clothes in the meantime. Do you want me to call Shion?” Tokoha was taking matters into her own hands, and it made the situation so much more bearable.

“Yeah...” Chrono wanted to see him, too. “Call... call Shion.”

“I will. I'll hang up now, okay? And see you in a minute?”

“Yeah. I'll be... heading over there.” Chrono decided to pull himself together. “And let me know what Shion says, okay?”

“I will.”

It was still raining lightly when they hung up. Chrono lingered by the river for about a minute, watching the dark waters. Setting one foot in front of the other, he slowly made his way along the walkway. Talking a walk could clear one's head. So far he'd mostly tried to distract himself, but that wasn't working. Tokoha, and hopefully also Shion, were coming to see him. The knowledge of that made it possible for him to remain empty-headed for a while, his anxieties in suspension. It was a November evening with a decent chill in the air. He'd worn only a light jacket, but the cold didn't bother him.

He'd asked to be seated in the restaurant, ending up in a seat in one of the window booths. It was a slow evening, with only a few other patrons. Quietly, he'd politely ordered some drinks. He guessed that Tokoha probably wanted a beer. He started reading the menu but felt disinterested. It was probably best to leave the decision to Tokoha, anyway. The grill was already warm, the waitress turning it on as she'd taken his order. The steam on the window obscured the view outside, but in the silent ambience of the near-empty restaurant, Chrono could hear it rained harder.

Tokoha didn't take very long. Chrono heard her sharp voice at the counter beyond the partition walls.
She came in walking briskly, her umbrella still half open and dripping wet. She found him quickly in the empty restaurant. Chrono raised his face from his hand, and looking at her he knew he looked miserable. With a huff, she sighed, and let her arms fall to her sides.

“What's with that face, huh?” She asked him, troubled, sweetness in her voice.

Chrono dragged himself out of his seat, and to a standing. She hugged him, and he let her, returning the embrace lightly.

“Did you order yet?” Tokoha had sat down across of him.

“Just some drinks.” Chrono replied. “It should be in soon.”

“I see.” Tokoha hadn't given him much time, after all. “I talked to Shion. He has some family thing going on.” Tokoha was looking into her phone. Of course he did, Chrono thought. Whenever did he not? “He said he was gonna come up with an excuse to get out of there as soon as possible, though.”

Knowing that he was on his way was more than enough. “He'll be a while. He said we should get some food in the meantime.” Tokoha put her phone away. Chrono felt detached, looking out the window.

As Tokoha looked at him, the blatant concern on her face felt jarring. Tokoha was not above worrying, but she was usually good at taking things in stride. “So. What's wrong?” She asked him, head on. He knew she would.

Chrono couldn't stop himself from sighing as he rubbed his face with his hand.

“It's not about school, is it?”

If only.

“No...” Chrono replied to her somewhat poignantly. “It's not about school.”

The way Tokoha had asked insinuated she'd already known that. “Then, what is it?” She asked him, a bit more carefully. “Is it... your dad?”

“It's not.” Chrono had though about him. Surely not in the way Tokoha had expected, however.

“It's...” When Tokoha had paused, resorting to simply waiting, Chrono knew he had to explain himself. “It's kinda... complicated. I probably should've told you sooner. But I didn't 'cause, well, I've been...”

“You've been what?” Tokoha asked. She stared at him quite hard.

In truth, he'd been quite self-conscious, if not outright embarrassed. Chrono didn't feel like making that aspect of his feelings the focal point right now, though. It was best to approach this in a practical way. “You know when you threw that surprise party for my birthday?”

“Yeah. Of course I remember.”

“Right.” Chrono pushed onward. “You know how... you invited Ibuki to come, right?”

“Yes?” Tokoha was starting to get a little confused. Chrono wished she'd be a bit more patient. “Should we not have?”

She asked the question as if it was absurd. Chrono felt awful. He felt awful, because his friends
hadn't known anything about what had gone down. He'd barely even mentioned a single word about anything. It occurred to him now as he thought of it, but his relationship with Ibuki had always been like that. Whatever conflicts or bonding that'd ever happened between them had usually been only been known between the two of them. In truth, he'd known. He'd known, but he'd never quite expected that fact to become an obstacle to this degree.

“No. I... I was glad you did.” Chrono had a notion that, in the grand matter of things, it hadn't made much difference. “It'd been a while... since I saw him.”

It'd been a while since he'd seen everyone. Chrono knew his comment didn't make any sense on its own.

“Yeah?” Tokoha asked him. Chrono knew he was bad at this, and naturally he dreaded Tokoha's reaction, but fatigued with the situation beyond reason, Chrono lost the ability to care.

“He... he went home with me after that.” Chrono only managed a non-committal shrug. “So, that-”

Chrono hadn't meant to say much else, but Tokoha regardless didn't give him a chance. “Wait...” Tokoha stared at him, her voice shaking. "What?"

Looking away, Chrono didn't have the energy to keep the guilt off his face. He'd clammed up, his lips refusing to move. He knew however, as dread consumed him, that his silence spoke volumes. Tokoha stared at him, appalled.

“You... you slept with him?!” Tokoha pushed herself forward in her seat, her voice a raw, hushed whisper. “You-you slept with---”

“Y-yeah, I...” Under her stare, Chrono couldn't help but feel intimidated. He'd paled, his voice weak. “I guess?”

“You guess?” Raising her voice, Tokoha was in a state of utter disbelief.

“What?” A little offended, Chrono found himself hooked on technicalities. “You want details?”

For a second, Tokoha looked like maybe she did. She let it go. “W-why? Why would you...” She focused on the big picture.

How in the world was he supposed to answer that? “I... I like him?”

“You like him?!” This was somehow the more shocking of his claims. “You like him.” Tokoha crossed her arms. “Since when do you like him?”

Chrono felt the world around him spin. “I... I don't know?” The question had shook him quite hard. “Since high school?”

“You've liked him since high school?” Tokoha was bewildered, in shock. Chrono put his face in his hands.

“I... I guess so?” He responded, meekly. In reality, it was yet another complex matter. Chrono was frankly not certain when, when he had started feeling this way. Right now, he wasn't very eager to elaborate on that.

“And now you slept with him.” Tokoha was still processing the information. “Does Shion know?”

“Shion doesn't know.” Chrono hadn't told anyone.
“He doesn’t know you like him or he doesn’t know you slept with him?”

“He... he knows neither.” Chrono in general talked a bit more to Shion about the details regarding any of his relationships, which was something Tokoha didn’t blame him for. It wasn’t a matter of closeness or trust, and she knew there were things Chrono preferred to talk to her about as well.

“And, well,” Chrono hesitated. He knew he had to correct her assumptions. “I... I did... or---”

He inhaled, bracing.

“It’s less that I slept with him, and more...” Chrono sighed. He wanted to get this over with. She’d jumped to conclusions, conclusions he had to correct. “More that I’ve been... sleeping... with him.”

Tokoha looked at him. Rising slowly in her seat, she pulled herself back up against the backrest. Her hand fell on to the table as lightly formed fist, and as her head had fallen back, her eyes were directed at the ceiling. The waitress arrived with their drinks. As she served them, the odd, deathly quiet atmosphere tipped her off. Chrono gave her a very quiet thanks. She nodded and left without a word.

“Were you planning to tell us?” Tokoha asked, well after the waitress had disappeared. She wasn't looking at Chrono. She stared out the window, as if she'd suddenly noticed the rain falling.

“I...” What was the point in lying? Just to make her feel better? Tokoha would be able to see right through him anyway. Chrono shrugged. “Not really, no.”

“So, since your birthday, you’ve been...?”

“Yeah.”

“So you've been going out?” Tokoha finished her thoughts. “Like, dating?”

Had they been dating? Tokoha saw him doubt himself, hesitating to answer, and Chrono wished it didn't have to be that way. “I... I dunno.”

“You don’t know?” Tokoha asked him pointedly.

Chrono knew it had to sound bad. He didn't like that, but he couldn't bear to be anything but honest. “We went out. A few times. But we mostly just, you know...”

“Slept together?” She filled him in quietly, turning her head to look at him.

Chrono didn't respond. He didn't really need to. He sighed into his hand, his eyes sliding tightly shut. “I... I assumed... thing were gonna pan out. I mean, we talked... and, I... felt like, like... we were on the same page.”

“I’m going to assume something happened?” Tokoha was usually bright, straightforward. With age, she'd gained a poignant, almost cynical side. Chrono wasn't used to being on the receiving end of it.

Leaning back in his seat, crossing his arms, Chrono knew Tokoha saw him blink repeatedly as his vision became misted. He'd already cried, but it didn't seem like he'd had the last of that just yet. Tokoha exhaled the tension that’d built inside her. She leaned forward slightly, and spoke to him more warmly. “Chrono, what happened?”

“I’m not sure.” He'd collected himself, refusing to cry. This time, Tokoha didn’t try to fill him in. “Things were good as far as I could tell. I mean, he was... I guess, still warming up to the idea of us, but I didn't wanna push him, so...”
“What do you mean?” Tokoha sounded concerned.

Chrono had to think, he actually had to try to think. Rewind, and reconsider. This last week had made things all too twisted in his mind. “It felt to me like he just needed time. Like, we rushed things and he needed time to process it. It seemed like he had a lot of things on his mind, but it didn't worry me that much because I felt like... we connected and... and, that... we were good together. You know?”

Tokoha didn't look like she fully knew.

“So, then, about a week ago,” It had been a Friday night, today was a Wednesday. “We were spending the night together, again. Mikuru was... abroad, and she only just got home again the other day. He'd had some work... nearby, so we thought we'd meet up at my place, I'd made us some dinner... we had a good time. He seemed tired, but... like, he often is at the end of the week. So I didn't really think about it. It didn't get too late. We went to bed, we... we had sex. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. He acted like he'd missed me. He... he was a little quiet but, I didn't really... think much of it.”

If Ibuki went quiet, it could mean something was wrong. It could also mean he was just tired, or that there wasn't anything in particular that he wanted to talk about. He wasn't as quiet or as reserved as other people might think. If anything, Chrono thought Ibuki had developed a rather healthy relationship with socializing. He did as much as he wanted, as much as he had the energy for. Being around people could burn him out, but it wasn't necessarily because he disliked it. Chrono knew he was just a bit sensitive.

“I was tired, so I fell asleep pretty fast... and I'd assumed he did too. Sometime late though, he got up.” Retelling it felt absurd. Chrono wasn't sure where the different points connected, or where he was being overly analytical. “It was kinda hard not to notice. ‘Cause we shared my bed. I didn't think anything of it, like he was probably just gonna use the bathroom or get a drink or something.”

His voice had grown sullen. With Tokoha still watching him, he was surprisingly apt. His need to resolve what had happened was surfacing. “I almost fell back to sleep. Or maybe I did, I'm not sure. I dunno how long he was up for, to be honest. At same point, I came to, and I realized he hadn't gotten back to bed. I thought it was weird, so I got a little worried...”

“Yeah?” Tokoha asked him after a moment's silence.

Chrono's guarded appearance had deteriorated. His vision was less focused. He was remembering, more vividly than he'd previously allowed himself, the events of that early morning.

“I tried talking to him, but he wouldn't really say much to me. At least not at first. He started saying he had to go... I just said, you know, let's go back to bed. We can talk in the morning. But he wouldn't really listen. I got worried at this point, 'cause he seemed really upset.” Chrono let his eyes fall back down on the table top. Neither him nor Tokoha had touched their drinks. “I mean, I... I guess I got upset too. I really hate it when he won't talk to me, and he knows that.”

Chrono had scrutinized himself. Maybe he could've done a better job of getting through to him. Tokoha looked at him, uncertainly.

“Anyway,” Tiredly, Chrono tried to pick up where he'd left. It was a little hard, because he felt himself constantly becoming distracted. “I... I pushed him to talk to me, and he... well. He said he thought things weren't working out, basically. That he couldn't...”

It'd become a bit hard to speak. Chrono inhaled, slowly. “That he couldn't... do this any more. By
which I guess he meant, be with me. So that... really hurt to hear. But at that point I still thought I
could talk to him.” Chrono shrugged. He knew there were still about a thousand things Tokoha
didn't know. It proved to complicate things.

“I asked him why it had to be like that. Since I mean, whatever was bothering him we could
probably work out.” Chrono felt himself becoming increasingly detached from the story. As strange
as it felt, it made it a bit easier to tell it. “But he didn't really want to hear that. He said it wasn't right
of him. He said he was just... using me.”

Saying those words now, they didn't make any more sense than when he'd first heard them. Chrono
had fallen into silence, expecting Tokoha to have something to say. “He said that?” She sounded like
she didn't know what to believe. Which, as far as she knew, was a perhaps the only reasonable
reaction.

“Yeah.” As let up as he sounded, Chrono's voice was breaking. His memory of the conversation
they'd had was fuzzy, and with all the reflecting he'd done, surely it had become twisted as well. He
did remember those words however. He remembered them clearly. “He did.”

Tokoha looked uncomfortable, like Chrono feared she would. “I thought it was... pretty absurd of
him to say, so, I barely even knew what to say to him. I got mad 'cause I thought, if he was gonna
say things like that he better explain himself. And,” Chrono sighed deeply. For a while, he'd
physically felt the tears pressing hard to fall behind his eyes. “And he started... talking about my dad,
and...”

He struggled to fight it, but as his lips trembled, a sob escaped him. “And h-how he couldn't do this
to him after he'd promised him... he was gonna like, look after me and... like this, he was just gonna
hurt me, and...”

The tears had started running down his cheeks in a slow, steady stream. Chrono heard Tokoha sigh,
quietly. She reached out across the table, and Chrono took the hint. He relaxed in his seat, and let his
arm lay out on the table. She held his hand gently.

“He promised that?” Tokoha asked him, very quietly.

“Yeah, like,” Chrono spoke mockingly, irritated, even as his voice was colored by tears. “I don't
know? Some ten years ago?”

He didn't know exactly how long it'd been, he just knew it was before he and Ibuki ever even met.

“It just...” Chrono squeezed his eyes shut. “It just really hurts. That he'd say that, ‘cause... like, why
does he care? About the opinion of... someone who barely even knows either of us.”

Tokoha looked at him, her mouth a thin line. Chrono dried his tears. They'd mostly stopped, but he
felt like they could start falling again at any time. After a moment of collecting himself, Chrono
continued his story. “I let him know I thought he was crazy, but... again, he wouldn't really listen. In
the end, I couldn't keep him from leaving.”

“Do you think... he had any reason to say those things?” Tokoha asked him, very carefully.

Her tone tipped him off. Chrono frowned hard. He knew, his instinct was to jump in defense of his
own perspective. Tokoha knew the same. Adverting his eyes, Chrono said nothing.

“I mean, you said... things were still a bit in the air about your relationship.” She could have been a
lot of more blunt. “So maybe he was right to feel like he was using you.”
“Look,” Chrono, as upset as he was, tried to collect his madly scattered thoughts. “It’d only been so long. How am I supposed to know?”

In reality, he wanted nothing more than to deny it. Ibuki wasn’t capable of something like that. That was his firm stance on the matter, but he was also aware of the reality of the situation. As Chrono sniffled, once more drying his tears, Tokoha handed him her napkin. That was when her phone started ringing. It was Shion.

“Hello?” Tokoha picked up. “Yeah, the top floor. It's just across from the elevators. We're in the back... Okay. Alright, see you.”

“He's here?” Chrono asked her, quietly. His voice was still stained with tears.

“Yeah,” Tokoha laid the phone back down on the table. “Any minute.”

Chrono didn't make much of an effort to collect himself. Tokoha drank some of the beer Chrono had ordered her, and glanced at the menu. They'd yet been asked to make any orders. Lucky that, because it wasn't as if they would've been able to.

Shion did arrive after a few short minutes. He came through the entrance purposefully, somehow untouched by a single drop of rain despite the pouring outside. He was dressed up, his eyes alert and his hair shining. They needed not to call out for him, he'd easily spotted them.

“Hey,” Tokoha had greeted him first. Shion's eyes had stuck to Chrono, who's climbed back up in his seat with his arms crossed. Though his cheeks were no longer wet, it was pretty easy to tell he'd been crying. “Hope it wasn't to too tough to get back here?”

“Are you kidding?” Shion sounded humored. “I was happy to leave.”

She would've gotten up to greet him, normally. Right now, things weren't exactly normal. “Right.”

“How are you, huh? What's going on?” Shion sat down next to Chrono. In all emotional matters except for his own, Shion was usually cool and tactical. His familiar, casual tone put Chrono at ease.

“Things aren't so good with him.” Tokoha said, smiling sadly.

“Come here.” Shion pulled him into a hug. Chrono let Shion hold him tight, weakly returning the embrace. As they pulled away, Chrono again took the napkin Tokoha had given him. Though Shion's arrival had helped him feel a bit more at ease, it'd caused a few stray tears to escape him. Honestly, at this point, he was tired of crying. More so when he saw it concerned Shion, who'd then surely realized how upset he was. Chrono rarely cried, after all. In all the years they'd known each other, he'd hardly ever cried in front of them. Last time now was when he'd failed his university entrance exams some three years ago.

“Chrono, what happened?” Having had a little time to digest the situation, Shion had changed his tone.

Tired, Chrono gestured to Tokoha. “Do you mind?”

“You want me to tell him?” Tokoha sounded uncertain.

Chrono didn't want to do it all over again. “Sure.”

Leaning out of his seat, Shion alerted them to the approaching waitress. Aware of the emotionally loaded situation, she appeared professional. “Are you ready to order?”
“You didn't order anything?” Shion sounded a little surprised.

“We were waiting for you.” Tokoha said. “We were hoping you'd take care of it.”

Shion smiled. “I see. Why not?”

After getting something to drink for himself, he ordered them a meat platter, one of the nicer ones. Then, a smaller shellfish platter.

“Could we... maybe get some vegetables, too?” Chrono had interjected quietly, just as Shion was about confirm the order. He was unable to stop himself from keeping their indulgences in check.

“Oh. Of course.” Shion grinned, even as Chrono wouldn't look at either of them. Shion scrolled through the pages of the menu. “Like my friend here suggested, could we get a vegetable platter as well?”

With their order taken, the waitress left. Tokoha looked at Chrono. “Do you really want me to tell him?”

“Would you?” He sounded drained.

Tokoha sighed. “Chrono's, well,” She barely hesitated. She looked at Shion. “He's been sleeping with Ibuki.”

Chrono knew Tokoha's bluntness would surely do well in simplifying his story. Actually hearing it was a different matter. “What?” Sharp and unfiltered was Shion's reaction. Chrono felt himself sink deeper into his seat, his lips tightly shut together. “Really?”

Chrono wished Shion could've done something to hide his amusement, though he wasn't sure if he had the right to demand that.

Chrono felt Shion's eyes on him even has he'd looked away. “You really slept with him?” Shion sounded amazed. “Since when?”

Shion let his eyes dart from Chrono, back to Tokoha. “They went home together after that birthday party we threw.”

“You really went for it, huh?” Shion's words made Chrono want to crawl out of his skin, mostly because he couldn't deny them. He had indeed gone for it, without an ounce of hesitation. “You slept with him, just like that?”

Chrono had sighed deeply, eyes wide in reaction to Shion's words. “I... I didn't--” It was too late before he'd realized his mistake.

“You didn't what? Sleep with him?” Shion could talk about these matters freely without shame, and Chrono knew. “Then what happened?”

“I--” It was faster to just be honest. “I blew him, okay? If you have to know.”

Shion looked a little too pleased. Meanwhile, Tokoha gave him an awkward side eye. She sipped her drink, trying to hide her grin.

“And since then, you've been what? Hooking up with him?” Shion was ruthlessly on the mark.

Chrono managed a shrug. “Yeah. I guess.” He said, quietly.
“Chrono’s liked him since high school.” Tokoha, unlike Shion, made an effort to not sound amused. Chrono was glad he indeed hadn’t elaborated on that.

“Really, huh?” Shion smiled at him, adoringly, and Chrono frankly didn’t care for it. He was still holding the napkin Tokoha had passed onto him, and now as his face was heating up, he gripped it hard.

“Are you done?” He asked, bitterly. “Are you finished?”

“So? What happened?” Shion asked him, shifting his tone. Chrono couldn’t deny he felt less wound up with the change in conversation. Despite everything, their teasing contributed to a feeling of normalcy. They’d both seen him crying, and they’d both made him stop.

“He broke up with me.” Chrono admitted, quietly. “Though, I mean. I guess we weren't dating in the first place. Or maybe we were. I don’t know.”

“It can be like that sometimes.” Shion was reassuring with the confidence in his own statement. “It's not always so clean cut. It can still really hurt.”

“Yeah, I... I mean...” Chrono let his gaze rest on the table top. “We hadn't been seeing each other for that long. But I really like him, so...”

“You do, huh?” Tokoha asked him.

Pained, Chrono sighed. “Yeah. I do. And even now, I'm just... worrying about him. I'm still not sure why he'd do this.”

“What do you mean?” Shion asked.

“He'd been a bit reserved around me, but I thought he was just shy. He’d said some things, like he didn't know exactly how to... approach our relationship. But I really just got the feeling he needed some time.” Perhaps he should feel naive for thinking that. Chrono had already scrutinized himself over and over. “So it was still... really sudden. And more so confusing because it didn't sound like it was something he wanted.”

“It didn't sound like something he wanted?” Tokoha repeated what he'd said, skeptical.

“Yeah like...” Chrono wasn't sure how he should explain it. “Like he did it because he thought it was something he should do, not ’cause he actually wanted it.” Chrono knew it sounded only like his own wishful thinking. “But what do I know.”

“I mean, it sounds to me like he felt bad.” Tokoha reasoned. “Which would make sense, if you really were just sleeping together and he felt like he couldn't commit.”

“I... I don't...” Chrono didn't want to believe that. He didn't, as plausible as it sounded.

“I mean... he said it himself. That he was just using you.”

Tokoha had said it very quietly, and Chrono had looked away once more.

“He said that?” Shion asked. He sounded astonished, if not intrigued.

“He did, but...” Chrono groaned. “He's an idiot. So I dunno if it's true.”

A moment’s silence, and Chrono looked up to both Shion and Tokoha watching him doubtfully. He knew they had to think he was in denial. “Chrono...” Tokoha spoke to him carefully, leaning in, her
gentle voice addressing him almost as if she was speaking to a child. “Do you really believe that?”

Chrono felt his heart sink deep into his gut. He felt sick. “I... I don't know.” He told her, rawly earnest. “I really...” He swallowed hard. “I really don't know.”

Chrono reached into the truth he still clung to. “I don't think he'd do that. I really don't.” The tears threatened to come again. “We... we were good together. He made himself really vulnerable to me.”

Chrono sniffed. He felt Shion's hand on his shoulder. Tokoha took his hand again, like she had before. “We know Ibuki, and I don't think he seems like the type, either. But you're our number one priority, you know?”

“I... I know.” Chrono didn't blame them. He knew they just cared, and he knew he would do the same.

“We're always gonna be hard on any guy you date, you know? Even if it's Ibuki.” Shion said, and Chrono couldn't help but smile, if weakly.

“By the sounds of it, he's made himself deserving of it.” Tokoha filled in.

“I'm... I'm mad at him too, honestly.” Chrono admitted. “Mostly because I feel like he's just... being dramatic about all this, and refusing to talk to me. Like, all the things he's said to me, too. It sounds so... cliché and rehearsed.”

“When did this happen, anyway?” Shion still hadn't been filled in, completely.

“Little under a week ago.” Chrono simplified. “I tried... texting him and calling him a few times, but he wouldn't respond.” He'd considered trying to go see him, at work or otherwise, but once he'd gone over it, it'd felt like a genuinely awful idea. They would just make a scene.

“I'm... expecting him to... talk to me, eventually.” As he'd said that, Chrono saw the waitress once more, returning with the food they'd ordered. His voice quieted. “He can't keep quiet forever. Sooner or later, he's gonna have to say something.”

Shion and Tokoha didn't appear to disagree with that. They were served their food, and Shion his drink, and with a short exchange, the waitress left. Tokoha wasted no time loading some meat on the grill. Shion went for some prawns, whereas Chrono settled for watching them.

“Things have been... a little turbulent between us, I guess. Already before all this.” Chrono knew that at this point, he owed them the full story.

“Turbulent?” Shion asked.

“Yeah...” Chrono said quietly, with another sigh. “All winter and spring he wouldn't even talk to me. And this after we were really close last year, spending all this time together. Honestly, I thought... I thought something would happen between us already back then. But it never did.”

“You had something going on?” Tokoha asked, tearing her eyes from the meat that was cooking up. Chrono thought back. Looking at it now, it felt all the more obvious. “Yeah.” He breathed. It was satisfying to admit, even after the year that had passed. “We did. But nothing came out of it.”

“Why not?” Shion asked a very good question.

Chrono rested his head in his hand. “I dunno. I guess I could've come on to him stronger.” He'd been
a bit too scared, in the end. That much was clear to him now, too. “I guess I was waiting for him to drop some bigger hints. In the end, he dropped me instead.”

“He dropped you?” Tokoha asked. Chrono knew he wasn't painting Ibuki in a very favorable light. Maybe that was what he deserved.

“Around December, he stopped talking to me.” Chrono said sullenly. “For the most part, anyway. I didn't see him until spring, and then it was for Kai and Aichi's reception.”

Tokoha and Shion were staring at him again. “Yeah, I know.” Chrono groaned. “It hasn't been a great year. He apologized, said how he'd been unwell and really busy and... implying he wouldn't have been very fun to be around or something. Which kinda hurts to hear, too. Like I'd stop wanting to see him just because things aren't peachy.”

“It sounds to me like he has some unresolved issues.” Shion surely wasn't aware how much of an understatement that was. Chrono slumped further in his seat.

“I say you should ignore him. Let him come crawling back to you when he wants to explain himself.” Tokoha said stubbornly.

Chrono wished he could share her easy-going approach. “...It's not that simple with him.”

“Is it not that simple, or are you complicating it?” Shion asked.

“Look...” Chrono hoped what he'd say next wouldn't be misinterpreted. “You don't know him like I do, okay?”

“Sure we don't, but the question is what difference it makes.” Shion was grounded in his remark.

“What I mean is, I don't... want him to suffer for what he did. I'm sure he already does, anyway. I just... want him to talk to me. I just want us to sort things out.” Chrono couldn't be sure about Ibuki's motives, but he knew the person who was the hardest on Ibuki was always Ibuki himself. “Whatever's making him act like this, I'm not sure. But I know he's not okay.”

“Chrono...” Tokoha spoke to him calmly. “He's hurt you. Either way, it's not your responsibility to take care of him.”

“I'm not saying it is...” Chrono felt his voice break again. He knew it wasn't his responsibility, but he absolutely wanted it to be. It was so hard to let go. “It's just... I care, okay? I care, and I want things to work out.”

Thankfully, neither Shion nor Tokoha said anything to that.

“Besides,” Chrono sniffled again. “He's always come through for me. In the end.”

The food was sizzling away, and in the silent ambience of the restaurant, Chrono's words appeared to linger. Again, Tokoha and Shion didn't know, not about the things that had happened years before. “He did always... look after me. Even when it didn't seem like he was.” He said, once again drying a few tears. “And when he did something wrong... he always apologized. He... recognized what he'd done and he'd apologize and make up for it.”

Chrono still remembered, clearly.

“When he said he didn't want to hurt me, I know he was telling the truth.” Chrono said weakly. “He wasn't just saying that.”
“He said that?” Shion asked him, as he took his prawns of the grill. They’d turned a pleasant shade of pink.

“Yeah,” A faint smile came on to his lips. “He did. Because he's... an idiot.”

“Well, he sure did a good job of that.” Tokoha commented. Chrono couldn't help but laugh bitterly.

“I guess.”

“Aren't you gonna eat?” Tokoha asked him. She was checking her beef.

Chrono knew he should eat something, but he didn't have much of an appetite. “I should...”

“Here.” She put two of her meat slices on his plate. “You look exhausted, some meat will do you good.”

“Would you like some seafood?” Shion asked him courteously, but did not wait for an answer before loading some on Chrono's plate.

“Oh, I'm sorry, but,” Tokoha's excited voice cut through to them. “This is so good!”

“Really?” Shion said, unsurprised.

Chrono grabbed his chopsticks, and had a bite of meat. It was indeed tasty. For a brief moment as he indulged in the taste, his worries felt distant. He realized how hungry he was. When did he last have a proper meal? “Let's... let's put some vegetables on the grill, too...”

“Right.” Tokoha said, laughing.

Perhaps it should come as no surprise, but Chrono did feel better after a square meal. A square meal and having vented his problems, at least. They spoke some of the family gathering Shion had opted out of at the last moment, but they never strayed too long from the original topic of conversation.

“When Tokoha called I was for certain it was something about school.”

“I thought that was it too at first.”

“Look... I wish it would have.” Chrono said to them sourly.

“Why didn't you tell us?” Shion's question was upfront, and too vague.

To this, Chrono allowed himself to sound vaguely irritated. “Tell you about what?”

“That you liked Ibuki all this time?” Tokoha pointed at him sharply with her chopsticks. Shion scoffed lightly, implying it was not what his question had referred to, but that he regardless agreed.

Chrono looked at Tokoha, irritated. “Because I never thought things would end up like this. I mean, I liked him, but it's not like I thought anything would ever happen.” As a teenager, it had been wholly impossible, for multiple reasons.

“You still might've wanted to talk about it with us?” Tokoha has a point, but Chrono didn't want to admit to that.

“You both would've just made fun of me anyway.” Chrono accused them pointedly.

Indeed, they both looked very guilty. Tokoha couldn't muster an excuse, the tension causing her to
“Sure, at first, maybe...” Shion couldn’t wipe the smile off his face, either.

“So you admit it.” Chrono’s stern tone had the opposite effect to what he would’ve liked.

“I’m sorry,” Tokoha said as she tried to collect herself. “But... it... it is a bit funny.”

“What do you like about him?” Shion brought the hard hitting questions. Mentally, Chrono felt himself crawl in under the table.

Exasperated, Chrono sunk into his seat. He sighed tiredly, baring his heart. “He's... he's really hot.”

Shion and Tokoha both allowed themselves a snorty sort of laugh. “Well, at least he has that going for him.” Shion commented dryly. Chrono knew Ibuki was not Shion's type. No, he was into bright-eyed, well-built men with hearts of gold, the type he could easily lead astray yet wholeheartedly adore.

Chrono chewed and swallowed more food. He felt his energy returning, though his bitterness was still seeping into his words. “And I know... I know under all that, there's a truly thoughtful and-and sensible person... who's dedicated and hardworking, and...” He gestured vaguely, his shrouded mind searching for words. “And kind.”

“Chrono...” Tokoha addressed him carefully. “He dumped you.”

“I know.” He hadn't forgotten. He couldn't even if he'd tried. “And I still like him. Okay?”

Tokaoha looked like she'd known he'd say that, and didn't push it any further.

Shion set his drink down, and turned to Chrono. Quietly, he asked him, “What's he like?”

His suggestive tone was enough to make the intended meaning of the question very clear. Chrono felt his life force slowly leaving him.

“I mean, what's he like in b-” Shion had opted to clarify.

“I understood what you meant.” Chrono firmly drowned out Shion's voice.

Rising his gaze to look across of him, Chrono saw Tokoha lean in and look at him curiously, expectantly. While this was not fully unexpected, it wasn't something he'd taken for granted. He probably should have seen this coming.

“Come on.” Shion goaded him. “You can tell us.”

“We're really having this conversation, huh.” Chrono stated, sourly.

“Why not? We've talked about this stuff before.” If Tokoha did understand, she played dumb.

“Do I really have to explain to you why this is different?” Chrono was on edge, but truthfully, they'd chosen a good time to ask if they indeed wanted to know. He had little to lose, little left to hide.

“If it's because we know him, that's not exactly new.” Shion had a point, one Chrono didn't fully agree with.

“Look...” Chrono set his hand down in the table. “If we're gonna talk about this, you gotta promise me... not to tell anyone else. Okay?”
Both Tokoha and Shion strangled bursts of laughter. It didn't make Chrono feel super good in terms of confining in them. He crossed his arms and looked at them disdainfully. “I'm serious.”

“What?” Tokoha managed through her giggling. “What's he got to hide?”

Chrono didn't find it very funny. “Just promise.”

“I promise.” Shion had collected himself. Curiosity won in the end.

Chrono turned to Tokoha. “I promise, I promise.” She said, lightly. When Chrono didn't look very convinced, she calmed herself down. “I do promise. I won't tell.”

As his friends still appeared to need a moment, Chrono waited for it to pass. “So... the thing with him is that...” Chrono refused to look at either of his friends, focusing on his choice of words. “Before me, he was... inexperienced.”

The meat was sizzling away on the grill, next to some bell peppers and shiitake mushrooms. Tokoha was chewing slowly with staring eyes, absorbing the words.

Shion let a light laugh leave him. “Are you trying to tell us he was...” He propped his face in has hand, his smile unreadable. “A virgin?”

Chrono had went out of his way not to use that word. It felt so undignified. It also felt like it shifted the focus to wrong aspect of it all. “Well, yeah, but...” He tried to not get so worked up on Ibuki's behalf.

The words appeared to finally settled in Tokoha's mind. Raising her hand to her mouth, she turned her head away. Chrono could still hear her.

“You don't have to laugh.” He said, dryly.

She struggled to swallow her food. “I'm sorry,” She managed, her voice breaking. “I'm really sorry, it's... it's just...”

“It is pretty funny.” Shion concurred.

Chrono surely would've been more upset with them if he hadn't been so torn up by the situation at large. Maybe it was kind of funny, if he allowed himself to think about it that way. He smiled weakly.

“So?” Shion inquired. “How bad was it?”

He sounded like he assumed it had been awkward. Chrono wasn't sure if he felt that way. For Ibuki, surely it had been. For himself? “It wasn't that bad.” He admitted.

“It wasn't awkward?” Tokoha didn't sound convinced.

“I mean, sort of. I mean, it would kinda have to be.” Chrono watched the grill. He felt his thoughts drift away. “But, I mean... it was... it was special.”

It all came back to him, the deep reaching feeling of sadness in his heart. Chrono shifted his weight on the hand where he rested his head, slumping in his seat. His mind and body felt frozen in time, unable to escape the great unrest, the emotional turmoil that poisoned his mind. Chrono hadn't thought of it before, but he realized in that moment that he was heartbroken. The notion in and of itself seemed to only drag him deeper under the surface. He could smile one moment, but as soon as
he remembered, it would engulf him.

“It was special?” Shion asked him, his voice lightly, if suggestively, tender.

Chrono felt little call to reaffirm his statement further. Shion had done it so well already.

“It sounded to me like you were spending a lot of time together.” Tokoha reconnected to their previous conversation.

“We were.” Chrono confirmed quietly.

“I'm assuming you talked about it?” She didn't need to specify.

“We did. A bit, like... generally, at least.” Chrono had tried to communicate as much as possible, while trying to make the conversations feel natural. He could wonder now how well he'd succeeded.

“It must've been hard on him.” Shion was making assumptions, but he was right to.

“It was.” Chrono replied quietly. “But it felt like... we could pull through. Like we could talk about it. Like he... wanted to... do this whole thing. With me.”

Tokoha was quietly eating. Shion was taking a sip of his drink. Chrono rubbed his face, and allowed himself to sigh. It was still so easy to recall every single little detail. Ibuki's scent, and the curious shine behind his eye. Their kisses, which had been so awkward and fumbling at first. Chrono hadn't cared about any of that, and in whichever capacity that he did care, it was because it had been special. Special, because Ibuki had shared those vulnerable moments with him.

“I don't think I was wrong about that.” Chrono was tired of doubting himself. “So that's why the things he said to me make no sense.”

“It sounds like excuses to me.” Tokoha said, somehow casually.

“It could be.” Shion agreed.

Chrono hadn't though of it quite like that. As much sense as it made, it made no difference as long as Ibuki wouldn't talk to him. “I just... I just hope he tries to talk to me soon.” As mad and as upset as he was, Chrono still missed him. He felt like he missed him more than he could say. “Like I said, he's always come through for me before. He just... needs to do it again.”

Shion reached for the bottle. He graciously refilled Chrono's glass, which was only about half empty.

“You say that, but unless he comes through for you this time as well, won't that make each and every single time in the past meaningless?”

“Shion...” Tokoha said quietly.

Chrono knew he had a point. It still hurt. “He'll come through. Sooner or later. He will...” He fought back a sob. “He has to.”

“Don't listen to Shion.” Tokoha said to him kindly. “He's being a jerk.”

“Yeah,” Shion admitted, quietly. “Sorry.”

“I know he'll talk to me, eventually. He's not that impossible.” Chrono stopped fighting the tears, letting a few slip out, drying them as soon as they did. “I just... I just hope he makes the right decision. In the end.”
Chrono inhaled slowly to keep himself collected. “He's always trying so hard. Doing whatever he does. I always admired that. But it hurts to watch him sometimes.”

It was still raining outside. Tokoha and Shion watched him, and Chrono felt something let up. It was easier to speak. ‘Other people, they'll commend him 'cause he's hardworking. Or they'll criticize him, for being careless... or they'll think he's detached. But they don't get it. He doesn't care about himself.”

What else Chrono remembered, was the sensation of Ibuki's limp body in his arms. The sight of him so weak, with only a shred of life left on his face. No one else knew. No one else had ever had to see him like that.

“I don't know how it is now. But I know he used to not even care if he lived or if he died.” Chrono raised his voice just a little. It was hard not to. Shion and Tokoha both looked at him, pensively.

“I know it's not my responsibility to look after him. I can't... make him do anything. He's a grown man.” Chrono allowed himself to be angry, his voice breaking again. “Which is why... I hope... I hope he makes the right choice.”

Drying his tears quietly, Chrono didn't wallow. He felt Shion's arm over his shoulder.

“We just want things to work out, you know?” Tokoha tried to reassure him. “We don't want you to be hurting like this.”

“I know.” Chrono replied through his tears. He knew his friends would rather have him move on than get hurt over and over.

Shion pulled him into another hug. Chrono reciprocated his embrace, letting Shion hold him tight, putting him at ease. As he pulled away, Tokoha started loading more food on his plate. “You've barely eaten anything. Here, have some more meat.”

“We could order some more food if you'd like.” Shion offered.

“Yeah...” Chrono said, fatigued. He was still hungry, and he could do well to focus on something else for a bit.

Tokoha patted his hand on the table. “You look like you need it.”

Chrono responded weakly. “I guess so.”

It was Shion who called the waitress again and ordered more of the same. Chrono tried to focus on eating, and did better than he'd done before. The meat was tasty, the vegetables were fresh, and crispy once cooked, while the seafood was juicy and savory.

“Are you home alone at the moment?” Tokoha asked him, eventually.

“Mikuru's home.” Chrono replied. He'd let her know he'd be out for the evening.

“I suppose you didn't feel like talking to her?” Shion made the right assumption.

“Not really...” Chrono didn't think he'd have to explain why. “I haven't told her anything, either.”

“So? Will you be okay?”

As Tokoha asked him, Chrono found that he wasn't really sure. He hadn't thought that far ahead, but now that he did, he dreaded going back home.
“How about you come to my place?” Tokoha offered readily.

Chrono considered it. It didn't make him feel terrible. In fact, he preferred that compared to going back home and pretending to be okay. “I... I'd like that. If it's alright.”

Tokoha still lived with her parents, at least whenever she was in the country. “It'll be fine.” She said confidently. “We won't have to bother anyone. You could stay the night if you want.”

“What?” Shion asked, dragging the sound of the vowels, suddenly innocently bright-eyed. “You're having a sleep over? On a school night?”

“Oh, you can come too if you'd like...” Tokoha suggested smugly.

“Really?” Shion said dreamily. “I'll guess I'll have to ask my parents, though...”

Where he sat, leaned back in his seat, opposite of Tokoha's grinning face and Shion's knowing smile, Chrono felt as if he'd been transported some ten years back in time, to when Shion was still innocently fascinated by the many simple joys in life, and when Tokoha was still learning to be ever-eager to take on every challenge the world had to offer. It had been so long ago now, it hurt to think about, though the ability to return to that feeling was also comforting. They could still have fun, just like they'd used to. Even when he was feeling so sad, his friends could still make him smile.

Chrono thought about Ibuki again. His thoughts never seemed to drift too far away from him. They'd had fun, too. Even though things had been awkward and a little off, they'd been able to enjoy all that they had shared between them. Now, what made him sad, was thinking that he might have no more chances to spend time like that with him ever again. He'd had a taste of it, after wanting it for so long. How was he supposed to forget and let go?

It was late at night, and it was still raining a little in Sumida as they were leaving the restaurant at closing hour. Walking across the bridge with the familiar, bright red lampposts, Chrono walked with a slight slouch. Tokoha noticed. She rushed towards him from behind, grabbing his hand in a tight grip, swinging it back and forth. Before he could really react, Shion caught on, and did the same. People were turning their heads to look at them, but Chrono couldn't find it in him to care. They'd been too full to order dessert at the restaurant, but Tokoha dragged the boys into a convenience store for snacks on the way to her house.

Tokoha's parents were easy-going, and it'd been a while since either Shion or Chrono had seen them. It served as a decent distraction to any explanation on why they were there, at least in combination with Tokoha being lightly tipsy. The Anjou family home was relatively large, and it wouldn't be too much of a challenge to spend the night without obstructing their usual routine.

Laying in one of two spare futons on Tokoha's bedroom floor, Chrono stared at the ceiling in the dark. On his right, Tokoha had climbed into bed. She'd gone silent, fiddling with her phone. On his left, the futon was yet empty. Shion was in the bathroom. Left with his own thoughts for a minute, Chrono reached for his phone, which laid on the mattress next to his pillow. It lit up, almost blinding him. Thoughtlessly, he navigated the start screen, and brought up his messages.

When Shion came into the room, Chrono visibly whipped his head around, his guilt apparent with his surprise.

“Oh?” Shion didn't hesitate to call him out. “What's that?”
Tokoha raised her head from her pillow, as Shion laid down under the covers.

Chrono didn't intend to hide anything, despite his reaction. “I was just... checking my phone...” He replied, mumbling.

“Still nothing, huh?” Shion asked.

“Nothing yet...” Chrono squinted at the screen.

“When did you last send him anything?” Tokoha asked, hanging over the side of her bed.

“A few days ago.” Chrono responded. “I tried calling him once after that, though. He didn't pick up.”

“That's a pretty long time to be left hanging.” Shion said, and Chrono truthfully wasn't sure if he agreed.

“I guess...”

“What did you send him?” Tokoha sounded a little curious.

“Just...” Chrono shrugged. Shion made a halfhearted attempt to glance at the screen. The intention was to let Chrono stop him. He didn't. Instead, he let Shion take the phone from his hands.

“I can read it?” Shion asked, a little surprised.

“Sure.” Chrono said. He didn't have anything to hide at this point.

“Okay, so... Saturday, you sent him two texts.” Shion was reading off the screen. “That was the day after it all happened, right?”

“Yeah...”

“So first you sent him... *I'm still not sure what's going on, and you're really worrying me when you're not picking up the phone. Could we please talk?* and then, several hours later you sent, *If you need time, I can live with that, but at least let me know if that's the case.*” Hearing Shion read his texts was strangely comforting. It helped him feel a little more sane. “Then, two days ago, you sent him, *You're really worrying me. I'm confused and upset you'd do this, and I'm not sure what to expect anymore. Prove to me that you're better than this. Please call me.*”

“Ouch.” Tokoha winced.

“You tore into him pretty bad there.” Shion commented.

Chrono laid unmoving, flat on his back. “I was really upset when I wrote that.”

“Well, it's all fair.” Shion said, he was still eyeing the messages on screen. Chrono saw him scroll up just a little before glancing his way. Chrono didn't react.

“If you think there's gonna be something juicy, you'll be disappointed.” He said, flatly.

“Really huh?” Shion took it as permission to slowly scroll up through the conversation between Chrono and Ibuki. “Nothing at all?”

“We don't even text that much. Ibuki prefers to call when he wants to talk.”
“Really?” Tokoha sounded a little surprised. “That's odd to hear.”

Chrono hadn't really thought about it. “I guess?”

“I mean he's not that old.” She said, mockingly. Chrono fought back a need to groan at her comment.

“There really isn't anything here.” Shion said in disbelief. “I thought you said you were hooking up?”

“Yeah?” Chrono sounded vaguely offended. “So?”

“I just thought there'd be something...” Shion sounded a little let down.

“I don't sext.” Chrono stated firmly.

“You don't?” Tokoha muffled a giggle behind her covers.

“By the looks of it, Ibuki doesn't, either.” Without asking, Shion handed the phone to Tokoha.

“I wouldn't expect that from him, with, you know. The situation we were in.” Chrono served to remind them. “He's very... prompt while texting, anyway.”

Up in her bed, Tokoha had started failing to control her laughter. “He... he texts like my dad.”

Shion started laughing too, and Chrono rose swiftly from his bedding. “Give me that.” They'd both been given way too much liberty and insight.

Tokoha didn't fight him, and let Chrono snatch his phone from her hands. With a sullen look he locked the phone and put it face down next to his pillow.

“S-sorry, it's just...” Tokoha was still giggling. “It's just so fitting somehow.”

“Yeah...” Chrono admitted reluctantly. “I guess.”

“I still can't believe you didn't tell us.” Shion sounded ever so slightly scorned.

“I'm sorry?” Chrono's apology was insincere. “Just because you tell us about every single guy you sleep with...”

Tokoha snorted. “I think this is a bit different?”

Of course it was different, but Chrono didn't want to see it.

“I'm surprised though. You were dating Michio in spring, and then while you were in the U.S you were seeing that other guy. And yet, you were working him on the side?” Shion didn't say it like he actually meant it.

“I-it wasn't like that...” As Chrono came in his own defense, Tokoha and Shion both grinned at him teasingly.

“Yeah, yeah we know...” Tokoha reassured him. “You wouldn't do that.”

“Well... not on purpose.” Chrono said, letting them in on something he hadn't intended to talk about. “I felt pretty bad though. 'Cause I mean... I didn't think it would ever be us, and we were barely even talking. But I still liked him. Even when I was... seeing others.”
“That's life.” Shion sighed. “Can't do anything about it.”

“I suppose so.” Chrono slipped in further under the covers. He was tired, but still pretty on edge. Still better than the depressed self he'd been in the past week. “I just feel like things would've worked out better if I could've just moved on.”

“Maybe they could have, but you don't know that, do you?” Tokoha corrected his manner of thinking.

He knew she was right. “Either way,” Tokoha continued. “There's no reason to lose sleep over that now, is there?”

Chrono wished he could be as easygoing as she was. In reality, he knew it wasn't as easy as she made it look. She'd worked hard to earn that outlook on life. He'd have to work to earn his own development, too. Was he moving forward? Was he still wanting, asking for too much? The same questions plagued him. It was easy to watch Tokoha and Shion and feel like their lives made sense, much more so than his own. Chrono knew that wasn't the truth. He knew they still struggled, too. He knew the troubles Shion had with his family situation ran deep, despite how shallow they might seem at a glance. He knew Tokoha was still chasing dreams, that she was still fighting the hard battles to earn a place in the world for herself. Spending time with them proved well to keep him sane. Even when things went awry, they could be a constant in his life.

They eventually agreed to turn the lights off and go to bed.

“Do you think you're gonna be able to fall asleep okay?” Tokoha asked him.

“I think so.” Chrono replied. He was tired, he wanted to sleep.

“Well, let me know if you need anything.” She said it casually, and Chrono allowed himself to be comforted by it.

“Good night!” Shion's voice rang out somewhat excitedly in the room. Tokoha snorted. Chrono liked to believe Shion was still excited to have a sleepover like this.

“Good night, Shion.” Chrono and Tokoha said to him in unison.

Chrono laid awake for a little while. His thoughts felt less heavy in his head, and once he relaxed, he was too tired to think very hard. It was still raining outside, and it had been picking up for a while. He still had faith. Even as his worries crept up on him, he made the conscious decision to ignore them. He'd been too miserable for words. Life could always get worse. In the end, Chrono knew what he feared the most was his own inability to let go, to lose control and be ruled by something he couldn't change. He'd already wasted too many years to the feeling of unfulfillment. He could only hope Ibuki felt the same as he did. Surely, he too was tired of being ruled by his fears.
It was a sunny day at the Dragon Empire branch office. A relatively active one as well. Ibuki could enjoy the upbeat atmosphere, but it also served to remind him of their work ethic and its faults. It was easy to be distracted with so many things going on, and hard to get work finished with so many things that needed overseeing. Over the years he'd become stricter and stricter with the branches in terms of their planning and executing of different events and happenings. The Dragon Empire branch was still lagging behind in following protocol most of the time. They were always up to something, and Ibuki preferred to not be the last to know.

The occasional on-site meeting helped him stay on top of things, and retain his sanity. Luckily it wasn't very far, so he could usually find the time. Finishing up as he'd planned, he was packing up and leaving the first floor meeting room, the last of everyone who'd participated to do so. By the reception desk he'd stopped to exchange a few words with the receptionist, a plucky young woman who was happy to give him a few minutes of her time. The building was emptying out somewhat, as the work day was reaching its end. Ibuki was in no particular hurry, but he regardless wanted to leave as soon as he was allowed to. He had places to be, and he badly needed a breather.

High heels clicked against the stone floor, a distinct sound that would quietly resonate in the large hall, even with the slight commotion. Ibuki registered it, but turned only at the sound of his name, called out in mild, yet underlined astonishment.

“Ibuki?”

He'd felt a rush of dread at the sound of the familiar voice. His fears were confirmed at the sigh of Tokoha, coming down the stairs with a sway in her hips, lifting her sunglasses up to her head.

Already more than vaguely anxious, the smirk on her face did not make him feel better. “My brother didn't say anything about you being here today.” She noted. Ibuki wondered why that was something to be surprised about.

In reality, he knew she wasn't surprised. “It was just for a short meeting.” He said, his hands already clammy.

“I see.” She approached him, slowly. “Keeping busy, huh?”
What was he supposed to say to that? He tried to smile. “I'm afraid so.”

The receptionist had left to take care of Ibuki's request, and they were the only ones standing by her abandoned desk in the lobby. “Are you... here to see your brother?” Ibuki asked, desperately not wanting to talk about himself.

“I am.” Tokoha sighed. “He's still busy though. With something or other.”

“My condolences.” Ibuki allowed himself to make it sound like a joke.

“How are you?” Tokoha asked him, cocking her head to the side, swiftly changing the subject. "It's been a while."

Ibuki thought of what to say, his mind rapidly jumping between 'I'm busy', 'I'm well'; trying to find the simplest and best answer that'd be sincere enough without triggering too many follow-up questions.

“Chrono said you were working an awful lot again, sounded like he was pretty worried about you.” There it was. He hadn't been able to respond fast enough. A split second's worth of hesitation had been enough.

“Well, things... have luckily calmed down since.” It was the truth, but in his fear of appearing shifty he made it sound like he was hiding something.

“I sure hope so.” An affirming statement. It was clear Tokoha wasn't really concerned with him.

“I'm back home, but you know,” She sighed, letting out some frustration. “I've barely had any chance to see Chrono at all.”

Ibuki felt a cold sweat. What was he supposed to say? Did she want him to apologize? She did not outright accuse him of anything, but the implications were clear.

“And then, he finally agrees to see me tonight.” She crossed her arms. Ibuki couldn't leave. He was waiting for the receptionist to return and confirm the conference room's schedule for him. “Which means, of course, my brother is late getting off work, so he can't take me like he promised.”

Chrono had time to see his friends tonight because Ibuki had made plans of his own. They both knew it. “I'm sure... your brother will be here in a moment.”

Tokoha leaned on the counter. “I hope so. I'd drive myself but he needs the car. So I can't just take it.”

Ibuki would have thought of something to say, but Tokoha paid him no mind, continuing to speak. “He says he doesn't trust me with it, either.” She sounded properly annoyed. “Just because I never learned to drive left-hand traffic. Can you believe that? I mean, I'm probably a better driver than he is, anyway.”

Her tirade left him anxious, and no less uncertain of how to respond. “He can be... particular sometimes.”

“He's just paranoid.” Tokoha complained.

On the topic of her brother, Tokoha appeared adamant Ibuki agreed with her. It was an awkward spot to be in. Mamoru had been a good friend to him for many years. What was he supposed to say?
“Sorry to keep you, sir.” The receptionist had returned. Ibuki breathed a silent sigh of relief. After receiving a copy of the plans, he could leave.

Tokoha stuck with him, following him to the entrance. Though stressed, Ibuki didn't want to be rude. “I hope... you have good time tonight.”

“Oh, sure!” Tokoha grinned. “We will.” Her smile became a little twisted.

Ibuki knew they would talk about him. There was no way they wouldn't. He just hoped they went easy on Chrono. It had been many months, but ever since he'd learned that Tokoha and Shion knew about their relationship, he couldn't help but feel unsettled around them. Whatever tough time they gave him, he was certain he deserved it. That didn't make him less nervous each time.

The doors came open as they approached, and as Ibuki felt ready to leave this conversation behind him, he heard yet another voice call out to him.

“Oh, Ibuki! Hello!”

His voice delightfully studded with disbelief, Shion had addressed him, appearing just behind the doors. Ibuki froze. He was surrounded now.

“H-hello...” He replied. Shion smiled at him all too kindly, his eyes narrowing.

“What a coincidence to run into you here.” How was it a coincidence? They all knew he worked here.

“I could say the same.” He responded coolly. Ibuki was on edge. Tokoha could put him on the spot if she so wished. She was outspoken and did not fear him. She enjoyed making him squirm. Shion was worse. His friendly smile and polite demeanor hid a cold heart and a twisted sense of humor. He was a fine-tuned contraption of deception and misdirection. He was ruthless.

“Chrono said you were going out tonight.” Right on the ball, Shion wasted no time.

“Did he now?” Ibuki smiled, trying to hide his fear.

“He's still so preoccupied with you these days. We can hardly ever catch some time with him.” Shion sighed. “I'm sure you realize, but he has a life of his own, you know?”

Ibuki probably would've felt more bad about the situation if he actually had a hand in managing Chrono's time. He didn't. Chrono did as he pleased. As involved with Chrono as Ibuki could be, his friends targeting him still felt unfair.

It wasn't just the heat causing sweat to form on his brow. Ibuki knew he was being played, and that there was no right answer for him to deliver. Still, he didn't like being humiliated like this.

“I'm aware it can be hard to make time.” It was only barely a response. Shion looked pleased with himself.

“Oh, I don't doubt that.” He laughed lightly. It was a polite, but unmistakably fake, laugh.

“I have to... head out, but I hope the three of you have fun.” Ibuki wished to excuse himself and disappear.

“Oh, are you in a hurry?” Tokoha asked beside him.

“We didn't mean to keep you.” Shion smiled.
The Dragon Empire branch office was located river side, surrounded by greenery. It was a breezy, pleasant place, and it was a beautiful day out. Ibuki was in no state to enjoy it. Ibuki felt Shion and Tokoha's eyes on him. Should he cling to his pride, or should he exit this situation, no matter the toll?

“Well, I...” Usually so articulate, only people who knew Ibuki privately could tell when he was pressed. Shion and Tokoha were Chrono's friends first and foremost, but that didn't mean they didn't know him well. “It's been nice meeting you, but I should really head out.”

It was a barefaced lie. Ibuki didn't hate neither of them. In fact, he knew they were both good people, who only had Chrono's best interests in mind. He held them both in quite high regard. In fact, he wasn't even mad with them. However, this did little to ease his suffering.

“I see. I'm sorry to hear it.” Shion didn't sound or look very sorry, but Ibuki didn't doubt there was more than a grain of truth in his words. He did seem to enjoy their conversation after all, in his own way.

“We should go out together sometime, the four of us.” Tokoha suggested. “We might have to, anyways. If we want to see Chrono.”

Shion laughed. Ibuki smiled fearfully.

He did eventually manage to slip away. Walking across the grassy plains he swore he felt eyes burn on his back. After making his escape, Ibuki slammed shut the door to his car, and allowed himself a moment to calm down. He still had some time before he had to go see Kai and Miwa. He'd decided to go home to change and eat a light meal. Chrono would indeed be out with his friends, and Ibuki wasn't sure exactly when he would be home. Probably sometime later tonight. He usually didn't stay out for too long. It was only just Monday, and Ibuki had the whole week ahead of him. Before he could start to think of any of that though, tonight would have to be over and done with first.

Just as he was about to pull out of the parking spot, his phone started ringing. He hesitated to pick up, at least before he saw that it was Chrono calling him.

“...Hello?”

“Hey? How are you?” His voice was low, and a little muffled.

“I...” What was he supposed to say? “I'm fine, I suppose.” His response came out sounding bitter.

“What is it?” Chrono had seen right through him.

“It's... nothing much.” Admitting to anything but made him feel a little less than pleased with himself. “I... as I was leaving, I ran into Anjou, and...”

“What?” Chrono sounded like he was half-listening. “Mamoru?”

Tired, Ibuki's lost his words. “No, not...” There should be some shortcut to this. “Your Anjou. Not mine.”

“Oh. Okay.”

Ibuki fought a sigh. “I had a meeting at the Dragon Empire branch today. I just finished up. I met her and Kiba just as I was leaving.”

“Yeah?”
Surely Chrono wasn't that oblivious? Ibuki wasn't sure how to proceed. “...I'll have you know they're quite tough on me.”

“Don't worry about it. They're just teasing you.”

“I realize that, but...” Ibuki indeed hoped they were just teasing.

“Oh come on now, don't let it get to you.” Chrono reassured him, although in such a way Ibuki couldn't feel fully reassured.

There wasn't much more to say on the subject, and Ibuki didn't want to dwell on it, not now. “How are you? Did you need anything?”

“Oh,” Chrono had indeed failed to mention why he'd called. “I'm good. I just wanted to check on you. I mean, it won't be until late tonight that I'll get to talk to you.”

Ibuki couldn't help but think Chrono's friends probably had a point. Chrono indeed was preoccupied with him. “Don't worry about me. Go and... have fun with your friends.”

“How am I supposed to not worry about you with how stressed out you've been about this?”

He had a point, and the tone he took was reprimanding, yet doting. As endearing as it was, Ibuki felt a little restless. “I... I'm going to go through with this.” He was still taxed, but he'd decided not to think about. “It won't be easy but I will.”

Chrono was quiet for a bit. Ibuki knew that if he had any advice, he would give it. “They're your friends, so... just try and trust them. Be yourself.”

“I will.” Ibuki replied.

In a way, he was a little jealous. He was close with Kai and Miwa, but it would be a stretch to say he was as close with them as Chrono was with Shion and Tokoha. Maybe this was his chance, his chance to invite them to be closer to him. When he thought about it that way, it made him feel less awful about the entire situation.

“Yeah.” Chrono's voice was reassuring. “I'll see you tonight, okay?”

“Yes. And...”

“Yeah?”

“Promise me you'll have fun with your friends, rather than worrying about me all night.”

“Alright.” He heard the smile in Chrono's voice. “I promise.”

They hung up. Ibuki felt a little lighter. Once he was home, he got changed and ate. His nerves were yet to get the better of him. He tried to form words and sentences in his head, something to fall back on, but he couldn't seem to grasp anything. It ought to have been more distressing, but he felt strangely calm. When he headed out, he took the train. He needed a little time to think.

In the evening, it got cooler outside. It wasn't very far to where they'd decided to meet up, the same place as last time. In the end, Kai had needed a little convincing to meet up with such short notice, but he'd come through. Ibuki sure felt thankful for that. He wondered if Miwa had told him anything. Ibuki didn't assume he'd broken his promise, but he still couldn't help but wonder if Kai had somehow been tipped off to why this was all being decided so suddenly. Knowing Miwa, he
probably hadn't said anything. Ibuki wasn't sure if he preferred it that way. Kai could be awfully clueless sometimes.

Ibuki got a table in the back. The place was far from empty, but the ambience of voices and noise made for a decent cover of the surrounding conversations. In the end, Kai and Miwa showed together.

“Terribly sorry to keep you waiting!” Miwa announced cheekily. Kai did not echo the greeting, but was quietly surveying their surroundings.

“That's fine.” Ibuki smiled, and it wasn’t as hard as he'd though it to be.

“It's good to see you.” Kai said, his voice the usual comforting murmur.

“Likewise.”

To an outsider, perhaps their greetings would appear detached, noncommittal. That wasn't really the case.

“With all those summer events and the TV stuff done with, you should have more free time, yeah?” Miwa had asked him, as soon as they'd ordered some drinks and snacks. They had met just a few days ago, but Ibuki hadn't been able to converse much with the two of them with the tumult that had transpired.

“I do.” Ibuki replied. Honestly though, he wasn't very interested in talking about work right now. It made him feel dull, more so because he couldn't seem to focus.

“And with Aichi home, you should have less time.” Miwa sounded more than a little smug. Kai looked at him tiredly.

“He's busy.” Kai said, sounding a little let down.

“Things got a little out of hand last time.” Miwa looked at Ibuki as he said this. Ibuki had come prepared, his skin thickened. “It's been a while since I saw him drink that much.”

“Yeah.” Kai agreed, his expression a little concerned.

“How bad was it the next day?” Miwa asked, and Ibuki couldn't help but be curious.

“It was bad.” Kai didn't sprinkle his sentences, but he said it quite lightly, tipping Ibuki off. “But he slept it off in a day.”

Miwa laughed. “Oh, he's such a lightweight.”

Indeed he was, literally and figuratively. “Be glad you weren't both hung over the next day.” Ibuki said. “Personally, I spent the night feeling like I needed a drink.”

Miwa scoffed at him dryly. “Naturally you did.”

Ibuki allowed himself to take the hit head on. “You being much of the reason why.”

Kai smiled, full and true. He didn't need to say anything.

“Right, okay,” Miwa admitted to it. “I might have... fueled the fires... a little.”

Ibuki felt less tense, but still quite uncertain of himself. He'd somehow imagined things differently.
Instead, meeting his friends felt a lot like normal. He had decided to not drag things on too much, and not try and wait for an opening. Surely, he could not hinge everything on something so flimsy. Their conversations recounted some of the events of the past Friday, and Ibuki caught Miwa glancing at him. Kai got stuck muttering about the harsh work schedule that kept Aichi busy late into the night. Research was indeed an unforgiving field.

“He... keeps accepting work that isn't his. He keeps staying late at work, even after his coworkers go home.” Kai had put his hand down on the table. “When I ask him... he keeps making excuses.”

“He's too nice.” Miwa concluded, as if that hadn't been obvious.

Befuddled, Kai barely glared at him. “Other people are taking advantage of him.”

Ibuki could easily see both sides. He knew exactly how tough it was to feel like you couldn't say no, but Aichi did have some responsibility for the situation he was in. “Perhaps they are, but it's also possible they're not aware of such.”

“They're still doing it.” Kai was pragmatic in that way. He was also stubborn, at least when it came to matters that concerned him. He could be equally indifferent, when that was not the case. “It won't stop, not until he starts saying no.”

"Knowing Aichi, well... even a no might end up sounding like a yes.” Miwa reasoned. "Not that it's any excuse.”

With how he was, Ibuki could be quite certain Kai was not just venting, he was looking for advice.

“You could make dinner a set time every night.” Ibuki suggested. “That way, he's already made a promise to you. It might help motivate him to stand up to his colleagues.”

“It could work?” Miwa looked at Kai, who was thinking.

“I'll ask him.” Kai said after a moment's silence. He wasn't fully convinced, but had regardless decided it to be worth a try.

Ibuki thought it to be a reasonable way to try and work around things. If not, it would make Aichi realize that Kai had conviction in trying to make their lives come together. Ibuki would know. Ever since Chrono had started living with him half of the time, he had become better at being home on time. Knowing that someone waited for him, someone who would share a meal with him, looked forward to seeing him... all that made it easier to shift his constant focus on work on to something else. In Ibuki's case though, his focus on work came from a lacking in other aspects in his life. So maybe Aichi's habits required a different solution.

With Kai's pondering, the conversation had fallen into silence. Ibuki, who had promised himself not to search for openings, saw his chance. He hated how calculated he had to be, but he knew he had to forgive himself for it. He had to let go, and make the leap.

“There's.” Without thinking, he found his voice, still searching for his words. He'd been searching for weeks, unable to find much of anything. He was not so foolish, though. He realized there was nothing to find. He already knew what he had to tell them. “Something I... meant to tell you.”

Miwa laid his eyes on him, but his expression gave Ibuki no notion of what he was thinking. Frankly, it was relieving. Kai looked clueless, as clueless as his unreadable expression allowed.

Miwa put his head in his hand. “Yeah?” He asked, casually.
Ibuki tried to prioritize his feelings, find a place to start. “I should have told you sooner... but it's taken me time to consider.”

His eyes narrowing, Kai had become concerned. “Did something happen?”

Miwa smiled awkwardly. Luckily, Kai didn't appear to catch it.

“I'm alright if that's what you're asking.” Ibuki said, not wanting to underplay Kai's worries. “It's been... complicated, but...”

Ibuki felt his lips tremble. It didn't carry into his voice. “I'm seeing someone.” When the words left him, Ibuki didn't expect it to be so hard not to smile.

Miwa's expression was more or less unchanging. Kai's brow furrowed. He said nothing, but he needed not to.

“Congratulations. Now, ain't that nice?” Miwa asked, turning to Kai.

The most observant person, Kai was not. He lived much of his life in his own world. He was still keen to the tone Miwa took. He realized he'd been left out of the loop. He looked at Ibuki strangely.

“I didn't mean to keep it from you for so long.” Ibuki managed to say, and as his self-consciousness seemed to take over, his mind spinning, Ibuki felt not much unlike his childhood self. Shyly, he'd adverted his eyes.

Perhaps the metaphor served him well. After all, even in his childhood, he'd always been able to talk to Kai and Miwa, even when it felt like it was impossible to get through to anyone else. “I suppose I've been...” Ibuki let that connection give him some courage. “Trying to find the right time to do so. Well. It hasn't proved very useful thus far.”

Kai watched him, somewhat differently compared to before. Ibuki realized Kai's idea of him was already changing, ever so slightly. It was terrifying to think of, but as he saw it happen, Ibuki felt that it was natural. Maybe it was irrational to be afraid.

In the end, he still didn't know how to talk to people. In the end, he was constantly fearful of his own image reflected in other people's eyes. It made him feel powerless. Maybe it really was an irrational fear. Maybe he didn't have to live his life embracing it. Ibuki thought he had let go along time ago. In reality, he had mostly gotten better at managing it. More notably, he'd found that maybe he didn't have to hate himself so much. Stripping himself bare still hurt. Without any barrier, without any role for him to uphold, any mask to wear, many of his old fears would surface, and threaten to take control. It made him feel awful. Did he not trust his friends enough to be vulnerable around them? Ibuki thought of Chrono. His feelings for him had been rooted in trust. Ibuki had first made himself vulnerable to Chrono a long time ago, and then it hadn't been on his own volition. Did he still lack the courage to willfully make himself vulnerable? What made his relationship with Kai and Miwa different?

In a silent surge of thought, Ibuki reached a conclusion, his mind coming to rest with clarity. There was no answer to that question. Even if there was, it didn't matter. Chrono had said to him, one time, that he ought to learn to see himself being loved by others. That he should learn to expect other's patience and efforts to understand. At the time, Ibuki had thought of people that he'd yet to meet. He was also guilty of not wanting to think too much of such things, despite also knowing that he couldn't rely on Chrono for everything. Now, he realized this applied to his general outlook. It even applied to his relationship with his two oldest, best friends.
Maybe it wouldn't be so hard if the situation didn't have so many variables, but what troubled Ibuki was that he knew it would be hard for him regardless. There was a reason he'd never before pursued any relationships in his adult life. He hadn't been confident enough that anyone would want to be with him. Now, sitting here, those same doubts made it hard for him to form the words he meant to speak, and making his stomach knot itself.

“It might come as surprise, but,” Ibuki had his weaknesses. He also had his strengths. He remained dignified. His voice remained clear. Once he made his mind up, he went through with what needed to be done. “I'm... I'm seeing Chrono.”

Kai lifted his arm off the table. He was thinking. He looked at Miwa, who was void of much reaction. Ibuki waited, anxiously. Kai slowly crossed his arms. His expression was unreadable.

“Miwa knew?”

So, he had indeed caught onto that.

“So like, not officially, no.” Miwa explained. “But I sorta... found out, I guess. Though, honestly, I can't say I was fully sure exactly what to expect to hear.”

“You found out?” Kai sounded more perturbed with Miwa's wording of choice than anything else.

“So, they were, like... kissing... after they dropped me off last Friday. I popped back in ‘cause I forgot my phone, and yeah.” Ibuki somehow hadn't predicted the conversation to go like this. His face was now taking color good and proper.

“Miwa, you don't have to...” He spoke quietly on an exhale, his temper flaring under the surface.

“I'm sorry, but he asked, so...” Miwa did sound a little sorry.

Ibuki knew he had to accept his apology. He closed his eyes tightly. “I really didn't... intend for that to happen. I'm... really sorry.”

“Could've been worse.” Miwa said, shrugging. “I guess.”

Ibuki wasn't sure if he agreed. He needed not say it. His expression said enough on its own. “I just wish I could've told you sooner.”

Kai looked at Ibuki blankly. “I had no idea.”

“Well, me neither. Until last week, anyway.” Miwa added. Ibuki felt as if he'd been going a bit crazy since last Friday himself. Kai and Miwa didn't sound like they were lying, but after the conversations and revelations of their previous get-together Ibuki had no idea what to expect anymore. He'd been fairly confident he and Chrono would surprise everyone. Now, it felt like people were being tipped off left and right, and he was finding out things he otherwise never would've guessed himself.

“Well, I suppose you were bound to find out one way or another.” Ibuki sounded disappointed with himself.

“Yeah?” Miwa agreed. “I mean, I can get why you'd... wanna give it time but, you know. It's best to not think too hard about it.”

Ibuki wished he could adapt that way of thinking. He was trying to, but he still needed more practice. Kai looked like he was still thinking, still trying to digest this new information. Ibuki realized he
appeared to be in a state of mild shock. “Since when?”

He’d asked quietly, as if he wasn’t sure he was allowed to. Ibuki had somehow dreaded this question.

“...Actually, it's... been about a year.”

The conversation came to a halt.

“A---” Miwa was, in reality, not the most easily astonished person. In his life, he’d already suffered through a number of greatly shocking events. As a result, he was usually good at keeping his cool. So, when he raised his voice, and appeared as if he was about to fly out of his chair, it said a lot. “A year?! A... a year?”

Ibuki slowly closed his eyes as his face took color, praying for it to pass.

“You've been seeing each other for a year?” Miwa asked him once more, his utter disbelief exchanged for a more calculated sort of skepticism.

“I... I said I was sorry I hadn't told you.” Ibuki knew he looked guilty, despite how he tried not to. His voice was quiet, hard.

Kai had been quiet. When he once spoke, it was with an unusual sort of clarity. “Why didn't you?”

With how he emoted, it would easy to assume Kai was upset. Ibuki knew it was first and foremost a genuine question. Ibuki shook his head. “When we first started seeing each other, things were a bit... delicate.” Ibuki swallowed. “I wasn’t really in any condition to talk to anyone about it. Still, I never... wanted to make you wait this long.”

“A year is a long time not to, like, at least mention it.” Concerned, Miwa sounded like he was still coming to terms with this new information.

“If I'm going to be honest, I've been averse to talking about it for a number of reasons.” Saying that, Ibuki knew he was going to be held accountable for a better explanation. Despite that, he felt a little braver. “We agreed to keep the relationship private until we felt more... comfortable talking about it. Though, I'm aware... I've been making excuses for way too long.”

With Miwa and Kai's eyes on him, Ibuki tipped his head down. “I'm really sorry.”

“Hey, hey...” Miwa held his palms up. “You don't have to... I mean... There's no need to go that far, okay? I mean, if you needed time, then... like, we can get that.”

Ibuki felt conflicted. Kai still had his arms crossed, his eyes focused.

“I didn't mean to get so worked up. It's just... it really surprised me.” Miwa's reaction was fair. Ibuki didn't blame him for it.

“That's fine.” Ibuki said quietly. “I... realized you'd likely be surprised. Even if I wasn't sure how else you would react.”

“Is that why you kept it to yourself?” Kai spoke so quietly, his question was like but a notion. Ibuki was still not immune from the effects. Far from.

“I'm afraid so.”

Miwa smiled nervously. “How so?”
“The more time that passed, the more I felt... unfit to talk about it.” You could say it was like much else. The longer a problem goes unchecked, the harder it is to deal with. “I suppose I... was afraid you'd assume I hid it from you for a reason.”

Kai looked somewhat oblivious to the implications. Ibuki doubted that was wholly the case. Miwa sighed. “I mean, obviously, but... we could still talk about it, right?”

“I certainly hoped so, but... I'm sorry. I'm still not very good at this.” Ibuki thought about the year that had gone by, and the year before that as well. “I'd like to say I didn't mean to hide anything from you, but that would be a lie. I did hide things from you, and I did for a long time.”

Ibuki looked at Kai. It was a bit hard to do so, but he wanted to. “I spoke to Sendou. He said you'd been worried about me. I never... quite realized. For that, I'm... I'm really sorry.”

Ibuki wished he could do something other than apologize. He fell into old habits.

Kai looked vaguely confused if anything. It was Miwa who spoke. “Hey, man... we're... we're always gonna worry about you. We're your friends, so it's sort of our job.”

“I know.” Ibuki admitted. “It still makes me feel selfish.”

“I mean, yeah...” Miwa agreed somewhat hesitantly. “But like... you being so hard on yourself won't solve anything. And you're trying to explain yourself, now.”

Ibuki felt stressed out. He still hadn't said even half the things he'd intended to. Maybe he couldn't say all of them at once, but he could try and start. “I am.” His voice was shaking a little.

“We've come such a long way now, since we started seeing each other, Chrono and I.” Ibuki wanted to elaborate. “I put him through a lot. I was very ashamed of that.”

Miwa and Kai were silent.

“I couldn't quite be... honest with myself. Which meant I couldn't commit. I'd never been in that situation before. I didn't know what to do.” At the time, Ibuki hadn't considered talking to anyone. Now, it frustrated him to think about that.

In his weariness, Ibuki felt some of his cynicism take the better of him. He'd ordered some Japanese liquor, of which he'd only sipped so far. “I didn't really consider it anyone else's business.”

“Well, I mean...” Miwa sounded like he didn't know what to say. Ibuki thought it to be a fair reaction.

“It's all such a long story.” Ibuki heard himself complain. “If I'd known how things would've turned out, I probably would've acted differently. But I didn't. All of last year was such a mess.”

“I didn't talk to you much, then.” Kai said, somehow unexpectedly. Ibuki indeed felt guilty.

“I wasn't talking with much of anyone.” He admitted, bitterly.

“Was that because of Chrono and you, too?” Miwa asked, and Ibuki realized maybe he needed to explain less than he'd thought.

He'd felt a slight shudder. He closed his eyes, and thought to elaborate. In his mind, it had been such a complex matter. He could see now, that was not the case. “Yes.” He said, and felt something leave him with that single word. The world was suddenly a simpler place. “It was.”
Ibuki felt the tension leave him. He breathed easier.

“I knew he had feelings for me.” It hadn't been very hard to figure out. “I didn't know how to deal with it. And, I... avoided him as a result.”

Ibuki thought about the state he'd been in back then, tapping into the mindset of his past self.

“I ended up isolating myself. All in all I was... depressed and bitter. It'd all... crept up on me.” It was hard to look directly at his friends, but once the words came out, it didn't feel quite as bad as he'd thought. They listened. He felt silly for fearing they wouldn't. “I should have spoken to you about it a long time ago. Frankly I was... ashamed.”

Miwa had turned his face away, though Kai still watched him. “It's not easy.” Miwa shrugged. He looked a bit more upset than he was letting on.

“It's really not.” Ibuki replied quietly. It was hard to find anything more to say.

“I thought maybe you weren't doing so well.” Kai still spoke quietly. “I thought you'd talk to us if you needed it.”

“We should have been harder on you.” Miwa said, somewhat jokingly.

“It's not on you, but...” Ibuki smiled faintly. “But perhaps.”

Ibuki allowed himself to relax somewhat. He had a little to drink. The taste of the alcohol helped his mind spring to life, gaining a little extra focus. “It would've been easier to talk if I'd known what to say. I didn't know how to approach the subject.” Ibuki knew he had to clarify a bit more. “After things started happening between me and Chrono it became even harder.”

Ibuki sat his glass down on the table.

“We've always had a complicated relationship.” It still felt like a simplification. “I wasn't sure what you'd think.”

“He did always have a soft spot for you.” Miwa said, lightly amused.

“He did?” Kai asked, confused.

Miwa laughed lightly. “He always made his feelings very clear, didn't he?”

“That's true.” Ibuki smiled weakly. “For that reason, I was afraid you would... misunderstand. But in my fear I only made myself look all the more suspicious.”

Miwa and Kai both looked uncomfortable. Miwa looked like he wanted to say something, but did not. It was probably for the best.

“From now on I really want to try and be as clear as possible in my intentions.” Ibuki took a serious tone. “For Chrono's sake, but for your sake as well. I don't want to hide anything anymore. I don't want anyone to have any doubts about me, or our relationship.”

“It's a private matter.” Kai said, doubtlessly. He was a very private person himself.

“It is.” Ibuki agreed. “But I want to be responsible. I want to... be in a position where I can be held accountable.”

“That sounds a bit drastic.” Miwa said, and Ibuki was genuinely surprised.
"That may be so, but..." Ibuki wasn't sure if he agreed. "I'd rather be drastic."

"Well, this is you we're talking about, so..." Miwa said quietly.

"Despite everything, Chrono's made me very happy. I wouldn't want anyone to think... I'm not trying to do the same for him." Ibuki said certainty in his voice.

"I understand." Kai responded, readily. His expression had changed somewhat.

Miwa sighed. "I mean, none of us expected this, but... sure, okay."

Ibuki allowed himself to feel somewhat relieved. Things could have gone a lot worse.

"It's not like I was gonna go out of my way to assume things about you." Miwa didn't sound hurt necessarily, but he did seem concerned. "But if it makes you feel better, then, sure."

It did make him feel better. "As a person... Chrono is very dependable. He's very responsible. In contrast... he often made me feel immature."

"Oh yeah?" Miwa smiled.

"I don't want it to be like that anymore. I don't want other people to think I'm taking advantage of him." He was able to speak more freely, with a different sort of resolve. "I still feel like I have to keep proving it to myself. I used to be afraid of that feeling, since I didn't know if I was capable of it. Well, in many ways, I still am afraid."

He'd been scared of more than just that, but it had been a central aspect to his avoidant behavior. "Now, I know it doesn't matter. It's worth it, even if I'm afraid."

Kai looked hesitant for a moment, but then he spoke, his voice strangely distant. "It'll pass." He said, quietly. "Most of it'll pass."

Ibuki wasn't sure if he wanted to equate his own journey to Kai's. However, he wasn't about to stop Kai if he wanted to make that comparison himself. He had the right to do that. "I hope so." He replied, most of all happy that his friends were listening and taking his account in, earnestly.

"You'll be fine." Miwa reassured him. "You have Chrono now, anyhow. He'll keep you in line."

Ibuki sighed. Surely he didn't mean anything by it, so Ibuki wanted to choose his words carefully. "Maybe so. But that's not his responsibility. He has his own problems."

"I, mean, yeah..." Miwa had realized Ibuki had a point. "But aren't those for sharing, too?"

"That's exactly it..." Ibuki allowed himself another sip. "Chrono, he's..."

He didn't want to bare too much of Chrono's personal struggles if he could help it. Regardless, he wanted to vent about it. "He's strong. He can take care of himself, regardless of whether or not I'm around. Perhaps that was why, it took me a long time to realize he needs me to be strong for him, too."

Thinking of Chrono now, in his vulnerable, emotional state, Ibuki felt his emotions flare up.

"Everyone seems to think he's..." Ibuki sought his words. He was aware of how bitter his voice had become. "Invincible. That he never doubts himself or that he never struggles with anything. In part, I don't blame anyone who thinks that. I used to think it too, after all."
Miwa had averted his eyes. Kai was paying attention carefully.

“Before, I never stopped to think about it. But he also struggles, and in ways we're both still figuring out. I still have to... keep earning his trust.” Ibuki let his eyes rest on the table top. Maybe he'd said too much. Somehow, it didn't feel that way.

“I didn't know that.” Miwa admitted. “I didn't mean to assume...”

“It's alright.” Ibuki replied. He felt more clear headed. “You didn't know.”

Silence lingered for a moment, but it didn't feel uncomfortable. Ibuki had some more to drink. In the end, talking to his friends had been liberating.

“I feel like...” Miwa hesitated only because he was trying to find his words. “It's worth asking, though, how are you? How are things?”

Ibuki looked at him, and realized where he was coming from. “Things are good, thank you.” There was breath of relief in his voice. “Chrono's worried about talking to his father about us. But other than that...”

“Yeah, uh, that sounds like it could be awkward...” Miwa was not wrong.

“He's been upset about it for a while.” Ibuki said, tiredly. “I can only do so much to support him in it.”

“Do they still not speak much?” Kai was only so familiar with the situation.

“I suppose they speak more in the last few years. It's... a marginal improvement.” Ibuki said, choosing his words carefully.

“I guess all those years of silence aren't easy to overcome.” There was a slight cynicism in Miwa's voice. Ibuki knew it was the truth.

“I met Rive recently.” Ibuki admitted. “He's... trying, but...”

He didn't want to speak for Rive and his efforts.

“He's trying but what? Not trying hard enough?” Miwa did a decent job at it thought, despite his distance to the situation.

“Yes.” Ibuki said, his voice firm.

“Where did you run into him, anyway?” Miwa asked. He was drinking too. Their conversation was a little more lighthearted.

“...At Chrono's aunt's house.” Ibuki said, trying to sound casual. “I was invited for dinner.”

“Uh-huh?” Miwa looked at him slyly.

“It wasn't...” Embarrassed, Ibuki tried to hide it. “It wasn't like that.”

“I literally didn't say anything, but okay.” Miwa said, humored.

“We thought it might be best to do something like that, in order to... make things feel a bit more... organic.”
“So I was right.”

“I thought you didn't say anything?” Kai asked, outright confused.

Ibuki allowed himself a fragile smile. “Frankly I've been... quite tied up with Chrono's family as of late. I ended up making a business proposal to his aunt. He wasn't very happy about it, but in the end... things worked out.”

“Sounds like you've got one foot in already.”

Miwa said it as a joke. In a way, Ibuki had to admit to himself that it was a little funny. “I suppose that's one way of putting it.”

Maybe both he and Chrono were worrying needlessly. After all, they were both pretty good at worrying. Ibuki knew that once he got home, he'd probably be back in his old way of thinking, but airing some of his worries with his friends he allowed himself to become a bit more easygoing, even if only for the duration of the time they spent together.

“You know what I think?” Miwa said, and Ibuki felt vaguely dreadful.

“What?” Ibuki dared to ask. “What is it now?”

“I think we've forgotten that this is, like, good news?”

Ibuki could physically feel himself pale.

“I know I said it before, but assuming things work out? Congrats.” He said it teasingly, and Ibuki struggled to take it to heart.

“Aichi was right to say I've been worried about you.” Kai said, his voice low. “But you seem to be doing better.”

“I suppose so...” Ibuki smiled to himself. “I'm... eating better.”

Miwa smiled at him strangely. “Well I guess that's also a plus...”

Ibuki was not ignorant to what Miwa was implying. “We do... see each other a lot.” He admitted. “It makes the weeks come together.”

“You were driving him home last Friday too.”

“Actually...” Ibuki hadn't thought to tell them, then again, they'd only been talking for so long. “He's been staying with me in the past six months or so, whenever his aunt is abroad. So I wasn't taking him home.”

Miwa was starting to look tired. “Wait. He lives with you?”

“No, he...” Ibuki had been fast to disagree. Perhaps too fast. “He only stays with me when his aunt is abroad.”

As he said it, Ibuki realized they might indeed not understand what this meant. “So, bout half of the time. Roughly.” Honestly, he could be more generous there. Some months Mikuru was only home for a few days at a time.

“What else haven't you told us, huh?” Miwa asked somewhat dryly.
Ibuki couldn't bear to look directly at him. What should he even say?

“Well, next time something happens, just try and tell us sooner, okay?” Miwa requested.

Ibuki smiled a little. “I'll try.”

In the end, he had to admit to himself that things had gone alright. He'd pulled through. He'd managed to keep his promise to himself. At times like this, he could still often feel a slight disconnect between himself and others. As things had been settled and the conversation shifted and mellowed, Ibuki was regardless content. He'd made an effort, and it had payed off. Kai initially hadn't been so talkative, but as usual he warmed up with enough time. Miwa was effortlessly himself, never compromising. Ibuki still remembered how happy he'd been when they had first become friends. Back then, Kai had always been preoccupied, living in his own world, biding by his own rules. He was still like that, no matter how his disposition had changed. It was comforting, more so because of how they were still friends in spite of it. Kai made time for him, and made an effort to relate to him. Miwa could be crass, he could be crude, but he was always genuine and truly a good and loyal friend, always ready to lend a hand. Even with how sociable he was, it was clear by his actions and his words that Kai and Ibuki were special to him.

Ibuki wouldn't say he felt silly, in the end. He felt like himself. There had been a time in his life when that had felt revolutionary, and tonight he relived some of that.

They finished their drinks and ordered some more. Ibuki hadn't planned to do that, but then again he hadn't planned much of anything tonight. Miwa and Kai had ordered more, and so did he. In he wake of speaking of relationships, he was informed that Miwa hadn't gotten any more dates since last. He didn't complain, unlike Kai, who still had a number of things to say about Aichi's coworkers.

He had ended up leaning on the table, his vision a little unfocused. “He's not a morning person. He knows that. I still have to remind him he can't keep working late.”

“I used to... get home so late all the time. In the long run, it really gets to you.” Ibuki spoke anecdotally.

“Chrono won't let you anymore huh?” Miwa asked him somewhat slyly.

“He... he wants me to plan ahead...” Ibuki knew Chrono's thoughts and his ideas well, but it proved a little hard for him to explain. “I don't think he's ever... yelled at me for being home late. He gets disappointed in me, though.”

“Ouch.” Miwa grimaced. “That sounds worse somehow.”

Ibuki sighed. “When he's mad it's usually because he's disappointed in me, anyhow.” Anger was a secondary emotion, even if it seemed like Chrono more often had easy access to it than other emotional responses. Despite this, his reactions usually weren't out of place.

Laughing a little awkwardly, Miwa reclined in his seat. “Oh, my bad.”

“He always just trying to help. Trying to be supportive. Even when he's mad.” Ibuki was late to figure he'd become more than a little tipsy. He was drunk. The realization that this might be bad only just cut through to him in his slightly hazy state. “I used to think we were a bad match, 'cause I'm bad at taking care of myself and he's... good at taking care of me.”

“That's a bad match?” Miwa asked, bluntly.

“It can be.” Kai muttered.
“But turns out... if I just make an effort it doesn't have to be that way.” There was a wry cynicism in his voice.

“Relationships are all about making an effort.” Miwa spoke down to them. “Right, Kai?”

Kai grumbled.

“I knew that.” Ibuki insisted, somewhat irritably. “I just didn't think I was capable of it.”

“You didn't think you were capable of making an effort?” Miwa asked, humored by the absurdity.

“I... I guess I thought my efforts wouldn't be enough.” Ibuki replied, trying to not sound stingy.

“But in the end you still finally thought to try?” Miwa's words implied he'd been more savvy to Ibuki's problems than Ibuki was fully comfortable with.

“Yeah,” He admitted, guardedly. “Chrono insisted.”

“Oh, he did huh?” Miwa sounded pleased. “He really must like you, then.”

Ibuki hated blushing in front of his friends, and with the drink he easily became emotional. “I... I suppose so...”

Miwa spoke to Kai. “They were all over each other when I caught them.”

In silence, Kai gave him a somewhat distrustful side-eye.

“What? I'm telling the truth!” Miwa insisted. “They really were, honest.”

Ibuki had hoped they wouldn't speak any more of that. Stressed, he couldn't help but snap. “We're not usually like that.”

“So you admit it.” Miwa said, pleased. He was getting drunk, too.

Ibuki hadn't intended to hide it if asked, it was more that he thought it was unnecessary to bring it up in the first place. “So? What about it...” Trying to hide his embarrassment behind some gusto, Ibuki knew it to be futile before he'd even tried.

“I just... I mean, it sure surprised me is all I'm saying.” Miwa still sounded like he was still experiencing the after effects of the shocking events. “I really didn't expect it, I mean... you of all people, with him, in that sort of situation.”

Kai was drinking. A wise choice, Ibuki thought. He had no rebuttal to make. He had surprised himself too, in the past year, though not all surprises had been pleasant. He sighed deeply.

“Am I pushing it?” Miwa asked, cheekily. Did he really need an answer to that question? As frustrated as he was, Ibuki wasn't actually mad. Whatever banter his friends threw at him at his expense, he probably deserved it. Regardless, he'd live. He'd live, even if uncomfortably for the duration of it all.

When Ibuki didn't muster a response, Miwa's imagination filled in the blanks. “I'm guessing it was all Chrono, huh?”

The assumption rubbed Ibuki the wrong way, more so than he was prepared for. His expression had become awfully transparent. “No?” Miwa asked, almost laughing.
“It's not like I ever only just... sit around and wait for him to make a move...” Ibuki tried to explain, his voice still affectedly moody.

“Uh-huh?” Miwa nodded, attentively, still way too humored for his own good in Ibuki's opinion. “Which is to say?”

Now, they'd all been drinking. Surely they never would have ended up with this topic of conversation otherwise. Even with his close friends, Ibuki had always been reserved when it came to certain topics. Maybe Miwa thought it was time for a change, or maybe this was his idea of some sort of revenge. In the end, in his current state, Ibuki was too prideful to let it go, and they both knew it. Despite this fact, Ibuki still couldn't come to terms with what was actually happening. He felt dizzy. “I'm... fully capable of... letting him know what I want.”

“Do you hear that, Kai?” Miwa spoke gleefully.

Looking up from his glass, Kai gave Miwa a hard stare.

Not sure what had just happened, yet very familiar to their usual forms of communication, Ibuki first hesitated to ask. “What?”

Did he want to know? Well, it was too late now.

“Kai, he... he used to really struggle with that sort of thing, you know?” Miwa said it endearingly. Kai looked like reality was slowly catching up to him. Did Miwa have his consent to speak of this? Surely Ibuki would soon find out.

“Miwa...” He grumbled noncommittally.

“What? You got better.” Miwa sounded accomplished in Kai's place.

“For the most part.” Kai admitted quietly. He sounded detached.

Kai and Aichi had been together for a long time. Ibuki would have assumed they'd worked things out by now, but in his own growing experience with relationships, he also knew that it was something you would have to continuously work on. He wanted to ask, but wasn't sure if he should. Speaking of things specifically he wasn't ready for just yet, but it all made him realize how he'd missed out on these sort of topics over the years.

“Well, I realize it can be... difficult.” He allowed himself to say.

“It is difficult.” Kai repeated. “But it's not impossible.”

It sounded like a conclusion he'd reached himself. Ibuki could only assume it was a result of his hardships. Ibuki didn't doubt that Kai and Aichi could overcome pretty much anything together, but he was also aware that being in that situation yourself was a different story.

“So?” Miwa asked him. Ibuki knew the question would come. “Things have... worked out alright between you?”

Though Ibuki had never spoken to his friends about his personal issues, whatever Miwa was assuming about him he was most likely right to. “They have...”

He felt strangely comfortable talking about it. If anything, he feared regretting this topic of conversation at a later time. “Though it was thanks to Chrono.”
“Well, I mean...” Miwa didn’t look surprised. “He was probably... more secure in himself so, well.”

Ibuki thought about it for a second. “That wasn't really our problem.” He said quietly. “Not when it came to-”

“Sex?” Miwa filled in before Ibuki could even try to finish.

“Yes.” He replied, tiredly. “Rather... I'd say I... I got quite... needy.”

Miwa appeared amused with how he'd put it, but didn't point it out. He didn't need to. “I see.”

“So I had reason to learn how to... talk about it.” It was a process that could've gone a lot smoother.

“That goes for anything.” Kai commented. He'd looked the other way.

“True.” Ibuki agreed. He tried to bargain, but gave up on it. “But in our case, we did everything except talk. At least in the beginning.”

Miwa was putting two and two together. “So you slept together but you didn't talk about it?”

Kai had become perplexed, his eyes fixated straight ahead of him.

“We talked... but perhaps not enough.” Ibuki once more tried to locate what had been the root of their problem. “Besides. We were already seeing each other a lot. I didn't feel comfortable telling him I... wasn't satisfied with that.”

Baring himself like this had felt unthinkable just a few hours ago. Ibuki wasn't sure what had happened. He'd gotten drunk, sure, but other than that.

“That can be tough, but in the end it's best to be honest.” Ibuki could only agree with Miwa's words, as woozy as he felt. “Hopefully you're not like Kai though. He can't take care of himself...”

“Miwa-” Kai had been slow to warn him. In his surprise, Ibuki snapped to attention.

“What, it's true?” Miwa was liberal with revealing Kai's secrets today, that was for sure. Kai sighed, giving up.

“He can't watch porn. It makes him feel like he's cheating.” Miwa's voice was a hushed, if excited, whisper.

Ibuki frankly wasn't too surprised. “I see...” He only felt so bad for smiling. Kai could have been a lot more flustered. He mostly appeared tired. Ibuki could only assume it was a worn topic for him.

“But that's not the case for you, is it?” Miwa had thrown the question in Ibuki's direction, and he'd been unprepared.

“Well, not quite...” Ibuki struggled with the smile that threatened to come on his face. “Then again, it's not a reason for concern.”

“Uh-huh?” Miwa asked. Kai was listening carefully.

Ibuki felt himself stretch his own boundaries. Miwa was looking at him expectantly. Kai was too, surprisingly enough.

“You get busy, huh?” Miwa really wasn't letting him off easy tonight. Ibuki thought he probably deserved it, after everything he'd hidden from them.
“Sure,” He admitted, headstrong to hide his embarrassment, his voice properly colored by the drink. “We do.”

Ibuki was surprised to see Kai looking at him as attentively as he was. He looked tense, but interested.

“So,” Miwa leaned in over the table, mischievous smile on his face. “How often?”

Ibuki hadn't been able to predict that the question would be quite so straight forward. He zipped backwards in his seat, and felt a cold sweat coming on. He knew he would regret baring himself, but this soon? “I... I don't...” He hesitated, his facade cracking. “It's not like... I keep track.”

His voice had become deathly silent. Ibuki's expression had frozen in place, and he was stiff in his seat. Kai looked at him strangely, slowly lowering the glass he had been drinking from, his eyes narrowing.

“You don't have an estimate?” Miwa asked him, not quite yet giving in to his disbelief.

Rapidly, stress overcame him. It overcame him because he realized he had no way to shrug this question off; Ibuki didn't know what would be considered a lot or a little. He stared at his friends' faces, as if it would somehow yield an answer. “It depends.”

“But overall?” Miwa said, somewhat noncommittally. Ibuki was still vary of relaxing.

“I'd estimate about... twice a week.” Ibuki said quietly, sharply, wanting it to be over with.

Kai's reaction was slow. He watched Ibuki in astonishment, then disbelief. Miwa choked a laugh. “I see.”

His eyes down on his drink, Kai looked like his mind was racing wildly. Miwa found Kai's reaction funnier than anything else, and let a chuckle slip out.

Muttering quietly, Kai's confusion had put a mistrusting glare on his face. “Twice... a week?” His voice was barely audible.

“It's... an estimate.” Ibuki attempted to clarify, trying to be objectively on-point. He failed.

At the sight of the shared confusion between Kai and Ibuki, their differing references worlds apart, Miwa slowly lost it. His bubbling laughter grew louder. Ibuki sighed, clutching his glass hard. Kai looked at Miwa disapprovingly.

“Well, good for you.” Miwa said to Ibuki, as a way to try and reassure him. He tried to collect himself.

“Isn't it an awful lot?” Kai asked, muttering, as if his thought on the matter somehow needed clarifying.

“I mean... I guess?” Miwa didn't sound so sure. “Depends on who you ask.”

An awful lot or not, Ibuki was awfully embarrassed. “Don't ask me. I wouldn't know.” He said, sourly.

“Right, right...” Miwa was still holding back some laughter.

“You don't have to laugh.” Kai said, giving him another side eye.
“You didn't have to react like *that*, either...” Miwa was still amused, smiling.

“Frankly...” Ibuki had set his glass down after taking a sip.Projected, his voice was firmer than before. “You're both awful.”

“You're the one who's awful, man...” Miwa smiled at him affectionately. Despite their previous disagreements, Kai didn't hesitate to agree with him. “I was worried about you. You were so distant.” He looked deep into his glass. “And now I find out what you've been up to all this time...”

Ibuki would've preferred not to visibly and audibly wince at the comment, but he had access to no such luxury. “I... I said I'm sorry.” He said, quietly, mumbling defensively.

With both his friends watching him once more, Ibuki felt pressed for a different reason altogether. “I won't... do it again. I promise.”

“Oh, we want all the lay downs from now on.” Miwa demanded cheekily.

“We want to know whenever something happens, is all.” Kai wasn't paying him much mind.

“We also want all the details.” Miwa added.

Ibuki, well aware he was just teasing, smiled somewhat weakly. “Sure.” He said, defeated. “If you say so.”

By the time they were saying goodbye, Ibuki was yet to sober up. It was late, but not awfully so. It didn't feel so urgent to leave, but they had to be reasonable. Once outside, they were about to go their separate ways. Initiating their goodbye greetings and overall setting the tone, Miwa grabbed Ibuki in a warm, hearty hug. While he was surprised by it, Ibuki returned it, though gently.

As he pulled away, he grabbed both of Ibuki's shoulders. “Take care of yourself now, okay?” Ibuki felt a little disoriented. “And say hi to Chrono from us.”

“I... I will.” He hadn't fully expected that.

“He is staying with you at the moment then?” Miwa was right to assume.

“He... he is.” Ibuki truthfully hadn't thought too much about him, not in the sense of wondering what he was up to. It had absolutely been for the best. “He's... out with some friends tonight, though.”

“Right.” Miwa patted his back before taking a step away.

“Take care now.” Kai was not the hugging type. At least not when it came to people other than Aichi. With his usually reserved mannerisms, steady eye contact and one hand on Ibuki's shoulder was more than enough to get the point across.

“You too.” Ibuki smiled, and Kai returned the gesture.

While on his way back home, still feeling a little woozy, Ibuki thought about that smile. He would probably feel bad, as in terribly awkward, thinking back on the events of tonight for an indeterminable amount if time into future. When those moments came, when the feeling of
awkwardness and regret came creeping up on him, it would help to remember that smile. That smile, and Miwa's embrace, and their genuine words of encouragement and concern.

Ibuki was still bad at assuming people thought of him outside of whenever they needed something from him, but he was getting better.

Feeling the touch of a hand on his back, Ibuki came to. Chrono's voice faded into his reality, as did the heavy weight of his body laying as if suspended. Ibuki did not manage to respond, his mind still fuzzy. He registered the sound of Chrono's familiar voice, but not the meaning of the words which he spoke.

"Hey, you okay?" Just a little concerned, Chrono spoke to him once more.

"I... I'm fine." His voice came out delayed and awfully slurred, which felt like a wake up call. Even as he tried to move, his body was slow to react, sluggish. It took yet another moment for Ibuki to realize he was in his bedroom.

"It looked like you'd collapsed is all..." Chrono spoke his observation. "If you're going to bed you should... probably get undressed."

Ibuki had almost fallen asleep again, all during the time it took for Chrono to voice his concerns.

"Ibuki?" Chrono touched him again. Realizing what had happened, he took a sterner tone. "Come on. Get up."

Moving slowly, Ibuki tried to roll over. He'd crashed into bed face down with his clothes on and fallen asleep that way, and his body felt too heavy to move. He mumbled, and somehow succeeded, though it felt impossibly uncomfortable. Groaning, he managed to flip over on his back.

Chrono, who was too looking like he'd just come through the front door, looked at him strangely.

"What's with you, huh?" He asked. "Are... are you drunk?"

The words woke him up more effectively than anything else. Ibuki started to remember. He thought to speak, initially to deny it, but the fear and regret made him incapable of it. "I'm sorry."

Chrono sighed. "It's okay, just..." He didn't sound mad. "You worried me for a second is all."

Ibuki laid staring at the ceiling, eyes narrowed. "I... I didn't mean to drink, I... I didn't, but..." He'd only meant to drink a little, at least. In the end, he hadn't even had that much, but his long time aversion to alcohol had made him not only all the more sensitive to it: he appeared to forget quite how sensitive he was as well. "I did. I'm sorry."

"Why are you apologizing to me?" Chrono sounded troubled, tired. "I'm not the one who's going to be hungover on a Tuesday."

Thinking about it now, Ibuki realized that his head already hurt.

"Come on, get up." Chrono grabbed him, and helped him get to a sitting. "You need to get out of
those clothes and go to bed proper. Maybe have some water. Did you brush your teeth?"

"I... I didn't." If he had brushed his teeth, he had no memory of it.

Feeling like a zombie, or at least a reanimated corpse of some sort, called back into the living by Chrono’s request, Ibuki slowly made it towards the bathroom.

Brushing their teeth side by side, Ibuki once more stood observing Chrono’s silhouette as it appeared next to his own in the reflection in the mirror. In his hazy mind, there were few conclusions to be drawn. He thought only, how he wanted Chrono to be here, with him, in this place. A simple moment was more than precious enough. No words, no touches, only a presence that accompanied his own, that was more than precious enough. The feeling wasn’t new, but Ibuki realized how long he’d felt this way. Doubled with his actions today, it was all the more easy to see, all the more undeniable.

Ibuki somehow managed to climb out of his clothes and roll into bed. He’d feared brushing his teeth would wake him up, but once he laid back down, his body felt like a stone. Easily, Chrono slipped in next to him.

"Did everything go alright today?" He asked. They had barely spoken, so they’d either yet to bring it up. As tired as he was, Ibuki couldn't blame him for asking.

"It went alright." Ibuki mumbled, submerged in his blanket.

"It did?"

"They were awfully startled." When the events replayed in his mind, they felt distant, almost pleasantly so. "And perhaps they were a bit upset with how long I’d taken to tell them."

"Well, I mean..."

"It’s to be expected." Ibuki knew that was how Chrono felt, too. "I don't blame them for reacting that way."

"But it went well?" Chrono sounded like he was still quite awake and alert.

"Yeah..." Ibuki admitted. "We had some good conversations, though..."

"What?"

Rushing back to him was a few certain details he’d already tried to suppress. "I might have... said too much."

"Uh," Chrono sounded vaguely nervous. "Which is to say?"

Ibuki roused somewhat. Opening his eyes where he laid, he could peer at Chrono's face and the carefully confrontational expression upon it. "Perhaps I made a fool out of myself."

"Don't you worry about that, now..." Chrono reached out to pat his shoulder.

"You were right." Ibuki managed, a thought that been stuck in his mind for the duration of the evening.

"What do you mean?"

Ibuki shook his head where he laid. He was tired. He wanted to sleep, desperately. "I couldn't... get it
through my head." His voice was a weak mumble. "I keep thinking people... won't care. Or they won't listen. Or think about me. But they do."

With his eyes closed, Ibuki felt Chrono move closer to him. "Of course they do."

Chrono's voice was warm, pouring. Feeling strongly that his articulation had failed him, Ibuki relaxed, and succumbed to his fatigue. They would speak more of this at another time, most definitely already tomorrow. He dreaded asking Chrono about his night out with Shion and Tokoha, but he was frankly also quite curious to know.

Feeling Chrono's presence next to him, Ibuki thought once more of the visage of Chrono right next to him in the bathroom mirror reflection. Undeniable indeed, were his feelings. He still had things left to do, and he still had to stick to his plan. Maybe next he should make a new plan. A plan to let Chrono know, exactly how he felt.
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

It's been three thousand years weeks. To offer some foresight: I originally planned for this story to have 17 chapters. However, I also want to write at least one epilogue chapter, though I'm still just largely focused on getting the main story finished. I'm currently working on chapter 16 and it's taking longer than I thought. Chapter 13 and 14 are also very long and I'll need a lot of time to edit them. I'm saying I might need another three weeks for the next update but hopefully it won't come to that. Anyway, here's the update.

The pavement was wet, and the air unpleasantly humid. A bike passed over the bridge, rolling by leisurely in the dark. The walkway across the river in Sumida, Asakusa that shone with golden lights after sundown, was a place of many memories. It was like a radiant arch reflected in the water, visible from far away, wherever one stood by the river bank. The Sensouji. The Sky Tree. The Sumida river. All places where impactful and traumatic recollections meshed with the memories of the mundane, day by day life that he'd lived in this part of town for the past decade or so. Chrono still loved this place. He still did, and he felt prideful to live here, where Tokyo's new and old, foreign and native came together in a wild mix. Tourists would travel far to come here, to see the relics of old and the wonders of modernity alike, and he had the luxury of calling it his home.

As mixed yet precious as his memories were, Chrono could be more conflicted. He could be more conflicted about standing here, overlooking the river, waiting. Many years prior, it was here he'd come looking for Ibuki on a cold December evening. Here he was again now, looking for him, but perhaps more so looking for an answer.

They'd decided to meet up, finally. Ibuki had asked to see him. It had been about two weeks. No more, no less. Chrono hadn't felt like sitting around his room, anxiously. So he'd opted to wait out here. If it was more or less excruciating, he didn't know. He liked to think it was easier when he could feel the cool breeze on his face and watch the ever-changing yet familiar view of the river. He still couldn't help but listen to the traffic, paying attention to each car that stopped within his earshot. In reality, he didn't know how Ibuki would arrive.

Eventually, the appointed time came. It came, and it passed. Standing in place, Chrono felt his heart sink. He'd once more become overtly acquainted with his own sentimentality. Ibuki hurting him had left a deep imprint on him, counteracting the feelings for him that he'd hidden away for so long. It threatened to make him twisted, bitter. It scared him. He didn't want to hate Ibuki, no matter what. He didn't want for all the good things that had happened between them since they'd first met to be tarnished. When he thought about it in that way, he felt almost as if he could understand something, something in the way Ibuki had acted, but it all faded away before he could reach any conclusion.
In the end, Chrono was pragmatic. He was equally stubborn. The minutes ticked by slowly. He waited. Though his trust in Ibuki had threatened to wean, he stood by his words as he’d expressed them to Shion and Tokoha. Not that many people passed him by, it was already past dinner time. Whenever Chrono heard footsteps, he tensed up where he stood, leaning on the railing. When he heard someone stop by him, just an arm's length away, he did not move.

Ibuki wasn't very late. Just a few minutes. Chrono wasn't about to point it out. When he turned his head to look at him, Chrono knew he had a cold look on his face.

“Are you here to say you're sorry?” Chrono asked him pointedly, void of greeting. “Or are you going to ask me to take you back?”

Ibuki's face was pale. He looked weary, upset. There was a clear line on the skin under his eye.

“I'm afraid I... haven't thought of much to say.”

This was somehow more disheartening than any response he'd imagined. In this case, he could only value Ibuki's honesty so much.

“You really haven't thought of anything to say?” He didn't hide his disappointed, nor his sheer disbelief.

“I wanted to see you.”

Ibuki's words were raw, emotional. Chrono felt overwhelmed, for although he felt the same way, he didn't care for the thoughtlessness of it. It made him almost wish for a simple, if worn, apology.

“I missed you.” Ibuki continued to speak to him in the same way. Chrono looked away.

“Do you really have nothing else to say?” He already felt like he might cry out of pure frustration.

“I know I shouldn't have... put you through any of this.” He sounded so genuinely regretful it hurt. Chrono could only assume his feelings extended to everything that had happened between them, not just this particular ordeal. “I don't have any excuse.”

Chrono didn't want to look at him. Ibuki's words did not surprise him, but it was still hard to bear.

“I'd missed you.” His voice was eerily quiet. “When I saw you... after not seeing you for so long... I...”

Chrono felt his throat dry up.

“I stopped thinking that night. I shouldn't have let those things happen, but I did.”

“So you regret it?” Chrono felt like he was ready to stop thinking, too, in a bout of anger. “You regret all of it? Is that what you came here to tell me?”

Ibuki looked like he didn't know what to think. He looked more lost than Chrono had ever seen him. It was jarring, but Chrono couldn't find it in him to feel bad.

“I don't know what to do.” He admitted, eventually. Chrono heard his voice breaking. “I thought things would make sense if I gave it time, if I let you go. I still miss you. I miss you terribly.”

Ibuki swallowed hard. “Chrono, I don't know what I should do.”

Chrono had looked at him then, and he realized the situation they were in. Ibuki had come here
searching for answers, too.

“I can't... tell you what to do.” Chrono's voice was steady, concentrated. “You'll have to figure that out by yourself.”

As his words seemed to sink in, Ibuki put his hand on the railing, and looked out over the river.

“I still don't know why you'd say all those things to me.” Chrono said to him in distaste, his voice quiet but underlined with frustration. “All I know is that it really hurts.”

When Ibuki looked at him, he looked strangely cold. “You're smart. Can't you figure it out?”

Feeling his lip tremble, Chrono knew Ibuki had a point. He certainly wasn't naive. He wasn't without any counterargument, either. “You... you like me.” As he spoke the fact into existence, Ibuki looked away. “You like me, so why do you act like this?”

He'd projected his voice, hoping to shake some sense into the situation.

“I feel like you're trying to make me hate you or something. I know that's not what you want.” As Chrono imposed his idea of Ibuki's feelings onto him, he didn't appear to fight it.

“In this case, I don't think it necessarily matters...” His voice wavered just a little. “How I feel.”

“Oh, come---” Chrono raised his voice, properly mad. “Why would you say that?! Why would you say--”

“It shouldn't be me to be with you.” Ibuki cut him off, forcefully. “You can be with anyone. It doesn't have to be me.”

“Sure!” His voice breaking, Chrono agreed in irritation. His eyes watered, but he refused to cry just yet. “Sure I could be with anyone. But it... it wouldn't be you.”

He sniffed dryly, his voice hard like the look in his eyes. “A-and, what do you even know about that, anyway?!” He couldn't keep himself from stuttering, so upset he was. “You don't know what I'm thinking. You haven't even... asked, or anything.”

Ibuki stared at him for a moment. He appeared to waver in the face of Chrono's outburst. As he was thinking, he spoke, eventually. “I can't... I can't be what you need me to be.”

Chrono felt some of his energy leave him. He sighed. “Do you... ever, like... listen to yourself?”

As he said those words, Ibuki appeared to tense up.

“I don't... need you to be anything.” Though irritated, though upset fierce, Chrono spoke with a fierce conviction derived from elsewhere. “Except just yourself.”

Pained, Ibuki looked ashamed of himself.

“And again, you're assuming all these things about me, like what I need or what I'm thinking.”

Chrono argued.

“I won't understand for sure unless you tell me. Specifically.” Chrono crossed his arms.

“Chrono, I know you understand what I mean.” Ibuki bargained.

“Things weren't supposed to be like this between us.” Ibuki said, quietly.
“Things weren't supposed to be like what?” Chrono retorted back, mad. Ibuki was still being vague, dramatic. “Were you not supposed to not talk to me for almost a year? Or, were you not supposed to-” His voice wavered again, as the words came to him. “Make me think you liked me?”

The times they'd shared post his 20th birthday were still precious to him, so precious despite everything. Was Ibuki going to take that away from him now, too?

“Oh do you mean that, like, you weren't supposed sleep with me?” It was hard to say, and in fact he didn't want to- but as his temper got the better of him, the words seemed to fall out of him, having acquired a will of their own. “Take me out, and... and sleep with me again?”

Ibuki had paled. He looked fearful, in fact. It only served to make Chrono even angrier, through he settled for seething in silence. Ibuki looked like he might cry too, as the words Chrono had spoken lingered between them. Swallowing tensely, Chrono adverted his eyes. The view of the Sumida river gave him no peace.

“I knew...” As Ibuki spoke silently, Chrono felt his eyes on him. Even now, it still made his heart beat a little harder. “I knew how you felt.”

As the meaning of the words connected to him, Chrono felt cold inside. It was hard to breathe.

“I'd know for... a long time.” Though delicate, Ibuki's voice was clear, and unwavering.

Thoroughly embarrassed, Chrono still had his face turned away. His lips now dry, Chrono couldn't bear to look at him with how he appeared so emotional. “You knew?” He asked, irritably.

“I...” Ibuki hesitated just a little. “I guessed it.”

He'd been right to. There was little left for him to hide now, but Chrono still felt exposed. No one was supposed to know. He still didn't want anyone to know, as irrational as it was. It was his embarrassing secret, the crush he'd had on Ibuki for so many years.

“I was... flattered. That you'd feel that way about me.” Ibuki still spoke quietly. “Though, it also... scared me.”

His voice was warm as he recalled the memory of times gone by. “I wasn't sure how to go about it. You were... young, and you admired me. I didn't want to let you down.”

Ibuki took about half a step forward, and as his eyes were once more stinging, Chrono still refused to look at him. He didn't want to see the look in Ibuki's eye right now.

“You meant so much to me.” He spoke quietly, warmer than before. Chrono felt the words cut deep into him, and frankly, he didn't want to hear them. How Ibuki had felt about him back then, he didn't want to know.

“I was afraid I'd... somehow lead you on. Though I knew I couldn't go out of my way to turn you down, either. It would just hurt you.” Ibuki sounded like he was barely breathing. “I didn't want to patronize you.”

Now that he himself was the age Ibuki had been back then, it was easier to understand. Surely, if he'd been more clear of mind, if this information wasn't all coinciding with his own emotional turmoil, surely he'd been able to understand it all clearly. In a way, he did. It was not enough, however, to ease him. The person he'd been in his teenage years, with all that doubt and confusion, had risen to the surface, and he was regardless upset to hear the truth he'd feared deep in his heart already back then. Ibuki had known, Ibuki had known and he'd acted accordingly. It was an adults
job to do so. Chrono knew that. It was still hard to apply it to himself.

“In the end,” Ibuki continued. “It wasn't so hard. I was certain you'd grow out of it, anyhow.”

Chrono stood frozen in place. He'd thought as much himself, at least eventually. Now, the memory of all that felt deeply distant, if not outright ironic.

“Once you...” Ibuki's voice had lost it calm, now quivering. “Got a bit older. Got to know me... better.”

Chrono couldn't help but sob, dryly. Ibuki too, drew a shaky breath. In that moment, the shared the same melancholic, exasperated feeling, living together. It was a strange union, but not as tiring as their dividing truths and clashing words.

Chrono felt compelled to speak, the words overfilling in his mind. “I... I guess I thought so, too. But, I... I didn't.” He shrugged weakly. “I really tried. I did. But I couldn't.”

They'd both imagined things differently. Maybe there was some comfort in that, or maybe it was proof they'd walked down the wrong path. Chrono, stubborn as he was, refused to think in those terms, but he knew Ibuki was different.

“When... when I heard you'd started seeing Yanagi from the Dark Zone branch, I was really happy for you.” Chrono hung onto his words, each formed carefully by Ibuki's fragile voice. “I was really happy. That you'd... found someone. That you could have something like that. Something I'd never had myself.”

Chrono didn't know how he was supposed to feel after hearing that. He'd thought so much about it, he'd been so concerned with Ibuki's idea of him. After all this time, they were finally talking about this, but after everything that had happened, he felt strangely numb.

“I know you. So it wasn't surprising in and of itself, though...” Ibuki sounded like he'd thought about this, more than he was comfortable with. “Perhaps it happened sooner than I'd thought.”

With a glance, Chrono caught Ibuki smiling weakly, despite himself. It faded, quickly. As if bracing, Ibuki closed his eyes. “It's been so long now. I don't know... how to make sense out of everything.”

The wind that blew past them was cold. It was not enough to cool Chrono's raging feelings, nor relieve him of his wound up tension. No one had yet to pass them, and on the bridge, they stood undisturbed.

“Something that was so hard for me was so easy for you.” Ibuki said quietly. “It made me... jaded.”

He exhaled. The tension in his voice shattered into frustration. “Or that was what I was thinking at the time. There's probably some truth in that, but... it...” He spoke breathlessly. “It was a rationalization.”

Though his mouth was dry, Chrono swallowed. His heart had started beating heavier, though he wasn't sure when.

“I was happy for you. But it was harder than I thought it'd be to... watch you...” Ibuki paused, but his voice had drained of emotion. “Look at someone else the way you had looked at me.”

Rain had been hanging in the air since morning. The air was stuffy, and it made it hard to breathe. Chrono was already so fatigued, and now he felt lightheaded, overwhelmed. When he looked at Ibuki, he saw his gaze cast out on the view from where they stood, past the river and at the city line.
He looked like he was taking this in as much as Chrono was himself.

“I’d never had anyone like me before. I was special to you, and... it made me feel good about myself.” Ibuki said, pushing on. “So even though I’d expected it, waited for it... in the end, when you had someone else, it... it hurt.”

All the time Chrono had spent fearing to learn Ibuki might have someone came rushing back to him. Conflicted, he pushed the thoughts from his mind.

“It made me feel so selfish. I really hated myself for feeling that way.” Chrono didn't doubt that. “Still, I... I allowed myself to ignore it. I knew I just needed some time, to get over it.”

Chrono wanted to ask, but realized there was no point in doing so. After all, they were both here today for a reason.

“When I heard things had ended between the two of you, I was... surprised.” Ibuki still had his eyes set on the distance, and Chrono found it easier to watch him that way. “I couldn't really understand why that would happen. That was my... spontaneous reaction to it, anyhow...”

Many others had expressed the same feelings about their breakup. Of course, when you are on the inside looking out, you see a different perspective. As Chrono saw it, it wasn't so complex. They'd fallen out of love.

“In a sense, I was relieved.” Ibuki admitted, and his voice had become a little hard, forcing the words out. “It was something off my mind. Now, I wouldn't have to think about it anymore. I wouldn't have to feel bad... anymore.”

As Ibuki fell into silence, Chrono realized where the story was headed. He might have said something, anything at all, but his throat seemed to have dried up.

“It was so nice to... see you. Spend time with you, and talk to you... the way we did back then.” When he finally spoke, Ibuki's voice was shaking, his words both direct and avoidant. “It felt like... things were back to the way they'd used to be. But of course, they couldn't be any more different.”

The words didn't surprise him, but Chrono felt clarity, almost as if a veil had been lifted. Ibuki had been aware, just like Chrono himself. He had been able to tell as things had started changing between them. Though quiet, and intending to listen, Chrono found it hard to not get stirred up. He was frustrated, and he was angry.

“You were spending time with me, and paying attention to me... so I wasn't about to question it. I knew it was indulgent, but I couldn't help it. I knew what was happening but, I couldn't... I couldn't... be honest with myself.” Ibuki again sounded like he was on the verge of tears, though his eyes appeared dry, with a detached look in them.

“I thought it was best if I didn't see you so much. I realized I'd already taken it too far, so I thought it best to... put some distance between us.”

“Well, you... you sure did.” When Chrono finally spoke, he surprised them both.

“I didn't... mean for it to... last for so long.” Ibuki told him, pained. Chrono believed him. He didn't think he was lying, but that didn't change what had happened.

“I wanted to see you, but I... I'd lost control of what was happening, I didn't... know what to do. I felt so selfish. I couldn't be honest with myself. How I felt... scared me.”
“It scared you?” Chrono asked without thinking.

Ibuki had looked at him then, and Chrono could see how conflicted he was. “Like I said,” He’d lost a fair amount of his composure. Chrono knew, though, that this was a part of Ibuki too. Fundamentally, he was a very emotional person, despite how he might try and delude people to think the contrary. “I’d never... had anyone like me before. You made me feel good about myself, and... I felt like I was taking advantage of that.”

Chrono didn’t know what to say. The idea felt so far-fetched to him, he never would have considered it. Allowing himself to step into Ibuki’s mind, he found a reality more twisted than he’d expected.

“It made me feel awful.” He’d become worked-up, angry. “Though, the idea that... that I might have developed feelings for you, made me...” His voice was trembling awfully. “It made me feel even worse.”

Now, Chrono would have to lie to himself as well if he’d claim this surprised as well. It didn’t make him happy, nor satisfied, but it absolutely did not surprise him.

“I thought maybe if I didn’t see you the problem would just go away.” There was transparency in his voice, allowing Chrono to learn exactly how good of an idea Ibuki truly had thought it to be, in hindsight. The cynicism was overwhelming. “Instead I just missed you terribly.”

Ibuki sniffed, blinking rapidly. “When I... I heard you'd... started seeing someone else, I...”

Chrono raised his eyes to look at him, and when he saw the look on Ibuki’s face, his heart became cold.

“I felt like I couldn’t go on.”

Confounded, the words didn't seem to sink in. Chrono was confused, though how cold he still felt. Ibuki looked ashamed.

“I felt like I’d missed it.” He spoke quietly. “My one chance, to... to be with someone. Someone who understood me. Cared about me. Someone who had been willing to be patient with me despite everything.”

Chrono knew he was that person. He'd doubted if Ibuki knew. Now, as late as it was, it shook him deeply. Ibuki had known. He'd known exactly how ready Chrono had been to be with him.

“You could have... said something.” Chrono's voice was quietly defiant.

“What was I supposed to say?”

“I don't know?” Chrono spoke louder, upset. “How you felt?”

Ibuki shook his head. “I wasn't... ready for that.”

“You could have said something,” Chrono changed his tone. The desperation of his past self was present unlike before. “Anything.”

Ibuki sighed shakily. “It wouldn't have changed anything. There was nothing I could... I was still in denial, just...” Ibuki was still angry with himself. “Just feeling sorry for myself.”

Chrono didn't know what to say to that.

“I'd... I'd basically be asking you to break up with someone, someone who was committed to you,
without being able to offer you the same myself.” Ibuki’s voice was hard, and he was doubtless in the truth of the statement. “How was I supposed to do that?”

“I'm... I'm not saying you'd have to go that far, I just...” Chrono hesitated. “I just wished you'd at least talked to me.”

A moment's silence. “I was really worried about you.”

“I know.” Ibuki replied quietly. “I'm really sorry I couldn't... be any more mature about it.”

“I know it's not always your strong point...” The shaken up emotions in his voice contrasted strangely to his words. “But I thought, I mean... I kept thinking about you. I hoped you'd come through, even though I knew I... probably shouldn't.”

Ibuki exhaled. The slightest notion of tension appeared to leave him. “I kept you waiting for such a long time, and... even now, I don't know what to say to you. I feel like I still can't be honest with myself. I want to do what's best for you, but everything I do just seems to hurt you.”

“Why, though?” Chrono said, asking what he'd been wanting to all this time. “Why can't we just... be together? 'Cause I felt like... things were going well. If I'm going to be completely honest, I have no idea what you're even on about half of the time.” Perhaps it was an exaggeration, but his feelings regardless aligned with his words. “I know there are things that are hard for you but... I wish you'd be more patient. With yourself.”

Torn, Ibuki watched him. He was thinking, and Chrono felt that it was a bad sign.

“You said it yourself, that you could be with anyone. Rather than putting all your time and effort into me, it would be a better use of your time to invest in a relationship with someone else.” It sounded like he'd thought about this. It sounded like he'd come here today prepared to have this specific conversation. “You always make all my problems your business. You take everything upon yourself. It's not fair. It's not fair to you, or to me.”

A strange feeling engulfed him, and Chrono, though eager to speak, realized he had nothing to say.

“When I think of us together, it scares me. I can only see myself draining all the energy out of you, taking up all your time. I'm not very good at taking care of myself. I take no pride in it, but it's the truth. I know you'll make it all your business, each and every little thing. I don't want that.” Though calculated in his words, Ibuki still couldn't help but grow emotional. “How could I do that to you?”

“Well, you'll... you'll just have to get better at taking care of yourself, then.” Chrono said, upset, if not mad.

“And what if I can't?” This was the moment Ibuki regained his composure. It rubbed Chrono the wrong way.

“You can,” Chrono insisted, irritated. “You'll just need to learn how to.”

“And until then?” Ibuki challenged him. “Until I can learn to take better care of myself, what will you do?”

When Chrono hesitated to answer, he knew Ibuki had made a fair argument. In the first place, he'd never directly argued against him. Chrono knew he was right. He knew he could never leave Ibuki alone, not truly. It was tempting to lie to himself, but after the year that had passed, Chrono had more so than ever proved to himself that he was unable to let Ibuki go. He always worried. Even know, he worried. Even now, he was focused on getting Ibuki into a better place.
Chrono had always seen himself as a reasonable person. Now, if he wanted to retain that idea of himself, he had to be honest. At this point, it was the only thing that would make things work. Ibuki wouldn't settle for anything else.

“I could... try not to.” He could hear the hesitation in his own voice. He wanted to be more convincing. “I'll make an effort to... give you time.”

Ibuki looked at him, clearly unsure of what to think.

“If we both make an effort... we could figure things out.” He knew it had to be a collaborative effort.

“I don't know, Chrono.” Ibuki sounded painfully sincere. “I feel like I've already wasted so much of your time.”

“Could you not...” He felt his emotions flare up. “Assume I think it was all wasted?”

“I already tried to move on and well, I couldn't.” Though angry, Chrono felt his eyes water. “And even if things haven't been perfect... I was... really happy... to be with you.”

Ibuki watched him and as the words weighted him down, his expression failed him. He was tearing up, too.

“It felt like things were finally making sense. Sure, I worried about you. About... us, but...” Chrono saw it as it happened, he saw the tears come rolling down Ibuki's cheeks as he cried, silently. “But I thought... whatever it was we could work it out. 'Cause in the end, we always do.”

The words piling up inside him, wanting to burst out, his chest and his throat constricted, it was all too much, all too painful.

“I know I get all preoccupied with you, and I can't... seem to let things go. But I do... trust you, you know?” Seeing Ibuki cry made him want to stay strong. “I trust you, and... I believed you'd come through.”

The anger, the frustration, it all seemed to evaporate. "I believed in you, and... I still do.”

Ibuki had laid his eyes on him, not looking away. Chrono saw him become strained as the tears started falling harder. Chrono reached out to him, raising a hand to touch his face, and wipe some of his tears. Closing his eyes, while struggling not to cry even harder, Ibuki put his hand on Chrono's.

“It was really special, to me. Being with you.” Chrono relayed his words to him quietly. He felt Ibuki hold his hand.

“I... I do trust you too, but...” Ibuki fought hard to speak. “I do, but...”

He opened his eyes slowly, and more tears spilled out, running down his face. He shook his head, and Chrono let him try and collect himself. Ibuki drew a shaky breath.

“I was supposed to look after you.” He said, quietly. “I was supposed to... but I never could.”

His voice colored by tears, Ibuki struggled to speak. “I promised your father. I promised your aunt as well. But in the end... it was always you, protecting me. Setting me on the right path.” Ibuki had his eyes cast down, with a steady stream of tears coming down his face. He sobbed, and Chrono heard him hold his breath. It sounded painful.

“That was a long time ago. You did everything you could.” Chrono told him quietly. “Sure, things
didn't turn out the way you expected. But I don't think you realize... how much you did for me.”

Though it frustrated him more than he could say, Chrono swallowed hard his anger. Ibuki's agonizingly overbearing words were regardless his truth that he lived. For now, he had to accept that, and allow him to speak freely, as much as it pained him hear it.

“I was immature. And selfish.” Ibuki's voice was coarse as he cried. “And... I still am.”

Chrono ran his thumb over his cheek. He sighed, lightly.

“Even now,” Ibuki swallowed hard. “I... haven't changed.”

“You don't have to punish yourself so much for it, you know?” Chrono said it to him, his voice steady. “Because, at least to me, that's what it feels like you're doing.”

Ibuki looked like he stopped to consider it, even as the tears were still rolling down his cheeks. “Maybe I am...” His voice was a ghastly whisper. “Maybe I am punishing myself. But I don't know what that changes.”

“I want...” Chrono spoke clearly, without the faintest doubt in his voice. “I want us to try again.”

Surely that had been clear. Ibuki sniffed quietly. Chrono still held his face in his hand. “But for us to do that, you need to stop being so hard on yourself for things that happened so long ago.”

“I just don't feel like... I can make you happy.” Ibuki's voice had cracked, and his sadness was painfully sincere.

“How would you know that?” Chrono smiled, if tiredly. “You... barely even tried, did you?”

Ibuki, who had been sobbing, stopped. He appeared to freeze in place, his eyelids slowly coming tightly shut.

“I... I'm sorry.” He said, his broken voice just above a whisper. He parted his lips to speak more, but nothing came out. He tensed up terribly, his tears falling faster than before.

Chrono gave in. He embraced Ibuki, tightly. He pressed Ibuki's head down on his shoulder, and he felt him return his embrace desperately. He sobbed again, though the sounds were muffled, and Chrono felt him grasp at the clothes on his back tightly. “I thought so.” Chrono admitted, his own voice strained by his eyes that watered once more.

“It's really not like you...” Chrono spoke gently. Ibuki had buried his face in his neck, and Chrono felt his body tremble, letting out the tension. “To give up before you've even tried.”

“It's... it's been so long, already.” Ibuki's deep voice became even quieter when muffled by their embrace. “I'm sorry.”

“It's okay.” Chrono reassured him, lightly. He rubbed his back, still holding him tight. “It's not too late.”

Chrono felt Ibuki relax somewhat, and he allowed himself to squeeze him tighter.

“We can still fix it.”

The wind would blow, the scent of rain mixing with that of tears. The shoulder on Chrono's jacket became wet as Ibuki continued to cry. The sound of the speeding traffic of the elevated highway across the river carried, proof that the world carried on, even as they became locked in a tight
embrace giving in to a long time's worth of pent up feelings and emotional turmoil. The water in the river laid still, only quiet ripples forming in the wake of the boats that passed like ghosts in the dark.

After Ibuki stopped crying, his sobs silenced, they still embraced for a passing moment before pulling away. It was Ibuki who moved, somewhat clumsily as he pulled away, and he carelessly used his sleeve to try and dry his cheeks. With Chrono's arms still loosely around him, he drew one last, quiet, dry sob. Chrono had never seen him cry like this before. Yet, it didn't quite surprise him. Ibuki was capable of a wide spectrum of emotions, after all. He collected himself, successfully, though his episode had left him looking fatigued.

“Are you okay?” Chrono asked, quietly.

“I'm...” Ibuki sniffed. “I'll be fine. I think.”

Chrono brushed the hair out of his face where it had stuck to his wet cheeks.

“Thank you for...” Ibuki looked worn out as he spoke. “Agreeing to see me, despite everything...”

“Hey, look, I...” Chrono watched him carefully. “I want us to be able to talk. No matter what.”

“Right...” Relieved, Ibuki spoke on a breath. Chrono pulled him a little bit closer.

“It always felt like...” Ibuki appeared to drift away somewhat, the look in his eye distant. “You knew just the thing to say.”

Chrono smiled. An untainted smile. “I... I try.”

Ibuki shook his head. “All the more reason I feel like... I need you. Around me.”

He looked so very sad. Chrono was pained at the sight. Watching him, Chrono felt something inside him call out. The very same feeling that had restlessly tormented him in this past two weeks, and the year before, all in Ibuki's unexplained absence.

“...I need you, too.”

The words, their meaning, had formed most naturally. Chrono himself hadn't realized until now. Slowly, Ibuki rose his gaze to look at him, and Chrono realized how vulnerable he must appear to him now; much more so than he'd ever intended.

Chrono felt himself choke up somewhat. “I'm... not so good at being alone.” Despite how upset he'd made himself, with Ibuki's eyes on him, he couldn't help but feel at peace. “I lose my motivation, feeling like I don't know what I'm doing.”

Ibuki hadn't expected this, not quite. He did not appear confused, but rather he listened carefully.

“When I'm with you it's so easy.” Though he felt his lips tremble slightly and his blood rush, Chrono refused to let it hold him back. “It's easy to... motivate myself, and... feel like I can do the things I wanna do.”

Chrono felt Ibuki's hands on his shoulders, and with a serious look in his eye, Ibuki had pulled him closer. “Chrono,” When he spoke, though he still sounded worn from all his tears, the tone of his voice matched his expression. “You're the one who's... inspired me. To do better. Be better.”

With Ibuki's grasp on him, tight, his gaze steady on his face, Chrono's heart was beating hard in his chest.
“It's all making me look quite silly, but I suppose I find myself there again, now.”

Ibuki sounded like he had come to terms with something he'd wrestled with for a long time. Dazed, Chrono looked up at him.

“I loved you, though I didn't act like it. I couldn't tell you. I couldn't even admit it to myself.” It was strange how easily, lightly the words left him. With his eyes moist and his hands firmly on Chrono's shoulders, Ibuki gazed at him earnestly. “Well, it's time I did. It's time I at least tried to act like it.”

Chrono would have said something, but he could not draw a breath. There was a distinct tingle on the surface of his skin, on his face, on his hands. As the words replayed in his mind, he felt as if though he was experiencing someone else's life. Out of all the things he'd expected to hear Ibuki tell him today, this was not one of them. The concept was alien even in the deepest reaches of his mind. Ibuki loved him. In theory, he'd known. Yet, it shocked him, shaking his very core.

“So, if you're going to ask me to try again, I ought to. I owe it to you.” In his vulnerable, yet grounded state, Ibuki voiced a new truth for himself. “I knew you'd probably convince me, somehow. It scared me, because I felt like I couldn't... go through with it, not without making things worse than they already were.”

“Things can... always be worse.”

If Ibuki was privy to the state he'd put Chrono in, Chrono himself wasn't sure. When he heard his voice come out, on a whim, it only helped so much to make him feel reconnected with reality.

“But...” Chrono shrugged, awkwardly. “I feel like... I don't really care, 'cause... it can't be any worse than, you know... trying to move on and feeling like I'll never know.”

Ibuki looked like he might tear up again. “I... I hope so.” He said quietly. “I just hope I won't make you regret it.”

“Hey, if... if it comes to that, it's on us.” Despite how wound up he'd become, Chrono felt more confident than before. “Which is why I said we gotta work on it... together.”

Ibuki looked at him, not yet doubtful, but fatigued by his emotional state. Chrono rose his hand to his face once more, hoping to comfort him. “We just gotta work on it. I know we can.”

“Chrono, there's...” Ibuki lowered his eyes somewhat. He sniffed. “Still things you don't know about me.”

“Like... like what?” Chrono smiled, sighing. To him, it sounded absurd. “What could it possibly be... that would make me feel differently about you at this point?”

Ibuki shook his head in silence. Chrono leaned in, hugging him, and as he did, Ibuki returned his embrace without hesitation. It was a different sort of embrace, though as Chrono once more felt Ibuki press his face down on his shoulder, he felt strangely light. Chrono stroke his back slowly, and felt Ibuki breathe calmly. Once and for all, Chrono allowed himself to feel relieved. Naturally, he'd still worry, though he'd made the earnest promise to Ibuki to not let that feeling control him. He hadn't lied when he'd said he believed they were worth a second chance. As overdue as it had been, he'd finally gained insight to Ibuki's feelings. With a new perspective, he could put the events that transpired between them into context. Surely, it would make things easier henceforth.

“I should have told you all this, already a year ago.” Ibuki spoke to him, quietly, his voice still colored by his tears.
“You weren't ready.” Chrono responded, quietly. He didn't mean for it to simply be reassuring. It was the truth as he saw it. “And honestly, I don't think I was, either.”

Ibuki sniffed quietly. “Maybe not.”

It didn't sound like he fully believed it, but that he found solace in the possibility that it might be true.

They embraced for a while longer, until it felt like they were both going to be okay. The air was still richly humid and stuffy, but Chrono regardless felt like he could breathe again. Pulling away from Ibuki slowly, he leaned in to kiss him, gently pressing his lips against his cheek. The sensation was familiar, and yet, a brand new feeling seized him. Ibuki still held him tightly, and as Chrono pulled back once more, he saw Ibuki slowly lean down. By Ibuki's initiative, their lips met. It was a simple kiss, not delicate, but simple. Rather than pulling away, Ibuki pressed their foreheads together, closing his eyes. Chrono sighed. Ibuki had indeed come through for him, in the end. He hadn't been wrong to hope.

More so than before, it felt like it might finally rain. Ibuki had his car parked a short walk away. Coming inside and sitting down in the passenger seat, Chrono felt as if the inside of the car was more like an alternate reality.

As the lights in the cabin came on, Chrono could in the harsh light clearly see Ibuki's strained eyes and the trail the tears had left on his cheeks. He'd located a handkerchief in the compartment in the door, and Chrono decided not to stare as he used it to properly wipe his face. Instead, he lightly laid his hand on top of Ibuki's where it laid on his lap, comforting him.

A moment of still, direly needed silence passed them. Chrono finally felt like he could breathe again. He didn't notice at first, but it would slowly start raining. The sound of drops hitting the outside of the car resonated, making them feel all the more encapsulated, isolated from the real world.

Despite this, when Chrono thought to speak, tangible matters were on his mind. "Have you eaten?" He asked carefully. "It's quite late."

It had gotten darker outside.

"I... I haven't." Ibuki admitted shamefully.

"I thought so..." Chrono couldn't blame him. "I... haven't really eaten much of anything, either."

As he'd confessed, Ibuki smiled weakly. "I guess we ought to do something about that, then..."

It was strange to think of, stranger to speak of. Though seeing Ibuki smile made him forget all about it, and Chrono felt strangely light.

"There's..." Ibuki spoke carefully, as if to not disturb the peace. "There's a burger place not too far from here. If you don't mind."

"Oh." Chrono, who'd been lost in thought, realized this wasn't what he'd expected Ibuki to suggest. "Sure. Why not?"

"I thought, maybe... you'd like something a bit more," Ibuki hesitated. "Substantial."
"I don't mind..." It's not like it was worth thinking too hard about now. It really didn't matter.

"Alright." Ibuki inhaled as if bracing. "I'll... I'll take us, I just..."

"There's no need to hurry." Chrono reminded him.

"Right..."

Chrono allowed him to mellow out. In a minute, Ibuki would grab the steering wheel, and pull out from the parking spot.

The burger joint was yet another familiar place with many memories. As they'd sat down to eat, Chrono couldn't help but bring it up.

"I used to go here with Tokoha and Shion all the time."

"I've ended up a few times here myself, I'm afraid." Ibuki still had something definitely fragile about him. Chrono saw it his responsibility to take it in.

"Well, once it gets late, you start to run out of options, even around here." Though Asakusa was such a well-visited tourist spot, restaurants would still close past dinner time, leaving only bars and fast food locations.

Ibuki sighed, and Chrono had a feeling it had little to do with the closing hours of the local eatery establishments. "It could be less forgiving," He reasoned. "Though, I feel like I've perhaps eaten more than my fill of fast food in my life."

"...You don't really seem the type." He had to wait to speak, needing to swallow his food. Chrono had thought about it before.

Ibuki appeared vaguely conflicted by this. "Perhaps." He smiled weakly. "How was your burger?"

"Oh," Chrono realized he'd yet to comment on it. "It's good. Hearty."

"That's good, then."

As they ate, they managed to have a casual conversation. To Chrono, it felt like the most normal exchanges they'd had in a long time.

Ibuki's apartment felt different. Chrono couldn't quite put his finger on it, but it did. Maybe it was just his tired mind, but the apartment somehow felt bigger and emptier than he'd remembered it. Despite this, it felt good to be back. The situation was starting to settle in. By the time they'd made it past the front door, it was late. Getting ready for bed, Chrono found it almost absurd how easy it was to feel at home. The toothbrush he'd used was still sitting inside the cabinet in the washroom, as if nothing had changed since he'd last been here. Coming into the bedroom, he laid on top of the covers, waiting for Ibuki. He'd thought to text Shion and Tokoha and let them know how things had gone, but couldn't think of much of anything to say. It would have to wait until he'd had a chance to think and formulate a message that could at least decently convey what had happened.
As he came into the bedroom, Ibuki shut off the lights. Then, he saw Chrono with his phone.

“Sorry,” Ibuki apologized quietly. “...Do you want me to turn the lights back on?”

“That's fine.” Chrono didn't exactly mind. He put his phone away. “Honestly though, I dunno if I'm gonna be able to fall asleep for a while.”

He still felt quite alert. As Ibuki laid down next to him, Chrono moved a little closer.

“I suppose I don't feel too different myself.” He admitted. He sounded a little reluctant to do so, and Chrono thought it was cute.

“When are you getting up tomorrow?” Chrono asked him, not just making conversation, but wanting to know.

“Not too early.” Ibuki replied. “...I thought this all might take some time tonight. I don't have anything scheduled tomorrow morning.”

Chrono watched him. “I see.” He put his hand on Ibuki's arm, and as he did, Ibuki turned to look at him. To the ambience of the city outside, they shared a short moment. Chrono came to a rest. Eventually, he closed his eyes, though he could still feel Ibuki's gaze on his skin. He felt Ibuki's fingertips on his face, then lightly running through his hair. It was almost overwhelming, and yet he felt so satisfied.

Satiated with the lingering silence, Chrono spoke eventually. “How do you feel?”

“I'm better.” Ibuki replied, and Chrono could hear the smile on his lips.

“You were crying an awful lot.” Chrono hesitated a little to bring it up, but he rather not pretend like it didn't happen.

“I feared I would.” Chrono didn't doubt that. “I needed it, though.”

“Yeah...”

“You looked like you might, too.” Ibuki sounded like he was holding onto a notion of disbelief.

He was right, though. “Yeah, I know.” It'd made it hard for him to cry, once Ibuki's own tears had started falling. “I'd be surprised if I had any of it left in me. I've been...” He paused, his voice becoming a little strained. “Crying all week.”

In the silence, Chrono felt Ibuki's hand in his hair once more. He exhaled, bracing himself to speak. “Me too.”

It didn't surprise him, but it hurt. Where he laid, Chrono pulled himself closer to Ibuki, raising his hand to lay it on his chest, resting his head on his arm.

“I wasn't sure what would come out of it. I'm still not.” Ibuki's voice was a murmur, steady in his conviction. “But other than missing you... it hurt, feeling like I couldn't have been honest with you. I wanted you to know what I was thinking, how I felt.”

Chrono felt his body stiffen. He swallowed quietly.

“You deserve that. After everything you've done for me.” Ibuki's voice was still steady, and resonated with clarity. “I kept thinking... that if I couldn't at least talk to you, if I couldn't even be honest with you, then... that was way too sad a life for anyone to live.”
To Chrono, that sounded like too much of a defeatist way of thinking for it to be healthy. Regardless, there was a grain of truth in Ibuki's statement.

“I've tired.” Ibuki concluded. “Of putting up these barriers between myself and others. I've tired since long. Yet, I keep doing it.”

Chrono stroke his chest. “It's hard.” He whispered.

“It is.” Ibuki concurred without fail. “I'm sorry...” Ibuki's voice diminished, his mind drifting.

“You already apologized, so... don't” Chrono was about to retort.

“No, I.” Calmly, Ibuki spoke, and Chrono realized his mistake. “I kept saying I trust you. And I do. But I still...”

Ibuki remained calm, his voice hushed. He took a short moment to think. “…I couldn't actually believe... that you'd want to be with me.”

That made sense.

“Really, huh?” Chrono smiled, if sadly. “I think I made that... pretty clear.”

“You did.” Chrono could hear him smiling, again. “I knew. Although I suppose it's hard to... understand. Why you'd... feel that way. About me.”

His voice had grown quieter, as if he didn't want to invite to anything. Well, it was already too late. “Well, for starters...” Though it embarrassed him terribly, Chrono couldn't resist. He was honest to a fault. “You're only like... the hottest guy I ever met.”

Hearing a soft, short laugh, Chrono felt pleased. Making Ibuki laugh made it worth it.

“I see.” He still sounded amused when he spoke.

“Other than that...” Chrono didn't wait too long to speak. He was still a little flustered. “I feel like, again... I've been pretty open about what I like about you.”

He reflected on the conversations they'd had, earlier today, and in the distant past. “Like... you're ambitious. You work so hard. You're always... trying to do the right thing, no matter what.”

“Yes,” Ibuki breathed, quietly. “And see where that got me.”

Chrono refused to let him twist the meaning of his words. Ibuki's comment had only been so lighthearted.

“Even now, I still... admire you.”

As quietly as he'd spoken, he felt the words weight them both down. As Chrono saw it, it was his secret, well-guarded even now. He hadn't told any of his friends, and he probably never would. Ibuki did not respond, but Chrono didn't fully want him to. He wanted him to listen, to take the words in.

“I still, you know...” Though he smiled, Chrono felt his cheeks heat up. As he moved to hide his face, burying it in the fabric of Ibuki's shirt, his voice became muffled murmur. “I want you to notice me. And pay attention to me. I want you to think I'm... reliable. I want you to think I'm cool.”

Chrono slid his leg up on Ibuki's thigh. He let his fingers grasp his shirt, laying with his face still hidden. “I guess I just... want you to like me.”
Chrono felt Ibuki move underneath him, shifting. Then, he felt his breath against the skin of his face. “I like you.”

The temperature rising, Chrono's heart was beating slow and hard. Ibuki kissed him lightly, placing his lips on the side of his face.

“I thought so.” Chrono replied, his voice shaking despite the smile on his face.

“For a long time...” Ibuki sighed with his words, his face still rested against Chrono's. “I was scared. I wanted to... be with someone.”

Feeling the words form against his skin, Chrono felt their meaning resonate with him.

“I was terrified. Of letting anyone that close. Though I craved it.” The raw emotion in his words didn't shatter the clarity in his voice. “When I... thought of being with you, it didn't feel like that. I knew you'd be patient with me. I knew you’d... understand.”

His heart swelling, Chrono shifted to look Ibuki in the eye, their faces close together.

“We rushed quite a bit though.” He said. “It worried me. I thought maybe you weren't ready after all.”

Ibuki exhaled a quiet sigh. “I was the one who rushed it.”

Memories, reflected on repeatedly; Chrono would still think of their first evening together. It still made him feel warm, it would still make him shiver if he delved on it for too long.

“Maybe, but...” It wasn't as if Chrono himself hadn't had a part in it.

“It's true I was terribly nervous, self-conscious. I didn't know quite what to do or what to say.” Chrono felt Ibuki's words almost as if they were his own. He knew what it felt like, what it felt like to be there.

“But I was never afraid.” Chrono felt Ibuki's arms curl around him, pulling him close as he rolled to his side. Eyes wide, and with rousing emotion, he hung onto Ibuki's words. “When I’m with you... I always feel safe.”

Chrono returned the embrace, holding him tight. Chrono knew what it meant. He understood the significance of it. He kissed Ibuki where he could reach, kissing him lightly on his neck, snuggling his face into his shoulder. On his back, Ibuki's arms pressed around him tight, so tight it was almost hard to breathe. Chrono still couldn't get enough of that closeness, and he knew Ibuki was the same.

Breathing against Ibuki's bare skin, his scent so strong and close, Chrono savored what he'd feared he would never experience again. He'd feared it, but now that he was back, it felt natural. Ibuki had once more proved to him his willingness to overcome his own shortcomings and fears. Chrono kissed his neck more, still lightly, letting his lips linger on the surface of his skin. He felt Ibuki run his hands over his back, but even as he squeezed him tight, Chrono couldn't fully relax. The leg that Chrono had rested against him was now sandwiched between his thighs. He hadn't thought of it at first, but when he felt Ibuki's breath against his ear, then the touch of his lips, it became hard to ignore, harder to think clearly. Another kiss, this time just below his ear. As Ibuki sucked hard on his skin, Chrono audibly inhaled.

The kiss ended. Chrono laid perfectly still, his heart beating hard in his chest. Awkwardly, they pulled away. Ibuki looked uncertain, perhaps guilty, unable to look Chrono directly in the eye. Chrono honestly didn't feel too different himself. It'd just been a few hours, and yet here they were
again. It'd only been so long since neither of them had known what would come of their relationship. Placing his hand on the side of Ibuki's face, Chrono lightly kissed him on the lips. He wanted to be reasonable.

“We can kiss,” He spoke, trying to be casual about it. “If you want to.”

Ibuki looked at him somewhat skeptically. They both knew what would happen if they did. Just now, they hadn't shared innocent touches. Chrono's leg was still tucked in between Ibuki's thighs.

“Or, I mean...” Somewhat hesitantly, Chrono attempted to amend his statement. “Whatever... you feel like.”

Even with his eyes somewhat unfocused, Chrono knew Ibuki was listening. “I'd like to.” Chrono admitted, his voice hushed. “Cause I really missed you.”

“I missed you, too.” Ibuki said, reaffirming his feelings.

When he said no more, Chrono leaned in carefully to hold him. There was a surging heat between them, shared between their bodies. Like this, it wouldn't go away. After a moment's silence, Ibuki spoke.

“I really hated myself, because it felt like...” He didn't appear to let the feelings take over him, yet he struggled to form his sentence. “It felt like, before, we were just...”

“Having sex?” Chrono filled in, quietly. Perhaps he was a bit quick to. Ibuki couldn't quite look at him.

“Yes,” He admitted. “Rather than... all the parts that should encompass a relationship. Or, should I say...” He added, after a moment. “The sort of relationship I wanted. I felt... awful about it. Yet, I allowed it to happen.”

It was more, new, information. Chrono knew Ibuki had surely been upset for a number of reasons. This being one of them didn't surprise him.

“We both had a part in it.” Chrono spoke to him seriously.

“Perhaps, but...” Ibuki's voice lost some of it's clarity.

“I should have talked to you more.”

“I don't know if it would've made any difference.” Ibuki said quietly, wholly uncertain.

“You know what I think?” Chrono asked him kindly.

Ibuki didn't respond, but Chrono's tone of voice caused him to fight a smile.

“I think... that you're very good at scrutinizing yourself. Sure, things could've been better, but as far as I'm concerned... it wasn't so bad.” Chrono hoped he could offer Ibuki a different view point, even if just his own. “I know it was tough for you, and I know you were carrying a lot of stuff around, worrying... I worried too, but you know... mostly about technical stuff.”

Ibuki did bear to look at him then, and it was comforting.

“But I want you to know... it really was a good time for me. I was always... looking forward to seeing you, spending time with you, and...” The comforting feeling morphed, and as Ibuki watched him, Chrono grew restless, flustered. “And sure, it was a bit awkward. And things could've started
out better between us. But it still... it made me... really happy.”

Chrono felt Ibuki's hand move on his back. He had to close his eyes to gather himself. “And I don't want you to feel like... the sex was the problem.” His voice was now a whisper. “I really don't.”

Ibuki looked like he'd come to consider it. When Chrono leaned in to kiss him again, he returned the gesture. It was a gentle first touch, a simple kiss, though rich with feeling. Chrono hooked his arm around Ibuki's neck, pressing against him harder. Lips parting, he felt Ibuki's tongue in his mouth. They kissed deeply, if tenderly. When they parted, Chrono felt a sigh pass through Ibuki's body. He leaned in for another light kiss, their lips just about brushing together.

“What do you say?” Chrono asked him, as if he needed to.

“As usual... you make a compelling argument.”

He'd said it almost icily. Chrono groaned tiredly. With his arm still looped around Ibuki's neck, he pushed towards him, toppling him. Surprised, Ibuki did not fight it, and fell back down flat on his back.

On top of him, Chrono glared at him. “Stop being so cynical. Do you want to or not?”

Ibuki's arms had fallen out on his sides, and his hair had been spread out on the cushion. Already before Chrono's question registered to him, he appeared stunned, his expression unreadable.

“I want to.”

He said it quietly, his voice sounding clear. It was as if he'd allowed himself once more, to admit it to himself. Chrono reached out and took his hand, holding it, intertwining their fingers. The stunned expression on Ibuki's face faded. As he leaned down to kiss him, Ibuki moved ever so slightly to invite to it. It was a wet kiss, compelling, and as Chrono pulled away, it felt incomplete.

“I didn't mean to... say it like that.” He apologized.

“Sure you didn't.” Chrono replied warmly.

Ibuki smiled somewhat shyly. “I feel like I'm always complicating things.”

“I never would have pushed it, you know...” Chrono lowered his voice as he spoke. He was about to embarrass himself, again. “If you hadn't kissed me like that.”

Though Ibuki looked like he'd been put on the spot, he didn't appear to be very bothered by this. The smile had stuck to his face, and it was contagious.

“You got me there.” He said, trying to fight a light laugh that bubbled up below the surface.

They kissed again, continuing where they'd left off. Chrono allowed himself to relax his weight onto Ibuki, pressing him down. He felt Ibuki comb his fingers through his hair. Neither of them felt like rushing, but a warm kiss with tongue as they were pressed together still effectively took its toll. Chrono held Ibuki's hand in his own, and felt him squeeze it.

The apartment was dark, and outside, the ambience of the city had mostly fallen into silence. The heavy, humid air had let down into a heavy rainfall. It poured, staining the pavement, rushing off the
rooftops and splattering off the windows. Similarly, theirs was a tension that had accumulated beyond the breaking point. Chrono moved steadily. Below him, Ibuki helped support him, hand on his waist. Chrono could move faster, but he didn't. He was enjoying himself as it was, just like this. Their lovemaking was yet not very loud, masked by the sound of their unified breathing. Even as he stuck to his pace, Chrono soon felt the building pleasure ripple through him. As his body tensed, his back arching into a stretch, a quiet groan left him. Ibuki felt it too, the shiver in his body stealing his breath away with a whine passing through his lips. Chrono kept moving, his strokes still longer than than they were faster, allowing them both to savor it. The space between them, the places where their bodies touched and the points of which their gazes rested were the only things on his mind. He'd missed this, too. He had, but he'd barely dared to think about it. It gave him all the more reason to indulge himself.

“You... you feel really good.” He spoke on an exhale, delighted. Chrono had allowed himself to speak. Maybe it was because of how today had been both emotionally draining and exhilarating, it felt easier than ever.

Hearing his words, Ibuki's face appeared to take more color. He let his eyes slide shut. “You---” He struggled to speak. When his words came out, his voice was firm yet breathless, only a whisper. “You're so warm.”

They still held hands, though their grip had gone relaxed. Chrono's hand laid in Ibuki's, their palms pressed together as he braced to steady his movements. Ibuki's words had made him smile, as such he was grinning, pleased. He couldn't help but find Ibuki adorable, his simple observation sweet. Overwhelmed with the need to kiss him, Chrono sunk to a stop. Ibuki responded to the kiss needily as their lips met. As he moaned, Chrono kissed him harder.

Pulling away just a little, with the residue of Ibuki's kiss on his lips and his breath hot on his face, Chrono started moving again. He moved with short strokes, sliding against the skin on Ibuki's abdomen. He heat had gotten to his head, and he couldn't quite contain himself anymore. He moved faster, the jerking motions of his hips more defined. Ibuki's shape was already familiar to him, but he wanted it to be more so. He wanted to know it better, feel it closer, work the friction and make it hotter. Ibuki responded to the sensation, breathing heavier.

Chrono lifted himself upward, without stopping. Though he momentarily wobbled as he tried to reposition himself, he quickly found his balance. “I'm... I'm gonna go faster, okay?” He asked, out of breath.

“Y-yeah...” Ibuki managed to respond, nodding readily.

True to his word, Chrono used his thighs, his hips, going faster. Oh, it felt so good, so satisfying, though Chrono knew he could only do this for so long. His legs were strong, but he would tire eventually. He still wanted to try; it was still worth it. Ibuki would still try and support him, though it only did so much. They'd gotten louder, and Chrono couldn't help but be affected by it, just like he knew Ibuki was, too. He could now feel the spring of the mattress below them. Ibuki exhaled with a heavy sigh, his lips parting, his expression making the pleasure he felt clearly readable on his face.

As Chrono felt himself indeed tire, his focus not yet letting himself give in, Ibuki's grip on his hip tightened. When Chrono first felt Ibuki move, pressing up into him, it was off rhythm. Thought it surprised him, it took little for them to cooperate. Chrono had never felt that before. Whenever Ibuki had ever moved against him in the past, it had been slight, weak movements, or something brought by his climax passing through him. This was different, it was new to them. Chrono felt his head spin as he allowed himself to think about it while he felt Ibuki move beneath him, he just as desperate to build the heat between them as Chrono was himself.
Their eyes met in the dark, and though Ibuki had before appeared so bashful, shy, he had become bolder. He did not look away, even as Chrono smiled at him adoringly. Even with Ibuki's support, Chrono eventually had to give in. Fatigued, he slowly came to a stop. As good as it felt, he knew he couldn't finish things off like this. With a sigh, he slid down. Like himself, Ibuki also appeared tired, worn down. They both wanted to finish now, despite how far away that feeling had felt just a few moments ago.

“I-I'm gonna...” Chrono took a moment to catch his breath. “Start moving again in a bit, okay?”

Ibuki watched him, clearly anticipatory. He still held Chrono's hand, gently. “Right.”

With their shared body heat, Chrono felt Ibuki's rushing blood as if it was his own. Moving his hand from Chrono's hip, Ibuki brushed his fingers through his hair. It was a sweet moment, short, tenderly raw. It all caught up to him, and Chrono blushed when Ibuki would still not look away. Once he started moving again, it felt all the more overdue, the sensation overwhelming him all over again. When Ibuki moved against him this time, he started off a bit more carefully. The surface skin contact between them was feverishly hot, and Chrono was ready to become lost in that sensation. Chrono knew, sex wasn't always like this. With Ibuki, it was hard to imagine anything else. He didn't doubt why that was, and yet, it was hard to articulate. Maybe with time, he could know. Right now, it was hard to think as it was.

Ibuki became bolder again, and as Chrono felt his enforced movements he wanted to reward him. “O-oh, yeah...” He breathed, his words passing through his lips on a light groan. “Th-that's good.”

It felt like something had given way. Ibuki let his eyes slide shut once more, and as he was breathing freely, a sound moan left him. Chrono watched him, staring. Below him, he could feel the muscles of Ibuki's thighs tightening. His lips parting with a sharp sound, Chrono then heard Ibuki call out to him. “Chrono.”

He'd heard it before, but it didn't cease to amaze him. Chrono felt the rush transmit to his chest, his face. He'd indeed heard it before, but it was yet another thing he hadn't dared to think much about. Surely, it had been all too good to be true, is what he'd thought, when alone with his doubts. Here again now, living the reality of it, it was hard for him to describe how it made him feel. It was comforting, yet exhilarating, astounding. Ibuki's head rolled back, and his body appeared to tense up. “Chrono, Chrono...” Ibuki called out again, his voice breaking. A callback, to memories of the two of them together, like this. It meshed with the words Ibuki had spoken to him just earlier that evening. As it overlapped, Chrono shivered. He couldn't forget. Ibuki loved him. Ibuki needed him. Those were his own words. So good it made him feel, the blood rushing to his head, causing him to lose track of his thoughts, and lose control. He refused to let it get to him, the panic that felt like it would seep through his pores, and make him hyper aware, as self-conscious as one could be. He moved furiously, tirelessly.

“...Are you coming?” He asked, his voice rough, louder than he'd intended.

“Y-yeah,” Ibuki affirmed, without hesitation, breathless. He sounded eager to. “I... I am.”

Ecstatic to hear it, though he'd already known, Chrono smiled. He was so close too, so close he could almost taste it. Though, despite this, he couldn't help but anticipate Ibuki's climax more than his own. He didn't question why. Watching him, feeling him, Chrono was captivated.

Within the next few seconds, he felt Ibuki tense below him, heard him gasp, groan, saw his lips tremble as they formed the sounds that left him. Ibuki had tipped his head back on the pillow, and Chrono realized all over again how fascinating it was to see him like this. He knew how special it
was, for Ibuki to allow himself to be so transparent, to allow this all to happen in this manner. As he came, he was not hiding anything.

They both breathed a sigh, relaxing. Ibuki's body had come to a rest below him, but Ibuki had barely caught his breath before Chrono felt him try to get up from where he laid.

“H-hang on...” His impatience made Chrono smile.

They were still on the same package they'd bought that one night, after so many ordeals. A little less clueless, Ibuki helped Chrono lift himself off him. Now, there would be a wet spot on Ibuki's nightstand the next morning. Neither of them really cared right now.

As he sat himself back down on Ibuki's abdomen, Chrono leaned forward to kiss him. He kissed him hard, and Ibuki was a little unprepared. In the past, Ibuki had been shy to touch his body. It wasn't really like that anymore. Ibuki knew what he wanted to do, and he didn't make Chrono wait for it, either. He'd reached to stroke him, working his hand in the space between their bodies, moving purposefully. Chrono smothered a moan at the touch. He'd almost forgotten, and now he had been reminded. He'd been so aroused, it was almost unbearable.

“I-I'm close...” He felt compelled to let Ibuki know, despite how his own words made his face heat up. “I'm close, so...”

His words failed him, but the point had been made. Ibuki had started stroking him faster. Chrono could feel his eyes on him, and it didn't feel fully fair, and Chrono was well aware of how much of a hypocrite that made him. Ibuki's hand that he'd been holding was now the one touching him. That didn't feel fully fair, either.

Chrono knew he had to let go, too. Ibuki was giving him the extra push he needed. With a final, strangled moan, his body tensed up. Here he was again. Chrono squeezed his eyes shut. He had nowhere to hide, not this time. He was coming, the sensation that'd threatened to grab a hold of him and take him away all this time finally engulfing him. Chrono held his breath, allowing himself to think only of Ibuki's touch. He was gripping Chrono tight, moving furiously. It was a first, but Chrono hadn't doubted he had it in him. Though it embarrassed him so, thoughts he'd long since sealed away, they once more resurfaced. Chrono's old fantasies of being touched by Ibuki, not unlike this. The response came a bit delayed, but when the sensation ripped through him, his mind went blank. Again, though he couldn't quite describe it, it felt special. In the end, he'd come hard, his body going limp as he'd finished.

Chrono felt Ibuki's hand run through his hair, again. His eyes still closed, trying to breathe, he felt Ibuki move, not quite reacting to it. Ibuki still wore the same tee he'd worn under his shirt that day. Chrono had been too lightheaded to realize, but he'd effectively ruined it. Ibuki had folded it up, allowing it to smear. He didn't appear bothered.

Ibuki had sat up to kiss him, and Chrono had simply allowed himself to lean into him as their lips were pressed together. Though it was a lazy kiss, it deepened. Chrono felt Ibuki's arms around him, holding him gently. Ibuki kissed his neck, buried his face in his hair, and Chrono, who was still dazed, allowed it to simply happen. Ibuki had never quite been this forward before, and thinking about it Chrono smiled once more. He wasn't about to stop him. In fact, he thought he might as well let Ibuki kiss him for as long as he needed.
Chrono laid with Ibuki's head rested on his chest, his arms lightly placed on Ibuki's back. It was still raining hard outside. Chrono had barely noticed until now. Though they'd laid together like this before, it felt significantly different. Ibuki appeared as if he was close to sleep, his eyes closed and his breathing calm. As Chrono felt him adjust himself, he knew he'd just yet to drift off. His mind had been so full in last week. It made him now notice quite how drained he'd become as a result. He'd been unable to calm down, unable to rest. Surely Ibuki had been the same. Chrono stroke his back gently. He wasn't sure how he would have ended up if he hadn't been able to talk to his friends.

His hand stopping where it'd been moving, Chrono stared at the ceiling in the dark. "I told Shion and Tokoha about us."

It had been a plain statement. Merely a piece of information. Ibuki laid perfectly still.

"I see."

Similarly, he took it in as such.

"I thought I should let you know." Chrono voiced his thoughts. The slightest notion of doubt colored his voice.

"What you talk to with your friends isn't any of my business." Ibuki spoke after a moment. He sounded tired, even if not necessarily with the topic at hand.

"I mean sure, but... it's about you... or, us at least." Chrono though Ibuki was perhaps being a bit too pragmatic about this. Maybe it was a defense mechanism. That would make sense.

"I suppose." Ibuki replied.

Chrono thought about if for a moment. "They're the only ones who know, though." He added. "I really just, needed to talk to someone."

"I don't blame you for doing that."

Chrono put his hand on Ibuki's head. "At first I really felt like I couldn't. I dreaded it, really."

Ibuki didn't say anything. Perhaps he didn't need to.

"... I had to... go over so much stuff with them. All the things I hadn't told them. Over the years."

Indeed it had not been easy, but he was relieved to have gone through with it.

Ibuki moved a little. It was as if he was coming to. "I thought..." He stopped himself. "The three of you were always so close."

"Yeah..." Chrono said. "But, I... well. There's stuff I never told them. When it came to you, well... all of it."

"I see." He sounded a little concerned. Chrono didn't blame him.

"I was wondering why they'd invite me to celebrate your birthday." By the sound of it, it'd been on his mind.

"Oh yeah..." Chrono couldn't help but be humored, putting himself in Ibuki's situation. "I never told them about... any of that."

"Nothing at all?" He'd become surprised, arguably rightfully so.
"Nothing at all." Chrono repeated.

With the truths they'd shared today, Chrono felt inexplicably compelled to elaborate. "I never told them how I'd started seeing you more, either." He'd gotten a bit sleepy, his voice barely drifting off. "It's not like I was hiding it. I just didn't tell them."

He brushed Ibuki's hair with his fingers. "Honestly though... they really didn't expect it. There's been so many things I never told them. So, it... it was tough. They listened, but... it was tough."

"I see..." Ibuki repeated. He sounded tired as well.

Chrono wasn't sure if he had anything else to say. It was late now, he was tired, though overall very content. Ibuki shifted a little where he laid. "It would be the same for me. I never told anyone, either."

Chrono realized he was not surprised to hear it. Though in the end, the truth that revealed itself was that they were perhaps more similar than he'd come to consider.

"I never knew what to say." Ibuki spoke with his voice muffled by Chrono's shirt. "More so when I was so conflicted I couldn't even be honest with myself."

"Yeah..." Chrono agreed. "It was more or less the same for me."

"I suppose it's all the more proof that ignoring your problems solves nothing."

"I just..." Though he agreed in theory, Chrono wasn't very interested in going off on such a tangent. "Want us to be able to talk to each other."

"Yeah." Ibuki replied, certainty in his sleepy voice. "Me too."

As Chrono realized indeed how tired he was, he felt his body sink in to the mattress with Ibuki's weight layered on top of him. Maybe the future ahead of them was still uncertain, but much else had become clear. As such, it was easier than ever to feel at ease. Ibuki eventually fell asleep. He slept peacefully, and Chrono laid awake listening to his slow breathing. In that lingering moment, the pieces finally fell into place. This was where he wanted to be. He knew now, without a doubt, that Ibuki felt the same way.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

I wanted to finish this fic before Vanguard EX came out. I will not finish this fic before Vanguard EX comes out.

The pointed peaks stretched towards the sky, desolate, uninhabitable. They obscured the familiar sight of the moons, their outlined silhouettes layered in the sky only becoming more defined as night fell. The towering walls withheld their light, and in this deep crevice the darkness laid undisturbed.

There was a crack in the planet's surface. It ran deep, deeper than a mortal mind could comprehend. At its core, the planet was blazing hot, coursing with movement, as if alive. The gentle breeze, a gust of wind, that rose from the depths was warm. It rushed across the surface of his skin, through his hair. The depths made his mind sway, the darkness rising, engulfing him. The sensation was alien, but soon familiar. The surge of air, a light caress, a nearly inaudible whisper. It rose from the crevice, from the depth of his mind. It was indistinguishable, yet to him well known. He strained himself hard to hear, but failed to understand. Sinking deeper as he opened his eyes, he could not see, and the heat pressed harder against his body. It seeped into his flesh, and in the silence, the whisper of rushing hot air turned into a whining, sizzling current. A crawling sensation covered the surface of his skin, which too was ingrained in his memory. The voice which reached out to him from the depths of the dark, echoed in his heart, in his mind. Even as it grew louder, it was no more distinct, and yet it was comforting, far from alien. Ibuki had heard this voice before. He had heard it, he knew it. Reality formed, the truth only just within his grasp, knowledge that had eluded him for years. Deep within the planet, he rose, and as light shone beyond his second eyelids, the sensations came carrying through to the other side.

His skin was moist, wet. Ibuki laid in bed, sunken into an indentation shaped after him, the outline of his body engraved in the mattress. The heat pressed down on his heavy body, the covers sticking to his skin. His mouth was dry, his lips crumpled up like a dried plum. He still failed to realize quite the situation he was in. Coming to, he was still tired, ready to fall back to sleep at any moment. Half awake at best, he could still hear the whining, the sizzling. He could still hear the familiar voice in the distance. A prisoner of his tired mind, Ibuki did not move, the discomfort forcing him awake. Impatient, he rose, struggling, dizzy and disoriented. He stumbled a little as he came out of the bedroom, the light in the kitchen hurting his eyes.

“Oh? You're up?” Chrono sounded surprised as he acknowledged Ibuki's presence.

The stove was hissing, sizzling. From the living room, Ibuki heard the distinct sound of a woman's voice. The usual meteorologist was relaying the morning news’ weather report on the television. Today would be a sunny day in the greater Tokyo area, and temperatures would reach 35 Celsius or
higher. Failing to respond to Chrono's greeting, Ibuki put one foot in front of the other, slowly steering towards the mounted module in the kitchen.

Heated to his core, Ibuki felt a distinct absence of energy in his body. Feebly he reached for the AC remote where it sat on the wall.

“Hey, hey,” Chrono called out to him. “Don’t.”

Confused, still half-asleep, Ibuki turned to him slowly. The AC was off. He wasn't sure why. There was a reason for sure, but whichever it was, it eluded him.

“Chrono,” He managed to speak. His dry throat felt like it hadn't been used in a decade or more. “It's hot.”

“Yeah?” Chrono didn't seem confused or troubled by this. In fact, he seemed fine. Ibuki felt distant to him, as if they were worlds apart. Chrono took the AC remote from Ibuki’s hands and put it back in the holster on the wall.

“Can we please... turn on the AC?” As Ibuki was starting to become a little more clear-headed, he tried to cut through and reemerge in reality.

“No?” Chrono tilted his head. His tone was a scolding one. “You promised, remember?”

He didn't remember. Not at first. Frankly, with everything going on, he had forgotten completely. “Chrono it's...” The news broadcast was still running in the background. “It's 35 degrees out. Surely even hotter in here.”

“I know?” Chrono didn't seem to care much for the implication. “It's August.”

Ibuki could still physically feel the moisture evaporating off his skin. His shirt was sticking to his skin in more places than not.

“Drink some water. You'll feel better.” Chrono said, returning to the stove, and Ibuki in his tired, dreary mind, heard a mother's voice distant in Chrono's tone.

“Breakfast will be ready in a minute.” He announced. Rather than pouring himself some water, Ibuki just went to sit down in the living room. He heard Chrono sigh audibly.

Ibuki hadn't registered it happening until Chrono set a glass down in front of him. “Here.”

As he reached to drink, Chrono picked up the remote and turned off the TV.

Suddenly awake, Ibuki turned to him sharply. “I was watching that.”

“The news were over, so I turned it off.” Chrono said simply.

“I can't watch TV?” Ibuki asked him, not hiding his distaste.

“Not today. Sorry, but you can’t.” Chrono only sounded so sorry. He left. Ibuki pressed his hands against his face for a second, collecting himself. He still wanted to go back to bed, back to sleep, but that just about felt impossible.

The water was fresh and cool, but his body only absorbed so much of it. If anything, it felt like it evaporated from the surface of his tongue, making him even thirstier than before. Ibuki laid down flat on the couch with his arms by his sides, trying to somehow exist less than he currently was. Indeed he longer for sleep, more so for the tranquility of his dreams, be they real or unreal.
Indeed he had forgotten about today, and the promise he'd made. He'd forgotten, surely, because he hadn't given it much thought in the first place. If he'd known it would be like this, he might have hesitated to do so. Ibuki felt himself fade away, his body still feeble. He was too tired to think about anything now, yet unable to fully accept the circumstances he was in..

Chrono called to breakfast moments later. He did it once, and when Ibuki did not show, he did it one more time. Peeling himself off the couch, Ibuki went back into the kitchen. When he sat down, Chrono poured him a glass of juice.

“We have to go to the grocery store today.” Chrono said, calmly. Ibuki found it hard to listen. “We need to stock up on pretty much everything, I'm surprised you didn't tell me.”

He was not accusing Ibuki of anything. Not quite. “It... slipped from my mind. I'm sorry.”

“It's fine, it's just a bit tedious to do it today.”

Ibuki was slow to connect the dots. “We can just take the car.”

Chrono looked at him flatly.

“Or... if we go together, then...” His mind was still sluggish.

“Sure. I assumed we would.” Chrono didn't push the subject further. He poured Ibuki more water in a second glass. “Make sure to drink.”

“Right...” Ibuki said weakly, complying, even as the water made him feel a little sick.

The cold water in the shower was too cold for his piping hot skin. Though he'd longed to do nothing but douse himself in it, Ibuki had to wait for the water to get hotter. Washing himself he felt revitalized. As soon as he exited the washroom, he was hit hard by a wall of hot air.

“Are you finished?” Chrono asked him, somehow alert. He was finished getting ready.

“I... just need to get dressed.” Ibuki mumbled. Getting dressed proved a bit problematic. Every article of clothing was too hot on his skin. He didn't really own any shorts. He didn't like showing off his pasty calves to the public. A pair of long, slim white pants would have to do. He rarely wore t-shirts outside the house, but today would have to be one of the rare exceptions. It would have to be, or he wasn't sure he'd survive.

The scorching hot sun was pressing down hard on them as they walked through the streets. The only thing worse than the direct sunlight was the humidity. It was normal for this time of the year, more or less. However, having felt the heat getting in under his skin already before waking up, Ibuki found it harder to deal with. Even Chrono appeared affected, but it was hard to judge how much exactly. He trudged on regardless, as he usually did. As they passed by the usual convenience store, the automatic doors opened. Feeling the cold AC from inside hit him, Ibuki slowed down to crawl. Irritated, Chrono grabbed his arm and pulled him along.

It was a 25, perhaps 30 minute walk to the supermarket. Inside the store it was thankfully cool. Almost too cool. Ibuki tried to savor it. This would be it for today, after all. Chrono didn't have a shopping list. He had everything they needed more or less memorized. It made it a little hard to contribute. Chrono would dictate his own order. Ibuki tried to not overthink the implications of it, at least today he ought not to do that.

“What do you want for dinner?” Chrono asked him, eventually, after they'd restocked on vegetables and other perishables.
Ibuki didn't feel like eating much of anything. He still felt a bit sick. He felt even less hungry thinking about the hot, hot apartment that awaited.

“...Soba.” He replied, as he'd allowed himself to think about it.

Chrono gave a lighthearted snort. He smiled. “Sure.”

Their shopping cart became a little fuller than expected. With two shopping bags each, they were headed home. Though the chill of the grocery store had kept them cool, the walk back somehow felt even worse, and not only because of the weight they had to carry. Ibuki felt himself shudder with a cold sweat only a few blocks away.

“You know, the constant switching back and forth between hot to cold takes quite the toll on the body.” Chrono said in response to his complaining. “Which is a contributing reason to why people get sick in the summer.”

Ibuki knew that.

“So,” Chrono continued. “Not being so depend on AC is a good thing.”

“I think...” Ibuki brew a breath. It was nothing but moist, scalding hot air. “I think it's a matter of... doing things in moderation.”

“Yes, I mean...” Grinning, Chrono let his grocery bags swing back and forth. “Obviously.”

They passed the convenience store again on the way back. They were already walking quite slow. The grocery bags were heavy, and felt heavier in the heat. Ibuki did not stop, not this time. It was hard to think, and he didn't even feel like talking. Inside, it was at first a relief to be out of the direct sunlight. With a minute passing, Ibuki felt the stuffy, heavy heat eat away at his sanity once more. Chrono poured them both some more water. Ibuki only drank about half of his glass before helping Chrono unpack the groceries.

“Hey, what would you like for lunch?” Chrono asked him.

“I don't know.” Ibuki replied, in earnest. “I'm not very hungry.”

“I mean, yeah...” Chrono didn't sound very eager to eat, himself. “The heat does that to you.”

Ibuki felt awful. The clean clothes he'd put on were already faintly damp, and they felt heavy and stuffy on his skin. His eyes hurt, and his body felt strangely swollen. His mind was swimming, and he was fatigued. It was all starting to affect his mood. This wasn't how he’d imagined spending his day off. He only had so many Saturdays a year. Why did he have to suffer like this?

“I'd... I'd like to take my mind off the heat.” His thoughts were slow in his mind, as if passing through a fog. “Distract myself from it, even if only for a while.” He said, irritably.

Chrono didn't appear to take his tone to heart. Humming, he was thinking. “I mean, I feel like there should be something... something we could do.”

An activity. Anything. Anything as long as it didn't require electricity. Ibuki's boiling brain was empty. They were always so busy, always so short on free time. Even when they were free they always had something they were preoccupied with, together. Now, he couldn't think of a single thing.

Chrono appeared to have run into the same issue. “Huh... what do we do?” It sounded like he'd
smiled. He opened the fridge to place a jar of pickles on the top shelf. Next to him, Ibuki closed his eyes as the cool air swept across him. The fridge closed with a heavy thunk, the glass bottles in the door rattling gently.

As they looked at one another, Ibuki and Chrono had both reached the same conclusion. They both had the same thing on their minds. The answer had been right in front of them this whole time.

Ibuki had failed to notice until he'd stared hard at Chrono's face, but he had some sweat on his brow, too. Chrono bit his lip, his shoulders rising slowly. All day, and it hadn't been until now that Ibuki had seen Chrono's fierce, focused gaze. Ibuki had been slow to realize how effective a distraction it had been. Perhaps that was proof of the effectivity in and of itself. Judging by his expression, it had been the same for Chrono. He'd been able to tap into some of that burning passion inside him, despite the demoralizing heat they suffered through.

Ibuki had been on edge for a pretty long time, and he'd been more than a little aware. Chrono was indeed fond of pushing him around, and Ibuki found himself struggling to resist. Ibuki was weak to his advances, and as distracted from the heat as he'd become, it was hard to think clearly. He felt himself fumbling. Chrono appeared less affected by the circumstances than he was himself. It was frustrating, though Ibuki knew he admired Chrono for it. When Chrono's eyes passed over his face, it still gave him a rush.

He'd already been defeated once. Then, in a second game, he'd been able to return the favor. Ibuki didn't want to admit how much he struggled, and suddenly their best of three game became a matter of pride. If Chrono knew, surely he'd tease him about it. Then again, he'd become quite engrossed himself. Chrono had always praised his relentlessness, his intensity when they played together. Ibuki had never quite seen himself in that light, not before he met Chrono. Ibuki knew he was a methodical, if not particular person. He had rather always thought of himself as painfully stiff, inflexible; but to Chrono, he was exciting. It still didn't always make sense, but when they were together, he would forget to question it. He would just live it, step into the role, effortlessly.

Again now, he wanted to do nothing but that. He wanted to, but it was hard to be your best self when it felt like your brain was going to become sweat on your back.

Regardless, it took little deduction skill to see that Chrono had, perhaps carelessly, left his left front row circle occupied once it once more became Ibuki's turn. Perhaps he hadn't expected Ibuki to hit generation break two before his first stride, but he had been blessed, his heal triggers hard at work.

Though it was a seldom used strategy, Ibuki had an idea, slowly forming in his foggy mind. It was an innate response to the situation he found himself in, but it was less so Chrono's oversight that inspired him and more so the nagging heat that irritated his mind.

“I stride,” Though indeed seldom used, it had sat in his G zone, waiting for an opportunity like this one. “Trans-else messiah.”

Focused despite the glossy shine to his face Chrono's eyes watched hard Ibuki's hand as he brought the card out on the field. He was aware what was about to happen, and it clearly bothered him.

“Stride skill,” Ibuki had only glanced at him, not wanting to jeopardize his own focus. “I call Lady Attacker of Vacuum Collapse. I lock Aurion.”
As it was only his first stride she was still there, in his back row. What else, he still had Metallia since last turn. “Plus three thousand to Metallia.” His fan of cards folded in his hand, Chrono put them aside, face down on the table. Ibuki heard him exhale.

“Trans-else’s skill.”

The effect was finicky, though the cost cheap. It was only a single persona flip.

“All cards on the field become locked, and all locked cards on the field become unlocked. I unlock Aurion. Vacuum Collapse and Metallia cannot be locked by the effects of a skill, so they remain unlocked.”

“Right.” Chrono said, his arms now crossed. “I know.”

Ibuki smiled. “I'm just reminding you.”

Chrono was looking no less pleased when he had no choice but to turn three cards on his side of the field face down. History-maker in the left front row, Causality behind him, and Danish in the right back row. Chrono knew having his cards locked was a disaster waiting to happen while going up against Ibuki, but he normally wouldn't deploy such aggressive shut down tactics.

“Metallia gets plus power. Aurion's skill.” Aurion went into the soul, and Ibuki drew one. “I give the power to Vacuum Collapse.”

“I call Vlastos.” With a permanent extra four thousand, Vlastos made for an 11 thousand booster. Behind Vacuum Collapse, that made even more of a difference. “I call Dunamis.”

Behind Metallia, it was a simple seven thousand extra for that column. The skill couldn't even be used effectively this turn. Perhaps it was frivolous, but it was best to be on the safe side.

“I attack with Trans-else.” No boost. It was just 26 thousand.

Chrono was staring hard into his hand, having leisurely picked it back up. He was at three damage. A moment passed.

“Will you guard?” Ibuki asked, not impatient, but rather realizing how the heat seemed to eat away at him more effectively the longer they sat in silence.

Chrono looked at him, and then back on his hand. Reluctantly, he took a card out of his hand. Arlim, appearing on the guardian circle, made a clear statement.

“Really?” Ibuki was a little humored, asking as Chrono struggled to decide what card to discard from his hand. He was only at three damage.

“Yeah?” He responded, not lifting his eyes from the cards. “I don't wanna get sacked and die.”

“You should worry about your next turn, rather.”

“I am.” Chrono said assertively. He'd finally decided what to discard. A grade 2 went to the drop zone.

“Alright, then...”

“Drive check,” Ibuki turned the first card over. Asteroid Wolf. “Critical trigger.”

Their eyes met. Chrono didn't look very surprised.
“I give the power and the critical to Metallia.”

“Second check,” Turning the second card over, Ibuki didn’t stop to reconsider Chrono’s precautions. As a result, he was unprepared for the sight of a second Asteroid Wolf. “...Critical trigger.”

“See?” Chrono said, insistently. “See? It's just like I said.”

Too humored for his own good, Ibuki said nothing in response. “I give the critical and the power to Vacuum Collapse.”

“Third check,” Chrono stared hard at the top of the deck. As the third card revealed itself, Ibuki was in a state of disbelief. Chrono less so. “Critical trigger. Blink Messiah.”

“See?” Chrono repeated, just a bit irritated.

“Two would have been enough to defeat you.”

“And yet you keep checking them...” Chrono's voice was a grumpy monotone. Ibuki's mood was on the other hand improving.

“So, what will you do with the effects?”

Indeed, what should he do? “I give the critical and power to Vacuum Collapse.”

“Yeah, you would...” Chrono eyed Ibuki's field tensely.

“I attack with Vacuum Collapse.” With the boost, it was 41 thousand. Chrono exhaled audibly. Ibuki hoped he rather not take too long.

After going minus two with Arlim, Chrono's hand was still eight cards. He could surely guard this, question was just how.

“You just had to attack there first, huh?” He mumbled.

Ibuki knew he was well aware of the usual, simple tactic. There were virtually no upsides to attacking with the non-lethal attack first.

“Generation guard,” A faint determination cut through the dullness of Chrono's voice. He'd made his mind up. “Heteroround.”

Of course.

Soul blasting, Chrono needed not explain the effect.

“And your target?”

Ibuki smiled when Chrono stared at him plainly. “...Vacuum Collapse.”

“Oh?” His feinted surprise only appeared to annoy Chrono so much.

“Yeah. ‘Cause... it's 41 thousand.” Resting his chin in his hand, Chrono gestured towards the card, pointing somewhat accusingly. “I'm not gonna throw down my entire hand for your stupid triple crit.”

“Alright then.” Ibuki was amused. He enjoyed this development. Taking Vacuum Collapse off the board, he shuffled her into the deck. As he put it back down, Chrono watched him somewhat
anxiously.

“Look at the top card first. Then, you can choose where it goes.” He made sure to remind him.

“I know.” Ibuki replied, coolly.

“Right.” Chrono responded snappily.

“...Are you nervous?” Ibuki asked, amused.

Chrono did look wary. “Whatever it is, it won't have three crits.”

Ibuki chuckled. “A fair point.”

Reaching for his deck, Ibuki drew the top card. As he saw what it was, he let a short laugh slip.

“What?” Chrono asked, nervously expectant.

Revealing the card, Ibuki called it to the rear guard circle that Vacuum Collapse had preoccupied moments ago. “I call Lady Fencer of Matter Transmission.”

“Okay.” Chrono groaned a bit. “That's... not ideal. For me.”

“It's not 41,000 with three criticals.”

“It's not.” Chrono was agreeable when it came to approaching things from the bright side.

“Lady Fencer's skill. She gets plus two thousand.” Ibuki rested the unit. “She attacks.” Counter blasting one, he activated the second skill, soul charging one. “She gets an additional five thousand.”

Chrono's eyes was not on her, but Metallia. “Guard.” With the attack totaling 16 thousand, Chrono dropped a trigger's worth of ten thousand to guard the attack.

“Lady Fencer is locked.” Turning her face down, he Ibuki resolved the skill. “Metallia gains three thousand.”

“Metallia attacks...” Ibuki stopped to think.

Chrono stared at him.

Feeling the sweat on his brow, Ibuki tried to count the cards on Chrono's field, and somehow failed.

“You've locked five cards, and unlocked one, so...”

“Right.” It was usually more than that. “So, that's...”

“...37.”

“37.”

In the pressing heat, they'd agreed on 37. Ibuki wanted to move on. He really didn't want to delve on it, or he'd start thinking about how sweaty his scalp was again.

“No guard.” Chrono sighed. He would hit 5 damage.

“Alright, then.” Ibuki had somehow not expected that. Reaching for his deck, Chrono put the first card in his damage zone. No trigger. When the second card revealed no trigger either, he was
bothered.

“Dunamis’ skill…” Ibuki continued gingerly. “I soul blast one. Dunamis is locked. Lady Fencer is unlocked. I counterblast one, soul charge one. She gets a total of plus 11 thousand power.”

“Right.” Chrono sounded like he had some regrets.

“Lady Fencer attacks the vanguard for 20 thousand.”

If he’d gotten just one trigger, a single grade one or two would’ve been enough. Now, he’d need a trigger to guard. Chrono didn’t spend too much time thinking. Two grade twos were called to the guardian circle, only to go to the drop.

Locking Lady Fencer, Ibuki sought Chrono’s gaze opposite of the coffee table. “I end my turn.”

Looking like he had something to prove, Chrono acknowledge the announcement with a steady look in his eye. Ibuki was still on three damage. With only one open front row rearguard circle, Chrono had a lot of work to do, with limited space to do so.

Drawing, only to eye his hand very carefully, the seconds ticked on painfully slow as Chrono considered his first move. It would have been more unbearable if Ibuki’s own mind wasn’t twisting and turning, trying to predict what he might do, just how he would do anything with just two open rearguard circles.

“I stride…” As Chrono discarded two cards from his hand, Ibuki became privy to the state his hand was in. He’d done the same thing in the last turn, and thus he was still painfully enough unable to utilize Chronojet Dragon Z’s first skill. Cost less stride was just not happening. “Mystery-freeze Dragon.”

“Oh?”

Ibuki’s spontaneous reaction had slipped right out of him, and Chrono smiled dryly.

“So you’re going to brute this force this, are you?” Ibuki asked, with an endearing ring to his voice.

“It’s worth a shot.” Chrono played along.

“Fair enough.”

“First, the stride skill,” Refusing to be distracted, Chrono resolved it accordingly. “I put… Dunamis back in the deck.”

Ibuki complied, turning the card over and placing it at the bottom.

“Then, I call Upstream from the deck.” Chrono’s one front row circle was now occupied as well. “And now, Mystery-freeze’s skill…”

“Let’s see it.” Ibuki smiled, expectant.

Turning over the two cards that had ended up in his damage zone courtesy of Ibuki’s last attack, Chrono shuffled his deck. Mystery-freeze would allow him to bind 4 cards from the top of his deck, and the grade of those cards would be sealed in Ibuki’s hand, ineffective against Mystery-freeze’s attack. A grade three would give him an extra drive, with a total of four. With some luck, and a good drive check, Chrono might be able to turn this around in his favor.

Reaching for the top of his deck, Chrono pensively turned over the first card. Lugal-ure, a grade two.
That's not very good. However, Chrono would not yet be discouraged. The second card turned over. Delayed blazer Dragon. Another grade two. Ibuki stifled a laugh. Chrono slipped up too, the disappointment displayed with an almost childlike sincerely on his face.

“Alright, come on.” Gathering his determination, Chrono flipped over the third card. Chronojet Dragon G. A grade three. “Finally something.” He mumbled moodily.

What would the last card be? Depending on his luck, Ibuki might still be in trouble. Guarding a quintet drive without a perfect guard would be hard, and taking the attack head on was risky.

Turning the third card over slowly, Ibuki could only assume Chrono was begging for a grade one to show. One of his many grade ones; the grade ratio was in their favor.

White, radiantly shining, was the surface of the card as the hot, harsh sunlight reflected on Chronojet Dragon Z's polished form.

“Are you kidding me?” Chrono said in disbelief. The four cards in his bind zone lined up, two grade two, and two grade three; the grade three cards that had refused to come to his hand to serve has stride costs. Moreover, the drive was capped at four. The final card made no difference whatsoever.

“That deck sure has a knack of responding to you.” Ibuki said, endearingly.

“This is the worst thing to ever happen to me.” Chrono announced, sharply.

Ibuki laughed softly. For the duration of the effect resolution he'd completely forgotten about the heat.

Moving on, Chrono looked at the one empty circle in his back row. Chrono knew Ibuki could lock his back row with a generation guard. Would he go for it? Ibuki watched him think, focused. It looked like he’d made his mind up. “I call Heart Thump.”

It was the better choice, that is, if he was to call something. Once the vanguard attacked, Heart Thump would go in the soul and grant Mystery-freeze power via a skill rather than via boosting. Ibuki wondered if it was worth it to lock it just to mess with him. After all, Upstream would surely attack first, knowing the skill.

“Upstream attacks the vanguard for 13 thousand.” Not yet giving up, Chrono rested the card.

Indeed. Ibuki did hesitate. He did, but only for about a second.

“Generation guard.”

“Seriously?”

Discarding Carina from his hand, Ibuki picked her Generation Guard form out from his G zone.

“Carina's skill, counter charge. Lacus Carina's skill, counter blast,” Flipping a copy of her face up, Ibuki locked Dunamis. The low cost in and of itself made the card infuriating to go up against.

“Choose one card in your back row, and lock it.”

Tiredly, Chrono glared at him. “I can't believe you're doing this.” Any single card with shield from Ibuki's hand would've been enough.

“You thought it appropriate to call a card to the field, despite knowing the risks.” Ibuki said, calculatedly. “Since you apparently don't realize the situation you're in, I thought I ought to teach you a lesson.”
“Uh-huh?” The intended effect had not been to make Chrono grin at him slyly. Ibuki refused to be thrown off, though he struggled.

The attack had indeed not hit. The 15 thousand shield had absolutely been overkill if anything. Chrono was still not quite done, however. “Upstream’s skill. He goes into the deck.” Searching the deck for a grade one to call, Ibuki had an inkling what Chrono would settle for.

“I call Causality. Mystery-freeze gains two thousand and “time leap”, and then an additional six thousand via the two History-build in my G zone.”

The attack had gone from 26 thousand to 34, and it would have gone even higher if he’d allowed Chrono to use Heart Thump.

“Mystery-freeze attacks the vanguard.” If the attack hit, Chrono would be allowed to time leap in a grade two for a third attack.

Ibuki gave it a thought. Chrono had only sealed grade twos in his hand. Moreover, it was the quintet drive that was problematic. With a relatively generous hand at his disposal, Ibuki had reason to consider. It would be bad if Chrono would get more than one critical trigger, naturally. However, unbeknownst to Chrono, had he bound a grade one, it would have made no difference. Ibuki had no sentinels at the moment. It certainly made things interesting, Ibuki thought.

“I guard.” With two Asteroid Wolf, and one Vandal Sharp, it was 46 thousand guard. Depending on the triggers, he’d need two or three to get through.

He could guard it equal to a no pass if he wanted to. In his boiling mind, Ibuki found that to be quite dull and boring.

“Alright,” Chrono said confidently. “First check!”

His voice rang out in the apartment, making Ibuki again realize how unreal his body and how detached his mind had felt all day.

Melem. A grade one. Chrono frowned. Ibuki was weakly amused.

“Second check.” Chrono was fast, turning over the card without hesitation. Upstream. The very same grade two.

Without looking up, Chrono paused for a short second, allowing Ibuki to feel the doubtfulness and disbelief radiate off him. “Third check...”

A familiar face. Melem, again. It was still not a trigger. Giving up, Chrono exhaled. It didn't matter if he got a trigger now. “Fourth check...”

Again, the same confidently smiling face, as a third Melem was checked. “...Really?” Chrono asked, but Ibuki felt strongly that the question was not directed at him, but at the image of the girl who had felt it appropriate to insert herself into this particular situation, not once, not twice, but three whole times.

“Clearly it's because you keep putting her back into the deck.” Ibuki saw the logic in the situation.

“Then, where was she before?!” Chrono gestured towards his bind zone, exasperated. Ibuki smiled. He still didn't have a sentinel in his hand.

Adding the three Melems and the one Upstream to his hand, Chrono reluctantly announced the end
of his turn. Slowly, he unlocked his units one by one, his chin rested in his hand. He seemed relieved to do so, and Ibuki thought to himself that Chrono should savor the moment, for it would be fleeting.

Standing his units, drawing, Ibuki reached for his G zone. “I stride,” Chrono’s eyes followed his movements, and as his eyes caught sight of the pink and metallic sheen of the card Ibuki had picked out, his expression soured with disapproval. “Genesis Dragon, Basaltis Messiah.”

His hand forming into fist, Chrono slowly brought it down on the table.

“I counter blast one, and persona flip one. With that, I can lock or unlock as many cards as there are face up in my G zone.”

Chrono stared down at his full field. Then, he looked at Ibuki’s stacked G zone. Clicking his jaw into place, his expression worn by the toll of battle, he undid the work he’d so painstakingly only just finished. He didn’t bother to wait for Ibuki to tell him to do it.

Chrono’s entire field was locked. He was at five damage. He hadn’t drive checked a single card with a decent shield number. And yet, he was defiantly staring Ibuki straight in the face.

“Come on. Do your worst.”

“I certainly will.”

With a frowny face, Chrono fell back on the couch. Ibuki would’ve felt more accomplished, but it still felt satisfying to win.

“Can’t believe I lost.” Chrono complained, a little unlike himself. “I can’t believe I lost... like that.”

“It was a good game.” Ibuki had enjoyed himself, most certainly. Though he was aware the heat had affected his mood, and thus, his play style. If Chrono had indeed checked a few lucky triggers or sealed his grade zeros, things might have turned out very different.

“One more time.” Chrono demanded, pulling himself back up.

“No.” Ibuki rejected the idea.

“Hey, come on...” Chrono groaned. “We can play one more time.”

Ibuki didn’t fully have faith in that it’d just be one more time. “I’m tired.” Ibuki sighed. “I need... a break.”

“I thought this was the break?” Chrono looked disappointed, his voice stingy.

“I feel like I’ve used up all of my brain capacity for today.” Ibuki admitted, becoming irritated. Chrono grumbled in a dissatisfied manner. Ibuki paid him no mind. He stood up from his seat.

“I’m going to take a shower.” He mumbled, walking towards kitchen.

“Again?” Chrono asked him, pointedly.

“I’m soaked. I feel awful.” Ibuki turned to him, expression grim.
“Yeah, but you already showered once this morning.” It sounded like Chrono was about to lecture him. Ibuki closed his eyes slowly.

“I usually shower twice in a day.” He said, plainly.

“Yeah, after you wake up and before you go to bed. You're not going to bed already, are you?” Chrono had a point, but Ibuki thought the belittling tone was unnecessary.

“No, but...”

“So you'll not shower tonight is what you're saying?” Chrono was being awfully persistent.

So far, Ibuki had agreed on all the conditions, even the ones he had not been made explicitly aware of. So far, he had endured all this. He realized, perhaps a bit too late, that he was at his limit.

“Can I... not shower as I please in my own home?” He was aware of how acidic his voice was.

“There's really no point of doing this if you're gonna shower several time a day instead of the AC running.” Chrono argued.

“That wasn't part of the agreement.” Speaking plainly, Ibuki left. It had been a daring move, one true to himself. When he heard footsteps behind him as he approached the bathroom, Ibuki felt more than a little dreadful.

“You're really gonna do this, huh?” Chrono asked him, and though he remained calm, Ibuki could hear how mad he was.

His hand reaching for the door handle, Ibuki felt his pores clam up, his skin shiny with sweat. His hair was sticking to his face, and he was beyond lightheaded. He was ready to fall victim to hysteria.

“Chrono,” He struggled to remain calm. “I'm just going to take a short shower.”

“Sure, and I already made my thoughts on that very clear.” Chrono stood his ground.

Ibuki was not yet able to come to terms with the dilemma that present itself to him. “I've been compliant all day. You could let me have this.”

“Oh, come on.” Chrono was wholly unimpressed with his argument. “You've been complaining since you woke up. I didn't say anything, because I didn't wanna be too hard on you, but like... it's just for one day. You'll live.”

Ibuki didn't feel like he'd live. He felt like he was ready to expire. “You know I'm not... resilient. To the elements.” His voice became pitiably strained.

“Don't be like that.” Chrono scolded him. “Go drink some more water, have a rest. You'd feel better if you actually did those things, like I told you. Instead you're getting all worked up, acting like a child.”

Ibuki couldn't help but feel insulted. Chrono's dismissive tone hurt most of all. He'd already bargained, and he'd been unsuccessful. He was becoming desperate. “I... I didn't agree to this. You can't be mad about something we didn't agree on.”

“Don't make it about technicalities!” Chrono retaliated. “You know what this is about, don't pretend you don't!”

Seething, his mind off the rails and his sensibilities discarded, Ibuki held on to the door handle.
“This... is my house. If... if you wanted to do this so badly, then,” His voice was shaking, his eyes staring wildly. His true form had revealed itself. He had become stripped bare, and what as left was nothing but a moist and deranged shadow of a man. He'd raised his voice, and it'd shattered, deep with his foul anger. “Then you can do it at your own house, in your own home! Far away from me. Me, and all of my... complaining!”

Slowly, Chrono crossed his arms. He stared hard at Ibuki. In his overcooked mind and with his delirious outburst, Ibuki had been slow to realize he'd effectively thrown a tantrum. He'd spoken his mind for sure, though in a bout of anger. While the logic of his statement was straightforward, it took little brain power to understand why it would have been best left unsaid.

“Alright, then.” Chrono said, dismissively. “If that's... how you feel then, sure. Go ahead.”

The anger had drained out of his voice, leaving only dry irritation. While he was collected, Ibuki could tell he was hurt. Still standing with his hand on the door handle, Ibuki's grip loosened. He'd become a little stunned, more so by his own reaction than anything else. Chrono watched him for a few seconds, before turning around to leave to sit in the living room.

In front of the bathroom door, Ibuki wallowed in self pity as his thoughts became an entangled, distressed mess. He was too tired for this. That much was evident. A moment passed, and he wasn't sure how long. He didn't want to shower anymore. The disappointment on Chrono's face made it impossible to want it. He felt like a fool. Perhaps he had indeed been acting like a child all day. With his head hanging, Ibuki went into his bedroom to wallow.

He took off his pants, and laid in bed. The covers were cooler than he'd thought, perhaps due to the remnant moisture of his sweaty body from the night before. It was best not to think about. The drapes covered the window, making it marginally more pleasant than the living room. He was tired, and wanted to sleep. However, due to the heat it felt impossible, if not outright unsettling.

As much as he'd like to distance himself from it, Ibuki knew his outburst was not unlike himself. Chrono was right to call him childish. He'd felt slighted, he'd felt prideful, he'd let it control him and now he was paying for it. It was such a stupid thing to argue about, and more so considering the things he'd said. He heard Chrono out in the kitchen. Each day, it made him so happy to have him here, and yet he'd said such things to him. It already made his skin crawl when he thought about it. He was still mad. He still was, and he was still so uncomfortable it was hard to think. He wanted to rest, and yet it seemed like the last thing he'd be capable of.

In the end, he didn't eat any lunch. If Chrono made himself anything, he hadn't called Ibuki in to share it with him. Ibuki supposed that was fair, though it worried him a little. Chrono was always so adamant he ate. Ibuki remembered the promises they'd made each other. Each day, as their everyday lives floated by, it would slip from his mind. That didn't mean he'd forgotten. In the end, he hadn't made any radical changes to his life. He'd changed, little by little. He'd tried to work a little less, rest a little more. It was easier when you were not alone, even if it was just someone to think about other than yourself. Ibuki struggled to do things for his own sake. He had gotten better at it, over the years, even if he'd initially had to really force himself. As it had become part of his daily routine, it became easier.

Though he indeed failed to sleep, Ibuki eventually relaxed somewhat. His mind was duller once more, but it made it easier to be direct with himself. In summer, dusk would fall suddenly. It was yet only the afternoon. Time appeared to almost stand still. Before he knew it, it was later then he realized. Chrono had gone quiet. Ibuki wondered if he was still upset. Laying in bed, Ibuki had managed to overcome his self-pity. When he heard footsteps outside the door, he didn't move.

The door came open, with a quiet creak. As Chrono came into the room, Ibuki laid unmoving. The
bed shifted as Chrono sat down at the edge by Ibuki's side. Though he had been under the impression he had calmed down, Ibuki felt his emotions rushing back. He was too tired to fight it.

Ibuki wondered if he waited. Chrono would betray his expectations.

“I'm sorry I... yelled at you. I... I shouldn't have.”

Ibuki felt more than a little stupid. “I'm the one who should be sorry.” He turned his head to see Chrono looking at him, tiredly.

He shrugged. “I feel like... I don't know.” Chrono's stature slouched. “I just... come here and... force you to go through with this and that. Bossing you around. It's not really fair.”

“You don't...” Ibuki sighed deeply, finally allowing himself to do so. “Boss me around. I'm the one who doesn't even know what chores that need to be done in my own home. Or if there's anything to eat.”

“Maybe, but... I just do all that stuff. I don't even ask, or give you a chance.” Chrono shrugged.

“You shouldn't have to ask. It's on me. Not you.”

Chrono didn't respond. Worn, fatigued, Ibuki realized he probably wasn't feeling too different from Ibuki himself.

“I'm so sorry I said those things.” Ibuki already felt like his apology was overdue. “I didn't... mean to imply I don't want you here.”

Chrono had a distant look in his eyes. Ibuki reached out to touch him, laying a hand on his arm. “I'm really sorry, Chrono. Even if you... yell at me, or if we fight... I shouldn't say something like that.”

“Right...” Somewhat relieved, Chrono appeared to connect to his words. “I mean, I knew that, but...”

“That doesn't make it right.” Ibuki was sick of making excuses. “Besides, I yelled at you, too.”

“I was the one who started.”

“I probably would have yelled at me, too.” Ibuki admitted.

Chrono smiled, weakly. He shrugged. “I guess.”

Ibuki stroked his arm. He felt better. It looked like Chrono did, too.

“God, there's like...” Chrono got up from where he sat, impatient. “No oxygen in here.”

He went to open the window. It was just a little windy outside. The curtains flickered with movement. Ibuki felt the hot breeze on his face. He'd dreaded it, but it wasn't so bad. The sun was slowly sinking in the sky, and it wasn't quite as hot out as it'd been around noon.

“We sure picked the hottest time of day to be out and about.” Ibuki recalled their trip to the grocer.

Chrono groaned. He threw himself down on his side of the bed. Ibuki's side was by the door. Chrono's was by the window. Ibuki wasn't sure when it had been settled between them. It had just happened. “We sure did.” Chrono said.

Ibuki heard Chrono move on top of the covers. “How are you holding up?”
Ibuki wondered if he should be honest. “I feel like a husk of human being. How about you?”

“I feel... a bit better. I think.” Chrono didn't sound very sure. “Or it could just be that I'm finally losing it. Who knows.”

“It feels a lot hotter than...” Oh, what had the news broadcast said? He could barely remember. “35? 36 degrees?”

“I dunno.” Chrono didn't appear to care. “I haven't checked. Just feels like I'm gonna make it seem worse than it is.”

Ibuki laughed weakly. “I see.”

“I'm making us some food.” Chrono said, again shifting where he laid. He didn't appear to be able to lie still. Ibuki knew the feeling. “Soba. Like you wanted.”

“Oh. I appreciate it.” Ibuki said, feeling his mind drift. Maybe, just maybe, he could work up an appetite after all. If it was soba, soba that Chrono had made him, then perhaps he wouldn't mind eating.

“Yeah... we gotta eat.” Chrono said, simply. “Honestly, though. I haven't been very hungry, either.”

Chrono had been upset but he'd still made them food. It made him happy, though it was still hard for his mind to cut through the haze. It was frustrating.

“It'll be a while though...” Chrono admitted. “It's in the fridge at the moment. We got pickles, too. And I'm gonna make some salad.”

It would be a light meal. That was probably for the best. “Sounds good.” Ibuki replied. “I look forward to it.”

They laid in silence for a moment. Ibuki felt himself swaying back and forth, mentally.

“Did you get to sleep any?” Chrono asked him. Ibuki felt provoked by the question, by the idea that he might've actually been able to sleep.

“Not at all.” He responded, a little irritable. “I tried. But I couldn't. It's too hot.”

Chrono curbed a smile. “I thought maybe you blacked out for a moment, at least...”

“If I did... I don't remember.” Ibuki replied truthfully.

Chrono flopped over on his stomach. Ibuki felt the light, light breeze on his face. It was a few seconds of bliss.

“If I could at least... take my mind off it for another while...” Ibuki reasoned out loud, his thoughts disconnected.

Chrono had become eerily silent, watching Ibuki with a smile. Ibuki wasn't aware his body could even feel sweatier, heavier, hotter, and yet here he was.

“Hey...” The tonal shift in Chrono voice was less sudden with his expression taken into consideration. Ibuki already felt himself sinking deeper into the mattress. “Do you, um...”

Chrono's hand laid flat on the covers. His fingers lightly clutched the fabric, twisting it between his fingers. “Wanna have sex?”
Slowly, Ibuki exhaled, emptying his lungs of their content. He turned to look at Chrono, barefaced, steely. “Do I look like I'm in the mood to you?”

Chrono held back a laugh. He was still grinning quite unabashedly. Ibuki truly did not care for it.

“Sorry?” Chrono apologized, insincerely. “It's just, you know...”

Ibuki did not know. He didn't know at all. “It's just what?”

“Sometimes...” Chrono spoke to him kindly, as if to explain something. “When you act all... touchy... I've figured that, maybe...”

Ibuki wasn't sure if he wanted to hear this anymore. He couldn't look at Chrono, either.

“...It's really just 'cause you're horny?” As he laid it down, his voice hushed, Chrono sounded smugly accomplished with his observation.

Ibuki squeezed his eyes shut. He felt like his soul might finally leave him, and float to the great beyond. It was fitting, though. That Chrono would be the end of him, after all this time. He did not, however, perish. Though he felt like he sort of wanted to. His eyes slid open once more to harsh heat and to the harsher reality. Reaching into his mind for something to say, he struck irritation. Chrono was obviously fine with just saying whatever. It made him mad.

“That's... not true.” He managed to say, somewhat weakly. Though the irritation ran clear in his voice, the conviction of his statement did less so.

Chrono did appear to at least pretend to give it some thought. “Are you sure?”

“Frankly, I...” Still laying on his back, Ibuki felt powerless. Words appeared to elude him, the heat eating away at him. “Have no idea what you're even talking about. Since when do I---”

“Since for a long time?” Chrono interrupted him, impatient. “Like, so often when you come home... acting all annoyed and upset and whatnot, like not with me but in general...” As Chrono spoke, Ibuki involuntarily revisited that familiar mind space. Though he fought it, things appeared to click in his mind. “And, well... as soon as you've calmed down, or we've had some food... you always want sex, don't you?”

Ibuki clenched his fists where he laid. “We... we often... have sex. That doesn't mean... there's a connection.”

“Yeah, but like... that just means it happens often enough for me to notice.” Chrono explained. “You get more forward about it. And you get really into it.”

“I-I'm always... into it.” Not his usual choice of words. Ibuki felt dizzier, now for an additional set of reasons. “So that doesn't have to... mean anything, either.”

He heard Chrono sigh, and when Ibuki turned to look at him, he was watching him adoringly. “You know, I never said anything about it, 'cause... I didn't really see any point in it. I mean, you're already so stressed about that stuff as it is.”

Ibuki felt his heart sink, though he wasn't sure why. Chrono moved closed to him, putting his hand on Ibuki's arm.

“But like... it's okay.” Chrono’s gaze was strangely sharp, his voice textured, warm. He stroke Ibuki’s arm. “You don't have to hide it.”
“I... I'm not.” Ibuki fought Chrono's words to the best of his abilities, which was weakly. Chrono still watched him with his gleaming eyes and he felt himself blush, even as he tried hard not to.

Chrono pulled closer to kiss his cheek. “I... I said I'm not...” Groaning, Ibuki gave up. He knew Chrono had a point, he just didn't like thinking about it.

“Maybe you're not hiding it...” Chrono admitted. “I just couldn't help but notice is all. If anything, I'm glad you can be forward about it when you want to be.”

It had been a strange summer. More so a strange and quite stressful and eventful past few weeks. Ibuki tried to relax. It appeared to work. He stared at the ceiling, feeling Chrono's weight on his arm. “Yeah.” He said quietly, unhappy with the dry, wretched sound of his voice. Ibuki felt like he'd aged at least ten years today alone. “I suppose so.”

“I think it's kinda cute, anyway.” Chrono said, making himself flustered. Ibuki didn't doubt that he did. Chrono had a tendency to find whichever trait Ibuki was embarrassed about cute, after all.

Moving, Chrono pushed himself closer, kissing Ibuki's face. His breath was hot on his skin, more so when he kissed Ibuki's neck. Shuddering, Ibuki shifted under his touch. Chrono kissed him harder, trying to pull himself closer. Before he could, Ibuki grabbed him and pulled him away at an arms length. Surprised, Chrono stared at Ibuki's frustrated, perturbed expression.

“Chrono,” He breathed. “It's too hot.”

“Right.” Chrono responded attentively, pulling away. “Sorry.”

They rested for a while longer. Then, they went up to have dinner. Rising out of bed, Ibuki's body felt like it was made of rusty steel and wet cardboard. After moving around a little, he felt better. After eating, drinking, he felt additionally a little better. The soba had been good, and he hadn't realized how hungry he'd been. Chrono opened the windows in the living room after the sun finally started setting and the outdoors were no longer quite so burning hot. It was still warm, but Ibuki started to feel like he might be okay. Chrono announced it was time for the news and sat down on the couch, the same couch Ibuki laid sprawled out on. With his legs in Chrono's lap, Ibuki laid with his eyes closed, listening to the news broadcast while feeling the warm evening breeze on his face.

The different segments floated by. Chrono was leaned forward in his seat, listening attentively. In contrast, Ibuki felt himself drift off.

“...though, the numbers of participants are increasing.”

“Do you hear that?” Chrono asked, excitedly. Ibuki had almost nodded off. “Ryuuzu's gonna be real happy to hear that.”

Ibuki's eyes came open, slowly. The living room had become darker since he'd closed them.

“Though, we wish to remind the elderly, the sick and young children of the possible dangers of abstaining from air conditioning when temperatures are high, especially during the day.”

“Do you hear that?” Ibuki couldn't stop himself.

“Just because you act like a baby it doesn't mean you're a child.”
Ibuki sighed. He might've been irritated if he didn't feel quite so relaxed.

The segment on the news relevant to them ended, others followed. Ibuki felt ready to doze off, and at some point, he did. His body was still hot, but he'd become strangely numb to it. When he woke up, he wasn't sure how long he'd slept. His first thought was that it must've been forever, because of how pitch dark it had become outside, and because of how heavy his body felt. His second thought was that it couldn't have been very long, because Chrono was still sitting where he had when he'd first fallen asleep.

“You awake?” Chrono had asked him, once he saw Ibuki blinking confusedly, the streetlight from outside the only thing illuminating his face.

“I'm gonna call Ryuuzu in a bit, before it gets too late.” It got dark early in the summer. It was still only just about 8 PM or so. Still, they were approaching his bedtime.

Ibuki had tried not to think too much about that, but now, here he was. He tried to scramble up from the couch, suddenly feeling alertly awake.

“I'm gonna put him on video phone, okay?” Chrono usually did when they called.

“At least let me…” Ibuki walked dizzily towards the bedroom. “Put on pants first.”

“Right.” Chrono laughed.

As the signals went through, Ibuki felt increasingly anxious. Then, as he watched Chrono's calm face, something seemed to click into place inside him. Here they were now, living their lives. Such a simple fact, and yet he struggled to accept it. Opening up to his friends had made Ibuki understand one thing clearly, even if one thing only. He had to try and let go. He had already though he had. He'd been wrong. He'd been wrong, again. He was starting to grow sick of it all. It was like Chrono had said. It was tiring to live untrue to others, just like it was living untrue to yourself. Maybe he still wasn't fully sure exactly what he was so afraid of, never mind the things he absolutely knew he feared, but he could only let the unknown have so much power over him.

The other end picked up.

“Oh, hello!” Charmingly, Tokoha had answered. Chrono's face lit up when he saw her on the screen.

“Hi! Hope I'm not disturbing you?”

“Not at all.” She said, cheekily. “Hey, Ryuuuzu!” The sound of her footsteps carried into the microphone, the camera shaking as she moved.

From a different room, Ryuuuzu had heard her. He came running, bouncing into sight. “Chrono!” He called out, excitedly. “You called!”

“Of course I did.” Chrono smiled. “I promised, didn't I?”

“You did.” He sounded pleased. Just like theirs, the Anjou family home appeared quite dark, the lights off. “Where are you?” Ryuuuzu asked. Obviously, he didn't recognize Ibuki's apartment.
“Oh, see... I'm at Ibuki's place.” Chrono replied casually enough. He angled his phone in Ibuki's direction, so Ryuuzu could get a better look at him. “Here he is now."

“Hi...” Ibuki greeted him awkwardly, leaning a bit closer to Chrono in order to get a better look. He tried to smile.

“You're at Ibuki's place?” Ryuuzu became curious. “You're doing this too, Ibuki?”

“I... I sure am.” From where he couldn't see, Ibuki heard Tokoha laughing. He decided he would ignore it.

“How's today been, Ryuuzu? Have you all been keeping cool?” Chrono asked, engaging with him.

“It was so hot all day. But we went out for ice cream... and we went swimming!” Ryuuzu said, excitedly.

“You went to the pool?” Chrono asked. Ryuuzu nodded insistently.

“Yeah! Mamoru and Ryutarou took me!” He sounded proud.

“You could have thought of that.” Ibuki mumbled. Chrono did not humor him.

“Mamoru!” Ryuuzu called out to him, running towards the kitchen. “It's Chrono! He called!”

“Oh, did he now?” Mamoru's engaged with Ryuuzu sweetly, effortlessly.

“Yeah!” Ryuuzu replied enthusiastically as he sat down by the table. In the background, Tokoha's voice could still be heard, indistinct, talking to her parents. It was somehow a lively evening for them, and Ibuki felt strange experiencing it through the other side of the screen. It put the foul mood he'd carried through the day in a very different light. Mamoru leaned into sight behind Ryuuzu, and when he saw Ibuki's conflicted expression, he laughed in surprise.

“Oh, hello there, chief!” He smiled happily. “I didn't realize you'd been caught up in this too.”

“Hello, Anjou. And yes, I'm afraid so.” Ibuki returned his smile. It was easier to be himself speaking to Mamoru.

“He's been complaining all day.” Chrono said smugly.

“Oh, that sounds like someone I know...” Mamoru looked a little less pleased.

“You're not talking about me, are you?” Insulted, Ooyama's voice sounded melodically from across the room. Ryuuzu laughed.

“Now, who else would I be talking about?” Mamoru's tone was surprisingly harsh. Such was their usual banter.

“He's been so hard on me all day. Can you believe?” Dramatically, Ooyama complained. “Can you believe it, sir?”

Seeing as he could, actually, Ibuki didn't know what to say. “I, well it's... been a long day.”

“It's been a long day for all of us.” Chrono added, rerouting the focus to his own and Mamoru's efforts.

Mamoru smiled knowingly. “Did you eat yet?”
“Oh, yeah. We did.” Chrono replied. “Ibuki wanted soba. So I made us some.”

“Soba? That sounds nice.” Mamoru said in earnest.

“Why didn’t we think of that?” Ooyama echoed his tone.

“Tokoha wanted nabe.” Ryuuzu said, his expression suddenly sharp. He appeared to brace.

“...Seriously?” Chrono had only barely spoken before Tokoha’s voice came sounding though the microphone from across the room.

“So?” She asked, upset. “It’s not everyday we all get together to eat. That’s what nabe is for!”

“Please tell me you didn’t eat nabe.” Chrono said, quietly.

“We didn’t.” Mamoru confirmed. “In the end, we just had some soup.”

“Chrono! Did you hear?” Ryuuzu cut in, excitedly. “On the news, they said that more people were participating than last year!”

“Yeah! I heard. That’s great.”

“Next year I’m sure there will be even more.” Mamoru filled in.

“I hope so...” Ryuuzu sounded carefully optimistic.

Ibuki listened in to the conversation. He'd felt bad, but now a little more so than before. Chrono had been adamant to do this for a reason. Though he was cheery most of the time, Ryuuzu was still an anxious child. Maybe there was no way for any of them to solve the many problems which he worried about, be they global or personal; but they could listen to him and help him build his trust and faith in the adult world. Chrono recognized this without having it explained to him. He understood how important it was for a child to have good role models, and even more so adults that they could rely on. Moreover, he knew how to step into that role as well. In contrast, Ibuki would struggle to articulate his efforts. Professionally, he played an important role for many children each day. It proved harder to be a good influence on a personal level.

Ibuki knew he had it in him to not be so conceited or short sighted as he'd been today. Maybe current situation he was in had affected him more than he'd realized. Even now, he was mostly focused on himself. Mamoru spoke with Chrono casually, and appeared to be in a good mood. Ibuki considered him a true friend, and more so he was one of the kindest and warmest people he'd ever known. It was hard to imagine where he'd currently be in life without him. His small, though countless gestures had amounted to a lot over the years. Because of his open mind and unclouded heart, Ibuki had never doubted that Mamoru was a good and reliable person. However, he'd honestly never expected them to be friends. Already when they'd barely known each other, Mamoru had always been understanding and patient, even when Ibuki had been deliberately distant to him.

Now, after all this time, he felt not unlike how he had back then. Again, he was hiding something, being less than sincere. He still was, but when Chrono eventually hung up the phone, Ibuki felt hopeful. The idea that Mamoru might have guessed what was up didn't feel so scary anymore. Because surely he had, after all this time. Ibuki had suspected it already for some time. He'd never asked. Never intruded or pried. Perhaps a sign of trust, it had now paid off.

“How are you feeling?” Chrono asked him.

“I'm alright.” Ibuki said, the realizations lingering in his mind. “It wasn't... as bad as I thought it
would be.”

Chrono turned to him, a little surprised. “Oh.” He smiled. “I was wondering about the heat.”

Ah. Ibuki sighed. “I suppose that is better as well. Though that was worse than I thought it would be.”

“Yeah, I have to say the same...” Chrono admitted. He’d been far from unaffected himself. “We need a better plan for next year.”

Ibuki really didn’t want to think about that right now. “Can we please not... talk about that just yet.”

“I could take you to the pool.” Chrono grinned slyly. “You know, I don't think I've ever seen you swim.”

“...I was joking when I said that.”

“Oh, okay.” Chrono didn't sound like he fully believed that.

“It might've been nice.” Ibuki admitted. “But too crowded.”

“Yeah, probably.” Chrono relaxed, leaning back on the couch.

Still preoccupied with his thoughts, Ibuki sat next to him in the dim living room. It was still so dull. A little less so since Chrono had started staying here regularly, but the difference was marginal. Having reached a new point in his life, Ibuki was soon to start thinking of where he wanted to go next. Maybe he denied himself the simpler pleasures in life that way. Regardless, there was so much else he'd denied himself, and for so long, too. It was hard not to be impatient. That rushing had only done him so good. His relationship with Chrono had almost ended because of it. Looking back, though, he could see how he'd probably needed to try harder to spoil it completely. A moment passed. He took it all in. He indeed felt better. As he turned around, he saw that Chrono had been watching him in his absorbed state.

“Hey,” He put his hand on Ibuki's leg. Ibuki noticed the curved edge of his smile, and doubled with the sharp look in his eye it made his thought freeze in place. “Wanna go out for ice cream?”

Oh.

“Sure.” Ibuki smiled. “Why not.”

They'd walked a bit further than they needed. There was no point in rushing. In the end, ice cream had felt too filling. Ibuki had gone for an ice coffee drink, and while Chrono had considered a popsicle or frozen yogurt, he'd ended up going for the same.

“I hope we'll still be able to fall asleep like this.” Chrono said, all while not sounding very worried. Ibuki thought it was a lot like him to think of that. It hadn't crossed his mind at all.

“We'll be fine. I think.”

It was a pleasant evening walk. The pavement still radiated heat, and Ibuki's body felt like it still was, too. The sun had finally set, ending its reign of terror.
“Sorry for being so... irritable before.”

“I forgive you.” Chrono replied, somewhat tiredly. “We don't have to talk about that anymore.”

It didn't sound like he wanted to, at least.

“You wanted to keep your promise to Ryuuzu. Frankly, I... I seemed to forget all about that. That's what I want to apologize for.”

Chrono looked at him, so endearingly, Ibuki almost felt belittled.

“What?” He asked, on edge.

“It's nothing.” Chrono shrugged. “I just think it's fine, you know? Like. It really is okay.”

Ibuki knew he struggled to leave it unsaid. Maybe it was proof something had changed, or maybe he was just more so his usual self.

“You don't have to be so... so sorry.” Chrono shared his thought on the matter, at least. It made things clearer. Chrono always made things clearer. Ibuki's timid, demure self still lived on. He had merely taken a different shape.

“I'm glad you felt okay, though.” Chrono was back on track. “About the call and all.”

“Frankly, I... had completely forgotten about that, too.”

“Yeah, I... I kinda thought you had.” Chrono admitted.

“Frankly that might have been for the best.”

“Yeah...” Chrono agreed, quietly.

Ibuki thought he might as well speak his mind.

“I'm going to... talk to Anjou next time opportunity arises.”

“Sure?” Chrono didn't quite match the seriousness of his tone. “If you feel like it.”

“I'd like to.” It felt good to be able to say it. “I feel like I can.”

“That's good.” Pleased, Chrono smiled.

“After speaking to Kai and Miwa, it... it feels easier.” They'd talked about it, but Ibuki felt as if though he still had things left to say. “I was worried. That it would make things harder. Depending on how they reacted.”

It was a worry he'd struggled to articulate. “It wasn't like that. It feels easier. Even if I... I'm still anxious when I think about it, I went through with it, and... it feels better now.”

“Yeah.” Chrono sounded a little distant. He was preoccupied with his own thoughts.

Ibuki sipped his coffee. It was good. A little sweet at first, but with a strong, bitter aftertaste. His mind felt more alert now than it had all day. It was liberating.

“I... I should... get to it, as well.” Chrono said quietly, his voice a mumble.

Ibuki hadn't forgotten, but he considered it Chrono's personal strife. He thought it best to let him set
his own pace. Ibuki watched him for a moment, unsure of what to say.

“Your situation isn't really comparable to mine.” Ibuki said, his words resounding with certainty.

“I... I guess not, but... I've been trying to... think more about it. Talking to Mikuru, fine. I can do it. Even if it'll be awkward, I can go through with it.”

Ibuki had a hunch she wouldn't be too surprised. “Do you think she'll expect it?”

“She might. She hasn't said anything about it, though. Not yet.” Chrono didn't sound so sure himself. “If she's figured it out then, less reason for me to wait any longer.”

Ibuki wasn't sure if he agreed, but he knew how Chrono was. He hated it when things were unclear, and he hated lying.

“Did she say anything to you?” Chrono asked, a bit pointedly. “You're staying in touch, aren't you?”

They were. Though when they met in the past week, they'd only spoken of work. Well, for the most part. “She has... well. Expressed some gratitude.”

“What?” Chrono almost sounded scared. “What for?”

“For... helping when I can.” Ibuki tried to untangle his own bias, remember what Mikuru had actually told him. “It wasn't... so clear. She thanked me for being good to you, I suppose.”

Conflicted, Chrono groaned a little. “I see.”

“Is that unlike her?” Ibuki felt compelled to ask.

“I dunno.” Chrono shrugged. “I don't know what she's like when she's not around me. She's not usually so... sentimental, I guess.”

“She's not?” Ibuki wasn't sure what to make of that. “Whenever she talks about you she is quite... concerned.”

Ibuki thought it was natural. Mikuru surely didn't want Chrono to worry.

“Really?” Chrono didn't sound like he fully believed it.

“Don't let it worry you, though.”

“Sure.” Chrono said, after a moment. “I'm not... too worried. And, I mean... I want to talk to her. It would make things easier.”

It would. For the first time ever, Ibuki felt like he could envision what it might be like if she knew. Even if he had only just become a little closer to Mikuru, it helped put him at ease. She was no longer just a concept to him. She was a real person.

“Talking to my dad, though...” Chrono's troubles surfaced. “That's a different story.”

“Take it one step at a time.” Ibuki rarely felt like he could give advice, but he would whenever he could. “I know you said you wanted it done before your birthday, but there will be more chances.”

Chrono looked upset, his eyes unfocused, set ahead. “I know.” He replied quietly. “I'd rather not, though.”
“Just... don't push yourself.” Ibuki's voice had become fragile, more so than he'd expected. Seeing Chrono like this was hard on him.

“I kinda have to, if I'm gonna get it done.” Chrono sounded like he had come to terms with those conditions. “It's just...”

Chrono was thinking, and Ibuki waited patiently for him to untangle his thoughts.

“I've been trying to figure it out. Why it's so tough. To talk about this, especially with him.” A tension came onto his brow. Frustration brought something rough into his voice. “I thought if I could at least figure that out, I could try and find some solution.”

That sounded logical enough, Ibuki thought. Chrono was resourceful, after all.

“I've always... been self-conscious when it comes to these things.” He spoke vaguely, to save himself the trouble.

“Well. You're not the only one.” Ibuki wanted to remind him.

“I know. I've gotten better at... not being so hard on myself for it.” Chrono sounded like he found some pride in that. “But it's still... it feels like I'm overreacting.”

“I wouldn't say you are.”

They were still walking down the street together, slowly, luckily undisturbed.

When Chrono remained quiet, Ibuki felt a need to elaborate. “You barely know him. You'd be making yourself very vulnerable. You often... speak of him in a sense that's... removed. But he's still your father. If he... said something that would hurt you, then... that'd be very hard on you.”

“R-right.” Chrono's voice was barely shaking. He collected himself for a moment. “You're right. I... I act like... I don't care what he thinks. Of me.”

He sounded upset, and Ibuki realized indeed how hard this was on him. It made his head hurt.

“But, I mean. I care. Of course I do.” Chrono's mouth twitched. He blinked rapidly, his eyes more unfocused than before. “I wish I... could be more easygoing than that. I wish I wouldn't care about it. But... I guess, trying to suppress those feelings, well. It's not making them go away.”

“Chrono.” Ibuki addressed him quietly. “Locking your feelings away is only going to make things worse. Be honest with yourself. Trust me.”

Chrono raised his head to look at him. They'd both realized the same thing. He looked guilty, a sight that cut deep into Ibuki's heart. “I know.” Assuredly he spoke, but he looked so sad. “I'm sorry.”

“You don't have to be sorry.” Ibuki was baffled. Their conversation had taken a serious turn so quickly, he'd become thrown off.

The situation appeared to catch up with Chrono too, just then. “Y-you're right, though.” He appeared to collect himself somewhat. “It's best to just... be honest. Even if it's kinda hard to come to terms with the fact that I, like... care so much about what my dad thinks.”

“I can see why that'd be... strange.”

“I do want him to like me. To accept me.”
“He'll accept you.” Ibuki replied, quietly, if frankly.

“How do you know?” Chrono asked, sounding like he didn't know what to believe.

“He'll... accept you.” Ibuki struggled to articulate what he meant. “Rive- I mean, your father, he's... easygoing. Open minded. He hasn't been much of a father. But he has that.”

Chrono looked uncertain, though vaguely hopeful. It served as a reminder to Ibuki, that he indeed knew Rive a lot better than Chrono did. He also had a different perspective, one unburdened by a less than ideal father-son relationship. Surely, Chrono was jaded, and rightfully so, but Ibuki hoped he could calm his nerves somewhat.

“I wouldn't know.” Chrono said, finally. “But I hope you're right.”

“I'd be surprised to be proved wrong.” Ibuki didn't know how else to put it, as badly as he wanted to be more encouraging.

“I know he's... easygoing.” Chrono shrugged weakly. “But that doesn't really make me feel better. I don't... want him to be too easygoing about this. It's... it's serious. To me.”

“I understand.” Ibuki thought it was a more than reasonable way to feel.

“That's another thing that bothers me. Like... I feel like he's never fully honest with me. Even if he acts supportive... I don't know. What if he's just pretending?” Chrono sounded more frustrated than sad, having recovered from some of his more deeply rooted doubts. “I don't know him that well, so I wouldn't even be able to tell. I couldn't stand that. If he's gonna try and pretend, then I'd rather he just be honest with me.”

“Do you really feel that way?”

Chrono did appear to hesitate to answer for a moment. “In the long run, yeah. ‘Cause if he's just pretending, he's gonna slip up sooner or later anyway, isn't he?”

“Rive's always putting on an act around you.” Just as he'd said that, Ibuki realized the connection he'd just made. He remembered what Chrono had told him before, about the parallels between himself and his father that'd frustrated him so. The lack of vulnerability, the things hidden away. “He wants you to like him, too. I'm sure he's terrified, terrified that you'll hate him.”

“...He would be.”

No parent should ever fear their own child. Ibuki was adamant to stand by that, even if his own understanding of familial bonds and their significance was flimsy.

“I agree.” Ibuki spoke more gently. “But try and understand... if his mannerisms seem fake to you, it isn't because he wants to distance himself to you. He's... he's trying to be amiable.”

“Well, he shouldn't.” Chrono replied, more sad than angry. “Or, I mean. I just want him to be himself.”

“Ideally, he will realize that.”

“I hope so.” Chrono still sounded conflicted. “I barely know him as it is. And whenever I talk to him, it feels so insincere. It makes it hard to... to trust him.”

“If you open up to him, maybe he'll start to do the same himself.” Ibuki dared to believe that it might
“Should that really be on me, though?” Chrono made a valid point. Ibuki considered it.

“...He doesn't want to force himself on you. He said it himself that he wants you to rely on him.” Ibuki remembered the conversation he had shared with Rive the last time they met. It already felt like so long ago. “He thinks that you don't need him. So it might be worth trying to... reach out to him.”

“I mean... I will.” Chrono had become tired. “I will. I just... wish he'd been around more. Then, I could've... told him sooner.”

“Yeah.” Ibuki agreed. There was no way around that. “I didn't mean to imply it was your fault.”

“I know.”

During the silence that followed, Ibuki focused on the sound of their footsteps, matching together in rhythm as they walked. They were still a few blocks away from home. Ibuki had almost finished his drink.

“I didn't... mean to make the conversation so serious.” Chrono admitted. “So... well, I mean...”

“It's alright.” Ibuki couldn't help but feel his concern stir a little with Chrono's last words. “It sounded to me like you needed to talk about it.”

“Yes, I guess so.” He hesitated just a little to admit it. “I just feel like... I keep bringing it up. Making a problem out of it, over and over. Instead of just dealing with it.”

He’d smiled, somehow. It was a strange smile for him.

“Don't say that.”

“Alright,” Chrono appeared to understand. He stretched his shoulders, releasing some tension. “If you say so.”

Night had fallen, the sky pitch black above them stretched out between the buildings, outlining them. It felt good to have enough faith to be optimistic, in the end.

The walk had taken a bit longer than they'd both thought. Energized by his lowered body temperature and fueled by caffeine, Ibuki agreed on another best of three match. They had time to pass, and what better way was there? In the end, Chrono got his revenge, winning twice in a row, effectively eliminating the need for a third game. Not the one to rely on excuses, Ibuki regardless felt a bit frustrated about the outcome. He tugged at his shirt. Though he wasn't sweating as much anymore, he still felt grimy.

“You want another rematch?” Chrono had asked him, smugly. He sure looked like he was up for it himself.

“I would.” Ibuki said, indeed frustrated. “But before then, I'd like a break. Can I take a shower?”

He'd sounded a little irritated as he said it, but Chrono didn't appear to get upset. Far from. He gestured towards the bathroom. “Sure, go ahead.”
“After that... you'll get your rematch.” Ibuki wasn't backing down just yet. So far they were even. It would be the best of three, best of three.

Ibuki got up from his seat, and Chrono sighed in response. He did seem a little restless. “What is it?” Ibuki asked him, as he couldn't help but get a little vary.

Chrono got up, too. He stretched, and grabbed his glass off of the table. “You always take so long, is all. In the shower.”

His face turned away, Ibuki allowed himself to grimace irritably at Chrono's comment. He knew he was right. “Well, sorry about that. Just so you know, though, I am going to take my time.”

“Yeah, yeah...” Chrono brushed him off.

They both headed into the kitchen. Chrono got more water to drink. Before he headed into the bathroom to shower, Ibuki saw Chrono glancing his way.

Undressing, putting all his clothes in the bin without as much as a glance, Ibuki stepped into the shower. He'd only just gotten the water running when he heard a knock on the door.

“Yes?” He spoke clearly, approaching the door. Chrono had creaked it open just a little.

“Um...” He appeared to hesitate for whatever reason, strictly looking Ibuki in the eye.

“What?” Ibuki questioned, frankly. If Chrono needed anything, he should ask him now.

“You mind?” He asked, somehow bashfully. “...If I join?”

A smile cracked on Ibuki's face.

“Not at all.”

As he got the water running, checking the temperature, Chrono got undressed. Ibuki turned around to see him pull his shirt up over his head and dump it on top of Ibuki's own clothes. With his hair a little ruffled by his undressing, his gaze unfocused, Chrono appeared lost in thought, unaware that he was being watched. Ibuki stared at the line of his back, his neck, and the point where his arm connected to his shoulder. As he'd gotten a little stronger the shape of his arm had become a bit more defined. It was vague, a slight change. Ibuki had noticed, however. Perhaps he was the only one who would. Ibuki took it in, enjoying the sight while feeling fulfilled by his simple observations. He would occasionally catch Chrono staring at him, usually checking him out. Ibuki rarely allowed himself to do the same. It would happen like this however, when he was at peace, comfortable, with nothing to distract him.

When Chrono did turn around, Ibuki didn't look away. Perturbed, Chrono became flustered as soon as he noticed. Coming into the shower, he closed the curtains behind them snappily, and grabbed the nozzle where Ibuki had left it hanging low on the wall. Before Ibuki could react, Chrono had checked the temperature against the skin of hand, and then sprayed Ibuki down with it.

Throwing his hands out, Ibuki sputtered. “What are you doing?” He complained, sharply. “It's cold.”

“Yeah, it's cold? I thought that was what you wanted?” Chrono didn't sound like he was lying just to tease him.

“Not that cold.” Ibuki complained. Chrono adjusted the temperature on the handle.
They showered, Chrono taking the nozzle to wash his body while Ibuki started shampooing his hair. He felt Chrono's eyes on him as he did, and surely he had something on his mind. “You're washing it again, huh?”

“I have to. When I get sweaty like this, it just... it gets greasy so fast.” Ibuki complained.

“It does, huh?”

Ibuki had rather thick hair, but then, again Chrono did, too. Though, it wasn't as if the quality of their hair was in any way comparable otherwise.

Chrono still stared at him a little. “You always do that thing, too. With that weird brush.”

“I do what?” Ibuki asked, confused. The tone Chrono took was off putting to him.

“With that weird brush, the one that goes all the way around. You use the hair dryer and you roll it all up, like... like a hair roller, but it's a brush.” Chrono explained as good as he could, trying not to complicate things.

“You mean my round brush?” Ibuki knew that had to be it. He was perturbed by Chrono's description of it.

“Is that what it's called?” Chrono spoke over the sound of the water running.

“It's...” Ibuki hesitated, though he wasn't sure why. “It's to shape my hair. So it... curls inwards at the tips. It frames my face. Instead of just... falling down straight.”

Currently, his hair was as straight as it could be, plastered to his face. He wasn't sure why it embarrassed him to talk about this. Perhaps he was afraid to seem vain, or self-conscious of how he would easily fit into the stereotype of a man who put too much time and effort into his appearance.

“I think it looks good.” Chrono said, blurting it out. “I mean, I'm sure it would look good without the extra work too, just saying...”

“Thank you.” Ibuki accepted it as a compliment.

“I guess I always thought it was natural.” He said, thinking out loud. “So when I first saw you doing it, I was like, oh, I see.”

“Sorry to ruin the illusion.” Ibuki was at liberty to make a light joke.

“I don't... exactly mind.” Chrono's averted eyes and self-aware tone were hard not to notice. It made Ibuki happy, it made him really happy, actually. “I think it's nice. When you do that stuff.”

“I see.” Ibuki's smile bled through to his voice.

Chrono sighed, still restless. “As for me, I don't think there's enough circle brushes in the world.”

He hoisted the nozzle high up on the wall. His hair was not yet very wet, and the sprinkle of water rained down on them.

“It's called a round brush.” Ibuki corrected him. “And don't say that, you never know.”

He'd indeed intended to make a joke, but it was hard to follow through with. Chrono stared at him, his eyes hard and dull. The water only did so much to decrease the volume of his hair, and Ibuki watched, fascinated as the swirl only just seemed to sag and start to sink down on his forehead. Ibuki
had to look away, pressing his lips tightly together. Chrono sighed.

“If you can curl the edges of your hair, maybe we could uncurl mine?” He asked, his eyes still glossy, voice distant, painting a bizarre, if not surreal scenario.

“I... wouldn't count on it.” Ibuki spoke holding his breath. He would laugh if he didn't.

Chrono looked at him tiredly. He didn't appear insulted, but perhaps worn.

“Don't worry about it.” Ibuki tried to reassure him, but he came off as insincere.

Chrono accepted the situation he was in. “It's fine,” He said stubbornly. “You don't have to... say anything.”

As Chrono turned away, Ibuki reached out to run his fingers through the hair above his neck. Even with the pouring water, it still wasn't wet all the way through, so thick it was. “It's very soft.” He admitted, quietly. “I like that.”

Ibuki had found himself wondering if he ever complimented Chrono enough. He probably didn't, at least not enough to reflect his actual feelings. As his words left him, Chrono had visibly tensed up. His inability to take compliments, in particular about his looks, to heart, surely complicated things. His face had reddened, contorting with tension.

“You don't have to say that.” He spoke stubbornly. “Just to make me... feel better.”

“Maybe I said it because I wanted to.” Ibuki became stubborn as well, perhaps childishly so. “Have you considered that?”

Chrono sighed. He let it go, despite his discomfort. “Alright.” He mumbled. “Okay.”

It all felt more than a little unfair. It was usually Chrono flirting with him, not the other way around. Ibuki wanted to do it too, even if he still wasn't sure exactly how to. That it made Chrono uncomfortable only made it even harder. Ibuki let his hand slide down Chrono's neck to his back. He leaned in to speak to him. “If you don't want me to say it, I won't.”

Ibuki was surprised to feel Chrono's touch as he returned the gesture, laying his hand on Ibuki's side. “It's... it's not that.” He mumbled. “I... I just get awkward.”

Ibuki felt Chrono's breath on the skin of his shoulder as he spoke. “Sorry.”

With his eyes sliding shut, Chrono indeed appeared a bit awkward. Without thinking, Ibuki let his arm curl around his waist, pulling him closer. A smile twitched onto Chrono's tense expression, and he let Ibuki drape himself on him. The water was pouring around them, Ibuki felt it wash down his head and back, a flow that was obstructed as Chrono shifted, laying his other arm around Ibuki's neck. They embraced, pulling each other close. In the nude, with their bare skin pressed hard together, Ibuki could feel Chrono's breathing as if it was his own, as if they were one and the same.

Ibuki felt Chrono's hand clutch his soaked hair, and as they moved to fit together, Ibuki knew already before their lips met, already before he could feel Chrono roll his tongue against his own and run his hand across his back and down his body, that it would not just be a simple kiss.

Pressing himself closer, Chrono clung to him. Ibuki almost felt like he might stumble. The sound of the heavy water hitting the floor just about drowned out the sound of their kiss. It was Chrono who had started it, but Ibuki readily engaged with him, indulging him. Rubbing up against him, Chrono kissed him harder. Lightheaded, Ibuki regardless though about how he'd yet to finish washing his
hair. It did little to distract him, especially after he felt Chrono's hand on his lower back, and then lower still. For someone who was so easily flustered by simple compliments, Chrono was bold as soon as he wasn't on the receiving end. He had grabby hands, a firm grip. His fingertips indented the skin, and in his bare state, already elevated, Ibuki felt particularly defenseless. It did never take that much for him to get excited, at least not as long as he felt comfortable. Chrono wouldn't tease him about it, at least not outright, but he did always seem to become particular about it. As Chrono pushed against him harder, Ibuki felt his back against the wall. Frankly, it was uncomfortable. He had little mind capacity to think of it though, as soon he felt Chrono shift to press against his side, his hand now on his abdomen.

When they parted, briefly, Ibuki struggled to keep himself from panting. Chrono kissed his neck, sucking on it so hard it almost hurt. He could, because they both knew the marks would fade before the weekend was over. Ibuki felt his coursing blood heat up, and even the flowing water couldn't cool him down as Chrono touched him, already stroking him with a firm grip. He drew a sharp breath, and the air he'd inhaled left him with a moan. Things were happening fast. They usually did. Though dizzy, and though he didn't want to stop, with his back uncomfortable against the hard, cold wall Ibuki grabbed Chrono's shoulder to give him a nudge. Chrono pulled away, slowly, his hand traveling back up Ibuki's body.

“Sorry, was I going too fast?” He asked, his voice a hushed, rich murmur, his smile clearly audible.

“A little.” Ibuki pressed their faces together. Chrono stared at him, and it was hard to look away.

Chrono sighed against his face. “You got hard, so... I thought, I should, you know. Get you off.”

Ibuki couldn't stop smiling, even when Chrono's words made a shiver pass through his body. “I realized.”

Ibuki let his hand slide down Chrono’s back down to his waist. His mind was brimming, filling up with scenarios of his desire, of all the things he wanted Chrono to do to him. Before words could form, before he could voice anything, Chrono had caught his lips in another kiss. They would kiss more, and harder, before parting. Once they did, Ibuki felt increasingly impatient. They'd only been at it for so long, and yet, he felt like he couldn't wait.

Breathing, his breath labored, he sought eye contact with Chrono as he spoke, even as close as they were. “Could you... could you do me?”

“...Here?” Chrono could have been a lot more surprised. He was more concerned. “Now?”

“Yes?” Ibuki was lightheaded, eager. He'd gained a pretty intense look in his eye.

“Look, if you wanna...” Chrono lowered his voice a little. “If you wanna have sex, sure. But let's not... do it in here. It's not... a good idea.”

He sounded like he spoke from experience. Asking at this time felt like it could easily be a mood killer. “Alright,” Reality catching up to him, Ibuki saw the logic in his judgment call. Even just pressed up naked against the wall he'd been uncomfortable. Some things were easy to dream off, hard to realize. “If... if you say so.”

“I just don't want you to slip and knock your teeth out,” Chrono had put his hand against the wall to support himself. They were still effectively pressed together. “Or worse.”

“...Right.”

“We should finish up in here, anyway...” Chrono pulled away slightly, though he was evidently still
distracted, staring at Ibuki's face.

It was hard to let go. Maybe shower sex wasn't on the agenda, but maybe they could still compromise. Linking his fingers together behind Chrono's back, Ibuki wouldn't let him pull away, pressing his face against his shoulder. In truth, he would become flustered, too. With his lips against Chrono's ear, he spoke to him, quietly. “You could help me get ready. If you want to.”

He felt Chrono swallow, followed by his lips parting. “Alright.” His voice quivered. Chrono pressed his smiling lips against Ibuki's neck, kissing him hard once more.

Though it was no longer quite as unbearable, it was still hot, humid. The window was still open in their bedroom, but only so much noise would carry outside. Ibuki's hair was still wet. For once he hadn't bothered to blow it. He'd have to remedy that tomorrow. Tonight, how was he supposed to bother with it? In a sense, he enjoyed that ability to steer himself away from his usual habits. For once, there was something more important. With his knees sinking into the mattress, his hands bracing against the headboard and Chrono's breath hot on his neck, it was hard to think about anything else. In the end, they'd scrambled to bed, impatient. That in and of itself wasn't too unusual, but it'd resulted in some clumsy lovemaking.

With both his hands on Ibuki's hips, Chrono had slowed to a stop. “Sorry,” He slurred, breathing. “I can't quite... hang on.”

Dazed, Ibuki turned his head to look at him from the corner of his eye. His heart beating hard, he hated to stop. Chrono appeared to adjust himself, pulling Ibuki back towards him, guiding him with his hands on his thighs. Ibuki complied, but lost his balance somewhat. “Chrono, I... I can't hold on like that.”

“It's probably better if you lower yourself down a bit, anyway...” Chrono was focused, concentrated at the task at hand.

Ibuki complied, putting his palms down flat on the surface of the bed. To him, it was more uncomfortable, but if it meant Chrono would move again sooner he'd rather go along with it.

“Th-that's better...” Chrono's voice wavered, as he could reach deeper, feeling it as Ibuki could, too.

Leaning into him, Chrono moved slow and steady. As good as it felt, Ibuki almost couldn't take it. He was uncomfortable, but he decided it would have to do. His mind would drift to their conversation earlier that day. Whatever observations Chrono made watching him were usually more than a little right. Ibuki knew that, though he might deny it when it was convenient to him. In the end, it wasn't such a roaring revelation. What else, Ibuki knew he had been tense all day. He'd been tense, irritable and in a bad mood. He often struggled to relax, but he'd found his ways of doing so. Sex was one way, and it was effective, assuming he was in the mood. Now, he yearned for release.

Chrono had found a good angle. Ibuki once more felt his breath on his back as he leaned forward, enforcing his movements with his whole body, going faster. It felt good, it did, and yet he felt as if he couldn't see the end of it. Normally it wouldn't necessarily bother him. Now, he felt strangely detached by it, and the impressions left on his mind throughout the day appeared to return, distracting him. He still had a faint aftertaste of coffee in his mouth, and he could still remember the look in Mamoru's eye while they'd spoken on the phone, and he could still with ease recall word by word things they'd said speaking of Chrono's father. He remembered, just as suddenly, how they'd both
forgotten about their final rematch, and how it would probably be too late play any more after this.
Chrono was panting, and Ibuki could only assume he was enjoying himself. Ibuki tried to focus on it,
but it wasn't so easy. The sound of it was faint. He realized how badly he wanted to hear Chrono
moan, loud and clear, and how rare it would be for that to happen. He still felt the heat rising, making
him restless. It wasn't equal to the pleasure he felt. When he felt sweat on his brow, his body once
more overheating, Ibuki let out a frustrated, pained groan.

Chrono caught it. “You good?” He asked, slowing down.

“I'm fine.” Ibuki felt his arms shaking somewhat. He was tiring. “Keep going.”

“W-wait, I...” Chrono sounded like he'd become distracted himself. Oh, what was going on now?
When Ibuki felt Chrono pull out, he became fully frustrated. “W-what's...? What's wrong?” He
managed, clumsily.

“Sorry, I... I didn't notice but,” From where he was, it was hard for Ibuki to see just what Chrono
was doing. “I... I think the condom started slipping before. I think it's best I get a new one...”
Chrono moved to get up, and as he did, Ibuki felt his patience fail him utterly. His legs collapsed
under him, and with a loud, dissatisfied sigh he closed his eyes and fell face down into his pillow.

“W-what's up with you?” Chrono asked him, surprised in his concerned. “You okay?”

Slowly, Ibuki turned his head to the side where he lay. At the end of the bed, Chrono had throw his
legs over the side, indeed working on getting them another condom from the nightstand drawer.

Ibuki shut his eyes tight. “I want to come.”

He heard Chrono sputter. “W-well, I-I'm working on it?!”

When Ibuki opened his eyes, it was to a Chrono who'd become quite flustered.

“I wish you'd work on it... over here.” Ibuki rolled over to his side.
Chrono climbed back onto the bed, moving a bit more urgently. “Right, right. I'm on my way...”

Sitting by him, Chrono looked at him, and appeared to make some sort of connection. “How are you,
 huh?”

“I'm... I'm hot. Again.” Ibuki complained. “And, I'm... I'm a bit distracted.”

He watched as Chrono bit into the plastic cover, and discarded it next to him on the bed. “Right.”
Chrono had looked a bit distracted then, too.

Ibuki stared at him. “How about you?”

The question seemed to throw him off. “Me? What about me?”

“Are you... I mean...” Ibuki felt his throat clam up. “Are you... getting into it?”

“Yeah... I am.” Though there was no lack of conviction in his words, Chrono appeared a little
uncertain otherwise. “How's so?”

Ibuki decided to be honest. “It's... it's hard to tell sometimes.”
Just as he'd said that, Chrono's expression appeared to fail him. He was not surprised to hear this. It served as a clue; he'd been aware.

“Well, I... I do.” His voice burned warm, as flustered as he'd become. Ibuki had to look away. “I... I mean I always enjoy it, or I wouldn't...”

“That's fine, then.” Ibuki didn't want to make him uncomfortable. He was the inexperienced one here. He wasn't sure what reply to expect, but how Chrono did things was up to him.

Chrono looked vaguely guilty of something, though Ibuki had no idea what it could possibly be. “Chrono?” He asked, voicing his concern.

“I-I'm fine. Sorry.” He appeared to shake it off. “Let's get to it, okay?” His voice was gentle.

Ibuki felt his hands on his sides. “Do you wanna roll over?” Chrono asked, suggesting what he knew Ibuki liked.

“No, let's... do it like this.” Clenching his jaw, Ibuki pushed himself back up.

“You sure?” Ibuki felt Chrono gently brush against him. It made him anticipatory again, a feeling so strong it was hard to think.

“Yeah,” Ibuki breathed quietly, with a focused sort of conviction. “I'm sure.”

“Lay your head back down. Relax.” It was more than a suggestion. Ibuki complied. He let Chrono guide his hips, closing his eyes.

“Are you ready?”

“Yes,” Ibuki replied, vaguely irritated. The question felt redundant at this point. “I am.”

“Okay.” Ibuki could clearly hear the smile on Chrono's lips as he spoke.

When he felt Chrono again, Ibuki found it easier to relax. They came together so easily, it was satisfying beyond words. He'd become impatient before. He still was. However, it felt more bearable now. It would still be a little while, but he felt sure of it now, sure that release would come. Chrono always started slowly, carefully, but didn't let Ibuki wait for too long. As he moved, using his body weight to lean into Ibuki, he had to sprain his knees against the mattress, tensing up. Already breathing heavier, Ibuki indulged himself, focusing only on the sensation. It felt good. It really did. He still wanted more.

“Chrono,” His voice was muffled, but insistent. “Go faster.”

It hadn't been a question. “A-alright...” Chrono was usually happy to comply, and give him what he wanted.

He leaned down once more, pressing their bodies together. Focusing the movement to his hip, Chrono moved faster. Ibuki reacted as soon as he did, gasping with a tense expression.

“How's that?” He heard Chrono's warm voice close to him, his breath against his skin. “You like that?”

Ibuki tried to formulate an answer, but failed. It was all getting to him, fast. Ibuki finally felt himself give in to it, like he'd longed to. It had been a while since they'd started, and he'd feared they'd both tire before he could finish. With the rapid movements shaking his body, Ibuki had indeed failed to
respond, though he hoped he wouldn't need to. He heard himself moan weakly, his eyes sliding shut as his lips parted. Chrono felt all the more heavy on top of him, and Ibuki felt his strength draining. Chrono’s breath was still hot on his back.

“That's cute,” Though Chrono's voice was a murmur, Ibuki could hear the rippling tension below the surface, causing his voice to tremble. Flustered by his own spoken observation, Chrono still couldn't stop himself. “You're cute.”

Holding on to the sound of his voice, each syllable as formed by Chrono's lips, Ibuki almost didn’t realize how close he was. It'd caught up with him. Hearing Chrono's voice was what had done it for him, in the end. Ibuki didn't doubt he could tell, and as much as that embarrassed him, he embraced it. “Chrono,” He called out to him. He had to let him know. “I... I'm coming.”

“Oh, finally, huh?” Despite how worn he'd become too, Chrono sounded pleased with himself.

Ibuki didn't blame him. He should be. Before Chrono, he'd never been able to feel like this. He’d never been able to feel this good, never been able to feel secure enough to enjoy himself this much. Ibuki had already let go. He invited to the sensation that washed over him, and with a sharp gasp it passed through his body with a shudder. Chrono came to a stop, and the heat between them was still searing hot, but not unpleasant. Ibuki could still feel him. He hadn't finished. It was unsurprising, honestly, but Ibuki had still dared to hope. In his disoriented state, he couldn't help but wonder, even if his questions didn't quite take root: was it not enough?

Raising his head, Ibuki could glance at Chrono as he felt him pull away. Laying down on his side, Ibuki didn't care much for the stained covers. They'd need to wash them anyhow, all things considered. Chrono leaned down over him, kissing his face. Ibuki shifted, allowing their lips to meet. Pressing down against him, Chrono pushed Ibuki over on his back, kissing him harder. Ibuki’s thoughts floated away as such.

Pulling away, Chrono sat up. With a sigh he threw his legs down over the side of the bed once more. Ibuki stared at the ceiling where he laid as Chrono wiped his hands. “It's hot.” He thought out loud.

“Yeah...” Chrono sighed in agreement. He handed Ibuki a tissue too. He was slow to realize what it was for. “It's not as bad as it was before, but still.”

Chrono climbed back into bed, and as he did, Ibuki pulled himself up. He put his arm around Chrono, leaning in to brush his lips against his neck. His head rolling back, Chrono let Ibuki kiss him, touch him. Usually when they had sex, Chrono would wear something, even if just a top. As they’d emerged from the shower together, this was not the case, for once. Ibuki couldn't remember them ever being nude together in bed, quite like this. Even with the heat that remained, it was comforting to feel the full length of Chrono's bare body pressed against his own. He was already stroking him, firmly, eager to please him.

His eyes closed, Chrono let a twitch pass over his face. He exhaled, and Ibuki realized he'd been holding his breath, again. “Maybe we should've just... finished this off in the shower.”

Ibuki leaned in to speak against Chrono's neck. “You were the one who said we shouldn't.”

“That was... just 'cause you said you wanted me to do you.” Chrono was adamant to remind him.

Ibuki barely huffed. “Right.”

As Ibuki kissed him harder, stroke him faster, Chrono tensed up a little. “I just thought... maybe it was 'cause of the heat that... that you couldn't come.”
“I got a bit distracted.” Ibuki admitted, his face still pressed against Chrono's skin.

“How’s so?” He'd asked quickly, without hesitation, his voice tense like his body.

“I was just thinking about today.”

“I mean, it's been a lot for you lately.”

Ibuki knew that. He wasn't sure what to say. He didn't want to talk about this right now. He wanted Chrono to relax, too. “It has.” He responded quietly.

Lately, it felt like all they spoke off was depressing, serious matters. It wasn't anyone's fault, but in that moment, Ibuki could feel himself growing sick of it. At the very least, maybe they didn't have to talk about it during sex?

“Let me know if it's too much?” Chrono wasn't dropping it. “I mean, I thought you wouldn't be in the mood today after all that, so...”

Ibuki pulled away, letting Chrono steady himself where he sat. He slid down, a new goal in mind. Headstrong, if not impatient, he'd lowered his head. As soon as Ibuki felt the passage of Chrono's hot skin past his lips, the taste of him in his mouth, Chrono reacted, too. “Shit, oh-” He inhaled, sharply. “Okay.”

Ibuki wished they were a better fit. He'd try and take as much as he could into his mouth, but he never seemed to get anywhere like that. Maybe the truth was that he just wasn't very good at it, but he refused to submit to that truth just yet. If he wasn't good, he just needed to improve. He knew better that to try too hard though. If he gagged, he'd just make Chrono worry, which was the best way to turn him off. Ibuki felt Chrono's hand come to rest in his hair, guided by his jaw line, sliding in under and past his ear. It laid there gently, in support. Ibuki longed for a firmer grip, more guiding movement. Oh, what was it with him as of late?

Chrono did moan, eventually. It slipped out of him, just as Ibuki felt him lean back onto the headboard where he sat. Ibuki paid close attention to the sound. Chrono never seemed to grow very impatient when it came to his own pleasure, but surely, he longed as well. Ibuki hadn't intended for this to drag out on time. Focused, he decided to change up his strategy. He wanted badly to make Chrono feel good. Pulling away, he quickly went back down. Applying more pressure, he moved with short, fast strokes. Pushing himself, he knew he couldn't do this for long, but it'd proven to be successful in the past.

He felt Chrono's fingers weakly curl in his hair, his fingertips against his skin. “Th-that's good. That's really good.”

Chrono usually didn't fail him, he'd always let him know, with his words. The confirmation gave him the energy he needed. In his eagerness, Ibuki had almost forgotten. Surely, Chrono was watching him. Not wanting to jeopardize his focus, Ibuki kept his eyes shut. He could hear Chrono's breathing a bit better now. It was more defined. He focused on it, working hard as he did, letting it motivate him. He waited for the pay off, not quite realizing how badly he'd come to yearn for it before it was too late.

“I-I'm close,” It was somehow sudden. By the sound of it, it had been a bit sudden to Chrono, too. “I-I mean, I'm coming.”

Ibuki continued to move. The sound of Chrono's breathing died. With Chrono's hand clenching into a fist in his hair, it'd initially only been a nudge. When Chrono yanked his head back, Ibuki complied.
He pulled away. It was a little too late. His lip and his cheek became stained.

“I keep telling you you don’t have to do that.” Chrono spoke while out of breath. Ibuki didn't need to look at Chrono to know his expression.

“Maybe I want to.” His voice was quiet, but stubborn.

Chrono sighed. Before he could give Ibuki a tissue from the nightstand, he'd already wiped his face with the back of his hand. “Or, maybe it's just something you feel like you should want.”

Not this conversation again. Honestly, Ibuki wasn't so sure himself. What he was sure of however, is that he wanted to be able to do things for Chrono, too. As far as he was concerned, the discomfort was worth it. “Just 'cause it's what they always do in porn, it doesn't mean you have to do it in real life.”

Chrono had told him that before. “I... I know.” Ibuki replied, quietly. Chrono was running his fingers through his hair, and he leaned down to kiss him, only reaching his forehead. Ibuki had accepted the tissue, drying his hand, and what little was left on his face.

“It was good, though.” Chrono said, his tone shifting, and Ibuki felt his face heat up a little. “In case you couldn't tell.” He added, very quietly.

Knowing he'd been teased with, Ibuki turned away. He wasn't mad, but he did feel a little ruffled up with Chrono's doting, his teasing. When Chrono moved, sliding down, very clear he wanted to hold him, Ibuki felt a lot better.

They'd laid in silence for a moment, enduring the heat together. They could have parted, but Ibuki was tired of compromising, and Chrono didn't pull away, either.

“We forgot about our rematch.” Chrono said, having suddenly remembered, too.

“Yeah.” Ibuki said quietly, laying with his eyes closed.

“I guess... there's always tomorrow.” Chrono thought out loud. “Unless you wanna go for it now?”

“Maybe in a bit.” Time seemed to have lost meaning. There was only the heat, and trying to pull through it. Ibuki wanted to relax for now, seeing as it felt like he could.

Chrono laid on his arm, curled up. A moment passed between them in comfortable silence, broken only as Ibuki heard Chrono draw a deep, heavy sigh.

“...What's wrong?” Ibuki asked, letting his eyes slide open to watch Chrono in the dark.

“It's...” He appeared to hesitate. Never a good sign. “It's nothing.”

“Are you...” Ibuki didn't even know where to start. “Are you seriously going to sigh like that and then insist it's nothing?”

“It's... it's nothing you can do anything about.” He said, somewhat stubbornly.

“You don't know that.”

“I know.”

“How?” Ibuki asked him, critically. “How do you know?”
“I... I just do, okay?” Though certain, Chrono also sounded considerably tired. “Trust me.”

“Chrono.”

Chrono groaned. He rolled over, and Ibuki laid, watching his back. “You really wanna know, huh.”

“Yes.” Ibuki said sharply. “I do.”

A moment’s silence. Chrono laid unmoving.

“I want a baby.”

His body tensing, Ibuki had risen where he laid. His lungs emptied of air, he only made a strained, pained sound in response, visibly recoiling.

“See?” Chrono had flipped on his back snappily. “See?”

Trying to find his voice, forcing the words out, Ibuki’s voice was thin. “I haven’t even said anything yet.”

“As if you needed to.” Chrono had a point. He stared at the ceiling, upset. “Whatever. We’re not... we’re not having a baby, so...”

Despite how he projected his words firmly, his voice still died out.

“Why do you say that?” Ibuki felt vaguely insulted. “You want to.”

“You don’t though, do you?”

Even disregarding the reaction he’d just had, Ibuki knew Chrono had reason to assume. It still hurt. “I... I haven't considered it.” He admitted. “I might.”

Weakly, Chrono put his hands out down by his sides. “We can't, anyway. Not now, like this.” Ibuki didn't need to ask. “I'm in school. And you work way too much. And none of that's gonna change anytime soon.”

“If... if you want me to, I could always...” Ibuki had already cut hours. He could always try and cut some more.

“I don't want this to be something you do for my sake.” Turning his head sharply, Chrono stared at him. “If we do it, it should be something we both want. For ourselves.”

Ibuki knew he was right, but he couldn't help but feel disillusioned. Was it so bad to want something for someone else? “I just... I know how much it would mean to you.”

“It would. But it's not fair. Not to me, or the kid.” Chrono sounded convinced without doubt. Ibuki knew he had to accept that. “And like this, it's not gonna happen either way, even if we were both sure we wanted it.”

Chrono laid staring hard at the ceiling, and Ibuki thought it hurt to see him so frustrated.

“I mean, I... I didn't apply for any scholarships this year because I wanted to spend the summer with you.” This was the first time Ibuki was hearing this. Chrono turned his face away. “But next year... next year I really want to, if I can. And I dunno how long I'm gonna be gone. And when I graduate, I have no idea where I'm gonna end up.” He sighed. “And... and if I do get to go to space, there's no knowing when that'll happen. Or how long I'll be gone.”
His own life comfortably on rails, already having climbed as far as he could, and with no plans of changing his career path at all conceivable, Ibuki realized how different Chrono's outlook was to his own. “I know.” He said. "I still don't think you should limit your options entirely based on that.”

It appeared this was something Chrono had yet to consider. “I mean, sure... but...” Conflicted, he still found his ground. “I wanna... be there. If we're gonna... have a kid. I want them to know I'll be around. That I'll prioritize them. So I don't wanna end up in the position where I can't do that.”

Ibuki found that he had little to say to that. The parallels were clear. “If... if we do make that decision, then, I'd be there for you. So, even if you couldn't always be there... then, I would.”

It felt outlandish to say. In reality, Ibuki knew that if he had to, he would. He found solace in that knowledge.

“Sure.” Chrono seemed like he'd already known. It was strange. “But you never know. What could happen to you, or us.”

Ibuki sighed, allowing himself to do so. Chrono was already so deep into this commitment, this commitment to a hypothetical child of theirs. It was endearing, even if those worries were rooted in something very real and deeply personal. “I understand.” He said. “I just don't want those fears to keep you from doing the things you want.”

Reaching out, Ibuki put his arm around him, pulling them closer again. “I know.” Chrono said, thinly. He was still thinking, yet to reach a definite conclusion.

“I guess...” He fumbled a little to find his words. “It's another reason to feel, like... like maybe I choose the wrong thing. To do with my life.”

“You can still have the things you want.” Ibuki said, quietly. “Just not right away.”

“Right.” Though his voice quivered somewhat, Ibuki's reassurance appeared to work. Chrono smiled. “Life's all about compromises, huh.”

The words rang true to him, as badly as he wanted to reject them. “Perhaps.” He reluctantly agreed. There laid a difference between him and Chrono, there. Ibuki realized it made him idealistic. “I just don't... want you to feel that way about... us.”

“Oh...” Chrono responded hastily. “I don't, okay? I mean, I'd still... I'd still be with you. Even if you didn't... want all the things I do.”

There was no dissonance in his voice. Ibuki still felt conflicted. “I'll think about it.” He said. “I'll have time to, after all.”

“If.” There was a new surge of energy in Chrono's voice. “If we have kids, then...”

Oh, they'd now gone from singular to plural. Ibuki wasn't very surprised.

“Then, I want us both to be ready. It'd... it'd make the wait more than worth it, in the end.” He wasn't giving up on his dreams. It was relieving.

“Sure,” Ibuki smiled, too. “If you can bear the wait. And unless I'm too old by then.”

“Hey, I'm not letting you use that excuse.”

Chrono pulled himself up wrapping his arms around Ibuki's neck, and Ibuki sunk his head to a rest
on Chrono’s chest. It was still warm, hot. The breeze from the window was cooler than before even if only marginally, but with Chrono wrapped around him Ibuki could not savor it. He didn't pull away. He didn't want to. Maybe it could work as an analogy for something, he thought. Though he was yet to tire, his body still feeling raw since the sex they’d had, his thoughts drifted, slowing in his mind. Chrono's smile when he'd spoke to Ryuuzu over the phone came back to him. Ibuki knew how much it meant to him, he knew how impossible it was for Chrono not to engage himself. Children, and in particular children like Ryuuzu, did not only take a shine to Chrono, Chrono readily loved them, supported them, understood them. Ibuki had always thought he'd never be able to relate, that he'd never be able to be like that. Now, he started to become curious, curiously wondering if that was actually the truth. Ibuki had already changed his perception of himself so much. It made it possible to feel hopeful.

“Besides,” Chrono spoke to him, kissing the top of his head. “I already have one baby.”

“Yeah...” Ibuki mumbled in response. “If... if you want... we could babysit Ryuuzu once in a while.” Mamoru and Ooyama could surely need it, anyhow.

Chrono quietly stifled a laugh. He spoke almost hesitantly, despite the gleeful resonance in his voice. “I... I was talking about you.”

Oh.

Pressing his lips together, Ibuki still couldn't hold back a tired sigh. He said nothing. Surely, whatever he said would just be used against him. Chrono held him tighter, still snickering quietly to himself.

In no condition to sleep, Ibuki still drifted off as the heat got to mind, eliminating the thoughts in his head. When he dreamed, it felt more like an altered reality, a thought from his mind that had extended from beyond his imagination, entering the real world. In bed, in his home, he'd become never yet alone, with and without Chrono. The presence of a third person was inexplicable, but never strange. Engulfed, the terms of his reality shifted. Once more inexplicably, there was perhaps a fourth person, and then a fifth one as well. Soon, his living space, his mind, was crowded, overflowing, bustling. Even in his half-awake state, it pushed his boundaries. With sweat forming on his brow, Ibuki regardless gave in to it, accepting his fate.

Time as a concept became vague to him. He lived each day at once, the happy days, the sad days, the busy days. The darkness of the late nights and the pouring light of the early mornings existed side by side, at once. Chrono was there, with him, even when he wasn't. The heat of his body overlaid with his own bled through to his dreams.

It was a restless sleep, even as Chrono held him tight. When he woke up it faded away slowly, leaving an imprint in his mind, more so in his body. Trying to alleviate the stiffness of his limbs, Ibuki moved, obstructed by Chrono who still held him close and tight. It felt like it'd only been a few minutes. It was still dark out. It was still hot. As Ibuki had moved, Chrono had come to, as well.

“Sorry,” Chrono said quietly. He must have seen the bothered look on Ibuki's face. “Need some space?”

Not needing to respond, Ibuki pulled away, rubbing his face. He felt quite terrible once more, even if he didn't feel like he had the energy to be irritated. Chrono had reached for the nightstand as Ibuki had fallen back down in bed.

“Hey...” Chrono said quietly. He held up his phone to Ibuki, who squinted at it in the dark. Before he could draw any conclusions, Chrono filled in. “It’s past 12.”

“Huh?” Ibuki made a confused sound.
“It’s Sunday.” Chrono smiled weakly. “Technically.”

Ibuki stared at him.

“Do you wanna turn on the AC?”

They’d both scrambled out of bed, suddenly energized. The apartment was dark, but no darker than the bedroom. In the kitchen, in the dark, Ibuki had gotten to the console first. He’d taken the remote, but Chrono had in turn grabbed it out of his hand. He looked at Ibuki somewhat distrustfully.

“Let’s not go overboard, now.” He said, sternly.

“Right.” Ibuki agreed.

“How much do you say?” Chrono still asked him.

“Twenty... twenty five?”

“Twenty five?”

They looked at each other. Ibuki suddenly couldn’t remember what he usually had it set to. AC degrees and real degrees weren’t interchangeable anyhow.

“Twenty six?” Ibuki asked himself quietly.

“Let’s go with twenty six.” Chrono had looked about as confused himself.

“Right...” Right now, Ibuki couldn’t be bothered to care about a few degrees.

Using the remote, Chrono turned it on. They both stared as it beeped, and whirred, the mechanism moving. In the silent room, the usually undetectable buzzing of the air conditioning could be heard soundly as it once more sprung to life. It took a moment. Then, they both felt a light, cool breeze. Ibuki closed his eyes, letting the wind hit his face. Next to him, Chrono sighed. They shared the moment in silence, enjoying the sweet release from their sweaty perdition, and the entrance into a more forgiving, comprehensible world.

“It’ll take a while...” Chrono said, airily. “Before the whole place starts feeling like normal again.”

Ibuki couldn’t find it in him to care. Not right now. “That’s alright.” He remembered something, a smile coming onto his face. “In the meantime, how about that rematch? We could sit here, in the kitchen.”

“Oh, sure.” With his tone, Chrono admitted to being surprised but nonetheless eager. “If you’re down, why not?”

“I don’t feel like sleeping just yet.” Ibuki admitted. He’d had his short nap, and he feared he was still awake due to the coffee they’d had before. Additionally, the bedroom was still too hot. It would be better to sleep in tomorrow.

Their cards were still scattered on the table in the living room, by the TV, frozen in the final game state of their last fight.

"Me neither to be honest.” Chrono admitted.

Despite their agreement, neither of them moved.
"I still can't believe I lost like that before." Chrono was still not over it. "And I can't believe you played like that, either."

"It's not like you to hold a grudge."

"But I guess it's like you to be petty, huh?"

Ibuki did laugh, lightly. "Better show me, then."

"I will."

The AC still audibly whirred. Their fight, their argument, his anxieties and even the pressing heat felt distant. Ibuki breathed lighter again, his existence no longer feeling like a burden. It brought something else he'd forgotten to mind.

"Chrono, before we play, we should..."

Ibuki turned to look at him, and Chrono stared at him plainly.

“Put something on.”

The slight chill had made him aware of their bareness.

Chrono smiled awkwardly. "Right."

The apartment would indeed not be back to normal for a while. Similarly, Ibuki feared he'd ruined his sleeping schedule. As the night became later, he thought of it no more, nor did they speak of any more depressing things. Indeed he only had so many Saturdays off in a year, but he would remember this one for a long time.
Chapter 14

It was just past noon. Chrono stood by the stove. He kept throwing glances at this phone, keeping track of the time. He'd been alone for the past few hours, despite what they had planned. When he heard keys inserted into the lock, he hurriedly dried his hands before rushing towards the front door.

It swung open, revealing Ibuki wearing a tired expression on the other side.

“You're back.”

“Yes,” Ibuki muttered. “Finally.”

“How did it go?”

“It's... it's been dealt with.” Ibuki replied, irritably.

“Are you hungry?” Chrono had his way of approaching the problem, the problem that was Ibuki's moody state. “The food's just about ready.”

“Oh. I am. Thank you.”

It should have been their quiet weekend together. They'd planned it for a little while. Chrono had been staying over since the night before, and he was going to stay tonight, as well. Chrono had been looking forward to it. He had been looking forward to it a lot. He'd stayed the night at Ibuki's house before, sure, but not quite like this. Which was why, naturally, Ibuki had gotten a work call Saturday morning. An urgent one.

Chrono would have preferred for them to cook something together, but at least he had been given the time to perfect lunch. He had felt strange being left behind alone at Ibuki's apartment, but the feeling had settled.

“This... this is really good.” Confounded, Ibuki set his soup bowl down. “Did you make this from scratch?”

“Oh. Yeah, I did.” Chrono himself preferred it over the usual instant miso. He'd needed the distraction, having been left to his own devices for a few hours. “I had the time, anyhow.”

“Well, I... I appreciate it.” Ibuki's sincerity made Chrono's attempt to casually brush off his compliment all the more ineffective.

He could only smile, awkwardly.
“We've been... using their services for years.”

“I... I remember,” Chrono had to try and focus. “From when I was working with you.”

“Yeah,” It wasn't like Ibuki to forget. “And now, just as we're about to reopen negotiations...”

Ibuki sighed heavily. The drama had been playing out this morning. It had started already the night before, though they'd both been preoccupied at the time. “They go behind my back like this.”

“Maybe they didn't mean to.” Chrono wasn't sure what else to suggest.

“I don't know.” Raising his head, Ibuki looked Chrono in the eye “I'd like to give them the benefit of the doubt, though.”

It was a bit hard to mistakenly issue a set overhaul of their business agreements to everyone in management- barring Ibuki himself and a few select others- before negotiations had even started. It was hard not to outsource IT, though Ibuki wished more and more it didn't have to be like that.

Chrono laid his arm over his shoulder. “You'll sort it out.”

Ibuki tensed in his attempt to breathe steadily. “I hope so.”

“Yeah,” Chrono watched him intently. “So don't worry about that now.”

Ibuki's focused expression faltered. Pressing his lips together, he let his eyes slide shut under Chrono's gaze. “I can't believe I had to come in... on a Saturday.”

They'd sat down to speak in the living room after lunch. That'd been a while ago, now. The fabric of the couch cushions was textured. Chrono already knew they'd most likely leave a mark on his knees. He ran his fingers through Ibuki's hair, and he blushed deeper, his eyes still closed. Once more, a sigh erupted from deep within him. Chrono felt it resonate in his chest, transmitting between them.

Leaning in to kiss his face, Chrono spoke with Ibuki's hot skin against his lips. “I said, don't worry about that, now.”

Chrono was still moving quite slow. It was starting to become unbearable. His muscled has started to ache. His feelings ached, too.

“It's just so infuriating.” There was tension on Ibuki's brow as he spoke, his eyelids pressing together tightly.

“Yeah,” Chrono found Ibuki's stubbornness endearing. “You're gonna give them a piece of your mind though, right?”

“I... I most certainly am.” Ibuki spoke darkly, his frustration cutting through to his voice even as he struggled to focus.

Letting himself sink deeper, Chrono smiled wider with his face hidden in Ibuki's hair. Ibuki was usually collected, but he would get so intense when he was mad.

“You're gonna...” He had to pause to breathe. “Have to keep me updated on that, okay?”
Ibuki's hand had been laying on his hip. Chrono felt his fingertips starting to dig into his skin. He saw little reason to fight his urges anymore. Moving faster, Chrono felt Ibuki's sharp exhale against his skin. With his arm still hooked around Ibuki neck, Chrono pulled away to admire his face.

“I want to know how things turn out.” Succeeding in speaking steadily, Chrono regardless realized this was going to be the end of their conversations. Ibuki was struggling just to uphold a straight face.

“R-right...”

Bracing harder against Ibuki's shoulders, Chrono enforced his movements. His knees digging into the seat, his legs were already starting to tire, but Chrono was nothing if not stubborn. He felt Ibuki shiver.

“You good?” He asked, wanting to hear him say it.

“I-I'm good.” Ibuki groaned. “I-It feels good.”

His blood rushing harder, Chrono struggled not to breathe so hard. Weakly, Chrono felt Ibuki's hip rise and fall, responding to his movement. Pressing down, Chrono exhaled sharply. His face was taking color, too. Using his legs and hips to move, he was uncomfortable, his muscles burning, but he hated to stop. Once he did, Ibuki seemed confused, his eyes coming open. Trying to relax, Chrono slid down to a sitting.

“Wait...” Trying to catch his breath, Chrono had decided to change up his strategy. Ibuki looked at him expectantly.

Connected at the hip, their thighs pressed together, Chrono pressed himself against Ibuki's body. Laying his head on his shoulder, Chrono worked his hips in place. An intense rhythm made the friction build hard and fast, but Chrono quickly felt strained. As good as it felt, too good to stop or to think, he couldn't fully indulge himself. When he heard Ibuki moan, once, and then again, he knew he had to keep at it. Pressing the two of them harder together, he bit his lip. Noisily, the couch was shaking below them, against the wall, against the floor. Chrono actually hated that. It was distracting, and it made him feel dirty. Additionally, it made him concerned about the structural integrity of this piece of furniture that had been standing in this apartment for the past six years, and who knows how long before then. This tangent was, on his part- he would have to admit- not very sexy. His aching muscles made themselves reminded, and at his limit, though not in the way he would have wanted, Chrono came to a stop yet again.

“S-sorry...” He apologized as he pulled away, his voice shaking. Ibuki looked disoriented.

“This...” Chrono threw his head back, groaning in frustration. “This was a bad idea.”

“Yes...” Ibuki agreed, in his deep voice. He still held Chrono in place, hands on his sides. Without a word, they'd still agreed to take a short break, but with no intention from either of them to actually call it quits. It would feel like a waste to stop now.

“We should have... just gone to the bedroom.” Chrono said, regret coloring his voice. They'd indeed just sat down to mellow out a bit after lunch. At which point, Ibuki had taken his hand, and then kissed him. After that, it had been hard to stop. They'd absolutely had alternate options already back then. Even now, with an alternate idea spoken into reality, neither of them made any volition to move even an inch.

“Yeah...” Ibuki agreed, again. He'd snuggled his face into Chrono's neck, and Chrono felt his breathing mellow out. Though they'd stopped, they still shared the heat. Chrono could still feel it
rising inside him, the searing sensation that stole his thoughts away. They shared it, together, and he savored it, closing his eyes.

They’d both looked forward to today. This wasn’t what they’d planned, but for once they didn’t have anything planned at all. Which was to say, it would simply be a normal weekend. To Chrono, it was all the more reason to feel that it was special. Moreover, it did feel like things had changed. Things were still tender, and at times Chrono could still feel an awkward disconnection between them. Still, Ibuki had let him closer. Rather than pushing him away, he appeared to do the opposite. As he thought about it, Chrono felt the shared heat of arousal between them as if amplified. With Ibuki’s arms wrapping around him tight and holding him, Chrono felt even warmer. Having sex on the couch had absolutely been a bad idea. At the same time, it was hard to regret.

Ibuki ran his fingers through his hair, and Chrono leaned his head back just enough to invite to a kiss. Shifting, while aware Ibuki could feel it all just as he did, Chrono grew impatient once more. With Ibuki’s tongue still rolling against his own, Chrono once more pressed down hard, jerking his hips. He felt Ibuki move too, steadier before. They’d both become increasingly desperate. They fumbled, their kiss ending. With Ibuki’s hand still firmly holding onto the strands of his hair, he wouldn’t let them part. Chrono didn’t fight it, pressing their faces together. His eyes sliding open, Chrono saw Ibuki return his gaze. Sharing eye-contact, joined in movement, Chrono felt lightheaded, his face tingling. Revitalized, Chrono drew strength from reserves he didn’t know he had. Ibuki was responding to him, cooperating. He couldn’t let that go to waste. He could do this. He had to.

Eventually, Ibuki did appear give in. He faltered under Chrono’s sharp eyes, overwhelmed, and with a light moan, his eyes came shut. Chrono hoped, wished, that he was close. As good as it felt, as hot and as dizzy as he’d become, it didn’t feel like he’d be able to come. He was already growing uncomfortable again, his body feeling like it would soon fail him. Oh, if only he could make Ibuki finish, it would all be worth it. He wanted to see it, feel it, experience it.

In just a moment, Chrono could indeed feel Ibuki tense somewhat below him, his strokes becoming more defined. Again, Ibuki tried to kiss him, and they did so clumsily, their lips and tongues a mess. Pulling away, their eyes met again, however briefly.

“Chrono,” Breathing hard, Ibuki held Chrono tight, and Chrono heard his heavy voice in his ear. “I’m coming.”

Oh, thank god. Relief gained him enough energy to ride through the final push. Putting his body weight to work, still moving rapidly, Chrono felt Ibuki press him close, close. With a sharp, audible gasp, Chrono felt Ibuki’s climax ripple through him.

Panting, Ibuki relaxed. Having come to a stop, Chrono also had to catch his breath, and relax his taxed muscles. Still holding Chrono tight, Ibuki was eager to kiss him. His heart still pounding, Chrono felt their bodies mesh just as effectively as before. Without parting, Ibuki touched him, letting his hand find its way down his body. In the space between them, Ibuki touched him boldly, if not impatiently. Ending the kiss, Chrono pressed his face down against Ibuki’s chest, against the fabric of his shirt. With his pants pulled down just above his knees, Ibuki was otherwise dressed, just like he’d been getting back home. His eyes squeezed shut, Chrono knew it wouldn’t be long. He knew, so he tried to brace. Coming with Ibuki was still overwhelming, but he knew he had to let it happen. He wanted it to, he wanted it badly. Ibuki was stroking him fast, matching the speed which they’d moved at before. Finally relaxing into the sensation, Chrono breathed a shaky breath, savoring how close he was, basking in it. Ibuki’s free hand ran down his back, his arm, before taking Chrono’s own hand that’d gone limp laying by his side. Chrono felt Ibuki hold it, felt him squeeze it, gently pressing their hands together and intertwining their fingers. He let go then, forfeiting. Chrono allowed his lips to part, inhaling one final time. Within a short moment’s passing, with Ibuki’s intensifying strokes, he quietly shuddered, the pleasure that passed through him numbing him to his surroundings, to all but
Ibuki's touch and his scent, which was so close and unmistakable.

He'd forgotten, in his rush, to warn Ibuki.

“Sorry,” He said quietly, struggling to find his voice. He couldn't say that it'd been sudden, because it hadn't been. “I... I came.”

“I realized.” Ibuki said quietly. His hand moved to Chrono's side, letting go of his hand.

Feeling his lightheadedness float away, Chrono heaved himself up, albeit carefully. “This is... such a mess.” He complained. “Sorry.”

“That's fine.” Ibuki genuinely didn't seem to care.

“Let's not... do this, ever again.” He sighed. “On the couch, I mean.”

“Right.” Ibuki agreed, though he didn't sound very committed. Chrono could only assume he'd enjoyed himself.

Side by side, they stood in the kitchen, washing their hands. Chrono leaned onto Ibuki's side, wistfully. Ibuki strangled a yawn. It looked painful.

“You tired?” Chrono asked him.

“A little.”

“Why don't you lie down for a bit, then?” Chrono suggested, but Ibuki didn't look too pleased with the suggestion.

“I really shouldn't.”

“Come on,” Chrono gently tried to persuade him. “You could take a short nap. You'd need it anyway, after rushing up so early this morning.”

With the water from the tap, Ibuki washed his face a little, rubbing his eyes. “You got up just as early as I did.”

“Let's both take a nap, then.”

As he'd suggested it, Ibuki looked like he'd come around to consider it.

“Fine,” He said, somewhat reluctantly, if not grouchily. “We'll take... a short nap.”

Once Ibuki did lay down on the couch, he looked like he'd yearned for it. Laying down next to him, Chrono rested his head on his arm.

“It got pretty late last night.” As he'd reminded him, Ibuki looked vaguely uncomfortable. “So it's not weird if you're tired.”

For a moment, Ibuki looked like he might not respond.

“I suppose not.”
Chrono pushed himself close to him, and he felt Ibuki lay his hand down on his back. “You should make sure to rest up. Seeing as you got the chance.”

“Right.” Ibuki replied, even if just to indicate he was listening.

“I know how much you work during the week.”

“I... I know.” Ibuki had become a little bothered. Chrono thought it was cute. “I'm... I'm resting so leave it be.”

“Alright.” Chrono put his arms around him, smiling. He heard Ibuki sigh tiredly, and felt him relax.

Panting, hacking, Chrono felt his body fail him once more. He kept moving by force of will alone, a feeling that shouldn't be so familiar. Watching Ibuki, his eyes nailed to him, he wanted to call out to him, but didn't. It would be humiliating, as his body wasn't quite listening to what he said. Throwing his head back, squeezing his eyes shut, he pushed himself, harder and harder. It still wasn't enough. He ought to be able to do more than this, or had Ibuki's performance warped his understanding of his own capabilities?

He was used to chasing moving goalposts. Chasing Ibuki hadn't been too different. He was still doing it now, though literally rather than metaphorically. From behind, like this, it normally wouldn't have been too easy to recognize him; his sweatpants of choice were a little tight on his skin, and his neck was visible with his hair pulled up on his head. Moreover, seeing him in a sweatshirt and sneakers was normally unheard of. At the very least, these observations served to distract Chrono somewhat, just like the movement of Ibuki's hair swinging from side to side as he ran. Desperately not wanting to be left behind, Chrono's pride threatened to push him beyond his limits. All things considered, it was unfair. After all, Ibuki had not only had six more years worth of opportunities to work out, he was also several inches worth of leg richer. Even statistically speaking, Ibuki had a larger leg to body ratio. In fact, thinking about it, Chrono was most certain Ibuki was mostly just leg, and not much else.

After about one eternity, they did eventually loop back to the park entrance where they'd started. By then, Chrono had thought of many things. Most of all, how stupid he'd been to suggest they go out running together on the basis that it would be a social experience. In the end, they hadn't shared a single word, not beyond the one time Ibuki had called out to Chrono after he'd lost sight of him turning a corner.

Ibuki leaned against the railing, waiting for Chrono to catch up. In the end, he was only so far behind.

“Here.” Ibuki handed him the water bottle they'd left behind before starting their round.

“Thank you.” Chrono thanked him as soon as he was able to get out a sound that wasn't just his rugged, hacking breathing.

Winter was approaching. Even if the direct sunlight would still warm if you found opportunity to bask in it, there was a clear chill in the air. Chrono welcomed it, frankly. Now especially. Ibuki had
already drunk a decent amount of the water they had to share, so Chrono didn't feel bad drinking to
his heart's content.

“How are you... so fast?”

Ibuki looked surprised to be asked. He didn't look particularly happy about it, though. “I used to run
a lot.” He admitted. “I guess it sticks with you.”

So Chrono had heard. He'd been fairly active when he was younger, but he'd never dedicated
himself to any sport or exercise, unlike Ibuki.

“I guess so.” He said, not sure what to say.

“It's good exercise.” Ibuki said, dully. It was something he'd learned to repeat, to himself. “And it
helps clear your mind.”

“There are... worse ways to go about that, I guess.” Chrono leaned against the railing, too. “Here.”
He handed the bottle back to Ibuki, who took it.

“I used to overdo it.” He admitted, casually so. “It helped me take my mind off of things. Though,
less the running and more the, well...”

“Martial arts thing?” Chrono was exhausted. If he hadn't been, he probably would've chosen his
words more carefully.

Ibuki smiled, though, so at least he'd accomplished that. “Yes,” He said. “I was... angry.”

“Well, again...” Chrono kept struggling with his words. “There are worse ways to go about that.”

“Oh... it got worse.” Ibuki smile became increasingly cynical. “It absolutely got worse.”

Chrono sighed, sliding into a crouch on the ground. “There's nothing wrong with working out's all I
mean...”

“I know.”

With his body feeling like jello, Chrono looked at Ibuki, thinking that he too, indeed looked quite
tired. Maybe he should be proud of what he'd accomplished.

“Get up.” Ibuki put the bottle down on the ground, having finished drinking. “Come on.”

“What?” His body painfully fatigued, Chrono retaliated. “What now?”

“We need to stretch.”

Oh. “Right...”

“Come on, then.” Ibuki was snappy. For once Chrono was at the receiving end.

He pushed himself up slowly, his legs wobbling.

“Alright, alright....”
It took a while to walk back to the apartment. They walked the smaller streets, and it was peaceful afternoon. Chrono soon felt better, despite how tired he'd been. It was cool out, making him feel revitalized once he wound down. It was getting later, and the number of people out on the town were slowly increasing.

“Are you hungry?” Ibuki had asked him, as their conversation had fallen into silence.

Chrono hadn't considered that he might be. “A little, I guess.”

“There's a noodle place not too far from here.” Ibuki gestured down the street. “It's quite popular. Right now though, it shouldn't be too busy.”

“Oh,” Chrono couldn't help but feel curious. “Sounds good to me.”

The restaurant was not quite in the direction they were headed, but regardless not a very far detour. Coming inside, it was humid, noisy, with the scent of broth strong in the air. Chrono was suddenly a lot hungrier than he'd been before.

“What would you like?” Ibuki asked him quietly, under the noise of the chatter and clatter of the kitchen, which both in the literal and figurative sense was situated halfway into the dining area.

Chrono squinted at the handwritten menus across the bar. “Uh... I'll take whatever you're having.”

“Alright.” Ibuki was pleased with the response.

As soon as they'd ordered, and sat down in a booth by the window, more people came in. Their food didn't take long. With the soup being piping hot, they still did what they could to start eating. Focused on their meal, their conversation had died down. Ibuki looked like he'd been hungry. Chrono did enjoy watching him eat with a good appetite. Preoccupied, Chrono didn't initially notice the shadow in the corner of his eye, the intruding presence.

Turning around swiftly, he noticed a girl standing by their table, staring at him. He would have guessed she was about nine, maybe ten.

“H-hello?” He'd been caught off guard.

Ibuki hadn't noticed her either, not until Chrono had spoken. She couldn't have been standing there for long, no more than a few seconds.

“Hi.” She replied, offish. Her expression was stiff, but Chrono noticed that she was shy.

“Did you need anything?” He smiled, speaking to her kindly.

“Oh, hello. Sorry...” An older girl came through behind her, smiling awkwardly. “She's a bit... is she bothering you?”

“Not at all.” Chrono said. She'd only just appeared, after all.

“You're Shindou Chrono!” She announced, suddenly, as the older girl had come up behind her. She sounded like she'd been holding it in, ready to burst.

“I'm... I'm surprised anyone remembers me.” Chrono said somewhat hesitantly.

“I remember you.” She said, assuredly.

Her excited exclamation had been like a heralding sign, and soon a number of children had appeared,
all aged between six to twelve, gathering at their table. Vaguely uncomfortable, Ibuki stared hard at Chrono.

Through a dissonant murmur, she raised her voice to speak to him, ignoring her friends. “Would you fight me, please?”

“Hey, hey... now...” The older girl, who was probably a high school senior or perhaps a first year in collage, placed her hand on her head. “I hardly think now’s the time.”

“I can ask!” She retaliated, showcasing how familiar their relationship were. “If he wants to say no, he’ll say no.”

“I’d... I’d like to but... I don't actually have my deck right now.” Chrono admitted. More or less immediately, he’d snuffed out the hope in the eyes of the group of children. “I’m really sorry.”

“I'll borrow you mine!” The murmur that’d followed had urged one of the younger boys to step forward.

He’d elbowed himself to the front, and placed the deck box on the table. Chrono knew that if he took it, he’d be agreeing to a game. He eyed the reaction of the older girl, who he assumed was a figure of authority in this situation. Before she could say anything, the girl exclaimed excitedly. “Then that’s solved! You can fight me!”

“Just… just one game, okay?” Her presumed babysitter bargained.

“What?” The response was instantaneous. “I want to fight him too!”

There was unrest in the small group. Chrono felt increasingly affected by this sudden situation he’d found himself in. What was he supposed to say?

“Just one game isn't fair.”

“Why does only Mayumi get to fight him?”

“Well, I-I saw him first.” The girl, named Mayumi by her friends, retaliated. “Besides, you all get to watch, so it's fine.”

“So, just spectating is fine?” No one had expected Ibuki to speak. He smiled, a smile Chrono could still only describe as infuriating. “In that case, why don't I fight him?”

The kids were taken back by this, but surprisingly, none of them complained.

“That's a good idea!” The older girl was fast to agree.

“Alright...” Mayumi said, hands on her sides.

“Who wants to borrow me a deck, then?” Ibuki asked, haughtily. Chrono looked at him disapprovingly.

“He plays Link Joker.” Chrono filled in, casually.

“Any deck is fine.” Ibuki corrected him stubbornly.

“I... I play Link Joker.” It was a strange stroke of luck. Mayumi had spoken up again, almost hesitantly. She stared at Ibuki quite hard. Perhaps she knew who he was, but she said nothing.
“What a coincidence.” Chrono smiled. “Let's see it.”

It didn't take long to get ready. Chrono examined the deck he'd been given by the young boy. It was a zodiac time beast deck of an older type. There were more than a few odd spots here and there, but Chrono thought it was a deck that had personality. Across of him, Ibuki was going over the contents of the deck he'd been borrowed with a confounded look on his face. It made Chrono smile.

“Are you ready?”

The question cut through to Ibuki, who raised his eyes from the deck with a peculiar look on his face. “Sure.”

Ibuki placed his first vanguard face down, and Chrono did the same.

“Let's go, let's go.” Mayumu hurried them on.

When Ibuki smiled in a strangely profound manner, Chrono felt unnerved.

“Stand up,” With a joint, trained movement, they both turned the cards over, their voices sounding in unison.

At the sight of Ibuki's forerunner, Chrono's voice had died down, drowned out.

“The vanguard.”

Chrono wished he wasn't surprised. Frankly, what was he supposed to expect? “Brass-winged Gear Hawk.”

“Earnest Star-vader, Selenium.”

Mayumi caught onto his unnerved expression. “My deck's really strong! You'll see!”

“We'll see, indeed.” Ibuki echoed her words, coyly.

“Well, bring it on, then.” This ought to be a bit interesting, at least. Chrono probably wouldn't have been so ruffled up, if it wasn't Ibuki sitting across of him.

“I ride.” Ibuki had assumed the first turn. “Ray Star-vader, Samarium. Selenium moves to the back row.”

Drawing, Chrono passed his eyes over his hand. “Chronocharge Unicorn.” Gear Hawk moved from the soul to the middle back row circle. “I attack the vanguard for ten thousand.”

With a no guard, and a fruitless trigger check, one damage went into Ibuki's damage zone.

“I ride.” Ibuki was focused, even for a silly game with borrowed decks in front of a row of peering children. Chrono might've been embarrassed for him if he wasn't quite so badly in love. “Star-vader, Mobius Breath Dragon.”

It was important to pay attention.

“I attack the vanguard for 14 thousand.”

Normally he would no guard it. Chrono had glimpsed the vanguard circle skill icon in the card text. Ibuki had caught on to as much. “If the attack hits—” He had no chance to finish.
“He gets to lock one rear guard!” Mayumi had filled in, unable to contain herself.

“I... see.”

That was annoying. Should he let it happen? He was only on six thousand, so he'd need to throw down quite a lot of cards to guarantee it wouldn't hit. “I... no guard.”

Chrono didn't want to lose 15 thousand worth of shield, not when Ibuki would probably get a trigger anyhow.

“Alright.” Ibuki smiled. “Drive check.”

Nothing. It made Chrono all the more vexed. His one damage was a vanilla grade one, now sitting in his damage zone. “Gear Hawk is locked.” Ibuki announced, and Chrono made it happen.

Standing, drawing, Chrono shifted through his hand. His booster had been sealed away, at least for now. He needed to ride something with nine thousand power or he would have to rely on a trigger to hit. “I ride, Pulsar Tamer, Manish.”

It felt like a poor choice, to ride a resist unit when he was up against Star-vaders, but he had little choice. “I attack the vanguard for nine thousand.”

“I guard.” Decidedly, Ibuki put down a trigger. It was a no pass. Chrono had to admit he was a tad confused. Ibuki was clearly in no need for counter blasts.

“Alright...” The drive check got him a critical trigger. Chrono would regret not throwing down anything more, but he rather not risk getting any more units locked so early on.

Ending his turn, Chrono unlocked Gear Hawk in his back row.

Standing, drawing, Ibuki reached into his hand to ride a grade three. Chrono realized he'd yet to brace. So far he'd only seen so many of the cards in the deck he was up against, but he knew that the star-vader grade threes were all varying degrees of nasty. For a split second, memories of old rushed back to him, forcing him to relive that suppressing presence, the sensation of the endless emptiness of deep space spreading out by his feet.

Ibuki hesitated. Chrono felt a cold sweat coming on. It couldn't be... right?

“I ride... Star-vader, Freezeray Dragon.”

Chrono dared to be relieved. For a second, he had glimpsed a world of ruin.

“I call Eclipse Star-vader, Charcoal.” A grade one was placed in Ibuki's left back row. “And, Star-vader, Red Sprite Dragon.” It was joined by a grade two in the front. Unsurprising.

“I call two Prison Gate Star-vader, Palladium.” The two grade ones made for a 14 thousand column on the right of the vanguard. Ibuki was emptying his hand quite effectively. As Chrono was still on grade two, it made sense that he would do what he could to make the most of the extra few thousands Chrono would need to make up for in guard value. However, despite having a full field, Ibuki's numbers were less than impressive. The vanguard's base power was only ten thousand. Chrono eyed the double grade one column suspiciously. Palladium was a card that could lock cards again when they unlock. However, since last turn, there had yet to be a single card locked.

“I attack the vanguard for 14 thousand.” Ibuki attacked with the double Palladium column first.
Wholly uncertain, Chrono decided to guard. “I guard.” He dropped a trigger.

No guarding the vanguard attack, Chrono took one damage, and with a draw trigger adding an extra five thousand to the last column he decided to no guard that one as well.

When it was his turn once more, Chrono had amassed three damage. This was standard procedure, but he as he eyed Ibuki's single card in his damage zone, he felt unnerved. Taking an extra moment to assess the situation, Chrono's eyes fell on his hand. He had a decent recollection of his viable stride targets, but it was worth mentioning that his G zone was not full, still uncapped at 12 entries, with five G guardians.

Ibuki's vanguard, Freezeray Dragon, had an interesting skill. Bearing in mind how generously he'd guarded the previous turn, it proved all the more problematic. In a few passing seconds, the situation he was in became clear. Freezeray Dragon would lock cards on the opponent's side of the field as the user took damage. The skill had a limit break restriction, but with Charcoal on the field, it was regardless active. Palladium would lock cards that were unlocked in the end phase, with one counter blast. Ibuki had successfully engineered a situation where Chrono could not deal him damage without having his own rear guards locked as a result; all while steadily providing Ibuki with the costs needed to keep those units locked until yet another end phase.

Chrono grew increasingly perplexed. He had to admit he was impressed, but no more so than he was almost infuriated. Ibuki really couldn't just let this be a fun and easy-going game. No, he was incapable of that. Chrono knew he was exactly the same himself, and he knew he loved to see just how badly Ibuki wanted to beat him, even at a time like this. It was still grating.

A calm and restful smile had come onto Ibuki's face. He was enjoying Chrono's mild panic, and Chrono felt that get to him, too.

It was frustrating though, because in his hand Chrono found only cards he couldn't use, not yet. Well, if Ibuki wasn't going to let Chrono deal any damage unpunished, then so be it.

“I ride,” Chrono had more than one option, but if he wanted to have a chance at winning, he had to try and be patient. “Classicgun Dragon.”

“Stride, Metapulsar, Altered Dragon.” Chrono placed the card on the board from the G zone. There was no stride skill to activate. So it would have to be. “The stride cost can be paid with one counter blast, and binding a zodiac time beast from my hand.”

Another copy of the very same Chronocharge Unicorn that he'd ridden on the first turn now sat in the bind zone. It was one card. Hopefully there would be more.

“Altered Dragon's skill.” Five cards from the top of his deck were revealed to him, and two more were added to the bind zone. A grade 2 and a grade 3. Shuffling his deck, Chrono once more reconsidered the moves he was about to make. “My vanguard gets plus two thousand for each card in the bind zone.”

It was an extra six thousand. It didn't really matter, not right now.

“I call Pulsar Tamer, Hegald. I soul charge one.” The top card went into his soul, a critical trigger. He decided to not be discouraged. “Hegald's other skill. I soul blast one, counter charge one, and he goes to the bottom of my deck... together with one card from my drop zone.”

The very same critical went back to the deck, together with Hegald. “I call Gadget Maiden, Maki. Soul charge one.”
A grade one went to the soul. Chrono knew what it would mean to leave her in the back row. He just hoped Ibuki would take the bait. Regardless, he really needed that extra soul right now.

“Altered Dragon attacks Palladium.” Chrono had caught Ibuki glancing away from the board, his eyes passing over the watching eyes of the children. There was a strange smile on his face. He appeared almost wistful.

“Alright.” He was humored. Chrono was a little infuriated by it, honestly. “No guard.”

The triple drive got him a draw trigger, a grade one, and luckily, another Manish. All in all, he thought himself to have what he needed.

Overpowered by a vanguard swing at 40 thousand, Palladium naturally went into the drop zone. It was once more Ibuki’s turn. Drawing, standing, Chrono felt a growing unease. The kids would talk among themselves, an indistinct mumble in the restaurant, but Chrono found it hard to focus on.

“I Stride...” Ibuki discarded an extra grade 3, the very same as his vanguard. “Death Star-vader, Glueball Dragon.”

Soul blasting one, and a persona flip. “Choose one of your rear guards, and lock it.”

Oh. That sure made things easier. Chrono locked Maki, turning her face down.

“I call Singularity Sniper.” With a full field yet again, Ibuki was ready to go to battle.

“Singularity Sniper attacks.” It was another fairly weak attack, only 15 thousand. “If she hits—”

“You have to lock another rear guard!” Again Ibuki hadn't been allowed to finish. Mayumi was quick to explain the workings of the deck.

“Yes.” Ibuki smiled.

Chrono had been planning to take attacks this turn. He looked at Gear Hawk in his back row.

“I... guard.” He dropped a grade one to guard it. “Pulsar, Bling Hawk. I bind the top card in my deck.”

“The vanguard attacks.” 22 thousand. Chrono knew what he had to do.

“No guard.”

Chrono had been so headstrong in his announcement, it had made Ibuki smile. “...Alright.”

“As long as he didn't get a double critical, it should be fine. Chrono had conditions to meet, but he didn't want to die trying.

The first check was another Mobius Breath Dragon. The second check revealed another Charcoal. Chrono had reason to believe the deck was quite focused indeed. If Ibuki was disappointed, he wasn't letting it show.
“Third check...” The critical trigger icon flashed into view. Chrono was not very surprised. “Critical trigger. Star-vader, Paradigm Shift Dragon.”

Two damage. Checking one, two, Chrono hit a stand trigger. Standing Gear Hawk, his power base was now 16 thousand. In truth, it didn't really matter.

“Red Sprite attacks.” With the extra trigger, it was 22 thousand.

“Perfect guard, Arka.” One of the few more familiar faces, Chrono discarded a second copy of her to guard the attack.

Ibuki was amused by this development as well. “...I end my turn.”

In the end, Ibuki hadn't succeeded in much of what he'd planned. He hadn't needed to. That was the whole point. Chrono was at five damage and he himself was at one. In that sense, things really didn't look too good.

A murmur erupted among their spectators when it became Chrono's turn once more. Rather than fretting about the damage, he was focused on his plan.

Drawing, he still had a sizable hand. The cost for that was in the damage zone, sure, but that was what he needed. Ibuki still had two Palladium on his field, and one Charcoal. In that sense, the conditions hadn't changed.

“I ride, Pulsar, Drastic Colossus.”

Their little audience went quiet. The visage of the card Chrono had ridden was quite sinister indeed, but the boy who owned the deck leaned excitedly on the table.

“I discard a card from my hand and look at the top three cards in my deck, bind one, and take one to my hand.” The third card went into the drop zone.

“I stride,” Discarding his extra Classicgun Dragon to pay the cost, Chrono already had his eyes on a specific card in the G zone. “Interdimensional Dragon, Ragnaclock Dragon.”

Ibuki was paying attention. Chrono was too focused to be affected by his watchful gaze.

“Stride skill,” Chrono drew a card, and bound a card from his hand. “My vanguard gets one thousand power for each card in my bind zone.”

There were only four cards in his bind zone, but it made a difference for sure; more so when Ibuki's vanguard was still at a base ten.

“I activate Arka in the drop zone. By binding a card with the same name, she goes to my hand.” With Arka, five cards now sat in the bind zone, and Chrono had successfully recovered a sentinel.

“I call Manish.” She appeared in the left row in front of Chrono's one locked card. With resist, her other skill of gaining two thousand for each other zodiac time beast on the field was not yet active. She was alone, for now.

“I call Luckypot.” By putting the draw trigger he'd checked the previous turn into the soul, he activated the skill. “Manish gets plus three thousand.”

“And one more...” Doing it again by playing out a second Luckypot, Chrono had amassed enough soul, and Manish had a total of 15 thousand power, a good number.
Feeling a slight nerve coming on, Chrono wanted to remain focused. He had to make this work now, or he wasn't going to have a chance of winning this.

“I call Vainglory-dream Gear Cat...” With a glance, Chrono saw that Ibuki had already realized something was up. “And Square-one Dragon.”

“Square-one Dragon's skill activates.” Tense, Chrono let the vanguard and its heart slide on the table, revealing the contents of the soul.

“I soul blast six,” He just about had enough. Six cards, everything he'd ridden since the first turn, the grade one he'd soul charged with Maki, and the two Luckypots all went to the drop zone. “And counter blast four.”

All but one of the cards in Chrono's damage zone were turned face down. “And you return all your rear guards to the deck, and shuffle.”

Sourly, Ibuki glared at him. He reluctantly complied, piling his rear guards on the top of the deck, taking care to shuffle. The children had roused, excitedly. Ibuki no longer had his limit break active, and he no longer had any rear guards to use for locking, either.

“Gear cat activates. When my opponent's cards are returned to the deck via the effect of one of my cards, it goes to the bottom of the deck, and my vanguard gets plus ten thousand.” Chrono put the card back, right at the bottom. “Gear Hawk activates. It gets five thousand each time a card is returned to the deck via the effect of one my cards. Since five cards were returned, it gets plus 25 thousand.”

The vanguard was now swinging for 79 thousand. Ibuki was looking a little more pale, and a little less amused.

“I call Pulsar Tamer, Zanbiia. He gets one thousand for each Zodiac Time beast in my bind zone.” He had five, so that was a 12 thousand booster behind Square-one Dragon.

“I call another Manish.” Square-one Dragon went into the drop. Chrono didn't want a card that didn't have resist in his front row. “Via their skills, both Manish now have plus six thousand.”

Surely, Ibuki was aware of the situation. His lone vanguard had been reduced to a ten thousand vanilla unless he let himself hit four damage this turn. Even if he did, he wouldn't be able to touch Chrono's front row.

“Ragnaclock attacks,” Chrono heard Ibuki exhale. He was impatient, impatient to just take the damage. “Skill. I persona flip and counter blast one.” Chrono's final counter blast. This was the reason he needed to hit five damage in the previous turn. “Ragnaclock gains a critical, and you cannot guard with grade zero cards from your hand.”

“No guard.” Ibuki said, decidedly.

Outside, it was fresh and cool compared to the stuffy and steamy small restaurant. Full and content, Chrono was more so satisfied because of the outcome of their game. The kids had been satisfied too, and left them alone to eat in peace just in time for their food to have cooled down. Even now, their conversation seemed to not stray too far from the topic.
“You sure were on the ball back there, huh. You wouldn't let any of the kids fight me.”

“Sure.” Ibuki admitted. “Though I simply did what had to be done, or they wouldn't have left us alone.”

“Oh, okay...” Chrono smiled. Ibuki was acting a little stingy. Well, he had reason to. “It just felt like you wanted to do it yourself is all...”

He'd implied as much originally.

“Don't flatter yourself, now.”

Ibuki's dismissive tone was only so natural. Chrono felt the cold air sting in his eyes, reddening his cheeks.

“Honestly, I've never been much of a fan of yours.”

“Alright, okay.”

“...You wouldn't have won if it weren't for those heal triggers, anyhow.”

The quiet, defiant mutter wouldn't have been audible if not for the quiet, abandoned streets.

“...I wouldn't have healed so much if you'd taken some damage in the first place, you know?”

They looked at each other. Humored, Chrono waited eagerly for Ibuki's reply.

“You were at five damage.”

“I took the damage. I needed the counter blasts.”

It wasn't the whole truth. Chrono let a nervous smile slip, and he knew Ibuki had seen through him.

“Come on. It was a good game.”

“...It would have to be.”

It had been just one game, but it sure had given them ample things to speak of. Chrono didn't have the courage to slip his hand in under Ibuki's arm, though it crossed his mind repeatedly. Regardless, he found himself realizing that this was the happiest he'd been in a long time.

Getting home, Chrono still felt his muscles ache weakly. He wanted to just throw himself on the couch, but refused to be so irresponsible. Though he was no longer sweaty, his clothes felt itchy on his body, and he'd come inside longing for a shower. Coming out of the steaming hot noodle restaurant, the cold had nipped at his skin during the walk back, making him feel uncomfortable in his own body. Stepping out of his sneakers, Ibuki appeared equally thrilled to be back indoors.

“Mind if I take a shower?” Chrono asked. He'd done so before, but wasn't about to do so without asking.

“Sure...” Ibuki replied, somewhat absentminded.

“I should have bought a change of clothing...” Chrono wasn't too thrilled to get back into the clothes he'd worn earlier today.

“You could just borrow something.” Ibuki said, going ahead of him inside the apartment.
“Really?” Chrono asked, surprised.

“You go in first.” Ibuki said, heading back into the bedroom. “I'll get you something in the meantime.”

Chrono still felt a little awkward when left to his own devices at Ibuki's apartment, more so in a place like the shower. Unlike the other parts of the house, it looked more like someone actually lived here. The bottles of body wash and soap in the shower, the clean state of the tub, and the similarly clean, no-slip rug on the floor was tell-tale of someone quite proper and particular about their living space. The towels that hung on the rack were neatly folded as well, and on a hook next to them hung a hair dryer with its cord tied neatly.

Washing his face, his body, Chrono felt the pleasant trickle of the water on his skin. He was still tired, but not as desperately so as he'd been before. The unpleasant sensation left by having been heated up and cooled down repeatedly appeared to wash away. He'd briefly lost track of time when he heard the door open.

“I... I'll leave the clothes here, by the towels. Hanging on the wall.” Ibuki spoke reservedly, and Chrono though it was strange. Was he embarrassed?

“Sure,” He replied, trying to be as casual as possible. “By the way...”

“Yes?” Ibuki sounded like he'd already stepped away from the door.

“I thought I might tap up a bath. What do you think?”

Silence.

“If you want to, go ahead.” Ibuki responded.

“Right,” Chrono refused to let Ibuki's awkward mannerisms rub off on him. “I'll be done in a minute, you can come in then.”

The tub filled up relatively fast. As Ibuki showered, Chrono had slipped into the bath. The water was piping hot, washing away the final tension in his body. Ibuki had left the shower curtain open more than a glimpse, and Chrono had decided from the get go that he wouldn't stare. He wouldn't, but he would still end up throwing perhaps one too many glances. Ibuki caught him, in the end, and Chrono felt properly ashamed of his wandering eyes.

With a twitch of his lip, Ibuki attempted to mind his own business. This was still a new situation for the two of them. Chrono thought it was exciting. He hoped Ibuki thought so too, rather than being too flustered to enjoy it. In the end, Chrono didn't ask, and after Ibuki turned off the water in the shower, he became anticipatory. As he heard the shower curtain rustle, Chrono looked up at him. With a glance, his eyes sticking to Chrono's face, Ibuki appeared to hesitate.

It passed. He did move to climb into the tub as well, and as he did, Chrono tried to make some room.

“Careful...” Ibuki hadn't stumbled, but Chrono had still grabbed him.

It was a little cramped. Chrono tried to move somehow. Ibuki's arm came in under his side, supporting him. “Sorry.” He'd said it on reflex.

“It's fine.” The sound of Ibuki's voice seemed to cut through to him, resonating with him. They were so close now, closer than he'd realized.
Chrono relaxed, finally comfortable. He laid on Ibuki's side, head on his shoulder. The water level was cutting into his hair quite a bit. He didn't care, the side of his face resting against the surface. Ibuki had his hair tied up on his head. It hadn't helped when Chrono had fought not to stare at him.

Chrono felt his body absorb the heat of the water. He'd placed his hand on Ibuki's chest, feeling his soft skin in the warm water. To think that there had been times when they'd felt so far away from each other. It felt almost unreal now, even if the memories were fresh. Chrono had tired of worrying. For now, he would allow himself to relax, and forget. He felt Ibuki sigh below him, and that too, was calming.

Closing his eyes, his weary body eased by the sensation of Ibuki's bare skin against his own, comfortable despite being so completely exposed, Chrono felt ready to doze off. The arm Chrono laid on was still coiled around his waist, and he felt the touch of Ibuki's hand, moving lightly like the gentle ripple of the water. When it stopped, Chrono didn't notice. His mind was shrouded. He knew laying together in the tub would eventually become uncomfortable, and he wanted to savor it. Frankly, he'd been successful.

The sound of movement breaking and tearing the calm surface of the water would resonate in the room. Chrono felt Ibuki move under him, adjusting himself. He turned his head where he laid, and Chrono felt the muscles in his shoulders tense. Things quickly settled back down. Closing his eyes, Chrono returned to his mellow, mindful state. It only lasted a moment. Ibuki moved again, shifting. Was he uncomfortable? The question floated into Chrono's mind. Ibuki had his back against the bathtub bottom, after all. Chrono shifted too, his head sliding down on Ibuki's chest, and their bodies brushed together. Ibuki appeared to freeze, and Chrono's thoughts did, too. He considered the possibility that he might have been mistaken, but his doubts were washed away within the same second. It was hard to control your movements in the water. Sliding back to his side, how he'd laid until just now, Chrono had more than reaffirmed the sensation he'd believed himself to have just imagined. Ibuki had frozen in place, unmoving, uncomfortable, and Chrono now knew why.

“You could have said something.” He spoke quietly, but his voice became pouring in the acoustics of the bathroom, highlighting the curiosity in which he'd spoken.

“I... I'm sorry.” Ibuki's response was stiff. Chrono could only imagine how flustered he was. “I thought... not to disturb you.”

“You're not disturbing me.”

Ibuki shifted awkwardly. His hand still on Ibuki's chest, Chrono rubbed his fingers against his skin firmer than before. Without waiting for a cue, he let his hand slip down to Ibuki's abdomen, and lower still. Even in the heat of the water, his touch made Ibuki shiver. As tranquil as he was, Chrono got a rush out of it, too. Ibuki's skin was so smooth against the palm of his hand. Chrono grabbed him tight and stroke him firmly. He'd need to. How long it'd been, Chrono didn't know. He'd been resting in place with his eyes closed the whole time. With his touch, Ibuki roused, a quiet, but satisfied gasp leaving him. He invited to it, pulling Chrono into place by his side.

Having emerged beyond the calmness of his mind, Chrono was equally at peace. His heart had come to beat a little faster, a little harder, but he still most of all relishing their shared closeness. His moving hand below the surface of the water, encapsulated in warmth, felt not unlike a shared heartbeat. Chrono could feel Ibuki's breathing, his chest rising and sinking as he drew deep, calm breaths. As they'd meshed in the steaming hot water, there was little edge brought by their touching, but they felt all the more connected as a result.

Chrono kept his steady pace. Ibuki was at terms with it. He savored it. He appeared to almost slip away, more relaxed than he'd been before. All the more reassured by this, Chrono closed his eyes,
his thoughts remaining with the touch of their skin, with their bodies which were as if joined.

Chrono could easily lose track of time like this, and he knew it. Ibuki sighed, and Chrono pressed his lips against his neck. Chrono knew it would take a while. He didn't care. There was no need to rush. The warmth from the water, from their bodies, it all rose to his head, engulfing him. Eventually, he felt Ibuki weakly twitch and shudder against him. Not breaking his rhythm, Chrono was patient. The pleasure ought to be simmering, slowly building. Feeling Ibuki so close to him, he could tap into it, sharing the feeling between them. It lasted, it lasted longer than it should have. His lips parting in an audible exhale, Ibuki moved, shifting his tense body, creating a ripple on the water's surface. He was close now, very close. Chrono could tell. His release was approaching, his release which would free him from the mind-numbing sensation that engulfed him.

Chrono didn't want it to end just yet. He wanted things to run their course. Ibuki would come eventually. Until then, he best enjoy himself, and be at peace. His touch firm, yet still forgiving, melding to Ibuki's shape, affirmed this. Chrono felt the reactions in his body transmitting to himself. Ibuki had started tensing up, more and more. Slowly, he was edging closer, and Chrono felt the ripples pass through him stronger.

With a final shudder, Ibuki's body trembled weakly. His lips parted soundlessly, and Chrono felt his head tip back. The long, drawn out progression had resulted in a drawn out climax. Breathing deep, long breaths Ibuki finally relaxed, his body sinking down to rest against the bottom of the tub. Chrono embraced him, placed his lips on him, and after his mind appeared to return to him, Ibuki responded, his touch firm on Chrono's skin, their lips molding against each other in a long kiss.

Time passed calmly between them in silence, barring the sounds of the rippling waters. Laying in the tub became uncomfortable eventually, as Chrono had predicted. More so, the heat eventually became unbearable. Rising, they went from being in perfect sync to struggling to cooperate in the barest minimum ways. Struggling to stand, Chrono got up first, but not before almost accidentally elbowing Ibuki in the face. The snickering laugh that escaped him alongside his apology was poorly received. Drying himself, Chrono watched Ibuki do the same before trying to untangle his hair tie. In the end, the roots at the back of his head had gotten quite soaked, and he spent some extra time brushing it. Getting dressed, Chrono noted the clothes Ibuki had picked out for him. A simple white shirt, the quality soft on his skin. The sleeves were a little long, but other than that it was a good fit. The sweatpants he'd been offered were surely Ibuki's second pair. They were obviously used, but well-kept, clean.

After being adamant Ibuki drank water to keep hydrated after the long bath, they settled on the sofa. There wasn't much on TV, but they watched some regardless. Laying with his legs across Ibuki's lap, Chrono saw him reach for his phone, checking it. He might tell him off, but knowing what had gone down this morning he couldn't exactly blame him.

“Any updates?” He asked, mellowly.

“Not really.” Ibuki admitted. “Word's been going around. I've told people we'll be dealing with this on Monday, thought.”

“A wise choice.” Chrono commended him.

“Well, I don't want to be disturbed any more.” He admitted, a slight chill in his voice. Dedicated, Ibuki was also a practical person when he was allowed to be. “I'm sorry... things turned out the way they did today.”

“Yeah, it sure was typical.” Chrono agreed. “But it's not like it's your fault.”
“Perhaps not,” Ibuki said. “I still wish I could allocate my time better.”

“Look, when... when I talk about you working a lot it's because I'm worried, okay?” Chrono wished he wouldn't have to make that clear. “It's not because I wanna make you feel bad... or make you feel like you need to make sacrifices you don't wanna make.”

“I... I know.” Ibuki had hesitated a little to agree.

“I had a good time today, anyhow.” Maybe it wouldn't have needed to be said. Chrono still wanted to say it.

“Me too.” Ibuki agreed, trying to be a little less guarded. Chrono took his hand, and it had the opposite effect, making him flustered.

“Though it wasn't all that eventful, it was still really fun.”

“Oh...” Ibuki smiled. “It was plenty eventful if you ask me.”

“Really huh?”

“I normally don't... do much on the weekends.” Ibuki admitted. “I work out. Do some left over work. Occasionally I see my friends. That's about it.”

“That's more or less what you did today, though...”

“I suppose so, but...” Ibuki did not look at him, but rather ahead. “It's different. To spend it with someone.”

Pleased with the answer, Chrono ran his fingers over the top of Ibuki's hand. “Yeah, it is.”

He'd already selfishly pursued the topic. It would have to do. He was hoping they'd spend many more weekends together like this.

They watched TV for a little while longer. It would be a relatively early night for them, which Chrono though was probably for the best. As he laid down in bed, his body still felt heavy, and his muscles still ached. As Ibuki came in after him, he shot Chrono a disapproving glance. Confused, Chrono narrowed his eyes at him.

“What?”

“Get up.”

“Why?” Ibuki's demanding tone made Chrono all the more perplexed.

“We're doing stretches.” Ibuki said, firmly.

“Again?” Chrono had been ready to go to bed, really.

“Yes.” Ibuki insisted. “You weren't doing them right before, anyhow.”

“I... I wasn't...” Embarrassed, Chrono wasn't sure how to deal with this. “Doing them right?”
“Yes.” Ibuki repeated. “Now get up.”

Chrono rolled over, worming his way to the edge of the bed before getting up. He hated to learn he hadn't done something properly, more so when it was Ibuki who issued the complaint. As tired as he was, he was prepared to do what he could to remedy this. After all, he wanted to learn.

“Right. I'm up.” Standing opposite of Ibuki in front of the closets, Chrono displayed a ready attitude despite his sleepiness.

“Alright.” Ibuki said snappily. “Straighten your back.”

Chrono would have liked to think his back was already straight, but complied anyhow.

“Now, like we did before, put one foot forward.”

Wordlessly, Chrono complied, mimicking Ibuki's movements.

“Bend forward, but make sure to keep your back straight.”

Trying to be mindful of his movements, Chrono did as he was told.

“Do you feel that?” Ibuki asked him.

“N-no?” He could only be honest.

“I thought so.” Ibuki said, dismissively, his voice a harsh whisper.

Humiliated, Chrono squeezed his eyes shut, but before he could relax his posture and try all over again, he felt Ibuki's hands grab his upper arms in a tight grip.

“Your heels should be planted firmly on the floor. Focus your weight into your heels.” He could hear Ibuki's voice firm and focused just above his head, and he could feel heat radiating off his body.

Before he could respond affirmatively, Ibuki spoke again, all while directing his posture with his grip on Chrono's arms. “Keep your back straight, even as you bend. If you don't feel it, keep going lower.”

Letting Ibuki guide him, his head falling towards his chest, Chrono indeed did feel it this time. A searing pain was traveling up the back of his leg, rooted in his heel.

“Now, do you feel it?”

Chrono realized he'd been slow to react. “Y-yeah, I... I feel it.”

“Good.” Though he couldn't see the expression on Ibuki's face, he knew it regardless. He was smugly accomplished. “Go lower.”

“I... I'm trying.” Chrono sounded pained. It hurt, it hurt quite a bit. Ibuki's hands were still tightly gripping his arms, and he guided him yet a little lower. Chrono let him, focusing on trying to keep his back straight as instructed. Ibuki's chest was just out to reach. Chrono couldn't lean against him, but he could smell him. He was still fragrant of body wash and soap from the bath, squeaky clean. Feeling his head spin just a little, Chrono felt his body heat up with a twitch across his face. Why this was happening now, he wasn't sure, which made him feel all the more affected by the situation.

“Now, when you go back up, go slow.”
Swallowing, Chrono found his voice. “Okay.”

Ibuki’s grip on him loosened, but he did not let go, slowly guiding Chrono back to his starting position. “Good. Now let's do that again.”

“I... I can do it on my own.” Chrono looked him in the eye, defiant.

“Can you?” Ibuki was still more than a little smug. Chrono didn't actually want Ibuki to let go of him. Ibuki appeared to have figured that out as well.

“Once more now.” Not waiting for a reply, his grip still strong, Ibuki repeated the action.

Chrono set a high goal in his mind, trying to go lower. It hurt, but he could almost forget about that once he registered Ibuki's familiar scent.

When he finally laid back down in bed, his legs felt beyond tender. In the end, they'd done a few selected kinds of exercises. Truthfully, Chrono was exhausted.

“You sure are throughout.” He said plainly, tired.

“You said you wanted to get stronger.” Ibuki was glancing into his phone before setting it so rest next to him on the nightstand. “In that case, you need to learn how to take care of your body.”

“I didn't...” Chrono struggled a bit to find the right tone of voice. “I didn't mean to sound ungrateful.”

“In that case, I'm glad my teenage years spent slaving away in a dojo three to four times a week has any sort of practical application after all these years.” Ibuki's voice had become detached. Chrono felt himself sink deeper into the mattress.

“Besides,” Ibuki recovered from his grievances. “It helps you sleep better.”

“That's true.” Chrono agreed. He indeed felt sleepy, but the good kind of sleepy. Sighing, he moved closer to Ibuki in bed. “What do you wanna do tomorrow?”

Turning to look at him, Ibuki looked like he hadn't considered that he might be asked. “I don't know. Did you have something in mind?”

“Not really...” Chrono admitted.

“We could go out.” Ibuki suggested. “So you won't have to cook again.”

“That's fine. I don't mind.” Ibuki could surely need some home cooking, anyway. “We could just take it easy. Rest up.”

“Right...” Ibuki smiled weakly.

“We'll think of something.” Chrono said lightly.

“Yeah. We will.”

“Sorry...” Chrono said. “I'm really tired.”

“That's fine. You should... go to sleep.”

“Goodnight, Ibuki.”
Seldom he fell asleep so fast. Chrono dreamed of vague things, of warmth, of home, of his hopes and dreams taking ambient shapes. It all faded, and he slumbered deeply. Chrono would wake easily at the notion of unrest, at the sound of voices or footsteps. It was a remnant of having spent near a decade of his early childhood in an institution. Other children had moved on. They’d been reconnected with their families, or found new ones. It usually didn't take more than a few years. For Chrono it had been different. Before long, he was the oldest among many. That never changed. It wasn't that the younger children had turned to him. He was the one who had made it his responsibility to care for them when the adults couldn't. For a long time, he often dreamed of waking in that place. Though rarely, he still did. When he felt Ibuki move next to him, it wasn't enough to wake him up, but the sound of his footsteps roused those memories, striking a deep set chord of unrest inside him. It would all overlap, new and old memories. In a waking state, Chrono was immediately anxious. It faded as he came to. Ibuki had just gotten up for a bit. Surely, it was nothing. He dozed off, sleepy as he was. Pulling the covers back up over his shoulders, he buried his face in his pillow. Sleep would come, sooner than later. Chrono knew he would wake once more when Ibuki came back to bed. Once the thought struck him, it became harder to relax. A minute passed. A car went past outside, the reflection of its headlights flickering across the window behind the drapes. The apartment was silent. Too silent. Flipping over on his back, Chrono cast a glance towards the door. It was open a crack, no light pouring in from beyond. Dread overcame him. Having done good in suppressing it, it all overflowed him at once. He waited, he waited yet another few moments.

Nothing happened. The apartment was still dark, and deathly silent. Ibuki could not be seen or heard. Alert, fearful, Chrono could not relax, much less fall asleep. He laid frozen until he could bear it no longer. Slipping out from under the covers, he stood and walked towards the door.

Coming out in the hallway, Chrono saw the door to the bathroom open, the lights off. He stood in place briefly before heading towards the kitchen. His eyes slowly adjusting to the dark, he saw Ibuki's outlined silhouette, standing by the kitchen counter, his head tipped downward. It was an eerie sight, but for Chrono unsettling for a very specific reason.

It had been just like this, that night. It wouldn't soon be enough until he could forget. He'd feared it would happen again, but in the past few weeks, Ibuki had given him good reason to believe it wouldn't. Chrono hadn't sensed any unrest from him, at least nothing he could tie to this behavior. Then again, maybe he hadn't looked hard enough; it had been like this last time as well. Chrono had been just as unsuspecting, just as clueless.

Chrono knew that Ibuki could hear him. Yet, he remained unmoving. Stopping, standing next to him, Chrono stared at his obscured face as if it would somehow yield an answer. It was strange. Worried, outright anxious, Chrono still found some peace standing by his side. He raised his hand, laying it on Ibuki's arm. He did not react to the touch; not right away. Slowly, he turned around. In the dark of the night, he appeared as if aged, as if he'd become twisted in the arrival of the early morning hours.

“Hey,” Chrono spoke quietly, gently. “Are you okay?”
Maybe he hadn't needed to ask. He still did. Ibuki's pale, harrowing expression came alive with a twitch across his face. He frowned.

“It's late.” Chrono tried to not let on quite how worried he was. “You really shouldn't be up, you know?”

Ibuki looked guilty. He said nothing, even as Chrono waited.

“Can't sleep?” It seemed like a fair assessment. “Do you wanna talk about it?”

Ibuki's hand had been laying on the counter top. He clenched it into a fist. He looked away.

“You're really worrying me,” When Ibuki wouldn't cooperate, Chrono knew he had to lay the cards on the table. “When you're acting like this. We both promised we'd talk. So whatever it is, I really... I really wish you'd tell me.”

Hearing this appeared hard on Ibuki. Saddened, he lowered his head. Chrono stroke his back.

“If you're not ready to talk right now... that's fine.” Chrono wanted to make that clear. “But could you at least please... come back to bed?”

Whatever was making Ibuki upset, losing sleep wouldn't help it. That was Chrono's firm stance on the matter.

“I don't...” When Ibuki finally spoke, his voice was broken, ghastly quiet. “I don't know how... I'm supposed to tell you.”

“I'll always listen.” Chrono responded, reassuring him. “Whatever it is.”

Ibuki looked uncertain, not quite convinced.

“Look, we can't... do this anymore.” Chrono said, earnestly. “I really can't stand seeing you like this, either.”

“I said...” Ibuki found some clarity in his voice. It was reason for concern. “I said I don't want you to own each and every single one of my problems.”

Chrono made an effort to think before he spoke. “This isn't about... every single one of your problems. I just want you to talk to me.”

Ibuki was still hesitant.

“What is it?” Chrono asked him, gently. “Is it... about us? Is that why you don't want to tell me?”

Chrono wished he hadn't been right, but judging by Ibuki's pained expression, he'd hit the head on the nail.

As sad as it made him, Chrono knew he couldn't avert his eyes from it. Ibuki had gone quiet again, and Chrono feared he'd stay that way.

“Whatever it is,” Chrono's hand laid warm on Ibuki's back. “We can work it out. I'm sure.”

He heard Ibuki sigh, his body tense. Chrono wanted to hold him, but he wasn't sure if Ibuki would let him. "Could you please come back to bed with me? You need... you need to sleep."

Being upset was tiring. It took a lot of energy. All the more reason Chrono worried. It was hard to be
sound of mind when you were exhausted. In a moment's passing, Ibuki appeared to ponder. When he raised his head, he indeed looked all the more fatigued. Turning in place where he stood, he almost fell towards Chrono, past him. Grabbing onto his arm, Chrono held him, leading him. Without a word, they walked back to the bedroom.

Ibuki laid down in bed, his body moving stiffly. He laid on top of the covers, appearing uncomfortable. Chrono laid down next to him, not too close, but not too far. The silence that followed was less tense, and Chrono felt it was a step in the right direction. Wide awake, Ibuki stared at the ceiling.

“If you feel like sleeping, let me know.” Chrono spoke carefully. “Or... if there's anything you need.”

He'd hesitated to ask, but still felt compelled to. Ibuki didn't move.

“I'd... like to sleep.” Ibuki spoke eventually. “But frankly I... I'm not capable of it.”

Weary, his voice was only just not breaking. It hurt, it hurt to hear again after such a short time. Chrono thought only of how he wanted to relieve that pain, but with little option to do so, he knew he could only wait.

“I... I might as well...” As Ibuki spoke with his fragile voice, his hands moved on the covers, restlessly. “Try to... to talk.”

Daring to feel hopeful, Chrono listened attentively. “I'm always here... if you need it.”

“I will have to, sooner or later.” Ibuki reasoned. Cynicism had seeped into his voice. “Might as well... not drag it out.”

That sure was a practical way of seeing it. If that helped Ibuki come to terms with the situation, Chrono thought it best to say nothing.

Despite his words, Ibuki fell into a lasting silence. They laid next to one another, apart yet together. Patient, Chrono waited.

“I'm sorry,” Ibuki said finally, his voice weak. “I'm not sure where to start.”

“There's no need to rush.” Chrono reassured him.

Ibuki appeared to grow irritated, impatient with himself. He let his eyes come shut. First lightly, then tighter. It yet would be another moment until he spoke. “For... a long time, I... I was frustrated.”

The jaded sound of his voice was awfully familiar.

“I never knew how to deal with it. When I was... younger, more so. I hated myself all the more for it.”

Though he'd intended to quietly listen, Chrono found this harder than he'd thought. “Wait...” He spoke carefully, afraid that he was jumping to conclusions.

He watched Ibuki, trying to gauge a reaction. He was unreadable. “Is this... about sex?”

He'd asked as unassumingly as he found possible. Ibuki's brow regardless tensed. “It... it is.” He breathed inaudibly. “It is, but...” His voice faded.

Chrono reached out for him, lightly putting his hand on his arm. As worried as he'd become, Chrono knew he couldn't let it get to him. He had to stay calm, and receptive.
“I never knew how to deal with it. Or, rather...” His voice was coarse as he forced the words out. “I...” Ibuki raised his hand to his face, pressing down on his brow, covering his eyes. He breathed a shaky sigh.

Chrono kept waiting, his hand still laying lightly on his arm. Ibuki only appeared to tense up more. He was suffering, and Chrono found it hard to bear.

“It's okay.” Chrono whispered to him. “You can tell me.” At this point, it felt like he needed it.

Slowly, Ibuki let his hand slide off his face. He appeared to have surrendered, as he'd reached the same conclusion Chrono had. They needed to talk about this, no matter how painful it was. Ibuki remained in silence, his thoughts evidently processing slowly.

“I could never... feel good.” He said it reluctantly. “Though I wanted to. As for why, I... I'm sure there were a number of reasons.”

Chrono was yet to be surprised.

“I... hated myself, and I was disgusted... with myself, and... I was in denial about... a number of things.” His voice was eerily quiet. “I was even in denial about my self-loathing. If I could have at least allowed myself to see that, I... I might I've been able to start working on my problems but... I couldn't bear it.”

“...When was this?”

“I...” Ibuki hesitated for a moment. “When I was a teenager.” He sounded a little uncertain. “High school. A year or so before then, even.”

“I see.” Chrono replied quietly.

“It was yet another thing making me bitter, angry...” Ibuki still sounded so ashamed, and that was what made Chrono more upset than anything. “For... for so long I just... I couldn't, no matter what I did, I-I couldn't...” Even with the frustration fueling him, his voice died down, breaking, fading.

“You couldn't... get off?” Chrono filled in warily, wanting to have it said.

“Yes,” Ibuki spoke on a breath, his voice hard, dark. He sounded almost relieved. “Or, I... I could. Occasionally, I... I could. Technically. It never... felt very good. Moreover, I'd... I'd always feel awful. Afterwards.”

Feeling his heart become cold, Chrono absorbed Ibuki's tension, his mind and body weighted down by his burdens.

Ibuki sighed deeply, gathering some courage.

“It got better.” He admitted, quietly. “With time... it gradually got better.”

Chrono's mind was still stuck on the previous point in Ibuki's story.

“I started trying to... work on myself.” Ibuki had become a bit calmer, or perhaps fatigued by telling his story. “It was still hard, for a long time, but... I started feeling more hopeful.”

Chrono tried to brace for the twist in the story that he knew would come. Next to him, Ibuki had become silent once more, appearing to choose his words.

“Last year, when... we were seeing each other so much, I...” Ibuki's voice was distant, detached.
Though he'd expected it, Chrono's cold heart only sank deeper.

“I...” His voice failing him, Ibuki tried to collect himself. “I... I was in denial once more. As I've told you.”

Chrono's fingers curled where they laid on Ibuki's skin. He hadn't forgotten.

“It didn't... do me any good.” His voice shaking, it appeared to be an understatement. “Especially seeing as I didn't want to acknowledge what was happening.”

Ibuki appeared to let go, let go off that which was holding him back. "I quickly lost much of my progress. It all scared me... stressing me out. I... I was thinking about you a lot, and... and it made everything so much harder.”

Chrono remembered, suddenly, vividly the scenes that'd played out in the year past. Ibuki refusing to touch him, shying away from his hand. His discomfort, his awkward, sudden goodbyes that would contradict his longing gaze. It had plagued him so. It had been driving him mad. It had made him feel so foolish and deluded. Now, he knew why, but it didn't make him feel better. Ibuki had been suffering, and he hadn't known. He'd been blind to see it, helpless to do anything.

“In the end, well, I... I hoped that putting some distance between us would help. In general.” Ibuki's voice was so heavy and weary Chrono felt a physical weight on his chest. “As you know... it didn't. It didn't make me feel any different. If anything I felt more miserable. I still... couldn't stop thinking about you.”

“Hearing that you were with someone else, it... I was so jealous.” Ibuki sounded like he'd yet to forgive himself. "I felt like I couldn't live with myself.”

“I thought about you a lot, too.” Chrono said it without thinking. He had to. He had already said it. He still could not stop himself. He had to say something. “I was so worried about you.”

“I know.” Ibuki replied quietly.

“I... I've been thinking about what you said to me before.” Ibuki's voice was steadier. “About me... punishing myself. You were right. I've been doing it all this time. I never even realized.”

“I thought so.” Chrono said weakly, holding no pride in his assessment.

“I thought I wasn't allowed to... feel certain things, or... experience certain things.” Ibuki spoke more freely, even as his voice was shaking. “Even though I wanted to. Whenever I'd... I'd cave to it, I... I'd feel so guilty.”

His voice breaking, Ibuki fell into silence. He sniffed, dryly.

Unmoving, feeling frozen, Chrono could not shake the one question that occupied his mind. He had to ask. He had to, even though he feared the answer. “Do you still... feel bad? I mean... with-with me?”

The silence that followed was to be expected. Chrono didn't want to be impatient. Still, it was so hard to bear, it felt like he would split in two.

“I... I mean, when we...” Chrono remembered well, his own anxious observations. Ibuki did often act a bit strange after they'd had sex. If it had just been shyness, or nerves, or if it had been something else, Chrono had sometimes found it hard to say. Regardless, he'd worried on occasion. Now, he found it hard to finish his question.
Chrono glanced on Ibuki's face. His expression made his heart sink deeper.

“I...” Ibuki's voice was hollow, distant. “I didn't... use to.”

Chrono knew he had to listen. He had to, as hard as it would be.

“The first time... the first time we... were together, it...” Ibuki struggled, his voice weak, fumbling. “It wasn't like anything I'd ever felt.”

Ibuki swallowed hard, trying to collect himself. “I thought, that... suddenly I understood... what it was supposed to feel like. I didn't even know... that I was capable of feeling anything like it.”

Chrono laid holding his breath. It had been so special to him, too. He'd assumed, or hoped, that Ibuki had felt the same way. Hearing this now, it was a lot to take in.

Ibuki sighed, still so sad, still so troubled. “That was why, why it was so hard to... stay away from you. And-” His voice broke, finally.

Chrono waited. He gently rubbed his hand on Ibuki's arm. Breathing deeply, slowly, Ibuki sounded a lot like he was trying not to cry.

“And, it... it wouldn't get better.” He finished, finally. “It... it just got worse.”

“What do you mean?” Chrono had to ask. He had a strong feeling he understood, but he had to ask and know for sure, without doubt.

“I...” Properly frustrated with himself, anger colored Ibuki's voice. “I felt awful, because I... I felt like I couldn't think about anything else. Constantly, just... wanting to... to see you. Wanting to... sleep... with you.”

His voice shaking terribly, Ibuki had regardless managed to finish his sentence. His hand fell down hard on the mattress with a dull thump. He sobbed dryly.

“I... I don't think you should feel bad about that.” Chrono tried to reassure him. “I mean, I think... it's pretty normal.”

“I wouldn't know.” Ibuki said bitterly, sounding wholly skeptical. “All I know is, is that... I couldn't do much to make it stop.” His voice deathly quiet, his lungs had drained of air. “I still can't.”

Ibuki had started crying, quietly. He made a halfhearted attempt to dry his tears with the back of his hand.

“I don't want you to feel bad. I don't want you to feel bad about... any of that.” Chrono struggled to try and comfort him. He'd remembered suddenly, some of the things Ibuki had said to him before. Aware that he'd be changing the subject, he still could not stop himself. “Is... is that why you said you though you were using me?”

Ibuki's pained expression was enough of a response.

“I wanted it so bad. And I knew... you would give it to me.” Despite his tears, Ibuki's voice did not shiver. “I felt awful for it. It caught up with me more and more.”

Feeling his stomach turning, Chrono knew where the story was going.

“I felt guilty every time. I still couldn't stay away.” Ibuki sighed deeply, wearily, and it did nothing to release the tension in his voice. “I... wanted to see you. To be with you.”
Chrono took his hand, feeling the wetness on the back of it. “I wanted it too, you know?” He hoped that did not need clarifying. “I also, I mean... I wanted all of it. I was thinking about you all the time, too. Wanting to see you, be with you... sleep with you. It... it wasn't just you.”

Ibuki wouldn't quite look at him, making Chrono anxious. He knew now, yet another reason why things had been so hard on Ibuki, but there appeared yet to be things left for them to speak of.

“For such a long time I was... dissatisfied. And so lonely. With you, I... I can feel good. B-better than... I thought was possible. Though I can't... bear with it.” His voice was so thickly jaded and bitter Chrono found it hard to listen. “I thought, if I gave in to it, it might get better. Instead, it got worse. I thought if I could... commit to you better, I wouldn't have to feel so guilty. That did not work, either.”

Ibuki's rambling words were coming out faster than Chrono could fully process. Instead of stopping him, he listened, allowing him to vent. “Then, I couldn't take it anymore. I felt like I had no choice but to leave you. At first, I felt better. I felt like I'd done the right thing.”

“It didn’t... take more than a few hours before that feeling started to fade. I started realizing what I'd done.” The tears had drained from his eyes. Ibuki stared blankly at the ceiling. “I felt worse than I ever had before.”

Ibuki sobbed dryly. He fought the tears that started welling up once more, but failed. Chrono still held his hand, clutching it. Ibuki had been hurting all this time, in ways he couldn't have guessed. It was tragic as he saw it. Chrono just wanted them to be together. Why did something like that have to hurt so much? It was so unfair.

“In the end I'm still... like this. I still don't know how to deal with it.” There was still a vagueness to the way he expressed himself. Chrono could hear him struggle to keep the words coming. “Like, today we... we already did it twice, but I... I'm still...”

“If... if you want to, you can just tell me...”

Ibuki looked at him, upset. “It... it wasn't so bad when we first went to bed. And, either way... you were tired, and... I you'd already... done it for me.”

“Look... if you want more sex... we could always-”

Before he could finish, Ibuki had slammed his fist down on the mattress. “Chrono.” His voice was shaking with frustration. “You don't understand.”

Watching Ibuki continue to fall apart, Chrono indeed had to consider that he may have made the wrong assumptions. Closing his eyes shut tightly, Ibuki was still suffering, awfully alert, tense, and thoroughly humiliated. This was not only serious to him, it was delicate.

“I'm sorry.” Chrono knew he had to apologize. “I didn't mean to...”

Sobbing dryly, Ibuki made an effort to calm down. Watching him, Chrono thought how he wanted to be strong for him, but for once, he didn't know how to. It was unsettling, if not heart-breaking.

"I can't sleep.” Ibuki said finally, frustrated. “I... I can't concentrate at work. It's driving me crazy.”

At a loss for words, Chrono knew the only thing he could do was listen.

“I feel... I feel like... such a pervert.” Ibuki forced the words out, refusing to look at Chrono.
“Well, you're not.” That, Chrono could say to him confidently. Ibuki didn't look like he believed it.

“You said it yourself.” Chrono tried to remain levelheaded. As emotional as he was, he had to remain calm. “This is all new to you. It's not so strange. You're still... still getting used to it.”

“I don't feel like I'm getting used to it.” It was strange to hear Ibuki so genuinely upset. “It's already been like this for so long.”

“It hasn’t been that long.” Chrono tried to reason with him. “I mean, when I... when I was a teenager, I-”

“Chrono,” Ibuki cut him off, his voice breaking. “I haven't been a teenager in... in almost a decade.”

“So?” Chrono challenged his assumptions readily. “Like you said, this is still all new to you. You have finally started feeling like you can... explore these things and... enjoy yourself. Naturally, you'll be, well...” Chrono realized he wasn't sure how to quite express himself. Ibuki looked like he was in physical pain.

“Look,” Sparing them both the trouble, Chrono gave up. “What I'm trying to say is that... there's no shame in it. And, it... it'll pass.”

“How can you say for sure that it will pass?” Ibuki was doubtful, distraught.

“It will.” Chrono spoke to him calmly. “It might take a while. But it'll pass. And you'll feel better.”

Ibuki looked like he wanted to believe it. “Nothing I've done so far has worked.”

“You need time.” Chrono stroked his chest. “And you need to... not be so hard on yourself. Stress won't make anything better.”

Ibuki's eyes were still unfocused, not laying on Chrono's face for very long. “I've been trying so hard to fight it. But... but giving in to it, didn't help, either.”

“I... I don't think denying yourself will do you any good. I mean this isn't... a matter of diligence.”

“I suppose I'm worried. If... If I keep giving in to it, it'll get worse.”

“Well, from the sounds of it, it can't get much worse, can it?”

Ibuki sighed. “I haven't been too eager to find out.”

“A-are you, um...” Chrono stammered, properly embarrassed. Ibuki braced. “Like, jerking off? Does it... do anything for you?”

Ibuki looked like he'd expected the question, eventually. He still took a moment to answer.

“I... I am.” His voice was silent, resolute. “It... depends. Way back, I always used to... feel like I couldn't bring myself to do it. When we weren't talking... after I tried to leave you. It was like that, again. I still sometimes... feel bad about it. But even when... it does feel good, I... don't feel... satisfied. For very long.”

“I... I see.” Chrono replied carefully.

“It... it really makes me feel like... like a degenerate.” The self-loathing doubled with his frustration, Ibuki's voice trembled.
“You... you really shouldn't talk that way about yourself, you know.” Chrono tried to keep his voice leveled.

Having sat up in bed next to Ibuki, Chrono reached to dry his cheeks. They were still wet, even after the tears of frustration and humiliation had stopped falling. Ibuki breathed, and even if just for a short moment, he appeared to come to a rest.

“I don't know what I'm supposed to do.” Ibuki had said that before. He'd said it about their relationship at large. Chrono was starting to finally understand what all those words had meant. When Ibuki had said that there were still things Chrono didn't know about him, he'd been right.

“I think... you should, for starters, go easier on yourself.” Chrono knew it was a tall order, but it was essential. “I don't want you to feel bad... about the things you want, no matter what. Because you shouldn't. I won't always be... available, but that doesn't mean you should feel bad about talking to me about it, or for wanting the things you do.”

Ibuki was listening. He was taking it in; trying to, at least. Chrono took his hand, lightly.

“When I say that, I really mean it. I know... I know it's not... easy. Or we wouldn't be here. But, I don't want you to think that way about yourself. When we're together, I... I want you to enjoy yourself.” Though he'd hoped it wouldn't have to be said, here he was. Feeling bashful, a smile weakly forming on his face, the words poured out of him. “I... I want you to feel good. When we do it. There's... there's no point if you don't.”

Ibuki laid vulnerable, perhaps more so than ever before. He listened. Barefaced, he appeared almost relieved, despite how his blood had started rushing to his face.

“It really means a lot to me.” Chrono heard his voice shaking. “Being with you, and... making you feel good. When I can tell that you... you like it, that's... that's when... when I'm the most, well...”

He wasn't sure how to put it. He wanted to frame his feelings, the whole spectrum of them. It wasn't just sex. With Ibuki, it felt like it could never be. “I mean, it... it excites me. But it also makes me really happy. Knowing that I can... give that to you.”

Ibuki looked overwhelmed. Chrono didn't blame him. He felt more or less the same way himself.

“I know you... don't want me to feel this way.” Ibuki replied quietly. “I know you don't want me to feel guilty. Or disgusted. With myself.”

“Yeah. And... just in case it needs to be said again, I don't think you're a pervert, either.”

Ibuki actually allowed himself to smile, weakly. It faded as quickly as it had cracked onto his face. “It's... it's hard to feel like anything else when I'm constantly... just...”

“...Horny?” Chrono filled in. It was hard for him to say, but he felt like he needed to. He smiled, a nervous response, a twitch on his face. They'd yet to be so blunt. In the long run, it was best to be.

Tensing up, Ibuki spoke. “Yes.” As the word left him, he relaxed, more so than before. He breathed a huff of a sigh.

A moment's silence passed, more comfortably than before. Under Chrono's careful watch, Ibuki rolled to the side. He still allowed Chrono to lightly hold his hand.

“Is... is there anything that helps?” Chrono asked, wanting to be more practical. “Anything at all?”
Ibuki glanced up at him, earnest in how tired he was. He laid his head back down. It didn't look like he had anything on his mind.

“I... I mean, is there anything in particular that... that you like?” Chrono tried changing his approach a little. He'd started with a broad question, thinking it might help Ibuki open up. If that didn't work, he'd have to try the opposite. “That might help keep you, like, satisfied?”

He'd tried not to stutter, and he'd succeeded, if barely. He watched Ibuki expression subtly changing.

“I... I like all the things we do.” He replied, his voice sternly hollow.

“Yeah, but... I mean...” Chrono had hoped for a different answer. “There's gotta be some things you like more than others. Right?”

Feeling a little nervous, more so when Ibuki wasn't fully cooperating, Chrono felt he had no choice but continue to talk. “And we could, like... try to communicate more. Make plans. We could make time to... sleep together. If that would help.”

Ibuki looked unhappy with this. “I don't want you to plan your weeks all around me.”

Chrono made an effort not to get irritated. “I know, but... if we plan ahead, it won't have to be a problem? And... if I could spend the night or the weekends, then, I'll get to spend more time with you without necessarily having it be like, a problem or take time out of anything else that I do...”

Though uncertain, Ibuki was considering it.

“Come on.” Chrono gently tried to persuade him. “It won't bother me. I want to see you. I could stay school nights. As long as you'll take me in the morning.”

“I... I suppose I could.” Ibuki looked vaguely terrified at the idea of driving Chrono to school, but he tried to be reasonable. Chrono could see how hard he tried to fight it. It made him proud, and more so, hopeful.

“I can study wherever I am, anyhow.” Chrono reasoned. “So that won't be a problem, either.”

Ibuki sighed heavily. “Right.” He agreed, reluctantly.

“Look.” Chrono knew he had to try and address this somehow. “You don't have to be so stiff about this. I'm doing this because I want to see you more. So don't... feel bad about it, alright?”

Displeased, Ibuki pressed his lips together thinly.

“We'll try it, okay?”

“Sure.” Ibuki said, releasing some tension.

“And, I... I want you to know you can always talk to me.” Chrono remembered what had happened just earlier that day, in the bath. He tried to not remember it too vividly. It would steal his focus away. “Whenever you... want sex, I mean. Even if I can't promise I'll always say yes, I...I don't want you to... ever feel like you have to hide it from me.”

Ibuki failed to respond. His eyes were still a little red and moist.

“Alright?” Chrono squeezed his hand.

Ibuki nodded weakly.
“You're not a burden to me, ever. And I won't judge. I promise.”

Ibuki squeezed his hand back.

“I said I wanted us to be able to talk. A-and that... includes sex, okay?” Still feeling jittery, Chrono tried to not speak quite so quietly. “I want to know. Like... when you want it. Or... how you want it.”

Ibuki didn't move.

“And I feel like, it’s worth asking if... there's anything on your mind? Anything you wanna try that you think might help...?”

Visibly uncomfortable, Ibuki laid frozen, staring ahead.

“T-to keep you satisfied o-or comfortable, I mean.” Chrono felt a cold sweat coming on. He'd been so worried about Ibuki, thinking only about him. Now, he started feeling the toll this all was taking on him, too. He felt lightheaded, dizzy.

“U-um,” He had to say something more. He had to. Maybe it was too much to expect an answer, at this time of night, after all the things Ibuki had already revealed to him, but he at least had to ask. “If there's anything... you'll tell me. Right?”

Ibuki rolled over on his back. Too tired to hide it, his eyes flickered nervously. Chrono knew now, without doubt, that there was something. With Ibuki's nerves being awfully contagious, Chrono wasn't sure how to proceed, all while knowing there was only forward.

“You... you can tell me.” He tried to sound reassuring, but he only did such a good job at it. “If... if you want to.”

Ibuki looked terribly pressed, despite Chrono's carefully phrased offering. That surely meant something. What, Chrono wasn't fully sure, but it made him awfully, if not unbearably, expectant.

Remaining silent, Ibuki laid in place. With his hand on Ibuki's, Chrono tried to gather his thoughts, scrambling for something to say. Unable to think of anything, the two of them fell into a terribly awkward silence.

It only became harder to speak. Chrono feared he would stutter, more so that he wouldn't be able to say the right thing to get Ibuki to open up to him. In the long minutes that passed, Chrono felt once and for all that he was being tested. He knew his resilience would win in the end. He just wanted it to be dignified.

“I mean, I'm...” He tried to sound casual. It didn't really work. “I'm... flexible.”

Okay, that sort of came out wrong.

He couldn't bear to look at Ibuki, which made him feel like a failure. He had to be strong for him. With the silence that followed, Chrono feared he'd been misunderstood, his own words replaying in his head. “I'm... I'm open is what I mean.”

“I realized.” Ibuki's voice was dry, deathly quiet.

“He-Right.” Chrono managed to respond.

Silence.

Physically in pain from the discomfort, Chrono struggled to breathe. He waited. He'd said what he
wanted to. He wasn't about to start guessing what was on Ibuki's mind. Or, he might. He just might if this dragged on long enough. Turning his head to look at Ibuki who laid looking pale and slightly moist, his eyes unfocused and his shoulders tense, Chrono felt that it was easier to be patient. For Ibuki, he'd need to be.

“We don't have to talk about it now if you don't want to.” Chrono said after another prolonged moment of silence.

“I... might as well.” Ibuki mumbled. He did not sound very confident.

“Okay.” Chrono exhaled. Ibuki looked all the more ashamed. He looked almost sick if anything. Despite how burdened he was by his silence, Ibuki said nothing, betraying his own sentiment.

Chrono had realized that Ibuki had yet to voice much of any of his desire. There had been that one time, after their Ginza date, but even then he'd been terribly tense and nervous. In hindsight, Chrono could wish he'd encouraged him more. Even that was not easy, however. It would quickly become patronizing.

“If... if it's hard to tell me, maybe... you could show me?”

It was worth asking. Ibuki didn't look receptive however, turning away with an agonized look on his face.

“Okay...” Sighing, Chrono felt himself quickly run out of options. Ibuki was growing aware of this as well, becoming restless.

“Look.” As Ibuki became distressed, Chrono knew he had to comfort him. “It's... it's okay. It really is okay. We can sit here for as long as you need. Or we can talk tomorrow. I'm just... a little worried, 'cause you've got to be tired.”

Ibuki did look exhausted. Though, with Chrono's words, he appeared to pull himself together.

“I can't sleep like this.” He whispered.

“I thought so...”

“I want to... to talk, but...” He looked awfully embarrassed, to the point where it was hard for him to speak.

Chrono wondered if there was anything he could do. Maybe breaking the silence was the only option he had. “Is it anything like the things we've done before?”

Ibuki shifted a little, giving Chrono a mixed impression. “Not quite. Or...” He hesitated, and then failed to recover.

“Look, I... I'm asking for a reason, okay?” Surely that much was obvious. It was still best to have it said. “And, like I said I'm... open. To... to well. Most things.”

Chrono realized that might not be super reassuring. He felt his face take color. “I... I mean. Whatever it is, we can always try it.” Nervously, he ran his hand over the covers. “Unless it's something, like... super freaky.”

Ibuki looked ready to fade away.

“Like, I mean,” Stressed, choking on his words Chrono struggled to salvage the situation, overcome
with the fear that it was already too late. “I couldn't like... choke you or anything.”

In his already fatigued state, Ibuki reemerged beyond the other side. Their conversation couldn't get any more awkward than this, after all.

“I don't want you to... asphyxiate me.”

“R-right.” Chrono was a little relieved despite everything.

Ibuki drew a deep sigh. Chrono peered at him, his face still red.

“Did you really think I was going to ask you to do that to me?” Ibuki's breathless voice was colored with disbelief.

“I... I don't know.” Chrono replied earnestly. “I just thought it would've been awkward if you had, after I... made a point about wanting to be... open.”

“I... I suppose.” Ibuki sounded like the concept was not something he wanted to fully consider.

“Are... are you worried I won't... wanna do it?” Chrono asked him carefully.

Ibuki looked wholly unsure, uncomfortable in his own skin. “I don't know. I... I suppose so.” He shut his eyes closed. “It's. It's... embarrassing.”

He sounded embarrassed to even admit that was how he felt. Chrono felt heavyhearted.

“I... I get that, but... it doesn't have to be, you know?” He tried to reassure him. “I mean... I want to know. I'd like to... do it for you.”

Something had changed. Ibuki looked braver, calmer. Realizing they were on the right track, Chrono felt his heart pound in his chest.

“Or...” Chrono knew he'd been making assumptions. “If... if it's something you wanna do... for me.”

Ibuki had shifted, and in that moment he'd appeared to smile, if terribly awkwardly, ironically. Chrono looked away, as if to give him some privacy. He had a lead now, a definite lead; or so he'd been led to believe. Whatever it was, Ibuki wanted to be on the receiving end. Chrono's heart was still beating hard.

Ibuki wasn't ignorant to what had just happened. Would it give him courage? Chrono hoped so.

“It's, it's not...” He spoke, despite his voice quivering. “I...”

Hanging onto every word, Chrono sat staring ahead, not wanting to intimidate Ibuki with his hard, focused eyes. His hand laid still on Ibuki's, which had gone limp, their fingers restfully interlaced.

Properly frustrated, Ibuki sighed deeply once more.

“Chrono, I...” His voice hard, he sounded angry, angry with himself. “I don't know, what you'll say, but I... I'd like... I'd like for, for you to...”

Stealing a glance at Ibuki, Chrono saw him raise his hand to cover his face.

“I-” His voice, which had been breaking, regained some of his usual, dignified tone. “I want you to... to do me.”
“What?” Chrono's disbelief was mild, mild and innocent. "That's... what you want?"

Ibuki stared hard, hard at the ceiling in silence.

“You, you mean like,” Chrono hesitated. “Ana-”

“Yes,” Firmly, Ibuki cut him off before he could finish. “What...what else could I possibly...”

“I... I'm just...” Chrono knew he right. “Sorry.”

Closing his eyes, Ibuki looked like he was in pain.

“If that's what you wanted you could have just... said so.” Chrono mumbled.

“I... I did?” Offended, Ibuki could barely muster a response.

“I just... 'cause it was so hard for you to talk about, I thought...”

“It's... it's hard to talk about. For me.” Ibuki rolled over with his back to him, letting go of his hand. “I didn't... know how to... tell you.”

“I get that, but... I-I mean... I'm up for it.” Chrono knew that might not be clear. “I know I... asked you. Way back. If you wanted to do me, but... I like... I like both. So... I mean...” Embarrassed, he struggled to finish his sentence.

“You did ask me.” Ibuki spoke quietly. “I know I don't... seem like... the type.”

Chrono started to understand. “Did you... think you were gonna let me down?”

“I... I don't know.” Ibuki’s voice was weaker than ever before.

“I mean it's nothing... it's nothing weird. To want. Lots of guys like it. I'd say it's just... normal.”

Laying perfectly still, Ibuki did not respond. Chrono scooted a bit closer to him, laying his hand on his arm. He felt Ibuki exhale under his touch. He'd started to realize, more and more, the extent of Ibuki's turmoil, his complicated and deeply troubled relationship with his own wants and needs. It hurt, but he felt all the more confident that he could support him, ease him.

“If... if you like it... when I'm on top then, that's... that's perfectly fine by me. I know I said I like both, and... I do. But... more than anything I... I like doing things for you.” His voice had become warm, rough. It would whenever he though of them, together. “So... I don't want you to feel embarrassed about it.”

“I've... I've known I have that... tendency, or...” Ibuki struggled hard to speak. “That inclination, and... it's just... become harder and harder to ignore. And I wasn't sure what you’d... think of me.”

Chrono hated to admit that he too struggled, struggled to follow. “You mean, um...”

“What I'm trying to say is, is that... I was always drawn to, to the idea of... b-being on... the receiving end.” Hard pause. “Sexually,”

Oh. “If... If you're trying to tell me you're a bottom, then,” Chrono saw Ibuki visibly wince. “Then... I got that. It's fine.”

“Right.” Ibuki's voice shook with humiliation and frustration.
“You're acting like you should feel bad about it.” It absolutely felt like a re-occurring theme. “Well, there's no reason for that... and not just cause I'd be into it, you know?”

Ibuki failed to respond. Chrono assumed he needed some time. He stroke his arm. They'd talked about so many things, surely he was tired. Ibuki had come through, in the end. Chrono could only feel proud of him, though he didn't know how to voice it.

“I'm glad you felt like you could tell me.” He whispered. “I know it hasn't been easy for you.”

“It hasn't.”

Hearing him respond was comforting, even if it was something so simple.

“You okay?” He asked. “I mean... are you tired?”

“I... I am, but...” Ibuki replied reluctantly. Chrono hadn't forgotten the reason they were having this whole conversation so late at night in the first place.

“If you're still up for it, I could... do something for you.”

It was hard to ask casually, yet he'd somehow succeeded.

“I-I was hoping we'd-.” His enthusiasm shining through, Ibuki still stopped himself. “What I mean is that, I think... I've made it quite clear. What I'd like.”

For a second, Chrono did not think. Perhaps he shouldn't be surprised, but he still was. He looked at Ibuki, who laid in place trying not to appear so pressed.

Chrono had to admit to himself that he wasn't sure what to say. “Could... could you?”

Ibuki wouldn't look at him. “I'm... confident that I could.”

Chrono though that didn't make any sense. He didn't want to state the obvious. “I... don't know. I think it's best to... not rush into anything, you know.”

Ibuki failed to hide how displeased this made him. “I... I know... what I'm getting into.” Chrono could tap into the frustration under the surface. Frankly, it concerned him.

“I'm... I'm really sorry but, you don't.” Chrono tried to speak to him carefully, minding his tone.

“You might think you do, but... you don't.”

Ibuki looked badly like he wanted to speak, say something in his defense, but could not quite bring himself to.

“It's... it's different. With someone. Trust me.”

“We could... try.” Chrono felt in that moment that Ibuki was using his own usual rhetoric against him. He would not let that fly.

“Since you're... insisting, let me explain it to you.” Having lost some patience, Chrono adopted a rather stern tone. “You've never been with anyone before. You don't know what it'll be like. You don't know how you'll react. You need to... slow into these things.”

Ibuki did not appreciate the tone, nor the things that had been said. He took a quiet, defiant tone. “I'm aware of what I'm capable of.”
Irritated, Chrono wasn't sure how to even respond. “Oh, are you?”

“I've taken things a lot bigger than you.”

The words seemed to pass through him like a spell that only made reality less real. Feeling his life force drain, Chrono looked at Ibuki with utter disdain. A sharp frown on his face, Ibuki did not appear to regret his all-revealing statement; at least not yet.

Chrono closed his eyes. “I'm going to pretend I didn't hear that.”

Unhappy, defensive, Ibuki crossed his arms. “You don't have to be so paranoid.”

“I'm not... being paranoid.” Upset, Chrono stood his ground. “I'm speaking from experience, okay? You have reason to listen, instead of assuming I'm just being overprotective.”

There was a slight crack in Ibuki's defiant expression.

“I've... I've been where you are. I thought I was ready. But I wasn't, and... I wish I would've... not tried to just power through it, and... taken it slower.” He sighed quietly. Ibuki was listening. He calmed down. “It wouldn't be like... the end of the world or anything. But I don't wanna hurt you, or put you through something like that if I could help it.”

“I... I just...” Shy, Ibuki spoke. “I'd really like to.”

“Yeah...” Chrono knew it has be tough. After all, Ibuki had struggled so hard to tell him. Surely he'd powered through assuming it would pay off. “I get that.”

“It... helps. Somewhat.” Ibuki whispered. “When I'm on my own. So I thought, with you...”

Chrono felt his blood rush. Until now, he'd remained collected enough. He’d tried to not dwell on the actualities of, nor visualize any expressed thoughts of desire and sex. It would only fluster and distract him. Well, it was starting to become impossible.

“I... see.” He replied, his voice wavering. “I want to do it too, I just... I need to get to know you, too, like... we both need to... figure out what to expect.”

“R-right.” Ibuki replied a bit stiffly, nervously anticipatory.

“Even if we can't go all the way, like... right now, we could... warm up a bit to it.” He hoped Ibuki would be receptive to the idea, despite everything. “I mean could still... make you feel good.”

Chrono stroked Ibuki’s chest.

“I... I'd... like that.” He managed to reply.

Chrono leaned in, kissing his cheek. With a frustrated sigh, Ibuki released some tension. Turning to Chrono, he rose his hand to his face. Still weary, fatigued and emotional, Ibuki let Chrono watch him, and take it in. He sniffed, and though he’d long stopped crying, Chrono still took care to once more wipe the tears off his face.

Pulling Chrono’s face down close to his own, Ibuki urged them to kiss. Sliding his tongue past Ibuki's lips, Chrono leaned his weight in to the kiss, deepening it.

It felt good to kiss. They both needed it. After all their talking, back and forth, it felt good to reaffirm and rediscover that familiar sensation. It was comforting, even as Chrono felt increasingly anticipatory. Parting, rejoining, he poured those feelings into their kiss, and he felt Ibuki respond to
him. Ibuki placed his hand on Chrono's back, pulling him close.

Pulling away, Chrono watched Ibuki for a moment. With a sigh, he laid his head down next to his, his lips resting against his ear. The hand on his back laid heavy, clutching the fabric. Chrono knew he'd need to get up if they were gonna do this, but he didn't want to move.

“...It's in the bathroom, right?” It was never an enticing or sexy conversation to have, but it was pretty unavoidable.

“...You were the one who used it last.” Ibuki replied somewhat flatly.

Remembering that he was indeed correct, Chrono pulled himself up, a little flustered. “Right.”

“Chrono.”

Hearing Ibuki say his name so warmly almost made him jump.

“W-what is it?” He asked, just as he was getting out of bed.

“You're... alright with this?” Ibuki asked, a little guarded.

“Sure. Why?”

“It's gotten quite late.”

“You weren't worrying about that before.”

Ibuki looked guilty. That wasn't what Chrono wanted.

“If you're alright with it, then that's fine.”

Chrono thought that for now, it was best to be satisfied with that answer. He smiled, and leaned in to kiss Ibuki's troubled face. “Just wait here for a bit.”

Retracing his steps, Chrono did end up in the bathroom. He washed his hands carefully, and as he did, he thought of Ibuki. He must be nervous, despite how pushy he'd been. Chrono worried he'd been too hard on him, though he had faith Ibuki would understand. If not now, then surely at a later time.

It felt strange to come into the bathroom and more or less just head out again. Coming back into the bedroom, Ibuki laid pensively in bed, appearing nervous, conflicted. It was a re-occurring aspect of their sex life. Sitting down next to him, Chrono felt considerably more confident. “You... could get yourself ready, if you want to.”

“I'd rather you do it.”

Chrono hadn't been sure what to expect, but Ibuki's words didn't surprise him.

“Alright.”

Climbing into bed, Chrono kissed him. Though he'd appeared guarded, Ibuki responded eagerly. They kissed, all while Ibuki's hands clung on to Chrono's back with a fierce grip. They'd kissed quite a lot today, kissed and touched. To think that it still wasn't enough. The taste of their kiss was well known to him now, but what else made it so distinct was Ibuki's stubborn need to hold him close, kiss him hard, roll their tongues together, breathe together without parting. They'd come a long way since that first night, since those fumbling and awkward first kisses that Chrono had struggled to
make sense out of. Only Ibuki's readiness hadn't changed.

With their conversation still lingering, Chrono felt it all join together, as smaller pieces of a whole. Ibuki's lips still trembled, just like when he'd spoken bearing his heart. There was still a faint scent of tears lingering on the surface of his cheeks. Chrono had been so in love with him, and for such a long time. He'd thought of himself as greedy to wish for this; the closeness, the vulnerability, the trust. Perhaps he hadn't been fully prepared for what being with Ibuki would actually entail. Perhaps he'd yearned for nothing but that feeling of fulfillment and validation that came from knowing Ibuki loved and trusted him. That, and the power to take care of him, and make sure he was safe. He had all that now, and he could now see that he'd never been as close to losing him as he'd thought. As happy as he was, he knew more work laid ahead of them. Chrono had stopped trying to verify the legitimacy of his feelings, but he only kept finding more and more proof. He knew that he wanted to be here, no matter what. It was all worth it, despite his past doubts, regardless of how he had gotten here. Ibuki had questioned himself, too. Chrono wanted to support him in finding those answers that he needed for himself, from now on.

Letting his hand lay on the inside of Ibuki's thigh, Chrono rubbed gently him as he kissed his neck. As soon as he pulled away, Ibuki relieved himself of his shorts, impatiently pulling them down and off on one leg. He was already hard. Chrono had been unable not to notice. Surely, it was just not the kissing. Ibuki knew what waited ahead, and it was exciting him. Thinking back, now with a different framing to their past lovemaking, thinking of Ibuki's reactions made Chrono's heart hurt. He kissed Ibuki again, pushing his tongue hard past his lips and grasping tightly with his hand in his hair, touching his exposed skin forgivingly.

Sated with Chrono's tame touches, and more so restless, Ibuki pushed him away. Chrono obliged, pulling himself up.

Ibuki came to lay more exposed to him than ever before. Despite the clear embarrassment evident by his expression, the twitch in his lip and the tension on his brow, he'd still quite readily propped his spread legs up. Kissing the inside of his thigh, Chrono touched the underside of his leg. It was hard not to. Leaning in, Chrono laid his tongue on Ibuki's tip, kissing him. He wanted to be absolutely certain he was properly excited. Showing a fair amount of restraint, he pulled away.

Ibuki had yet to speak to him, but Chrono knew he would once he was desperate enough. Not wanting it to come to that, Chrono decided that it was time. The lubricant was cold on his fingers. With a glance, Chrono saw Ibuki lay with his eyes closed.

"I'm gonna try this now, okay?" He asked, carefully.

Exhaling, Ibuki reacted to his words. "Yeah."

"You ready?"

"I am." He tried hard not to sound impatient.

"Okay."

Chrono only applied so much pressure. Using only a single finger, he passed inside. As he did, he leaned forward once more, pressing his lips on Ibuki's erection, gently. He was tense, and Chrono could clearly feel it. Ibuki had realized it, too. This didn't help him relax. Putting his free hand on the underside of Ibuki's thigh, Chrono helped lead him to spread wider. As he did, he pressed to go deeper. He'd only just come inside, but the initial resistance he'd felt gave way. He felt Ibuki breathe, slowly, deeply.
He moved. Gently, he pressed upward, swirling his finger. Chrono still had his lips pressed against Ibuki's hot skin, and unable to hold back, he took him into his mouth. Below, he felt Ibuki become molded by his touch. He moaned weakly. His tension was slowly giving way, but Chrono waited another moment before pressing on deeper. As he did, Chrono raised his head. Ibuki's eyes were closed, his face partially obscured by his hand. Chrono thought it fair. As eager as he'd been, Ibuki's reaction was to be expected.

Focused, Chrono thought only of how to make this as painless and pleasurable to Ibuki as possible, attentive to his reactions. He'd become receptive to Chrono's intrusive touch, and Chrono allowed himself to press harder, drawing wider circles. Beside him, the muscles of Ibuki's legs twitched, and Chrono felt the same shiver pass through his insides. Until that moment, he'd been too focused to realize how into it he'd become himself. It was fascinating, really. His heart beating hard with excitement, Chrono was curious to see what other reactions Ibuki had to offer him. He wanted to see and feel them all.

In truth, he'd been a bit nervous himself. It'd been a while since he'd done this, with someone else. Chrono was relatively confident in his ability as a lover, enough to keep his nerves from disrupting him, but not so much that he wouldn't constantly be receptive to any possible negative feedback. Having reached deeper, Chrono once again moved more freely. He heard Ibuki gasping in response.

"You okay? You like that?"

He hadn't stopped.

"It's... it's good." Ibuki struggled to keep his voice down. A moan trailed his sentence and Chrono had no choice but to believe him.

His legs having fallen open, Ibuki had become considerably more relaxed. Chrono wondered how much more it would take. He went down on Ibuki again, now with more agenda, but he knew that couldn't be what did it.

Pulling out, Chrono felt a little agitated. Ibuki had let out a dissatisfied sigh, and in his rushing mind Chrono thought that surely, by now, Ibuki could take two fingers.

"H-hang on," He wanted to keep Ibuki's impatience at bay. He needed more lubricant. "I'm gonna give you more in a second so hang on."

It was tighter than he'd thought. Dissatisfied with himself, Ibuki tensed up. "H-hey, relax..." Chrono reassured him. "Just relax."

His nerves giving way, it appeared to work. Feeling the effect, Ibuki relaxed further. Just to be safe, Chrono still went slow. He tried to find his way back to where he'd been. He had less freedom to move, and as such he had to go slower again. It was a little agonizing, but his endless curiosity helped him endure it. With his free hand he guided Ibuki wider yet again, and more so now than before Ibuki molded himself to his suggested movement without a hint of hesitation. Chrono found his circular movements once more, and he became more daring as he reached yet a little deeper. Ibuki was feverishly hot, transmitting body heat effectively through the thin skin.

Chrono watched him, leaning his head lightly on the side of Ibuki's leg. He'd found them both a good, comfortable spot. Ibuki did not move, but Chrono felt and heard his deep breathing. His eyes were still closed, telling Chrono quite how intimate this was to him. There was still a remnant of tension on his brow, but his hand had fallen down on his chest. When his lips came apart with the sound of a groan, Chrono had already been staring at him without realizing. It was so hard for him to understand why; why would Ibuki hate himself so, why would he feel such guilt and shame for
wanting to feel good? Couldn't he see that he deserved it? Couldn't he see how much Chrono wanted it too, wanting to give it to him, share it between them, together? It wasn't that he didn't know. Chrono knew well how much Ibuki was hurting. It was still hard to understand. Perhaps he hadn't wanted to see it, because of how it contradicted his own feelings, his own reality. As much as he could relate, it was still hard. Feeling his head swimming with thoughts, Chrono watched him, admiring him, forgetting everything else, even his wrist that had come to ache with restless, continuous movement. He wished badly he could transmit his own feelings to him, though he knew no such shortcut existed. Knowing Ibuki had felt guilty or ashamed in relation to their lovemaking really hurt. It hurt because Chrono wished for it to be anything but, he wished it to be something that gave Ibuki strength and courage, something that would ease and soothe him. More importantly, he wished it to be something they could develop and work on together. To Chrono, sex was just one part of their relationship. It was not the most important, but it mattered, it mattered a lot and now perhaps more than ever before. He'd come so far himself. He wanted to share Ibuki's strife with him. Indeed sex was not the most important part, but Chrono knew it was essential for Ibuki to learn that it was alright for him to yearn for it, to treasure it.

Ibuki's eyes came open, his face having taken color. Chrono thought yet again that he was beautiful, but moreover that the slightly impatient look he'd gained was cute. He smiled, wondering if he could get away with teasing him a little.

Rather than waiting for Ibuki to speak his frustrations, Chrono did the more humane thing. “You want me to go faster?”

“Yes...” Ibuki only struggled so much to find his voice. “Please.”

The faint irony didn't fully hide the extent of his feelings. He was needy. Ibuki wanted more. Chrono had yet to learn how demanding he could become, but he was seeing it now, he was seeing Ibuki starting to develop that tactic to communicate what he craved.

Chrono pushed upwards, and rather than just using his fingers, he moved his hand and wrist. Ibuki reacted, relief passing over his face. He sounded his pleasure, weakly. Chrono wondered if it would be enough. Surely, Ibuki would soon yearn for release. Managing to tear his eyes off of him, Chrono lowered his head yet again. Once more, he gently molded his lips after Ibuki's shape, forming to his needs. He was still gentle, not wanting to push him over the edge with his mouth, but still wanting to please him, lead him along.

Ibuki groaned, becoming all the more transparent. Chrono didn't want him to ever hold it in, but he also knew how hard it could be. He moved, trying to apply a little bit more pressure. It was hard to slow into it, but he heard Ibuki gasp, and felt him tense with a twitch passing through him. With his eyes closed, still carefully sucking him off, Chrono could suddenly taste him. He should be close now, very close.

Pulling away, Chrono raised his eyes to catch Ibuki amidst glancing at him. As much as this appeared to fluster him, he only managed to slowly tear his eyes away. As he worked the friction, Chrono felt Ibuki's hips buck weakly upwards into nothing, the motion transmitting to rest in his muscles. On each side of him, Ibuki's legs quivered. He should be close, he should be and yet it didn't seem like he would come. Ibuki was becoming tenser, despite how relaxed he'd been before. Chrono found it ample reason for concern.

Slowing down to accommodate, Chrono heard Ibuki breath a short frustrated huff. His hips came down to a rest on top of the mattress. He'd realized too, surely, even if he'd been late to. Chrono saw him become distressed. “Hey, now...” He spoke quietly. “Relax...”

Ibuki listened, or he tried to. He breathed a deep breath, closing his eyes. Chrono was gently nudging
him, responding to the resolving tension accordingly.

“I... I'm sorry,” Ibuki wouldn’t look at him as he spoke. “I thought, I… I was close, but…”

“It's okay.” Chrono smiled carefully. “Just try and be patient.”

“Right.” Ibuki sounded like he struggled.

“There's no reason to rush, you know?”

Ibuki didn't look like he agreed.

“It's... it's fine.” Chrono insisted. “Don't worry.”

Ibuki was fundamentally quite anxious. Chrono was aware of this. He stroke the outside of Ibuki's leg with his hand, feeling the smooth surface of the skin, and the hard muscle beneath it. It appeared to have some effect, though only so much.

Chrono stopped moving. He felt like he needed to reassess the situation he found himself in. “Hey, are you okay?”

“I'm fine.” Ibuki insisted, strained. Chrono wondered if his own nerves were somehow making things worse.

“Is there anything you want me to do?”

Bothered, Ibuki sighed. Staring at his face, searching for a clue, Chrono was surprised when he felt Ibuki's hand on his own. His grip was quite firm, grabbing it where it'd laid on his leg, pulling it towards him decidedly. Closing his eyes, Ibuki squeezed his hand. Chrono squeezed it right back. It worked. Ibuki was calmer than before.

With renewed strength, Chrono moved his hand, his fingers. He felt like he'd found his way back to where he'd been. Ibuki was breathing more freely. Gently trying to spread his fingers, Chrono felt Ibuki squeeze his hand hard. Forming a sharper curve with the shape of his fingers, Chrono touched him harder in return. With a whine, Ibuki's back arched, and Chrono felt something give way. Hopefully, this would be it.

“Is that better?” He'd asked before thinking. He'd wanted to know.

“Y-yeah...” Firm and dark, Ibuki's voice quivered.

Chrono had become increasingly curious. So badly he wanted to see how this would play out. The expression on Ibuki's face was different. He appeared to almost slip away. His eyes were unfocused, even as they came open. As he moaned, louder, Chrono realized how hard and fast he was touching him. Beyond the defeat of his anxieties, Ibuki was capable of this much. Chrono felt his head spin. He could understand why Ibuki would feel dirty. He'd felt the same way, a long time ago. Coming to terms with his own desires had taken time. It hurt to think how overdue it all was for Ibuki to struggle with, now. However, as worried as he was, Chrono was also confident that things would work out. After all, they could understand each other. He hadn't lied to Ibuki when he'd said he was certain things would pass.

“I'm coming, I'm coming-” Breathlessly, Ibuki's voice rang out loudly. He'd forfeited. It was finally happening, and he was letting the sensation take him away. Chrono stared at him, mesmerized, smitten. “Chrono, Chrono, I...”
It would be a third time since that morning, fourth since the night before. Chrono had to admit it was fascinating, though surely Ibuki could do without that observation. He held Chrono's hand, tighter, tighter, so tight it hurt. Ibuki's hips moved, adapting to Chrono's rhythm. It was only for a second or two, until he cried out weakly, his body coming to a stop with a final shiver.

Panting, Ibuki laid to rest. His grip on Chrono's hand had gone limp. Raising his hand to his face once more, he hid his eyes, overwhelmed. Chrono watched him for a second, letting him calm down. Chrono had to remind himself that this was still new to them. It wasn't that they'd drifted apart or that Ibuki had regressed, growing less comfortable with him. No, this was different, and he would need time. They would indeed have to get to know each other in yet another way.

Ibuki appeared to have collected himself somewhat. Chrono stroke his hand. “Are you okay?”

Nodding, Ibuki let his hand slide off his face, his eyes closed. His breathing had settled, his body doing the same. His propped up legs slid back down on the mattress.

“Do you feel better?” It sure seemed like it. Chrono still wanted to ask.

“I... I do.” The reply came as a hushed breath.

“How...” Ibuki had spoken just as Chrono had thought to move out of bed. In the end, they'd been pretty unprepared. He'd need to get a tissue. “How about you?”

Ibuki had asked carefully, shyly, but he'd still been unable to hide the curious undertone.

“I'm fine.” Chrono reassured him. “Don't worry.”

With a heavy breath, Ibuki made a displeased sound. “Chrono...”

“It's late. You should sleep.” It was a gentle reminder. When Chrono saw Ibuki's wary expression, he knew he had to offer something more. “You can do it for me tomorrow.”

Though reluctant, Ibuki accepted. Before leaving him, Chrono leaned over to kiss his face.

Washing his hands, Chrono allowed himself a breather. He had some water, and got some for Ibuki, too. Coming back into the bedroom, it felt like even just the short moment he'd been gone was way too long. Moving his head to look at him, Ibuki looked beyond sleepy, and Chrono thought it to be terribly cute.

A sigh passed through him where he laid, again letting Chrono touch him, but now with the intent to carefully clean him off. When Chrono took more than a second or two, displaying his throughout tendency, Ibuki tiredly pushed his hand away. “I'll... I'll just shower tomorrow.” His voice slurred as he spoke.

“Alright.” Chrono didn't push it. “Here, have some water.”

Without complaining, Ibuki did rise to have a little to drink. Chrono laid down in bed as he did, getting in under the covers. Breathing an audible sigh, Ibuki slipped back into bed. Laying his head down on the pillow, he looked fatigued and weary, reminding Chrono of the tears he'd shed just before. It made him return to that feeling, that sadness and tenderness. Moving closer, Ibuki responded by curling up and pressing his head down on Chrono's chest, allowing himself to be held. Chrono stroked his back, and felt deeply that it was comforting to him, too. He'd assumed last time hadn't been the end of it. He still hadn't known what to expect.

Holding Ibuki tighter, closer, he fit comfortably in his arms. He relaxed, molded by their embrace.
Chrono felt how tired he was, too. His muscles still ached from the workout, and now his wrist was hurting, too. It had been a long night. Knowing the two of them, surely there would be more henceforth. Chrono knew it wouldn't all just be tears and long, drawn out silences. Ibuki had fallen asleep before he knew it. He must have been exhausted. As Chrono laid awake for a while longer, he realized that he was no longer afraid. He'd always worry, but now he could feel the barriers breaking down one by one. Ibuki had been brave, braver and stronger than he'd thought. Soon enough, there would be nothing keeping them apart anymore.
October has been busy. The chapter's late, and not even very long. At least I finally posted it.

Chrono had woken up with a jolt. Startled awake, disrupted, cold inside, he had been unable to fall back asleep. He stared into the harsh light of his phone.

Ibuki had been right.

Unless Ibuki forgot to tell you, I'm coming home today. Should be around 4, just so you know

It was probably just his imagination, but the phrasing felt off. It was different. It was almost as if she'd implied he didn't have to come home. It made him feel nauseous, sick. He had intended to go back home, he fully had. Now, he knew what else he had to do. He was through with this feeling, and yet, in the early morning hours, he struggled to find his resolve. Reading Mikuru's message, he didn't even know what to say to her.

Ibuki had indeed told him, a few days prior. He'd mentioned it, even if just in passing. It wasn't even the first time it had happened. Was Mikuru aware of that, too?

Next to him, Ibuki slept, snoring lightly. Putting his phone down, tucking it in under his pillow, Chrono eyed him enviously. He knew Mikuru hadn't intended to wake him up with her text. Normally he'd just fall back to sleep, but right now nothing felt normal.

Ibuki slept on his stomach, and Chrono tried to slide closer to him without waking him up. Carefully, he put his head down on his shoulder. It was uncomfortable, frankly, but it helped him calm down. In a moment, Ibuki shifted, and Chrono realized he'd failed in not disturbing him. He pulled away, letting Ibuki move.

Flipping on his back, still looking like he was more asleep than awake, Ibuki spoke sluggishly. “What is it?”

His eyelids heavy, he barely looked at Chrono, innately aware of his presence. Already sounding like he was falling back into a dream, his voice was increasingly unfocused and distant. “Do... do wanna have sex?”

“No...” Chrono sighed. “That's fine.”

If they were both awake before the alarm went off on a work day there was usually only one reason
for it. Right now, Chrono was hardly in the mood, at least for sex.

“I guess I just wanted to cuddle.” He admitted.

Surprised that Ibuki was at all capable of listening, Chrono saw him raise his heavy head from his pillow and scoot towards him. Without a word, Chrono joined him in an embrace under the covers. Lying his arms lightly around him, Chrono rested his head on Ibuki's shoulder. He couldn't fall back to sleep, but at least he could spend the rest of the time before the alarm went off in Ibuki's arms.

He couldn't stop thinking of how he should respond to Mikuru. He drew a heavy sigh.

“What is it?” Ibuki asked him. Chrono hadn't realized he was still awake.

“It's... it's nothing.” He replied, quietly. “Go back to sleep.”

Ibuki complied. He was soon asleep once more. Once the alarm did go off, Chrono had uncomfortably enough finally started feeling like he might finally relax.

Breakfast was a joint effort. As they sat to eat, Ibuki looked snappily awake. Chrono still felt tired in contrast.

“I'll, uh, be going back home today. After school.”

“Right.” Ibuki was looking into his phone. Chrono might tell him off, but he didn't. “She said she'd be back today, didn't she?”

“She did.” Chrono hesitated. “It seemed like she assumed you'd tell me, though.”

Slowly, Ibuki raised his eyes from the screen. He looked at Chrono for only a second. “Is that so.”

He really didn't have anything more to say to that, huh. Chrono wasn't sure what he'd expected.

“Do you know how long she'll be staying?”

“I dunno yet.” Chrono hadn't even thought that far ahead. “I didn't ask...”

“Right.”

It was a strangely dull conversation. Chrono didn't feel like he had the energy to be unhappy with it. He'd come too far to worry about things like that.

Ibuki had agreed to take him to school. Chrono didn't bother to pack all his things, and Ibuki was too absorbed to notice. Pulling up a few blocks from the gate, Chrono grabbed his bag and was about to head out. Not in a hurry by any means, he turned to see Ibuki look at him expectantly. He averted his eyes, but it was too late. Chrono knew he wanted a kiss. Of course he did. He was going home, and as far as Ibuki knew it was uncertain when they'd next see each other.

Chrono glanced outside. There were some people about, but no more than a few. He knew there was no shame in being reserved. He also knew Ibuki wouldn't hold it against him. Right now though, what bothered him is that he wanted to kiss, too. He wanted it, despite how awkward he felt about it.

His heart beating hard, he put his hand on Ibuki's leg. Understanding, Ibuki drew closer to him without hesitation, but let it be Chrono who put his lips on his own. Kissing him, Chrono let his hand pass through Ibuki's hair. As simple a kiss as it was, Chrono could only think of their intense yearning kisses before sex, of their hasty, wet kisses during sex, and the long, deep ones afterwards. It made him feel self aware of even this simple, innocent gesture. He remembered the text Mikuru
had sent him that morning. He pulled away.

A little surprised with how suddenly their kiss had ended, Ibuki regardless accepted it. “Keep in touch with me, alright?”

“Yeah, sure.” Chrono was getting out of the car.

“Call me when you know your aunt's schedule.”

“I will.” It wasn't something he would prioritize right now.

“Oh, and...”

Chrono turned around as Ibuki had apparently remembered something.

“Could you ask her about her availability during the last two weeks of September? We're doing an upkeep overhaul and I'd like to know if she'll be in the country at all during that time.”

That wasn't what he'd expected at all. “Ask her yourself.” Chrono replied, tiredly.

Ibuki wasn't opposed to that, but Chrono's tone had put him off. “I thought... you might as well.”

“I... I think it's better if you ask her yourself.” Now was not a good time. Chrono didn't want to get into why.

“Right.”

“I'll get back to you, though.” Chrono had indeed planned to do that.

“Of course. Take care.”

Ibuki had smiled, and there was nothing unusual about how he said goodbye. Chrono stood and watched him turn the car around and drive off. Standing in place, he felt as if he'd become rooted into the ground. Again, his life was going to change. He wasn't sure exactly what things would be like from now on, and no amount of pondering would reveal to him any answers. He knew this, and as such, with a moment's passing, he bid the old times goodbye. He wished, dearly, that he wouldn't grow to miss them. He wanted nothing more than to push forward. He still wasn't certain quite why he felt fearful, but he had an inkling he was about to find out.

His classes appeared to drag on, but when he picked himself up to head home on, it was still earlier than normal. Empty minded, Chrono was slow to realize he didn't have a plan for once. He had to double check everything that needed to be done, and write a shopping list. Grocery shopping took longer than he'd expected, too. He couldn't quite seem to focus, and when four PM rolled around, he was still on his way home. Turning the key in the lock and coming inside, Mikuru's suitcase stood unopened just inside the door. At the sound of his arrival, she came running into the hallway.

“Chrono!” She appeared delighted. “I didn't realize you were out shopping!”
She hugged him, holding him tight. Chrono still wore the same clothes he'd worn the day before, while staying at Ibuki's house. He would have changed, but he had yet had the chance.

“Sorry,” He said. “I didn't mean to miss you.”

“Oh, that's fine.” She ruffled his hair a little.

Unloading the groceries in the kitchen, Mikuru had taken one of the bags that Chrono had brought home.

“I sent you an extra twenty thousand last month,” Mikuru helped him restock the cupboard. “Let me know if you need any more, alright?”

“Oh... I'm good, actually.” Chrono replied, pensively.

“Really?” Mikuru didn't sound concerned. Well, maybe a little.

Ibuki usually wouldn't let him pay for anything, at least not as long as they went anywhere together. He'd been able to save a lot of money that way, even if it wasn't by his own devices. During the summer he assumed it had become more noticeable. He just wasn't spending as much money on food and necessities as he normally would. Chrono had hardly, if ever, asked for money unless he absolutely needed it. In that sense, his behavior hadn't really changed, but when Mikuru would ask him, he struggled to act nonchalant. After all, lying about money was inconceivable to him.

“I should have enough for a while longer, don't worry about it.” He could have said it more casually. Analytical of his own tone, Chrono realized he had to try and stop overthinking. If anything, he realized this would be a good time to change the subject.

“Actually, I was wondering, if...” Mikuru turned around to look at him. “If we could have a talk. After dinner.”

“Oh,” She somehow didn't sound very surprised. “Of course. I don't mind.”

She didn't ask. He wanted to be relieved. Chrono couldn't help but take a serious tone as he'd asked. All in all, that should be enough to tip her off that a follow-up question wouldn't yield much. Chrono still wished that she would have asked, so he could spend another few hours without having to wonder how much she'd already guessed.

They made dinner. Chrono tried, and failed, to absorb himself in it. When he was a kid, he'd always been able to do so. It was strange how he found himself thinking about it, now. He'd always waited for her to come home, whether he'd realized it or not. He'd always looked forward to it. He'd feel bashful, awkward. He'd felt like he didn't know how to act around her, or what to say to her, the person who had given up everything just to give him a place to call home. He ought to have thanked her, but he never knew how to. His way of expressing gratitude, always, now and then, was just this. He would cook. He would clean. He would work hard so that she would have a home to back to, a home that was welcoming and well kept.

He'd used to think it was the only thing he was good for.

They ate, and Chrono found it hard to uphold any conversation. Mikuru was her usual self as far as he could tell. Chrono felt out of place, not unlike how he'd felt as a child. Maybe the memories had just caught up with him, and his fear of replaying them made for a self-fulfilling prophecy. Mikuru had never forced him to talk to her or spend time with her. Looking back, it had probably been for the best, though Chrono wished they had done more things together, as a family. That was what he'd wanted, even if he hadn't been able to articulate it. After all, how was he supposed to know? At the
time all he'd had was his distant memories of his father. Chrono hadn't known what a family was supposed to act, feel, or look like.

“How's school?” Mikuru asked him. “It's been a while since you mentioned anything.”

He hadn't mentioned it, because his mind had been preoccupied with other matters.

“It's fine.” He said, displeased with his dismissive tone.

“How did that test go? The one you were retaking?”

He'd almost forgotten about that.

“It went okay. I passed.” He had been so relieved to have it over and done with, and with everything else going on, it had slipped from his mind.

“Oh, that's great! You should have said so. We could have celebrated.”

“It wasn't... anything really worth celebrating.” Chrono did smile, forcing himself to. It helped him feel at ease. “I barely passed it, anyway.”

“But you passed.” Mikuru insisted. “You were so worried you wouldn't.”

She was right. He had to admit though, he hadn't realized Mikuru had been so concerned about it. “I... I guess...”

“You must have studied hard.”

“I did...”

Chrono couldn't help but remember what Ibuki had said to him, when they'd spoken of the same topic. If the circumstances had been any different, it would've made for a fun anecdote. Chrono felt more and more that maybe he wouldn't mind taking a year or so off from school to work, as punished for it as he'd probably be. Well, at least in his case, his dreams were already unconventional.

“I went to school in economics. To me, all that stuff you learn is crazy.”

“Oh, it's... pretty crazy to me, too.” Chrono indeed thought so.

Mikuru smiled, widely. She always seemed so happy whenever he spoke about school. It made him feel self-conscious, and he struggled to deal with it. He wanted to tell her, but the attention she gave him in return made him feel silly. He knew that she was supportive. That much was clear. Though, he'd wondered if maybe it wouldn't have been better for her too, if he spent his time educating himself more sensibly. He did what he could to ignore such thoughts, push them from his mind as soon as they entered. Mikuru wouldn't want him to think that way. Regardless, the effects lingered. Outright melancholic, Chrono was relieved once dinner was over.

While doing the dished, loading the dishwasher and cleaning up, for a moment he wondered if he'd need to remind Mikuru of their agreement.

“I'll take care of the rest.” She said to him, as they were about to finish up. “I'll come sit down with you in the living room once I'm done, alright?”

So, she hadn't forgotten. Nervous, Chrono regardless appreciated it. Going into his room, Chrono grabbed his phone. He sat down on his bed, and saw that Ibuki had yet to text him. It wasn't that
unusual, but normally he might send something.

Wondering for a moment what he might be up to, Chrono felt detached from his imaginations. He found that he missed him, strangely enough. He should write to him. Say something. The words failed to come. He'd said them all so many times already.

Letting his fingers hover over the screen, the consequences of his silence since that morning caught up with him. He felt bad, he truly did. At the same time, he'd felt compelled to do this on his own. Remembering what Ibuki had said to him the previous weekend, Chrono already knew his thoughts. He knew he was aware, that he was supportive and understanding. Thinking about it helped. It helped him feel strong on his own. Until the very end, he'd wanted to have the option to back out without consequence. He still didn't feel quite ready, but surely he wouldn't get any more ready than this.

Typing, his emotional state made him concise, even more so than usual.

I'm going to tell Mikuru about us

He sent it. Just as he'd typed it out, he sent it. Staring into his phone, Chrono had a follow up sentence slowly forming in his mind.

“Chrono?”

Mikuru called out to him from the living room. She was already done. Springing up from his bed, Chrono put his phone face down on his desk, and hastily made way outside his room. “Sorry, I... I'm coming.”

He would have to get back to Ibuki later. Surely, he'd know better what to say before too long. The idea of that made him incredibly anxious. Why did he do this to himself?

Coming into the living room, Mikuru was leisurely watching television. Sitting down by her, Chrono pulled one leg up on the couch.

“What did you want to talk about?” She asked, only glancing at the television.

Chrono stared at the screen too, not taking in anything of what was displayed on it. He had one final chance to try and come to terms with the situation he was in. It would indeed be hard to back out now, but as he considered it, Chrono realized that he didn't want to. He didn't want to at all.

“Do you want me to turn it off?” Mikuru offered, interpreting his silence, reaching for the remote.

“Sure.” Chrono would prefer it that way.

With the TV shut off, the room felt deathly silent. Now, Chrono missed that ambience, though he knew that in the end, nothing would be able to mask his feelings from now on. There was no point in clinging to any distractions.

Deep in thought, dazed by his own feelings, Chrono sat frozen. Concerned, Mikuru addressed him. “Chrono? What was it you wanted to talk about?”

“It's, um,” He had to start somewhere. He realized he didn't quite have the courage to dive straight in. “Something I've meant to... tell you. For a while.”

“Uh-huh?” She listened. Chrono saw how she tried to remain unassuming.
When he failed to follow up, she caught on to his threads. “Is something the matter?”

How was he supposed to respond to that?

“Not... really.” He knew he could have been more convincing. “I just wish I could have told you sooner is all. ‘Cause at this point, well... it’s kinda overdue.”

He felt pained thinking about it. It pushed him to speak.

“I don't know, if you've noticed but... I'm... I'm seeing someone, and...” His voice had been shaking, then. “I meant to tell you, but well. I couldn't seem to... find a good time to do so.”

He tried to gauge her reaction. It proved difficult. She watched him, taking his words in without judging. She saw how he clammed up, and for a second, she appeared to consider. “I see. It's... it's alright. Really.”

He'd know that, and yet it was hard to take in, hard to accept. He could not speak, the words refusing to form.

“Of course I'd want you to tell me. I don't want you to feel like you have to hide anything, either, but...” She smiled, preciously. “You can take all the time you need, alright? It's nothing to feel bad about.”

She strung her words together with care. There was a transparency in that. Mikuru understood something, something Chrono feared he might not even understand himself. He stared at her. Before he could realize how badly side-tracked his internal turmoil had become, his many thoughts linking together, Mikuru sighed lightly.

“Though, I mean, if you meet someone... naturally I'd like to meet him.”

It was such a simple thing to say, but it still embarrassed him. If her outspoken aspiration made it harder or easier to proceed, Chrono wasn't sure. If Mikuru wasn't clueless, she was at least very good at pretending.

“You've... you've met him.” Chrono spoke breathlessly, forcing the words out. It was tough, outright painful, but he didn't want to let this chance slip by.

“Oh?”

Chrono had no idea what to think anymore. Her reactions didn't seem to fit. “I thought... I thought you'd figured it out, but... I guess not.”

Things had been flipped on their head. Chrono felt no less anxious.

“It's... it's Ibuki.” Still forcing himself, he couldn't bring himself to look at her. “W-we... we've been seeing each other for... a pretty long time, actually, but... I... I didn't tell you, because, well...”

Why hadn't he told her? “I wasn't sure... how to tell you...”

If anything it had felt awfully convenient to simply avoid telling her altogether. For a long time, he hadn't even considered it.

“Oh. I... I see.” She somehow didn't seem very surprised, either. Chrono felt like he was going a little crazy.

“I thought... maybe you'd realized.” Chrono, unable to gauge his own reaction, was left defenseless
to it. “S-so, I... I didn't...”

The memory of that morning, the chill that laid in the pit of his stomach, came rushing back to him so hard he felt disconnected with his current self. The feeling was not unfamiliar. It was staggering. He struggled to understand. When he reached his hand to his face, the tears were already falling. He heard himself sob, his shoulders trembling, and as he thought to try and stop, it just made him cry harder.

“Chrono?” Concerned, Mikuru reached out to put her hands on his shoulders. “Chrono, what-”

She stopped herself. Chrono again tried to collect himself, his body rigid and his eyes shut tight. “I... I'm sorry.” His voice, weak, shook with the tremors in his body. “I'm... I'm really sorry.”

“Chrono...” Sighing, Mikuru put her arms around him and held him close. “You don't... have to be sorry.”

Feeling her arms around him, embracing him tight, Chrono stopped holding back. He cried freely.

“Did you think I was going to be mad?” She asked him, kindly, rubbing his back.

“I... I don't...” He didn't know. He didn't even know why he'd cry. Mikuru held him tighter.

“You know, it's alright. I don't want you to feel like... you're obliged to tell me anything.” She reassured him. “Of course I want to know what goes on in your life, but... it's best you tell me once you're ready. You don't have to feel bad.”

He had felt bad. He had felt bad for not telling her. Was that why he cried? He still wasn't sure. There was something, something that hurt. Something that didn't fit. It had been there for as long as he could remember. Now, it was swelling, aching, making it hard to breathe.

Mikuru stroke his back, hushing him. He pressed himself closer to her, into her lap. He felt like a child, perhaps more so than he'd ever allowed himself around her. Yet, the familiarity of the situation crept up on him. That didn't seem to fit, either. His disarrayed mind sought for answers. What gradually emerged was a foggy memory, locked away deep inside. She had used to hold him just like this, a long, long time ago. Before he was old enough to understand that his mother would never come back, that she would never again hold him. He'd forgotten, at some point, that Mikuru had always cared for him, that she'd always looked after him, already when he'd been too young to do anything but simply take it for granted.

As the tears had come out, his recollection resurfacing, the sensation of familiarity rising and fading away, Chrono breathed a shaky breath, and relaxed. His head laid on Mikuru's shoulder, and she let him rest in silence.

His heart still beat heavily in his chest, and though he wished to think the worst had passed, he was scattered and confused, more so than he'd initially been. When he pulled away, he let his head hang down. Despite everything, he didn't like crying like this in front of her. That, if anything, seemed to yield an answer.

“It's not like I thought you were gonna be mad. I... I just...” His voice broken, he was still crying silently. Mikuru's hands steadily laid on his shoulders. He sobbed. “I don't wanna... worry you. Or bother you. Or... make you feel like...”

Chrono shrugged, his words failing him. He barely knew what to say. “Make you feel like... I don't know. Like I'm causing trouble.”
Mikuru drew a deep, silent breath. “You hardly ever give me reason to worry. So don't you ever think about that.”

Her words held a kind sternness, filled with conviction. That was easy for Chrono to recognize, to acknowledge. It was still hard to accept her words.

“I don't mean to, but...” Chrono was at loss when he didn't know what else to say. “I'm sorry.”

She dried his tears, gently. “You can always talk to me. You're never bothering me. Or causing trouble.”

For short while, it'd felt like maybe he could stop crying. That feeling faded away too, as more tears came welling up. Mikuru saw it happen, and readily embraced him once more. Chrono felt how badly he needed it.

“I know how strong you are.” She spoke with such clarity and pride Chrono felt dizzy. “But you don't have to pretend like... you're stronger than even that.”

In the safety of her embrace, he felt guarded, shielded from the worst of his grievances, from the maddening edge of his confusion.

“I know you do, sometimes.” Mikuru became emotional too, but her certainty was unwavering. “If there's anything that ever worries me, well... it's that. You try so hard to be strong. For me. Even though you don't have to.”

Chrono had known that. He'd known, and yet it felt like a brand new revelation. He pulled away, still crying.

“There's... I mean-” His words got stuck in his throat. He had to breathe. Chrono paused to try and find his voice. “I wanted... to talk to you. But I wasn't sure how to.”

He sniffed, having calmed down somewhat. He tried to find it, the logic to his emotions, the breaking point. “It's... it's serious.” The words came out with conviction. “With Ibuki. And me. It's serious.”

He dried his tears, and with his concentration, they'd stopped falling quite as hard. Chrono still felt Mikuru's hands on his shoulders.

“I want to... be with him, from now on. Always. If I can.” His sobs were still wet. “And... I didn't know what you'd say. But I hate... hiding it from you. And he's... he's been really worried.”

Mikuru waited, patiently. Chrono felt stronger, like he could pull himself together.

“He's been really worried about... not making a good impression. He wants to...” Chrono found himself shrugging. Relaying Ibuki's words was hard on him, because they felt just a bit overbearing. “To be good to you. And to help you... us. Whenever we need it, and...”

Sighing deeply, Chrono put his face in his hands. “And I already waited way too long to tell you.”

“Chrono,” Mikuru rubbed his shoulder. “I... I have to say, I never expected this.”

She did sound quite uncertain. Emotionally drained, Chrono took it in without jumping to any conclusions.

“I though for sure you'd figured it out.” He said dully. “About... me and Ibuki, I mean.”

“I... I won't say it didn't cross my mind.” She sounded reluctant to admit it. Chrono felt the
discomfort physically pass through him. “It did, but... I didn't want to assume anything. I thought, that if there was anything you wanted to tell me, you would once you were ready.”

It was relieving to hear, once he allowed himself to think of it from her perspective. It was a relief that came over him slowly, creeping inside him and laying to rest.

“And as for Ibuki, well. I don't doubt that he's reliable. If... if you want him to be here for us, then, what am I supposed to say?”

Chrono looked at her smiling face, and saw sadness glimmering behind her eyes.

“I... I just want you be happy.” Her grip on his shoulders became tighter. “That's what I want. More than anything.”

He knew that. He knew it, and yet it felt like the tears would come again. Sobbing, he let her hold him.

“I... I want you to be happy, too.” He said, quietly, his voice muffled by their embrace.

“I know that.” Mikuru reassured him. “But that's not your job, to make me happy, is it?”

Stubbornly, he pulled away, drying his tears with his clenched fists. “You're... you're just like Ibuki.”

The words came out frustrated, coarse. “You... you work all the time. You never take any time for yourself. And-”

He sobbed, hard. “It's hard to just stand by and watch sometimes, you know?” Swallowing, he again tried to stop crying. “I want... I want to help, too. I want to... I...”

He had never wanted to make her unhappy. It hurt, it hurt, and he could feel again, how hard it was to breathe whenever he thought about it. He'd never wanted to be a burden. He'd never asked for her to take care of him, and at times, the frustration of it would make him deeply bitter, jaded. He had wondered, so often, when he was young, if maybe her life wasn't better off without him. He'd never voiced it. Barely dared to think it. It made him feel so ungrateful.

He'd wanted it, in the end. He'd wanted to live with her, to be her family. He'd wanted it, but the guilt made it hard to accept his own feelings.

“You're helping, Chrono.” Looking him in the eye, Mikuru spoke to him. Dazed, he heard his own voice in hers. “All I want... all I need... is just you.”

Her grip on him was so tight, and yet, it was never uncomfortable.

“You've made me so happy. I don't think you understand.” Her voice was pouring, true. “Just having you here... with me. To watch you... live your life, and be happy.”

He swallowed a sob, the pain coursing through him, his throat sore and dry.

“I was always so proud of you.” Sentimentality colored her voice in a way Chrono could hardly ever recall hearing before. “I'm so happy you do the things you do. That you've found the things you want to do, that you... have dreams. And how hard you try to pursue them, too.”

He thought back to their conversation at dinner. He thought back to the many times she'd ask him about school. It all seemed to make a bit more sense. He could only sniff quietly, feeling weak, his energy having started to drain.
“I remember when you were little.” Taking it in, he became overwhelmed. Chrono had to close his eyes. “We were all so happy to have you. When you were born... we were all so happy. Your parents, of course... but me, too.”

It was hard not to sob. Chrono tried to fight it, but the pain in his chest, in this throat, it was too much to bear.

“I was so happy to be part of their family. I always... admired your mother so much. She was so strong. And kind. And smart.” Mikuru's voice wavered. Chrono felt himself waver, too. “And when she had you, I was so proud of you. Because you were my family, too.”

“When she passed... none of us knew what to do. She'd come around to make sense out of our messed up family, and suddenly... she was just gone.”

The pressing, coursing pain in his chest only seemed to get worse. Even now, they rarely spoke of his mother. He didn't remember her, not outside the pictures. He'd known. He'd known it had been hard, tough. Yet, it felt like he'd never understood. Even know, it felt impossible, although he wanted to. He wanted to at least try.

“It was so hard on your father. It was hard on me, too.” Mikuru hesitated to speak. “But it was the hardest on you.”

Chrono looked at her, feeling dazed. He wasn't sure if he'd say that. He didn't even remember. Yet, he did not argue, nor did he do anything, except accept Mikuru's truth.

“Your father, he's... I don't know.” She sounded more let up than she hardly ever did when she spoke of her brother. “He's still... in a daze. I think. He can't seem to move on. Or he'd come back here, I'm sure. He's still afraid to come back. To you.”

With a sigh, Mikuru let her hands slide down. She lightly took Chrono's hand in her own.

“I wish he'd come back.” Chrono said quietly.

“I know.” Mikuru replied sadly. “Me too.”

“For the longest time, I thought I'd lost them both.” Mikuru held his hand tighter. Her voice had become a sad whisper. “But... I still had you. And in the end, there was nothing that could take that happiness away from me. You were still the greatest gift... I'd ever been given.”

It hurt to hear. As happy as it made him, it still hurt terribly. Perhaps it hurt because he felt that it shouldn't need to be said. And yet, after all this time, it was still hard for him to accept. When had he started feeling like this again? Had he ever stopped? He wasn't sure.

“So... when you tell me there's someone... someone you want to share your life with, I don't... want you to feel selfish.”

Mikuru had indeed understood. She had understood something he'd struggled to see himself.

“I do.” His voice was weak and distant. “I do feel selfish.”

“Don't.” She said kindly. “Please don't, whatever you do.”

He sobbed. Mikuru leaned in again to hold him, sighing. “I don't want you to feel selfish about anything. Okay?”
“I don't... know why I do... but...” Chrono sobbed, though dryly. He didn't have many tears left.

“I... I guess I just...” They'd pulled away, and Chrono felt that he had to collect himself. He needed for things to make sense. He'd cried, and he'd started to feel better as a result. Mikuru felt like she was one step ahead of him. He wanted to catch up. “I don't want you to feel like I won't be here. Or that I'm... forcing anything on you.”

“It's your life, Chrono.” Mikuru spoke lightly. “And I... I'll always... be happy to get to know anyone that you want to be with.”

Chrono somehow felt dissatisfied. Mikuru could tell.

“Of course I never... thought it would be Ibuki, but...” She smiled, even if hesitantly. “Even when I thought... maybe, I still... thought it best not to take it for granted. You've known him for a long time, so... I didn't want to assume.”

“Honestly, I... never really... expected this either.” Chrono said somewhat sullenly. He'd crossed his arms, still sitting halfway into her lap.

“You didn't?” She sounded amused.

“I...” Chrono knew he had to make choice, then. A choice to speak, or not to speak. He shrugged, looking away. He felt like he had little left to lose, now. “I liked him for... a pretty long time.”

“You did, huh?”

“Yeah, but... I never thought... he'd like me.” His cheeks were still wet. He dried them, roughly.

“He's... been very helpful to me.” Mikuru said carefully.

“I hope so.” Chrono muttered.

“I think... he's a good man.”

Her words made a smile tug on his lips. Chrono felt silly for fighting it, more so with how happy such a simple statement could make him.

“He's... had it tough.” Chrono said, tiredly. “Really tough. But he's... he's come through.”

“I don't know him like you do.” Mikuru smiled. “But I guess I'll have to get to know him better, from now on.”

“Yeah.” His voice shaking, Chrono indeed hoped so. He'd barely dared to think about it, but it was what he wanted. It was what he wanted so bad, it hurt.

“I still remember when I first met him.” Mikuru leaned against the backrest, smiling at the memory. “He was so young. Younger than you are now. He was so pale, and he barely said a word.”

She laughed a little. “I thought for sure he was scared of me.”

“Well, he had reason to.” Chrono said quietly. “He got me involved with all that stuff...”

“Sure.” Mikuru didn't sound like she fully agreed. “But that was all your father's fault in the end, wasn't it?”

Chrono hadn't fully thought of in that way. “I... I guess.”
“He was the one who made Ibuki do all those things.” She sighed. “Wasn't he?”

Sighing, Chrono realized the conversation once more had come back to his father.

“Well, yeah...” He agreed weakly. "He still could've been more mature about it.”

Mikuru laughed shortly. Chrono still felt raw from all his crying. He sniffed quietly. “With all that's happened, he's been pretty worried about, you know... not being able to make a good impression.”

"Well, he would..." Mikuru smiled carefully. “If it's serious like you say.”

Chrono realized he hadn't thought of it that way. “Yeah, I... I guess.”

Though worn, tired, he felt elevated. Now, it was almost hard not to elaborate.

“In his case though, he's... he's been worried that... I don't know. People would misunderstand.” Chrono gaze rested in his lap.

“As long as he has nothing to hide, he should be fine.” Mikuru said without hesitation.

Chrono felt a smile crack on his face. “I should let him know that's how you see it.”

“Would you?” Mikuru asked him kindly.

“Yeah. Sure.”

Mikuru let the words sink in before she asked her follow up question. “How long has it been?”

She ought to have been tipped off by his expression, by the way he squirmed in place.

“I thought... maybe you were seeing someone, already at the beginning of the year.”

This did not surprise him to hear. He had been coming and going an awful lot, and it had been around that time that he'd started staying with Ibuki, rather than just seeing him.

“Have you been seeing him since then?”

“Uh, it's... it's been... a bit longer than that, actually.”

“Oh?”

“It's... it's been about a year.”

She looked surprised, but was void of any other reaction.

“I'm sorry I didn't tell you.” Chrono knitted his hands in his lap.

“Were you that worried about what I might say?”

“I... I guess so, but... in the beginning I was just... really not looking to talk to anyone, 'cause... things were pretty awkward and... I just wanted to focus on... on us.” Mikuru looked like she could understand. “But in the long run I... I was just making excuses.”

Mikuru sighed, revealing that his conversation had been draining for her, too. “Of course I want you to talk to me... but it has to be on your terms, Chrono.”

“I... I guess.”
She hugged him again lightly, but he slipped away from her.

“Are you okay?”

“I... I'm fine.” He felt like he would be, eventually. “It's just... one last thing.”

“What is it?”

“Dad said that he'd be back, for my birthday. For once.” He tried to not sound so cynical. “I... I'd like for Ibuki to come, too. Celebrate with us. If that's alright.”

“Sure.” Mikuru seemed quite pleased by the suggestion. “Why not? We had really fun last time.”

“Yeah, it's just... I wanna tell dad. About us. Before then.” It felt so much easier to talk, it was as if a spell had been broken.

“Okay.” Mikuru nodded though she appeared vaguely uncertain.

“I'm not... fully sure how to go about it. But I've made up my mind.”

“If... if you're not ready...”

There it was.

“I'm as ready as I'm ever going to be.”

“I just don't want you to force yourself.”

“Ibuki keeps saying the same thing.” Chrono said stubbornly. “And... and maybe I am forcing myself. But it's so tiring to hide it. I... I just want to be able to feel like I can be myself around him.”

She knew he'd made a fair point. Mikuru let it go. “Alright. If that's how you feel, then I'll naturally... support you in that decision.”

Chrono hadn't been able to predict how relieving that would be to hear. He hadn't known it, but he had needed to hear it.

“I wanna do this for... for Ibuki, too, I...” He sighed. This was the final push. “I want him to feel like he's included. In the things we do. As... as a family. I want him... to be part of that, too.”

“Of course you do.” Mikuru smiled, and Chrono again felt like he would be overwhelmed. “I understand.”

“You haven't...” He hesitated. “Told him anything... have you? Dad, I mean.”

“Oh, I...” Mikuru looked surprised to be asked. “I haven't... told him anything. I would never do that.”

“I... I know, I just... thought if maybe he asked about, me, or...” Awkward, he wasn't sure how to put it.

“Even if he had, I would've just told him to ask you himself.”

Chrono was still uneasy thinking about talking to his father, but having barred his heart he felt all the more free. All of the exhaustion from crying was starting to catch up with him. Mikuru appeared to notice, touching his arm.
“Are you alright?”

“I’ll be fine.” He replied. “I... I’m fine.”

Sighing, Mikuru hugged him again. Chrono lightly put his arms around her. “I’m always here. If you want to talk. Or if you need anything. Alright?”

“Yeah...” He rested his head on her shoulder. So many times when he was young he’d wanted to be held by her. When he thought of that little child he’d once been, the tears threatened to come back. Instead of giving in to it, he held her tighter.

She ruffled his hair as she held him. “You can bring Ibuki here whenever you want.” Rather than a firm statement, it was more like a suggestion.

“Sure,” It was hard not to smile. “Okay.”

"You know... you know I love you, alright?"

“l... I know.” He failed to speak clearly. Chrono felt his throat clam up again, though for yet another different reason.

As hard as it was, as difficult as it felt, he had to go through with it. It was yet another thing he’d waited way too long to tell her.

“l... I love you too, okay?” Forcing the words out, he felt a hard weight pressing on his chest. It hurt. It hurt terribly, like his rib cage would burst. “So, I mean...”

“I know.” Mikuru replied to him kindly, squeezing him. “I know you do.”

Without thinking, he nodded. Chrono felt like he might cry again. He was tired of all that. Tired of crying, tired of being afraid, tired of hiding things from the people he loved most. He did sob, one final time, but he did also smile. “Yeah.”

The pain faded, though slowly. Mikuru held him the entire time.

In the end, he’d told her about his plans to call Ibuki, too. He was used to hiding their late night phone calls, at least to a degree. Checking his phone for the first time since after dinner, he saw that Ibuki had left him a number of texts, such as Are you going to tell her now?, and then after a prolonged silence, Did you tell her? and Chrono please respond.

Laying on his bed in his room, the lights on for once, Chrono felt increasingly at ease with each signal that went through.

Ibuki picked up.

“Hello?” He sounded vaguely distraught, confused. “Chrono? How are you?”

“Hey...” Chrono replied.
“Did you tell her?” Ibuki was hardly ever this full of questions. “How did it go?”

“I told her.” Weakly accomplished, he spoke. “It... it went well.”

“What did she say?” Ibuki asked carefully. He sounded nervous.

“We talked. She... she took it pretty well.” Chrono admitted.

“Did she seem... surprised?”

“She admitted that it had crossed her mind. But that she hadn't assumed anything.”

“So she’d figured it out.” Ibuki concluded.

“I... I wouldn't quite say that, but...” Chrono realized it had been naive of him to think in those terms. “More like she didn't want to... think about it too hard.”

“...I see.” Ibuki still sounded like he was on edge.

“It went well, anyhow. I mean, I... I cried, but...” He had no way to omit that. “But other than that.”

“Were you upset?” Ibuki sounded worried, concerned.

Chrono could only sigh. “I guess so.” His voice was sullen. “I didn't think I'd be, but... yeah.”

“Was it anything she said?” Ibuki asked, somewhat calculated.

Chrono was a little too tired to think about it deeply. “No, not like that. I guess I'm still... a lot more upset than I thought about, this whole... situation.”

He was met with silence. Chrono knew that he needed to elaborate. “With my family, I mean.”

“I see.”

“I hadn't realized it still upset me. But I guess that stuff doesn't go away easily.”

“Are you... upset about your father?”

As empty as his mind was, the answer came to him effortlessly. It was unexpected. “I'm upset 'cause he left, but not necessarily 'cause he wasn't there. I mean, I barely remember any of how things used to be.”

Perhaps it was a strange way of putting it. Chrono didn't know how else to explain it. After all, it was hard to miss what you didn't know.

“But I'm... I'm upset he'd put Mikuru through all that. She always... had to look after me. For that reason, I still, I mean... I don't wanna bother her. Or... worry her. Cause trouble for her...”

“Did you feel like you might?”

Chrono fiddled with the fabric of his shirt. “I guess so.” Awkwardly enough, it was hard not to keep talking. “In the end, we talked about all that stuff. And, I mean. That just made me cry more.”

“How do you feel now?”

“I feel okay.” Chrono could earnestly say so. “I'm pretty tired but it's good that it's over.”
“I see.” He could hear Ibuki smile. It was contagious.

“I honestly didn't think she'd react badly. So I dunno why I was so nervous.”

“It can still be hard to talk about.”

“Yeah... I mean... she'd never tell me that I couldn't be with you, or... or anyone.” Chrono wholeheartedly believed that. Mikuru had never policed his actions, or who he associated with. Even when she’d had reason to, she had let him make his own choices, in the end. “But I... I want her to be happy. With me.”

Just as he’d said that, Chrono felt like he'd reached yet another conclusion. He did want Mikuru to be proud of him. He indeed just wanted to make her happy.

Ibuki sighed. “As long as you're happy, I'd like to think she is, too.”

“Yeah...” Chrono felt like his mind was drifting. "That's what she more or less said, in the end..."

“I see.” Ibuki sounded a little accomplished. It served as a reminder.

“I do want her to approve of my choices, and well...” Honestly, he was embarrassed to speak of this, but he badly craved Ibuki's reaction. “She did say she thought you were a good man.”

Ibuki did not respond, not right away. “She... she did?” It was barely a question, but only because he sounded like he didn't actually want to know.

“Yeah, she did. Aren't you happy?” Chrono gave him no real chance to reply. “And she called you reliable. Though-”

“Thought what?” Ibuki had become nervous.

“She said she plans on getting to know you, now. So that you won't be able to hide anything.”

“Surely I... I hope we can still have our privacy.”

Chrono laughed weakly.

“I... I am glad she'd say that, though.” Ibuki sounded pained to admit it. Chrono thought it was cute. “So don't misunderstand me.”

“I know, I know...”

“I'm glad things went well, despite everything. Hopefully you'll feel more at ease now, speaking to your father.”

“I... I don't know about that.” Chrono could only be honest.

“Why not?” Ibuki asked, wondering.

“It's all 'cause I... I didn't think I was gonna cry.” Chrono had frankly been unable to predict his reaction. “And, I... I've never cried around my dad before.”

Chrono sighed. “Or, not since I was like. A baby.”

Ibuki was quiet for a moment. “I don't think you should worry about that.”
Chrono wasn't sure what else he expected him to say.

“I understand why you would... dread to be in that situation. Frankly I... I wish there was something I could do, to make you feel better.” Ibuki indeed sounded quite pained. Chrono could not help but feel lighter in turn. Just by listening, Ibuki was supporting him, helping him with his burdens. “In part, I can't help but feel that maybe your father could do well in doing his job for once. To... support you and comfort you when you are sad. But I realize that hardly makes you feel better.”

Chrono didn't know how he felt. “He's the reason I'm sad in the first place.”

“Yes. I think he deserves to know that. To see it for himself.”

Chrono closed his eyes.

“Though I realize, to you, it matters little as long as you're not comfortable with it.” Ibuki said apologetically.

“I get what you mean.” Chrono wasn't upset. He did appreciate a different perspective. “It's fine.”

“Chrono, I...” He heard Ibuki hesitate. Chrono realized he wasn't at all sure what he might say. “I want you to know how brave I think you are for going through with this. You're as frightened and as anxious as anyone would be. No matter what you do, or no matter how things end up, I don't want you to think any less of yourself for it.”

Chrono felt like his eyes might prickle with tears again. “Thanks, I... I know. I know.”

“I'm sure your aunt feels the same way.” Ibuki expressed himself sincerely. “As complex as this all is, please try and... focus on yourself.”

Chrono sighed. “I will.” He appreciated it. He really did, but he was at his limit.

“I'm sorry, but... can we not talk about this right now?” Chrono had tired of this topic. He had nothing more to say.

“Of course. That's alright.”

“Thanks.”

“You worried me quite a bit before, when you sent me that text.”

“Yeah... sorry about that. I didn't mean to leave you hanging.”

“I realize that. I was surprised you made your mind up quite so abruptly, though.”

“It wasn't... that abrupt. I'd decided this morning that I'd... tell her.” Chrono felt guilty. “I'm sorry I didn't let you know sooner, I... I guess I was afraid I'd back out at the last minute. I wouldn't know what to say to you if that happened.”

“...I wouldn't have blamed you.”

“I know.” Chrono sighed lightly. “I suppose I just... wanted to get it over with.”

“That's fair.”

"I might... come back to you. Tomorrow."
“What?” Ibuki was properly confounded. “Why's that?”

“I left most of my stuff at your place.” Had he not noticed? “So I thought I might as well.”

“You're welcome here at any time.”

“I know. And...” Chrono wasn't sure why he hesitated. “And now that I'm not hiding anything from Mikuru anymore, I don't have any reason not to.”

He could hear Ibuki smiling as he spoke. “I see.”

Chrono didn't want to wait. He really didn't. He didn't feel much stronger, if anything he felt that he'd become all the closer acquainted with his own fears. He did however, feel accomplished, and he'd realized his resolve ran deep, deeper than he'd known.

Mikuru's car pulled up outside Ibuki's apartment. Chrono sat in the front seat, his hands in his lap, feeling needlessly awkward with the whole situation. He felt like a child being dropped off by his parent for a play date with his crush. Not that he had ever been in that situation. He would imagine this was what it felt like, though. Mikuru got the glove compartment open with a trained flick of the wrist. “Tell Ibuki hi from me, okay?”

“I will.” Chrono said, his teeth clenched together.

“And here,” In his lap, she put a light box, wrapped in glossy gift wrap from an airport gift store. “Give him this. I meant to give it to him myself, but since you're going to see him, I thought you might as well.”

Chrono held it in his hands, eyeing it suspiciously. “What is it?”

“It's just a little something. He got me that liquor last time, so I thought I should get him something.”

“It's...” Chrono fought a sigh. “He doesn't care about that stuff. You don't have to buy him anything.”

Chrono feared they'd get stuck in a gift buying loop. He really didn't need that to worry about right now.

“Well, it's too late now, I already bought it.” Her way of dodging his reasoning was very effective. “Just give it to him, now.”

“Alright.” What was he supposed to say?

As he moved to get out of the car, Mikuru appeared to remember something. “Oh, and by the way...”

“Yeah?” Chrono was in no hurry, but he'd still like to get going.

“About the last two weeks in September, let him know I'll be in town on the 27th and then until the 1st. Okay?” She smiled, and Chrono felt increasingly tired. “He emailed me about it earlier today but
I forgot to respond.”

“A-alright, but...” He didn't want to be mad. He knew he was just being touchy for no good reason. “Next time, talk to him yourself. Okay?”

“Sure, I will.” Mikuru responded. Chrono had a feeling she wasn't fully listening. “Take care now!”

“Yeah, yeah...”

When Chrono came inside the door, it appeared that Ibuki had only just gotten home himself. Before he made his presence known, Chrono put the package Mikuru gave him in his bag. He'd show it to Ibuki later, he thought, aware of the risk that he might forget.

When Ibuki came to greet him, putting his arms around him, Chrono let it be a simple embrace. He didn't feel like kissing.

Chrono left Ibuki alone in the kitchen, all while he gathered his things. He would stay the night, but the task at hand left him feeling disillusioned. Most of his clothes were in the laundry basket, and his books were scattered across the kitchen and living room tables. Sitting on the bed, he'd been swept up by a nameless melancholy before he'd even realized. In the kitchen, Ibuki was keeping an eye on the dinner they'd prepared together. It had never happened before, but Chrono felt that he longed for his room, his room in Mikuru's apartment, the sound of her voice from behind the walls, and the familiar scent of that place which had been his home for so long.

What made him melancholic, surely, was the undeniable fact, that if he were home right now, he would miss this place, and Ibuki more so.

As he came back into the kitchen, he indeed saw Ibuki standing by the stove. Quietly, Chrono slipped up next to him. The meat strips in their fried rice was still going to take a little while longer. Resting his head on Ibuki's shoulder, Chrono thought that he wanted to speak to him, but felt as if though he had nothing to say.

Ibuki's head turned. “You look tired.” Such was his observation.

“I guess I am.”

“We should go to bed early, then.”

“I'm... gonna talk to my dad tomorrow.”

“...I see.” Ibuki made no judgment.

“I'll call him.”

“When did you have in mind?”

“I don't know. Not too late.”

Chrono frankly wasn't too concerned with the time zones. It wasn't like his dad worked a day job.

They ate, and after Ibuki had finished up his work and Chrono his studies, they got ready to go to bed. Chrono watched himself in the bathroom mirror, a little slow to start brushing his teeth. Ibuki's private, personal life; his unguarded natural self. It had only been so long since he'd gained insight into it all. Yet, it had already become so natural to him. To watch him through the mirror, as he was only his most casual self, Chrono felt himself fall in love with him, all over again. He would feel like
that, time and time again. He no longer doubted his feelings, but when Mikuru's words replayed in his mind, he felt anxious. Chrono knew it best to accept even the harsh truths. Then why, why were the kind and forgiving ones so hard to take to heart?

Rolling into bed once more, Chrono resumed watching Ibuki in the dark.

“I forgot to tell you, but Mikuru did say she'd be in town on the 27th and then until October.”

“I see.” Preoccupied with his phone, Ibuki did not look at him. “Thank you for relaying that. I'll make note of it.”

“Don't mention it.”

Putting his phone away, Ibuki laid down proper in bed. He moved a little closer, and Chrono felt his heart beat in his chest. He moved as well, putting their faces close. As tired as he'd been, he suddenly felt strangely awake. They'd laid in silence for a moment, before Ibuki shifted, his eyes glancing open. Chrono didn't hide it. He'd been staring at Ibuki's face.

“Go to sleep.” Ibuki huffed.

Chrono smiled. “Alright.”

As Ibuki put his arm around him, Chrono closed his eyes, and tried to calm his restless and overfilled mind.

A dreamless sleep, light and fleeting, left him awake and restless before dawn. Chrono had made an honest effort to go back to sleep. He couldn't. It wasn't strange or surprising, but in truth he was barely bothered by it. He had more important things to worry about, and within that laid the root of his problems. Ibuki laid close to him, on his side, eyelids heavily closed, his face submerged in his pillow. He appeared to rest comfortably, deeply asleep. Chrono watched him, once he was at terms with inability to do the same himself.

Nothing would change like this. He'd already made his mind up. Chrono rose, carefully, doing what he could to not make a sound.

It was dark outside. His mind was strangely sharp, his thoughts crisp. He still needed a moment. Standing in the kitchen, with his back against the counter, he stared into his phone. He naturally hesitated. He knew he would, until the very end. He was tired. He hadn't expected that to be the feeling that would motivate him once he was here, but frankly, he would have to take it. It wasn't how he wanted things to be. He'd wished it to be dignified. Now, he didn't care for such luxury.

Chrono put the phone to his ear. The signals went through, and when the cold sweat and pressing fear hit him, it was still somehow worse than he'd expected.

For a while, it seemed as if Rive wouldn't pick up. Chrono's heart sank, so when the line did crackle to life, his father's voice on the other side, he almost jumped.
“Hello?” In disbelief, he sounded carefully optimistic. It was heartbreaking, honestly. “Chrono?”

“I-hey, dad…” Chrono did smile, despite himself. He was already so nervous, it was hard to think. “It's... it's me.”

“Hey, what's up? How are you?”

If Rive was picking up on how hard he was trying to mask his anxious state, Chrono couldn't tell. He decided not to think about it. From here on out, it wouldn't matter.

“I'm... I'm good.” Never mind how he felt right this moment, Chrono would certainly have to say that he was well. His life was good, better than it had been in a long time. “How about you? Do you... have time to talk for a bit?”

“Oh, sure!” Despite his words, Rive's focus fluctuated. “I'm good, I'm good. I have time to talk, sure.”

Chrono decided to take his word for it. “Good...”

“What is it? Something on your mind?”

Rive sounded genuinely happy. More so than Chrono remembered him sounding in the longest time. It was tough. Not disheartening, but tough. It served to remind him off how things should be.

“I... well...”

He'd already become sad, like he'd feared. He could already feel his throat dry up, before he'd even said a single word.

He hadn't thought to hit things head on. He'd hoped they could small talk for a while. Now, that felt impossible.

“There's something I gotta tell you.” His voice didn't crack, though it felt like it might.

“Oh? What is it?” Rive sounded curious.

“Dad, I... I've met someone.”

“Really? That's... that's great. That's really great, son.” He sounded wondrous, but genuinely happy. “Congratulations.”

"Thanks." Chrono replied weakly. He tried to not sound upset. As jarring as it was, as hard as it was, he wanted nothing more than to accept his father's heartfelt words. It would still be a while longer before he could get a chance to start and try.

“Is that what you wanted to tell me?” Rive asked carefully. It was quite clear, as it would be to anyone, that Chrono had more things to say.

“Yeah, but...” Chrono's voice had become an unconfident murmur. He tried to pull himself together. Initially failing, he fell into silence.

“Chrono?”

Hearing his father concerned, Chrono gathered his courage. He did want to tell him. He'd been late to realize how strongly he felt that, despite how he dreaded it.
“I’m telling you ‘cause, it’s... it’s serious, and... we’ve been together for a while now and I know this is what I want.” Though his voice wavered, colored still by his doubt and already by the tears that threatened to fall, Chrono could only hope that his transparency would resonate with his father.

“And I don’t know... what you’ll say but, we’ve talked about it and, me and... and Ibuki we, we decided it was time to... to tell you.”

Though he’d made no plan of what to say exactly, he’d found his way. Chrono didn't dare breathe. His father remained silent for a moment, but Chrono was strangely thankful for it.

“I see.” His voice was rich with something, though Chrono was uncertain of what. Perhaps it was nothing but the lingering realization.

The colors of the deep blue morning darkness were cold, creating the first few shadows of the dawning day, stretching across him in the kitchen. Having said what he’d wanted, Chrono found that the anticipation was unbearable. He just wanted the relief to come. He cried, tears silently forming in his eyes, rolling down his cheeks.

“It's been... a pretty long time.” He felt compelled to fill in. He knew it wouldn't be hard to hear he was crying, even if the flow of tears was surprisingly painless.

“It has?”

“It's been about... a year.” Chrono felt himself shrug as he said it.

“A year, huh?” Rive was still vaguely wondrous. Chrono realized his father had to be in some state of shock.

“I know this probably isn't what you expected, but...”

“Hey, look...” Saddened, Rive would surprise him. “Sure, but... that goes for anything.”

Realizing what he meant, Chrono sobbed.

“I wouldn't know what to expect. I mean, it's not like I... ever asked.” Rive was humble, and yet there was a lighthearted sound to his voice.

Chrono realized he knew that voice. As a young child, his father had used to speak to him like that, to comfort him. Crying harder, Chrono squeezed his eyes shut.

“I was never around to figure it out. Or for you to... open up to me.”

“You really weren't.” Chrono sobbed, surprising himself with his outspokenness.

“I know.”

“Why weren't you?”

The question flew out of him like a ghost, like a curse, sad, frustrated and angry.

Despite everything, it felt good to ask. Before the answer even came, Chrono felt himself unwind. A profound silence followed. With the past having effectively and undeniably caught up with him, Rive had little to use to defend himself.

“I know... I owe you an apology. But I also know that I can't ever... say or... do anything that'll set things right.” Though saddened, Rive's humility did for once not feel misplaced. Chrono listened in
silence.

“For a long time, I wasn't well... I couldn't be much of a father even if I'd tried. But that was a long time ago. And already before then I'd... I'd failed you.”

Yet to disagree, Chrono still struggled to take it in.

“I was ashamed. It's not any excuse. It's barely an explanation, but... I didn't doubt... that you'd be happy. Even without me.”

“Sure, but...” Bitter, his voice trembling, Chrono didn't reject that reality. “You could still come home. To us. It would...” He sobbed, though he tried hard not to. “It would just be... easier, and... Mikuru could rely on you, and... we all could...”

His voice faded. Speaking had become so painful, he had to stop.

“I know.”

“Ibuki, he... he could use seeing you, too.” It was hard to be detached as he cried, but the words wouldn't form any other way. “He's been... worried you won't approve of him. To me, I mean, it doesn't really matter, but...” It did matter, naturally, but not comparatively. “Or I mean, it does, but...”

“I don't think I have the right to make that sort of judgment call...”

“Yeah, but... he deserves to at least learn that like, in person.”

“He absolutely does.”

They weren't actually disagreeing. It was a start. Chrono sobbed quietly. “I... I invited him to spend my birthday with us, so... I mean...”

“I see.” Rive indeed sounded like he'd understood something.

“Dad, I...” With his hand shaking, Chrono pressed his phone hard against the side of his face. “I'm telling you this because, I... want to be with him, and...”

Though he still cried, silently, he felt like he couldn't stop the words from coming out. It was too late, and the fear that remained in him, remained in fear of what else might come out.

“He's... he's gonna be with me from now on, so.” He sniffed, but it was not enough to shatter the distinct resolve in his voice. “He's gonna be family. So, y-you better treat him like it.”

“I... I understand.” Rive knew he had to accept.

“He doesn't... have much of any other family, anyhow.”

“I know.”

It sounded like he indeed knew. Chrono wasn't surprised. Closing his eyes, tears spilling out as he did, Chrono found it easier to breathe. The white, harsh morning light was slowly creeping up beyond the horizon, stretching the shadows in the apartment, as the day started to come alive with color.

“I'll come see you all.” Rive spoke to break the silence by himself, for once. “And I'm really looking forward to it.”
“Yeah,” Chrono's voice was fragile. He found deep inside, beyond his fears and his doubts, that he was looking forward to it, too. “It... it'll be... nice.”

“I had... a good talk with Ibuki last time.” Rive addressed the matter quite carefully.

“Yeah, he...” Chrono wondered if he was entitled to say what he knew. He realized he didn't care. “He told me.”

“I figured he might.” Rive was smiling, sadly. “I suppose he's gained some... leverage on me.”

Chrono smiled too, much in the same way. A scoff of a laugh left him. “He might surprise you.”

“I don't know.” Rive said earnestly. “I mean... I always knew he had a lot of good in him. A lot of sadness, too. But you know.”

“Yeah.” Chrono had yet to realize he'd stopped crying. He sniffed. “You ought to be better to him, too.”

During the years that had gone by, Rive had indeed put Ibuki to work. It had all been a very convenient solution for him. “I... I know.” It was catching up to him now, too.

“I mean, he...” Chrono shrugged. “He considers himself indebted to you, I'm sure.”

“I see. Personally, well, I...” Rive sounded like the concept was somehow unfamiliar to him. “I consider him a friend.”

“Right.” Chrono found it somewhat ironic, though, he was not unhappy to hear it.

“And when it came to anything regarding you, he was always happy to help.”

Chrono wished he hadn't audibly sighed. “Uh-huh.”

“I can only assume he's tired of... enabling me.”

“Yeah, I mean...” Chrono had realized, though it had somehow failed to dawn on him.

“Considering the... situation he's in, too...”

Chrono swallowed hard. “Dad, I...” He didn't want to get so emotional. It was impossible. “I really like him.”

“I see.”

“He's... he's changed a lot.” His voice barely breaking, Chrono pressed on. “For me.”

When his father was silent, Chrono was thankful. He needed a second, or two. The early day's pouring light gave him the final last shred of courage he needed.

“So, I just... I want you... to be good to him. Is what I wanted to say.”

“Hey, Chrono...” Though he wasn't sure why, Chrono could clearly hear his father smile. It was more reassuring than he'd ever thought. “Don't worry about it, okay? I will. I promise.”

A final, dry sob. “Okay.”

They spoke for a short while longer, though it would all quickly fade from his memory. It helped
take the edge off. In the end, he'd cried, like he had feared he would. Regardless, he felt that it had all fallen into place. After hanging up, the second the call screen faded and registered the call as having ended, Chrono felt himself deflate, drained. He was so tired. He'd been way too tense to realize, but he was outright exhausted. As soon as he thought of going back to bed, anything else felt unthinkable. It was a school day. He didn't care. Dragging his feet, he went back into the bedroom. The sun had indeed risen, but with the windows draped in the bedroom, it was still comfortingly dark.

As he came in past the threshold, Ibuki moved. Chrono had realized there was a fair chance he was awake, and that he had been for a while. That he'd probably heard bit and pieces of the conversation. It was alright. Ibuki didn't try to hide it. Instead, he rose, slowly coming to a sitting. Frankly, he looked way more awake than Chrono felt. Instead of going around to lie down on his side, Chrono just slumped to a sitting right next to him.

“How did it go?” Ibuki asked, his voice hushed.

Relaxing, Chrono tipped his body forward, his face coming to a rest against Ibuki's chest.

“It went,” He sighed. “Not terribly.”

He felt Ibuki's arms wrap gently around him. If he could, he wouldn't mind fading away just like this.

“I mean, I... I cried. Again. Like I feared I would, but...” Sitting in place, Chrono shrugged weakly. “I guess you can't always get things the way you want them.”

“You were scared. But you still went through with it.” Ibuki held him a little tighter. “I'm... I'm very proud of you.”

Chrono wished he could say he felt the same way. He could not wholly. Accepting it for what it was, he decided not to think about it too hard.

“I'm so tired.” He admitted. “But also so agitated.”

“I understand.” Ibuki sighed.

“I wasn't sure what he was gonna say, but... I guess I'd prepared myself for the worst.” Chrono said, quietly. “But I mean. He... he took it pretty well.”

“That's good to hear.”

“Yeah...”

“You should try and go back to sleep.” Ibuki still held him.

“I should.” Chrono didn't move, despite his words.

Though it hadn't been more than a few minutes since they'd spoken, Chrono already thought his conversation with his father felt equally distant as it felt uncomfortably close. There were certain things he saw little reason to speak of, but regardless he already felt as if he'd go crazy if he didn't get to vent.

“I… I told him to come back home.”

“You did?”

“Yeah, I guess I… got pretty mad.” In hindsight, it was hard to gauge. He'd felt mad. Whenever he
did, people always appeared to be put off.

“Naturally you were right to be.”

“I mean, yeah, but…”

“Were you worried he might be upset with you?”

Chrono shrugged. “I guess so. Or like. That he wouldn't wanna talk to me anymore. That he'd be too scared by me yelling at him to even try.”

He felt like crying again. All that escaped him was a light sob. Ibuki still held him.

“Even if things were to turn out that way, it wouldn't be your fault.”

“I know, but…” Closing his eyes, Chrono focused on the sensation of Ibuki's arms around him. It helped. It made him feel okay.

“He really seemed like he didn't know what to say. For the most part.” Chrono realized he might have been deluded to expect anything else. Other than that, he didn't know how to feel.

“Well, all things considered…”

Ibuki appeared to have realized that before himself. It was another strange matter. Chrono thought of Mikuru.

“It's frustrating, though.” Chrono admitted. “Cause it feels like. Things still aren't like, coming together.”

“Yeah.” Ibuki sounded like he felt the same way. “It'll be a while before they do.”

“I guess.” Chrono's voice cracked a bit. “At least… my dad, you know. He likes you.”

“I… I'd hope so.” Ibuki spoke carefully, reluctantly.

Chrono pulled away with another light sob. Ibuki wiped his cheeks, though he was a little clumsy doing so. Chrono let him, watching him endearingly. He was doing all this, just for them. He'd never questioned if it was worth it. Leaning in, he kissed Ibuki's face.

Ibuki kissed him back, pulling him close, rubbing his back. “It's still early. You really should try and get some sleep.”

“Right…” Chrono stretched lightly.

Chrono laid down in bed, next to Ibuki who moved over to give him space. He felt better, but he was still uncertain if he'd be able to sleep. He wanted to try, though. He wanted to at least rest. It was weird to think about how so many people knew about them now. Chrono couldn't get used to it, feeling exposed, vulnerable. He looked at Ibuki, who'd laid back down in bed as well.

“How do you feel?”

He asked without really thinking. Ibuki looked like he might ask something, but then he didn't.

“I'm not sure. I suppose it still feels like it's yet to sink in.”

Chrono thought it fair.
“I suppose once I see your aunt and your father it will be different.” He smiled, if somewhat cynically.

“I guess so...”

“I've been worried about you, rather.”

“You don't have... to worry about me...” Chrono smiled, his words coming out thoughtlessly. Ibuki didn't smile in return. Instead, he appeared quite serious.

“This is about you, in the end. I've realized as much.”

“Yeah but... you were so upset about the whole thing with my dad and all. Less so with Mikuru but still.”

“They're your family, Chrono. Me, I can always walk away. You don't have that same option, at least not without making an immeasurable sacrifice.”

“That's true, but...” Despite how dramatic his words were, they made Chrono smile. “I was just asking how you were doing is all.”

“Well, in that case... I am fine.” Ibuki said decidedly. He moved in a little closer.

Chrono still felt raw from crying. He was too tired to think about the day ahead. As he closed his eyes, he felt Ibuki's hand lightly on his back.

“Try to sleep.” He spoke quietly, gently.

"I dunno if I can." Chrono admitted. “But I'm too tired not to try.”

Ibuki moved closer, pulling the covers up over them. Laying his head on Ibuki's shoulder, Chrono felt the strong grip of his embrace.

“Maybe I should skip my classes today.” He mumbled, his voice muffled.

“...It might be for the best.” As vague as the response was, Chrono could tell Ibuki was encouraging him to do it.

Chrono didn't like skipping school. Naturally it was troublesome, but it also made him feel bad. Just this one time though, he might just let himself.

“...Dad said he was looking forward to seeing us.” Chrono mumbled against Ibuki's shoulder. His mind still felt too full of thoughts.

“Well, I'd hope so.”

“He said he had a good talk with you last time.”

“Well... I'd... hope so.”

With his eyes open, Chrono laid peering over Ibuki's shoulder. The sun had risen behind the drapes. It was morning.

“I was quite frank with him last time.” Ibuki didn't sound like he regretted it. He was sharing information that he wanted Chrono to take into consideration.
“Yeah. Which is why I'm letting you know.”

Ibuki still held him.

“Are you worried about meeting him again?”

“I haven't... thought too much about that just yet.”

Chrono's worries appeared to stir. “He didn't sound upset with you or anything. In case you were worried about that.”

“Chrono. Please try to sleep.”

“Right...”

Knowing Ibuki had a point, Chrono slid down, pressing his face against his shirt. He couldn't stop the thoughts in his mind, but he tried to not let them affect him. His father's voice, as heard though the phone, was still uncomfortably close and emotionally loaded. Maybe he should be happy his father had been so emotionally genuine, but Chrono could not yet judge clearly what it all meant. That frustrated him, making him impatient. At heart, he'd known telling his father would just be a first step. He'd need to accept the consequences as they followed as well, and he'd need to come to terms with whichever way their relationship would change. To actually be here was different. It was harder to be at peace. Recognizing that, Chrono thought it best to acknowledge that whatever pondering he did now would not matter anyhow. He was simply worked up, his body refusing to come down mercifully from the rush and the high of adrenaline.

After shifting one time too many, Ibuki held him tighter. Chrono took the hint, and let his body become limp. He was drained. Closing his eyes, his thoughts finally faded as he was too tired to hold onto any of them. He still could not sleep. No, a different, but more so familiar sensation disturbed him. Relaxing or resting would not make it go away. No, it would only make it worse. Chrono moved again.

“Chrono...”

“I'm hungry.”

Worrying, not sleeping, it would do that to you. Ibuki moved.

“Do you... want me to make you something?” He was reluctant to ask but did so anyway. He wanted to help. Chrono didn't know what to say, not because he didn't appreciate it, but because he had no appetite.

Falling face down into Ibuki's pillow, his voice was a muffled mutter. “That's fine...”

“Chrono.” Ibuki insisted.

Chrono knew he had to comply, knowing it would be hypocritical if he didn't. He rolled over.

“What would you like?”

Ibuki was asking him so sincerely, and yet Chrono couldn't think of anything. He felt like his body would reject any food he tried eating.

“I don't know...” He replied earnestly. He felt very close to complaining. He really just wanted to sleep. “I feel sick.”
“It could just be that you're just that hungry.” He felt Ibuki's hand in his hair, his fingers combing through the strands.

“I know, but…”

“Let me know if you think of anything.”

“Sure. Okay.” Chrono didn't feel very hopeful, but agreed. Ibuki's weight came back down on the mattress. Chrono still felt sick, but he felt a bit more successful at ignoring it.

Laying awake, with Ibuki's hand on his back, Chrono thought of his father again, unable to stop. He thought of Mikuru, too. Wondered about the things on her mind. He still missed her.

Laying where he did, with Ibuki holding him tight, Chrono eventually felt his emotions numbing. As the sun rose higher in the sky, his anxious thoughts eventually faded into nothing. He was asleep before he knew it.

The city would wake as the morning came. Chrono slept through it all, oblivious. He came to slowly, waking without a thought in his mind. Ibuki's presence was still in the warmth between the sheets, still in the space of the rooms, still like a touch on his skin. Chrono didn't know when he'd gone to work exactly, but he'd slept through that, too. Instead of rolling over, he slowly pulled himself up.

The light hurt his eyes. It was almost noon, already. His hunger had made itself known like a sharp pain passing through his chest and into his gut. He sat in place rubbing his eyes. He needed to think of something to eat. He couldn't ignore the problem this time around.

He remembered the feeling that'd engulfed him the night before. It already felt like a lifetime ago. He worried that it would creep up on him again. He really didn't need that. Things were supposed to make sense. He was supposed to be happy. Yet, he felt restless, melancholic. Maybe there was some solution, and maybe it was easier to find than he'd yet to realize. At the very least, Chrono hoped so.

He got out of bed. His body felt lighter than he'd thought it would. He'd really needed those last extra hours of sleep. Coming into the kitchen, he yawned, tears clouding his vision. He opened the refrigerator with a click, but in the corner of his eye an object out of order caught his attention.

There was a bowl sitting on the kitchen table. That it didn't make any sense. He saw that there was a mug, too, and a plate. Slowly, Chrono closed the fridge without even looking inside. He was still tired, sluggish, and unable to connect the dots. A meal sat on the table. It was just some rice and eggs, but it was regardless a meal. It still took Chrono a moment to understand, to understand that it was intended for him. Ibuki had made him breakfast. He'd made him some coffee, too. He pulled out the chair, and sat down. He stared. When had someone last made him breakfast? It felt like it should have happened at some point in his life, but he couldn't seem to remember. The coffee had gone cold. As had the eggs, and the rice. It didn't matter. He ate. It tasted good. Better than anything he'd eaten in forever, actually. He was so, so tired of crying and yet, and yet, maybe it was okay to get just another few tears out, just for good measure.

He thought about Ibuki. He should be eating right about now, too. Chrono thought that he should
check on him as soon as he finished. His thoughts soon drifted again. He realized he'd forgotten about the souvenir that Mikuru has asked him to hand over, just like he'd thought he might. He would just turn it over tonight, he thought, aware that would change his plans yet again. Soon enough, it wouldn't have to be like that. Soon enough, he could be home, and be with Ibuki, without having to compromise.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!