

“How’d you feel when you found out about Haruki, Miyabi?” Shuya asked, a joyful tone in his voice as his arm squeezed around Toshio’s shoulder. He had just finished congratulating Toshio for his wife Erika’s pregnancy, which everyone had just found out about and was so excited for. Miyabi, a few steps behind them, felt a piercing sensation when that question was asked, like someone poking at a wound in his heart that had been struggling to heal. His demeanor darkened as he thought of how he might respond. After all, he didn’t know about Haruki. All of the pain and guilt from that time began to bubble up again inside him, and he wondered if Shuya even remembered all of the details of how things regarding Nastasiya played out...

“Everyone, I’m glad I caught you,” Miyabi’s thoughts were then interrupted as Dr. Leonhardt, the cool bald and highly pierced American doctor who had just performed Akito’s appendectomy, ran to them in the hospital hallway looking slightly out of breath. “I just heard that a bunch of your fans have come to the hospital to try and see Akito.”

“Oh man... really?” Shuya shook his head, knowing it probably couldn’t be helped.

“Yes, but don’t worry. Hospital security will keep them in check so he can recover in peace. You all may want to leave from the staff parking garage, though, so you don’t get mobbed,” the doctor said. He then adjusted his black-framed glasses, their lenses glinting in the fluorescent lighting lining the hallway. “You have very... passionate fans.”

Toshio, Shuya, and Miyabi looked at each other with awkward grins. They were grateful and, at times, slightly frightened by the devotion of their fans. “Thank you, doctor. We’ll do just that,” Shuya said, wholly wishing to keep all his limbs intact.

The doctor then pulled a square object from his white lab coat’s pocket. Instantly the guys recognized it: a CD of their newly released single “Drizzle.” The doctor cleared his throat, his cheeks blushing a soft pink. “Now that I am off the clock,” he started, “I hope you’ll let me tell you what a huge fan I am. Your new single is... brilliant,” he tried not to sound too excited, but it was hard. “May I please have your autographs?” The guys smiled and were more than happy to comply. They each took turns signing their names on the disc with a silver pen the doctor had with him. Dr. Leonhardt was overjoyed and flashed a grateful smile to them. “Thank you. I’m something of a music fanatic, so this really means a lot. Do you think Akito will let me have his tomorrow before his release?”

“I’m sure he will,” Miyabi replied and placed the cap back on the pen. “Anything for what you’ve done today. We’re so grateful you were there, you really saved the day.”

“Yeah! No one expected Aki’s appendix to explode like that... Sure made for an interesting concert, though!” Shuya chuckled and Toshio nodded.

“I was just doing my job and happy to do it,” replied the doctor, clenching the autographed CD like a prized jewel. “And I look forward to your next gig. I’ll be front and center again, just in case of another medical emergency.” Everyone laughed and then noticed Dr. Leonhardt’s quiet

friend and assistant Klaus approaching. He had changed out of his scrubs back into his regular clothing. He couldn't help stifle a yawn as he came next to the doctor—it was getting late and he was ready to go home. “Well...” the doctor began, feeling a yawn coming on himself, “please have a good night, everyone. I'll make sure Akito is looked after well. Feel free to visit him tomorrow morning.”

“Thank you,” the Orochi boys bowed their heads a bit, feeling so grateful for the medical expertise which saved their fun-loving guitarist. They parted ways, and Miyabi couldn't help still feeling bothered by Shuya's question about how he felt when he found out about Haruki... He was just glad he didn't have to answer because he wasn't even sure what he'd say...

Meanwhile, Yumi had stayed in the waiting area with Erika, who had fallen asleep. She wanted to let the boys have their time with Akito, so she was fine to stay behind with the petite pregnant lady. She was feeling sleepy herself, but perked up once the guys approached. She smiled at them and eagerly asked, “How is he?”

“Good. A little loopy from meds, but excited about being engaged. And I believe enjoying true love's apple juice box as we speak,” said Shuya, stretching his arms a bit. Everyone was starting to feel tired now.

“Awww...” Yumi felt warm and fuzzy inside, and then felt Miyabi's hand on hers in a gentle grasp. She looked to see him leaning down to her, meeting his dark eyes directly. She noticed he looked a bit troubled.

“Let's go home,” he said softly.

Yumi nodded and stood up, still holding his hand. Toshio woke up Erika and helped her to her feet, glancing over to Yumi and Miyabi as they began to walk away. He put his arm around his wife and let her rest against his shoulder as he looked on to Yumi from behind. The feelings he had told Mitsuzuka-san about earlier were still on his mind, but he wasn't going to let them overrun him, he was determined of that. Toshio looked down to his sleepy Erika and thought about the news he had just learned before the concert of the little life budding inside her. It sent a soothing warmth over him. Toshio clung onto her tighter, leaning his head down onto hers as they made their way out of the hospital. Yumi, he knew, was indeed the past. Erika and the new baby were the future.

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Miyabi had been quiet on the way home as Ando-san, Orochi's new manager, drove everyone home. Yumi knew something was bothering him, but she got herself ready for bed before trying to determine what it was—she was just getting too tired. When she came into her bedroom after finishing her shower and brushing her teeth, she saw her husband lying on the bed faced

away from her with only a single lamp on to light the room. And since Haruki was spending the night at Shuya and Musashi's house, all was very quiet. Thinking he was asleep, she quietly climbed onto the bed, trying not to disturb him as she pulled the covers over herself. Then suddenly she heard Miyabi's velvet voice in a hushed, quiet tone. "I really was a jerk then."

"What?" She was startled, expecting he'd already fallen asleep.

"I didn't know about Haruki," Miyabi was still turned away, his voice a little louder now, "Not until he was, like, five months old. I had no idea he even existed..." Then he turned to Yumi with a pained look searing behind his eyes, almost as if he were close to tears. It made Yumi concerned to see that, and she knew something had triggered his past regrets to boil to the surface again. She just didn't know for sure what, especially after the appendicitis-filled adventure they'd just come from. Miyabi then sighed and lowered his head, "I'm sorry." He tried to compose himself again, closing his eyes which were starting to sting from trapped tears. "It's just something Shuya said..."

"What did he say?" Yumi asked, scooting closer to him.

"Just..." Miyabi opened his eyes again and looked forward in the dimly lit room to nowhere in particular. "Toshio's gonna be a dad. He knows Erika's pregnant. He's gonna get to experience all that with her, see when his kid is born... And Shuya got to do that too. But I... didn't get to."

Yumi's shoulders sank and she leaned her head against his. So *that* was what was bothering him... She knew how deeply he regretted everything from back then, but knew she could never fully understand the depth of his regret. How it must have torn him up, and still continued to claw bitterly in his heart whenever those memories surfaced. Quickly she tried to think of something comforting to say. "Yeah... but you have been such a good father. You stepped up and did everything you could when a baby suddenly showed up in your arms. I couldn't have done that." Yumi gently stroked his head, her fingers getting lost in his luscious black hair. "Whatever happened in the past... you're a wonderful father now. Haruki is so lucky to have you."

Miyabi smiled. "Thanks." He paused for a moment, enjoying the feel of her fingers stroking his hair. "I know I've said maybe it's better I didn't know because of how crazy everything was back then... But still..."

"I know," Yumi said softly, her head now resting on his shoulder. She honestly didn't know what else to say—the subject of Nastasiya was incredibly sensitive for her too. A slight shiver went down her spine as she remembered the frightening sensation of fingertips digging into her neck. Nastasiya, Yumi knew, would always haunt her to some degree.

Miyabi turned to Yumi and exhaled deeply. Then he noticed the neckline of her silky pink pajamas dipping enticingly low around her chest. His eyes fixated, it made him smile again and,

besides just exciting him, helped bring him back to the present where life was full and beautiful and good. He was grateful for how everything had turned out: he had known bitterness and now could fully appreciate and embrace the sweet, which was his life and marriage with Yumi.

“Well... I’ll definitely have better luck next time.”

“What?” Yumi couldn’t hear his whispered voice well.

Miyabi then straightened up to look into her eyes, the pain and regret sinking back down again. He put his hand over hers and held it firmly with a sincere smile gracing his lips. “I want to have a baby with you. And this time, I’m not just some stupid horny teenager—I’m gonna do it right. I’ll be there every step of the way... That would mean the world to me!”

Yumi’s eyes widened and she felt a jolt of adrenaline surge through her. It was a fight or flight response, and realizing that came as a surprise to her. She and Miyabi had never really talked about that subject before, and she certainly wasn’t expecting to on this night! She squirmed a bit and cleared her throat, trying to think of something to say. Instead she just ended up chortling uncomfortably.

Miyabi’s face was beaming and he was eager for the response he wanted to hear. “So... what do you think? You want to have a baby with me?” Just asking that excited him further. He could’ve gone for it then and there.

“W-well,” Yumi stammered and felt a little perspiration begin to build under her arms, “I... I do, of course. Some day! When I’m ready...” she trailed off and felt her heart rate quickening.

Miyabi pecked a little kiss on her neck, which he knew she liked. “You could do it, we could do it. As a team, like it’s supposed to be. Imagine how great that’d be!”

Yumi bit her lower lip, uncertainty beginning to lead to panic as Miyabi’s advances strengthened. Every touch he gave raised her emotions, and when she felt his hands traveling toward her inner thigh, she broke away. Quickly she adjusted her pajamas back to their proper place, the sound of her own heartbeat resonating in her ears. She turned away and dangled her legs off the bed, still tingling from his touches and sweating from the anxieties this situation thrust at her. “I’m sorry, Miyabi... I’m just... not ready...” her voice was weak and unsure.

Miyabi was quiet. He looked at her from behind, his expression falling. It was hard for him to believe what she’d just said, he was certain she’d be on board with it. Or at least agreeable to it in the very near future. He did not expect the *I’m not ready* response from the woman he loved and knew would make a fantastic mother. Unconsciously scoffing, he shook his head a bit and got off the bed. “Okay,” he simply muttered and left the room.

As the door closed leaving Yumi alone in the bedroom, she felt a lump form in her throat. She wasn’t sure what to think, or even what to feel. She and Miyabi had been married for a couple

of months, and were still very much in the honeymoon phase. This experience tonight, which came on so suddenly she couldn't even begin to process it, had been their first taste of disagreement. Everything swirling in her heart and head, she began to softly cry.

The living room couch creaked quietly as Miyabi leapt onto it. He threw his arms behind his head and lied down, staring up at the darkened ceiling above. All of the excitement he'd felt moments ago completely drained out of him as he replayed the scene endlessly in his head. Frustrated, and utterly exhausted from the day, he closed his eyes with a heaving sigh and pictured a baby with his and Yumi's features. Yumi was snuggled up against it, her fingers caressing the cute pink face and adorable little hands. Miyabi groaned with a kind of pain he'd never known before, thrusting the image from his mind. He wanted so badly to be a father again, and to do it right this time. He just couldn't understand why Yumi...

Sleep then took over. It had been a challenging day for sure. And the first night for the couple to sleep separately.

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Yumi's eyes were stinging a little when she woke up the next morning. She had cried herself to sleep, and was still feeling heavy with emotion. Turning, she found the spot next to her—Miyabi's side of the bed—empty. Her eyebrows and lips drooped in sadness.

She left her room quietly, she did not want Miyabi to hear her, wherever he was. After last night, she was feeling more than a little anxious about seeing him again and having to bring up what had happened. It made her sweat a little to turn the corner into the living room, where she suspected he'd slept on the couch, but to her surprise, he wasn't there. She went to the kitchen and dining area, which were also empty. So was the bathroom, Haruki's room, Miyabi's music room, and every other area of the apartment. Heading near the door, she noticed his favorite black shoes with the silver studs were gone. Miyabi had already left.

Tears began to sting her eyes again as the thought of him leaving without even saying goodbye tore the feelings she was already riddled with even deeper. Miyabi must have been so upset...

Yumi went over to the kotatsu in the dining room and sat with the warm blanket covering her legs. She turned on the TV and a morning news program was on. She didn't pay any attention to it as her heart was heavy with the mixture of emotions stewing inside until the news anchor said 'Orochi.' Immediately she perked up.

"Rock band Orochi's concert last night at the Tokyo Dome was abruptly cut short due to lead guitarist Yamashita Akito falling ill with appendicitis. He was taken to hospital to receive treatment and many Orochi fans have waited outside all night to show their support for their

favorite guitarist,” the news anchor reported. Yumi leaned on her hand and was glued to the report.

“I just hope he’ll be okay. I love him so much,” a devoted fan was then shown, in tears. Many other fans could be seen in the background, praying and crying over Akito. The shot then turned to—who else—Eizo looking as if he was trying to beg security to let him in to see the recovering guitarist!

As the report continued, Yumi was astonished. She realized just how rare and special her experience was since she’d known the band nearly from their beginning. They weren’t just unreachable celebrities to her. They were real, regular, flawed human beings. And sometimes they made her heart sink. Yumi lowered her head, replaying yesterday and especially last night in her mind. “Miyabi...” she said softly, a pained lilt in her voice. The report finished, moving on to the day’s weather forecast, and Yumi went to get her phone. She didn’t want to leave things like this, she wanted—*needed* to contact Miyabi. Even if they weren’t totally on the same page about having a baby, she loved him dearly. That would never change.

Ando-san had picked up Miyabi and was taking him to see Akito at the hospital. Miyabi had spent the night on the couch, and was feeling more than just the pain in his neck. He was feeling bad about last night. He didn’t like how things had played out, and wished he could’ve approached it again this morning, more delicately. But he left while Yumi was still asleep. So the pain would have to linger until he could talk to her again later.

The company town car approached the hospital, and Miyabi saw throngs of his fans staked out outside. His jaw dropped at the sight, there were way more than he was expecting, and the worry and concern they felt was palpable. Akito certainly was loved! As the car drove into the staff parking garage, which needed to be guarded by security, he felt his phone vibrate. It was a text message from Yumi:

Can we talk later?

Miyabi felt a tidal wave of remorse as he read the simple message. He replied:

Of course. I’m sorry for how I acted. And I’m sorry I left without saying anything. I’m at the hospital to see Aki. I’ll see you later. I love you.

Yumi smiled when she read his reply. She felt so relieved, even if the bigger issue wasn’t even close to being resolved. At least she knew her husband dearly loved her too. A spring in her step, she decided to cook herself pancakes and get ready for this new day.

Miyabi and Ando-san entered the hospital, many young nurses noticing and trying so hard not to freak out, and Miyabi felt his phone vibrate again. This time it was a message from Shuya:

I'm an idiot. I just remembered you didn't know about Haruki. That must've hurt when I asked that yesterday. I'm sorry...

Shuya's question about how he felt when he found out about Haruki was what started everything! Raising the side of his mouth in a crooked smile, Miyabi was starting to feel a bit better. He replied:

It's okay. Buy me lunch and we'll be even. I'm going to see Aki now.

About 10 seconds later Shuya texted back:

We're already here, come up!

Miyabi raised his head and Ando-san nodded for him to go up to see Akito. He would stay behind to let the guys have their time with him. Without hesitation, Miyabi nodded and headed for the elevator at the end of the hallway.

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The elevator dinged once it reached the floor where Akito had spent the night after his appendectomy. When the doors opened, revealing the bright gleaming hospital hallway, the sound of laughter flowing down the hallway entered into Miyabi's ears. He knew those laughs, his bandmates sounded like they were having fun. Miyabi practically sprinted to join them in Akito's room.

"And that's why you're going to make me your best man, right?" Miyabi stepped into the room to see Shuya rubbing Akito's bleached blonde hair aggressively, and Akito laughing and trying to bat his hand away.

"Shu, you *are* my best man! But so are my other Orochi bros! How could I pick just one?!" Akito said between laughs. The lighthearted atmosphere in the room was a welcome sight to Miyabi, and he smiled softly. It was good to be with the guys, and to see Akito looking like his usual bubbly self. Things started to feel back to normal.

"Okay fine, we'll have best *men*. And best woman for Mushi-chan. Best Orochi. Does that sound weird?" Shuya straightened up and asked to Toshio, who just shrugged his shoulders, then turned his eyes once he noticed Miyabi. Shuya and Akito looked to see him too.

"Mi-chan! Good morning!" Akito beamed. Miyabi shot a smile back and came next to his hospital bed, noticing the many empty juice boxes and pudding cups littering the small table, along with a big pitcher of ice.

“Hey, Aki... Breakfast of champions, huh?” Miyabi asked, playing on the light mood of the room.

“Beats pizza,” Shuya joked, remembering Akito’s comment yesterday about too much pizza for breakfast.

“I prefer natto,” Toshio added, referring to the infamous fermented soybean treat much loved by him and other Japanese.

“Natto! I love it too! But Mon-chan’s afraid of it. She won’t even try it! Says it smells like death...” Akito smiled widely at the mention of his fiancée’s name.

“Where is she? And how are you doing, Aki? You look good!” Miyabi said to the happy guitarist, who seemed totally back to normal despite lying in a hospital bed and still attached to an I.V.

“I feel pretty good, but that may be the pain meds. And Mon-chan’s at home, I told her to go get some rest,” answered Akito, adjusting his hospital gown and light blue blanket over his body. “The doctor’s supposed to come in soon to check me out, and then hopefully I can go home. With some of the pain med,” he chuckled. “Don’t have surgery if you can help it, guys...”

“We won’t plan on it,” stated Shuya, brushing his long tuft of hair from his face. Everyone’s appearance was greatly toned down this morning, just casual t-shirts, jackets and dark pants. Although there was still no doubt they were rockers, especially with the many piercings they all shared between them. And the nurses nearly melted at the sight.

“So,” Akito began chomping a piece of ice, “I wanted to tell you, last night after you guys left, Mon-chan was saying how excited she was for Erika-chan! And about getting engaged, of course. But mostly she talked about Erika-chan because she loves babies. So you’ll have yourself a great babysitter, To-chan!”

“Really?” Toshio smiled, pleased to hear about Monique’s excitement about his and Erika’s little bun.

“Oh ho ho... So does that mean *she*’ll want a baby once she becomes Mrs. Yamashita?” Shuya’s eyebrows raised in interest. He was always keen to talk about the subject of babies... and especially how they’re made. Miyabi swallowed nervously and started to feel a little uncomfortable.

Akito’s cheeks blazed a soft pink and he giggled like a little child. “I don’t know! Maybe?”

“A kid between you two would be so cute,” commented Toshio.

“Oh, for sure! Her beautiful skin tone and your beautiful personality,” added Shuya, trying to see how much more he could make Akito blush. “But you don’t need to rush into it. Enjoy each other first. Sex can get so much better after marriage, believe me,” he winked.

Akito ate another piece of ice, crunching it loudly in his teeth. It helped cool the heat on his face some. Then he decided to drop a bomb on his bandmates, and knew it would cause a major stir. But he didn’t care—maybe the cocktail of medicine inside him was clouding his judgment. “Actually...” he started, swallowing the cold bits of ice, “we’ve never done it.”

The hospital room was silent. Aside from the scurrying of a nurse’s feet shuffling past the open door, there was absolutely no sound to be heard. Miyabi, Toshio, and especially Shuya rallied together in collective disbelief, wondering if they had heard him right. Akito just continued nibbling ice chips, avoiding their stares, but feeling them drilling into his soul.

Finally, Toshio broke the silence. “You haven’t?” he simply asked, his eyes wide. Since Akito had been dating Monique ever since they attended Haru Con in Seattle, which was the same year both Ayane and Haruki were born, he was sure their relationship had gotten to that point, especially since Akito had seemed upset about the possibility of dying a virgin...

Shuya, obviously, had assumed so too. “So you’re... *still* a virgin?” his voice was drenched in both curiosity and mild outrage, which he tried his best to tone down.

“Uhh... eeeeeeyup,” Akito responded, reaching the bottom of his ice pitcher. Since his fingertips were freezing cold, he doused them over his cheeks to cool the fire and tried to think of some explanation, which he knew his friends were dying for. But before he could think of how to start one, Shuya suddenly sprang up close to him, his eyes glinting madly.

“Aki...” he began in a whisper, though Toshio and Miyabi could easily hear him, “If you’re like Yumi and want to wait until marriage... then I respect that. But if you haven’t done it because of...” Shuya bit his lip, his piercing shining, and drew his eyes downward along Akito’s body. “I mean, you’re so young, but I guess it could happen...”

Akito looked thoroughly confused. “What... are you talking about?” He almost wasn’t sure he wanted to know.

“It’s okay to talk to the doctor about it. He’ll give you some medicine. Then—,” Shuya whistled and launched one hand off the other, imitating a firework flying high and then exploding. Jazz hands streaming down completed the display. Miyabi understood the innuendo instantly, as did Toshio, who had to bring a hand to his mouth to keep from laughing like an immature teenager. Akito, however, had to think a bit before it clicked in his medicated brain.

“Wait!” he gasped, suddenly getting it. “You don’t think—Shu!!” Akito reached for something to throw at the bassist: an empty juice box. He was fuming and bright red again, and was about to

reach for another peltable object in his embarrassed outrage. "Trust me, man, *that* is not the problem!! I am *totally* fine, okay?!"

"Okay, okay, I was just joking!" Shuya laughed and wiped tiny droplets of juice from his shoulder. He went to stand next to Miyabi and Toshio again, while Akito glowered at him, nostrils flared.

"Can't believe you'd even..." Akito's face was scrunched in an embarrassed scowl, but it soon softened and his usual jovial countenance returned. He shook his head, scoffed quietly, and lowered his eyes to the light blue blanket covering him. "I know. It seems weird to you guys, right...?" he trailed off and his friends patiently waited for what he might have to say next. Akito closed his eyes and inhaled deeply. "It's just... I'm not confident."

Miyabi looked at him in the way someone would look at a kitten who couldn't reach down into a food bowl for its first taste of meat. And for some reason, it nearly brought a tear to his eye, but perhaps that was because of the emotions he'd been reeling with since last night. In any case, his heart went out for the adorable and still so innocent guitarist. And then the words, "Oh Aki..." tumbled out, soft and empathetic.

"Weird, right? I can get up in front of thousands of people and absolutely shred it on guitar! But when it comes to..." a hint of emotion saturated Akito's voice, and his cheeks went pink again. "Every time I just think about how I'll be a big disappointment. She's probably expecting something I'm not..."

"Is that because... you're not some huge, macho American guy?" Toshio asked in a hushed tone.

"Yeah," Akito answered weakly. His friends looked at each other. They hadn't ever known or seen this side of Akito, this side that felt inadequate, concerned, lacking confidence. It was a side they'd never have guessed existed. Then softly, before they could internalize it, Akito continued. "I'm hoping that getting engaged helps. Because I do love her and want to be with her... like what you guys have with your wives. But still I just..."

Toshio felt he should say something. He'd never had such feelings about himself, but summoned every bit of empathy he could and chose his words carefully. "Aki..." his deep voice began, "I don't think Monique-san is expecting you to be anything other than who you are. She loves you. No way she'll be disappointed."

Akito looked up at him. The side of his mouth was quivering slightly. He appreciated Toshio's words, even if he didn't fully believe them.

"That's right, man." Shuya chimed in delicately. "When you're ready to have that moment with her... nothing else in the world will matter. You'll feel like you're the only two people in the whole universe."

Miyabi looked between Shuya and Akito, and felt the bond between them all in its purest form. They all truly cared about each other, especially after everything they'd been through. And seeing this caring exchange really touched him. He reflected on his own recent experience with Yumi, and felt emotions bubbling up again. He sat on the end of Akito's bed and knew it was his turn to offer some words of encouragement. "Aki..." he thought about what he should say and came up with something he hoped would be useful. "Nothing good will ever come from comparing yourself to others. Especially the American dude with the meter-long dick you've constructed in your head." Akito smiled, nearly laughing at that. Shuya and Toshio did, too. Miyabi continued, "Remember yesterday when Monique-san said no matter how much she might stand out she just wants to be with you? I think that says it all." Yumi then popped into Miyabi's head. He felt a lump form in his throat and a barrage of feelings overpowering him as he thought of his wife and all they'd been through too. Voice full of emotion, he concluded and sincerely wished that something he had said would help Akito. "She'll love all of you because... you're the one for her."

The room fell silent as that message drifted sweetly in the air. Internalizing his friends' words, Akito thought about Monique. He felt a comforting warmth wash over him when he remembered the first time he ever saw her. That beautiful gamer girl who worked as Orochi's translator at Haru Con would very soon become his wife... He sighed contentedly and smiled. He knew for certain that she was the one for him, too.

Shuya noticed Akito's contented glow. He was so glad to see him feeling better, and hopefully more confident. He decided it would be good to add to it, to dispel any lingering concerns that may still be bothering him. "And as for sex..." he began slowly, trying to put himself in Akito's place and think about what might be most beneficial for him to hear, "I think no matter who you are, it can be kind of awkward at first anyway—"

"Oh, absolutely!" Miyabi didn't hesitate to add, cutting Shuya off. "But it's good you're an adult, and not just some stupid kid wanting to get laid. You'll actually be doing it right, so it shouldn't be *too* awkward." A tinge of bitter regret ran through his voice, and he couldn't help shaking his head at his own poor choices from the past.

"Yeah. No custodian closet on the way to gym class for you, Aki," Shuya shook his head too, remembering his own less than pious past. "You'll be with the woman you love. And you'll figure things out in no time. Before you know it, it'll all become so good... and so fun, too. Really, it's a blast!"

Miyabi nodded in agreement and smiled. "So don't worry about it too much. You and Monique-san... you're made for each other."

"*Quite literally,*" Toshio added under his breath, hoping to offer his own small piece to the conversation and taking some pleasure in seeing Akito's reaction: a combination of eye-rolling and slight squirming from embarrassment and excited anticipation.

“Thanks, guys,” Akito looked to each of his friends and offered a heartfelt and sincere smile. He felt their care and concern for him, their brotherly kindness lifting and encouraging him. His heart swelled with gratitude as his confidence gained strength.

Miyabi stood up from the bed and was able to bask in the supportive atmosphere built between the friends in the hospital room as well. He was almost tempted to share with them his own concerns, about wanting a child with Yumi, and how badly things had gone last night over it. He felt his heart rate quicken, but he knew his friends would offer him the very same support if he shared it with them. So, gathering courage, he decided to. His bandmates were like his brothers, after all. Surely they would boost him up after sharing something so sensitive and so personal. “So...” he began.

“So...” but then suddenly Shuya piped up, thinking he knew where Miyabi would steer the conversation next, “In the meantime when you’re feeling... how healthy hot-blooded young men tend to feel... dirty websites can really help out.” He cleared his throat, and Miyabi instantly closed his mouth. Sadly, but perhaps inevitably, he knew he had lost his chance.

Akito smiled bashfully and squirmed again. He turned his eyes toward the window where warm morning sunshine was streaming in. “True. But...” he trailed off, cheeks blazing again.

Toshio blinked, his expression blank. “...You don’t do that.” Akito simply shook his head in confirmation, eyes still turned away. The friends looked to each other in disbelieving surprise, but that soon melted into tender adoration, and even admiration, of their sweet and virtuous little guitarist.

“Oh, Aki...” Shuya whispered and swore he felt a single tear come to his eye. “Truly... you are too pure for this world.”

These are all the ideas I had written out. I may add more at some point, depending on reader interest. Please contact me at emily.muto@gmail.com to let me know your thoughts and if you’d enjoy reading more! Thank you!