the unexpected ones

by I Will Think About It Later

Summary

It should be impossible, you think.

But there is a word for the impossible.

Magic.

(heavily inspired by Erin Morgenstern's debut novel The Night Circus; title is derived from the same)

Notes

well, this is awkward. Hi, hello, it's been...a really long time. Life got in the way, I moved countries, homes, shit happened, I wasn't in a great place, and with it came a whole lot of doubt that made it difficult for me to be kind to my own writing. I think I'm better now - which is why I'm offering this, should anyone be interested in it. It is inspired by one of my favourite books I've read this year, perhaps ever.

Oh! And for those who were reading my Silent Hill AU - I'll still finish that. I'm sorry for the embarrassingly long break I took from it...but it was dark stuff and I was in a dark place and the two things weren't going well together. But it's Spooky-season, and a good time to pick it up again (if anyone is still interested orz)
I will also reply to everyone who's commented on my works during this hiatus even if it's awkward to bring it up after so long agsjkfhfd thank you for reading I truly appreciate it just give me some time to catch up!

Anyway - I hope you enjoy this! Thank you for stopping by!

See the end of the work for more notes.
Roses.

They wilt, unfurl from drooping, thorny stems, but before you’ve even fully grasped the soft beautiful sadness of this image, the dark petals are turning brighter, vivid, scarlet, as they float away, fly from right in front of your eyes, to rearrange themselves elsewhere.

The flowers in this high, vaulted hall don’t bloom.

They don’t grow – not in the way living things tend to do, not in that inevitable upward scale that eventually ends with a full stop.

No, these roses, these perfect, elegantly dangerous flowers do something more fundamentally impossible – they cheat time.

You watch the cycle, fascinated and a little afraid, watch the flowers age, gorgeous haughty beauty curling up like something tragic and forgotten, and then there’s a tiny flurry, a blur of movement like hummingbird wings and somewhere in that confusion everything is young and red and fresh again and the scent under your nose has changed from that old melancholic aroma of pressed petals between pages to something fresh-cut and belonging in the sun-bathed gardens outside and between one blink and the next, the roses decorating the vase right in front of you are several feet down the hall, full and healthy and almost pulsing with life in a crystalline bowl that was, moments ago, empty.

Time.

The cycle of life.

It should be impossible, you think.

But there is a word for the impossible.

Magic.

Eijun’s impatience precedes him – Ryousuke can hear the clatter of frantic footfalls, banging doors in the distance, long before the individual kicking up that ruckus all but bursts through his office door.

He’s sporting a huge, almost manic grin.

‘Did you see it?’ he demands, bustling into the room without any ceremony, a hand pushing through his hair to yank his unruly bangs out of his eyes, only for the mess to fall back across his forehead with little to no improvement. He’s excitable, but Ryousuke can see that hand is shaking.

‘See what?’ he inquires smoothly, but he’s fairly sure he knows what.

Eijun evidently doesn’t have time for his coyness – he rushes closer, and at this distance the glint in his eye, flashing golden-brown, is unmistakeable.

‘The exhibit!’ the syllables are emphasised with almost wild gesticulations, before Eijun bodily throws himself into a chair opposite Ryousuke, separated by his disturbingly tidy desk. ‘He replied!’
Ryousuke’s eyebrow hitches. There are many points of note in Eijun’s words, but he starts with ‘He?’

For the first time since his unapologetic disturbance of Ryousuke’s work (Eijun will insist that by now Onii-san should be used to it, while Ryousuke will lament his inability to teach Eijun any manners no matter how long they’ve known each other), the younger falters.

‘Wait, is it not a – I thought it was a he? Is it a girl?’ he tips his head, quizzical, reminding Ryousuke as he often does of a confused but earnest puppy.

There’s the briefest pause before Ryousuke responds. ‘You don’t need to know the gender.’

Eijun scoffs. ‘There you go again!’ He’s on his feet in a jiffy, but Ryousuke remains unfazed – Eijun is nothing if not chronically restless. Even his frustration isn’t at the heights of heat and aggression they used to be, when they initially discussed these matters – now it’s something tempered down with resignation, and a slight resentment Ryousuke cannot help but be conscious of. ‘Why won’t you tell me these things? How the hell am I supposed to compete with this guy if I don’t even know who he is?’

It’s a debate they’ve had countless times already, the impasse a stubborn knot that’s been yanked too tight to come loose now. Ryousuke instead chooses to observe, ‘You still think it’s a male?’

Eijun tosses him an unhappy glare. The fight has clearly drained from him just as soon as it set in, clearly anticipating that it will get him nowhere. ‘It’s just a feeling,’ he mumbles, not making an effort to hide the mutinous edge.

‘Rather than the gender of your opponent,’ Ryousuke steeples his fingers together and rests his chin on them, regarding the boy just a few years younger than him, ‘should you not be focusing on the exhibit? You said he…replied?’

Ryousuke lets his amusement at Eijun’s choice of word seep through – as though instead of issuing a challenge, Eijun had made a blog post that had finally received a response.

For a brief second, Eijun seems to dither between badgering Ryousuke more about his elusive opponent and spilling his guts about the thing that had clearly had him so excited; probably realising the futility of the former, he dumps his body into the chair again, still scowling to make sure Ryousuke is not under any illusion of how Eijun feels about all this.

‘There’s a new exhibit – it wasn’t there last night and none of the guards know who it belongs to… there aren’t any placards or signs, anything,’ Eijun is already breathless, his words already speeding up, fuelled by something akin to…glee. ‘It’s this glass case, in the Nature & Wildlife section, and – Onii-san you have to see it for yourself. There are these eggs, and they hatch, and there’re these little baby birds, but then they grow in, like, seconds, and then they fly! They fly around the cage and I stood there watching the exhibit like three hundred times but I still don’t know how in just a second they’re back in the eggs and the shells are all fixed and there’s no birds anywhere!’

The excitement is fully visible on Eijun’s face now, manifesting in child-like mirth, that glint in his eye he’d come into the room bearing glowing strong and bright, and Ryousuke is, against his will, endeared.

And gravely troubled.

‘Live birds?’ he poses the question, masking his voice of any inflection.

Eijun doesn’t appear to notice anything off; he looks mildly put-out at Ryousuke’s lack of reaction, if
‘No,’ he says impatiently, ‘from what I could tell they were like animatronics but – ‘

Ryousuke cuts him off. ‘That was…a strong counter-move.’

‘It’s brilliant!’ Eijun trills, the grin back in place. If he weren’t gripping the sides of his armchair he might almost clap his hands. ‘Way better than my butterflies!’

Eijun’s butterflies…also in the Nature & Wildlife section. Ryousuke remembers the almost fierce pride he’d felt, walking through that exhibit for the first time. Butterflies, suspended in the air, in various stages of flight but with a catch. Delicate wings translucent, shimmery under the soft, muted spotlights Eijun had requested of him to showcase his first move – butterflies with all their intricate details intact, but made of water.

‘You’re selling yourself short,’ is what Ryousuke says, demurely; it would be unfair to call himself objective, at this point, at least not before he gets a look at this bird-cage himself. ‘And you also sound much too impressed over an opponent’s counter-move. You’re supposed to out-stage him, remember?’

‘Yes, yes,’ Eijun brushes him away with a dismissive hand, before belting out an aggrieved sigh and pouting, ‘You’re no fun.’

*We’re not here to have fun,* Ryousuke almost tells him. Perhaps it would be kinder if he did.

But he looks at the smile on Eijun’s face, the thrumming vitality of this boy, and he doesn’t have the heart to.

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It’s not without an undue amount of reluctance that Kazuya admits to himself that this is favourite exhibit.

It might be masochistic of him, to come back here after agonising for weeks after seeing it in all its glory, tense from the worry that he may have lost before he had even started, that there is no way he could ever be capable of coming up with something better than this – but if there is one thing Kazuya considers an asset, it is his cool, practical head, and he thinks that it does not matter, right now. He has already made his move, and it wouldn’t hurt to study his opponent’s techniques as he waits for them to counter.

But it is difficult to be truly discerning when his feelings get swept up in awe whenever he is here – they’re passing this off as a fine crystal exhibit to museum guests (Kuramochi is fond of calling them Muggles) and while something like this would be worthy of admiration at face value, Kazuya has the privilege of knowing that it is so much more.

Like he has done countless times, he brings up his hand and gently swipes through the butterfly frozen with its wings curved up, right in front of his nose.

There is the unmistakeable feel of moisture, soaking his skin as his fingers travel through the tiny thing, barely big enough to fit his palm…followed immediately afterwards by that strange, almost suctioning sensation of the dampness retreating from his skin, as though pulled off like dried PVC glue. His hand emerges on the other side dry, and the butterfly is whole again, twinkling lightly in the overhead lights, but transparent and so exquisitely beautiful it shakes something fundamental inside of Kazuya apart.
He should be wary, if not rightfully apprehensive of his faceless competitor – he turns a wide arc in the middle of the room, pulling his arm through the butterflies in his wake, and watches as they return to their pristine forms seamlessly, and can’t help but wonder for the nth time how *much* magic there is in this hall. How much skill someone would have to possess in order to craft something as intrinsically shapeless as water to hold itself up, in so many fragments, in such perfect detail, even without the conjurer themselves present. How much skill someone would have to possess to separate their magic from themselves entirely, and leave it to exist by itself as its own entity, holding nearly a hundred little winged creatures, sculpted from unmoving water, none like its companions.

It isn’t that it’s impossible – Kazuya is aware that on principle, this is similar to his magic as well. But where his work lies with gears and axles and tiny bits of machinery, of manipulating man-made machines and supplementing them with a little help to achieve something no man-made machine can, this exhibit feels much more…

*Pure.*

Much more organic.

And

(Kazuya smiles wryly at the triteness of the thought even as it occurs - )

Much more *magical.*

*Do not get intimidated by your rival’s skill,* Ochiai-sensei’s voice, unbidden, travels his synapses, *this is not merely a test of your ability but also your mental hardiness, your endurance. If your foil dazzles you, you must blind them.*

It is like this, lost in thought, fingers just barely tracing the fragile wings of a butterfly, that Kuramochi finds him.

‘You’ll wanna see this,’ is all he offers, cryptic, but there’s something entirely too pleased in the smirk he’s poorly repressing.

Suddenly, Kazuya is on high alert, heart in his throat. ‘Has there been a counter-move?’ *Already?* His exhibit only went live this morning, just before the museum doors opened, *how –* 

Kuramochi’s grin broadens. ‘Come and see for yourself.’

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At first glance, Kazuya doesn’t notice anything off.

But then he looks closer.

*There’s –*

He leans closer, eyes wide behind his glasses –

There’s something written on the display case of his exhibit.

No, that is incorrect –

There’s something written *inside* his exhibit.

Eggshells litter the thatched ground of the case, and there are two largish, exotically coloured parrots
spreading their wings and swooping within its confines, but Kazuya doesn’t spare his usual moment to admire his handiwork, preen at how realistic his birds look, their feathers and movements hiding the miniscule mechanisms hidden in their bodies – if anything he’s glad when, between the space of a heartbeat, they’re inexplicably gone, and the eggs in their makeshift nest are intact again, because now he has a clear view of the translucent text swabbed in careless handwriting on the inner surface of the case –

And it reads, ‘This is crazy! They look so real! I wish I could ask you how you did that but the powers that be won’t let me’

Kazuya doesn’t even realise his jaw is hanging open until Kuramochi snorts and taps him under the chin twice.

‘Quite something, huh,’ he comments, so casually he may as well be complimenting Kazuya’s shoes, ‘Your rival’s got personality.’

Instead of replying, Kazuya takes a step back. The text, a faint lilac almost luminous against the glass, disappears right before his eyes.

*Definitely magic.*

Kuramochi is still chortling, ‘You should see your face right now.’

‘This is – isn’t this careless? The guests – ‘

‘This exhibit’s not publicly open yet dumbass. Sensei wanted your opponent to see it first, so I’m guessing they know that and decided to use the opportunity and pass on a message to you.’

Dumbfounded still, Kazuya steps forward again, running his eyes over the newly-visible letters – confused doesn’t even begin to sum it up, and then his eyes catch on something else, just below the text.

‘Who,’ he speaks into the hall at large, ‘the *hell* is *S.E.?*’
YOU PEOPLE ARE SO SWEET YOU MADE ME CRY WITHIN LESS THAN A DAY OF BEING BACK ILY ALL THANK YOU FOR ALL THE LOVE <333333

pls excuse bad writing and grammatical errors i’m rusty ;u;

‘I have a feeling it’s going to rain,’ Eijun had commented offhandedly, and just stood by all passive and occupied giggling over a compilation of puppies reacting to their own pictures while Haruichi had brought them to a stop before doubling back to go fetch umbrellas from their shared apartment – foresight that he is keenly grateful for, considering not halfway down their walk to the museum thick, woolly-grey clouds had rolled over the previously clear sky and pelted its worth of water on them.

‘Just go and become a weather-reporter, geez’, Haruichi grumbles, forlornly staring down at his shoes as they walk – the deluge is strong, water sliding over the sloped surfaces of their umbrellas and pouring down the sides. His sneakers are soaked through, and it’s all Haruichi can do not to squirm at the distinctly unpleasant feeling of damp socks encasing his feet. Aniki isn’t going to like it, but they’re going to be padding around in his office barefoot the minute they reach the paradise of the dry indoors.

Through the screen of rain separating them as they tout their individual umbrellas along, Haruichi hears Eijun laugh, unbothered by the cold, the fact that his jeans are soaked below the knee, or that their journey has been prolonged by at least fifteen more minutes as they manoeuvre puddles and squint through sheets of silvery water before crossing each road.

‘It’s fine, Harucchi,’ he says in that same boyishly gleeful way he’s said it since they were children. ‘It’s just rain! Enjoy the moment! Doesn’t this place look so completely different? The lighting, the fragrance – ‘

Haruichi rolls his eyes at the triteness of his friend, but not unkindly. Eijun’s always had an affinity for this type of weather – he enjoys the diffused light that filters through layers of cloud to cast everything in an unusual, surreal glow, tracing out silhouettes of familiar landmarks as they loom in the distance through the downpour. Fresh earth, pungent and aromatic, the crackling sound as rain hits the pavement, the rhythmic thumping as it hits your umbrella. He’s heard it described to him with giddy romanticism enough times to get the appeal –

If only it weren’t so cold.

‘So,’ he pipes up after a while, keen for a distraction, both hands wrapped around the handle of his umbrella and fighting against the drag of the wind attempting to yank it out of his hands. Overhead, blue-white light flashes within the wispy confines of clouds. ‘Have you figured out what you’re
going to do for your next move?"

Eijun sniffs a bit, side-stepping a puddle; when Haruichi steals a side-glance at him, he sees the thoughtful furrow on his brow.

‘Still working on it…nothing concrete yet.’

Unsurprising. Haruichi smiles a tiny bit, but then –

‘You…don’t you think you should be a bit more…I don’t know. Plan ahead a little more?’

He says it almost tentatively, as though scared Eijun is going to take offence. He doesn’t seem upset or affronted though; he merely gives him a mild disapproving look.

‘Since when can you plan magic?’ he demands, in too-loud a voice that instinctively makes Haruichi steal a worried glance around. There is hardly anyone insane enough to brave the streets in this type of rain, and those who had been must have already sought shelter, but Haruichi lets out a futile shh that goes ignored anyway. ‘But don’t worry – I’ve been thinking about it.’

‘Hmm,’ is Haruichi’s non-committal response. It’s an uncomfortable position for him to be in – Aniki’s instructions had been clear, they were not to interfere. This contest was between the two selected candidates, and the best means of ensuring success – Eijun’s success – was to let it all play out with minimal disruption from outside forces. But still…Haruichi worries.

‘That exhibit was something else wasn’t it,’ he hears himself murmuring, hating himself a little bit for being unable to let it go.

Beside him, Eijun lights up. ‘Right?!’ Where Onii-san had fallen short in reaction, Harucchi had delivered – Eijun had thoroughly revelled in his soft intake of breath, sharp eyes glittering through his bangs, even more untamed than Eijun’s himself, as he leaned forward to take a closer look at the birds, little baby chicks looking weak and boneless with haphazard tufts of fluff barely hiding pink skin seamlessly growing into luxuriously feathered creatures Eijun had never seen nor heard of – Animatronic Art, a sign that had popped up beside the exhibit on its unveiling day proclaimed, The Life Cycle of the Rainbow Lorikeet.

It should be impossible but it’s not because it’s magic and Eijun loves it.

Lives for it.

Reliving the exhibit again, as though he’d not spent enough hours ogling how the mechanisms shifted so fluidly he could make out the exquisite detail of tendons shifting beneath the birds’ plumes and marvelling over how so many tiny bits of metalwork inside were working together in faultless harmony to create something so real, so life-like –

And then Eijun remembers his own addition to the exhibit, and his enthusiasm takes a dent.

Maybe he shouldn’t have done that. Maybe that wasn’t the smartest thing he’s ever done. He’s been fretting about it endlessly, but in retrospection, after he’d done the deed and left the museum and was too far to change it back. It had been such an impulsive, rash move, something he’d done in the heat of the moment, overcome as he was with admiration for the feat he’d been witnessing that he felt he was bursting at the seams to express it – the same way his restive fingers would always find their way to pen out long rambly posts no one cared about when he came across The Best Anime, or The Song of his life.
This was different though. Onii-san had been so particular about this, had drilled it into him again and again that he direct his energies toward fine-tuning his magic and manifesting them in the most eloquent of ways than trying to figure out who his elusive opponent is but –

‘It’s not fair,’ he says out loud, sullen, and his ears are hot because he’s hiding something, something potentially big, from the two people he considers his own brothers, closer than family, and he’s toeing the murky waters between righteous indignation and pure guilt.

‘What’s not fair?’ Harucchi asks, and Eijun can already hear the caution in his tone and he hates it.

‘The fact that this is a contest and we can’t even meet the person we’re competing against,’ he rails, almost immediately – he’s unsure whether it’s his guilt at keeping such a secret talking, or his irritation that he isn’t the only one keeping secrets. ‘I thought when I signed up for this it was gonna be some kind of showcase of our skills – a duel or something.’ He shakes out his arm in front of him, getting renegade water drops speckling his skin and dripping down his arm as he acts out that one duelling club scene from the second Harry Potter movie.

Haruichi’s laugh is soft and airy, and it makes Eijun feel a conflicted mix of mad and unhappy. ‘It’s not Yu-Gi-Oh, Eijun-kun,’ he teases, and maybe sensing that Eijun’s mood isn’t too responsive to playfulness, adds, ‘besides…you are showcasing your skills. Not seeing your opponent…isn’t that like, making sure the contest is impartial? Like in labs, what do they call it…taking place in a controlled setting? You just focus on the magic itself.’

Eijun harrumphs. They’ve had this discussion before, exhausted it inside and out, but it doesn’t assuage this niggling doubt, this anxiety that’s run under his skin ever since he got old enough to see his training as more than that precious, precious time of the day where he could let loose, let all the ideas and images inside of his head spill out into reality, colouring outside the lines and making the impossible plausible and the plausible possible, real and definite, to something…

Something that involved other people, something that wasn’t just him pushing the bounds of what he could do anymore. Something with consequences he could not see.

‘…besides, safer than a duel and it’s – Eijun-kun? Are you listening?’

‘Yeah,’ he responds before his brain catches up with him – he repeats it again, as though trying to wring out the dishonesty in it. ‘Yeah.’

They fall silent after that. This is familiar too. These invisible walls that brick up between him and the Kominato brothers whenever it comes to this thing, this situation he’s been a part of since he was a child and too young to understand that the way he could think things and watch them happen was not something just anyone could do. It is the thing he hates the most about it all – the fact that he constantly feels as though something is being hidden from him, something important and –

They’re almost at the museum, just a corner-turn away from its faded but imposing façade, when Haruichi quietly, almost gingerly says, ‘Eijun-kun…you know we only want the best for you right? I- I don’t know exactly what this whole contract is about or why it is necessary but…I hope you know that that isn’t why we care about you. We’re not…using you for your magic or something like that, you know that don’t you?’

Harucchi has tipped his umbrella back to better look at Eijun, his shorter height making him crane his neck, and Eijun feels the twinge in his heart he’s too acquainted with – the painfully pleasant clawing born from caring, feeling cared for. Harucchi’s stare is earnest and unwavering, and Eijun gulps down the emotions pushing up his throat.
‘I know,’ is what he gruffs, in a voice smaller than his usual boisterous timbre. It carries all the
gravity he feels. ‘I – know. I don’t know why he can’t say what all of this is really about but I – ’ he
says this part with conviction, conviction that feels scary in how firm it is, in spite of the uncertainty it
entails. ‘I trust him.’

He doesn’t pause to look at Harucchi after that, the moment too heavy for him to handle without
feeling his breath running short in the way he hates, so he keeps his head down and continues
walking, until Harucchi whispers –

‘Hey…look. It stopped raining.’

So Eijun looks, peeks his head up and catches sight of the wide pool of water gathered at a dip by
the pavements, still now that the storm has relented, the high windows and broad steps of the
museum replicated against its glassy surface, identical but upside-down.

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‘What if it was to throw me off? Distract me?’

‘Flattery your weakness, Miyuki?’

Kazuya tosses an unimpressed glance at the green-haired freeloader raiding his fridge before
returning his attention to the radio in front of him. It’s old, the wooden exterior peeled of its burnish
and oddly soft, smooth under his touch from age. With a click of the fingers of his right hand, it
begins to hum – panels grate open, moving apart, wires unspooling and neatly arranging themselves
in coils, resistors lining up beside them –

‘Is that – are you going to spend your whole day taking junk apart and putting it together again?’

‘Practice,’ Kazuya quips back, watchful as the machine comes apart at the simple tug of his will – he
touches each token, intrinsically knowing, with the subtle spark that skitters up his bones, what its
intended use is. ‘I can’t just keep waiting and doing nothing until…whoever it is I’m facing off
against makes their next move.’

‘S.E., you mean.’

‘S.E. is who they say they are.’

‘Must you always be such a cynic?’

‘Must you always be so gullible?’ Kazuya deflects the empty soda can that comes sailing for his head
without even looking it up – it changes trajectory mid-flight and hits the adjacent wall with a metallic
clink. ‘I can’t believe my rival would be stupid enough to give away something as telling as their
initials.’

‘Why not?’ Kuramochi argues back, noisily dragging a chair over to Kazuya’s workbench, scanning
the tidbits strewn across it in an order that only makes sense to the bespectacled boy standing over
them, assembling and reassembling an antique piece of technology that, by rights, should be
impossible to fix without at least totally replacing its parts, if even then. ‘There must be plenty of
people in the whole of Tokyo with those initials –’

‘So you think it’s not someone from the museum?’

‘I know it’s not someone from the museum.’
Kazuya’s head snaps up at that, eyes narrowing as he levels them at Kuramochi and his entirely-too-smug face.

‘What did you do?’ he demands, just shy of accusatory.

‘I didn’t do anything,’ Kuramochi tosses back, throwing up his hands defensively, but his lopsided grin says otherwise, ‘anything that someone with common sense wouldn’t have done, anyway,’ he adds, cheeky.

Knowing Kuramochi’s just trying to bait him now, Kazuya changes tactics. Batting his eyes, he leans across the table, bits and bobs sweeping of their own volition out of his way as he plants his palms on the tabletop, simpering in the most shrill voice he can muster, ‘Oh! Share with me your wisdom, Kuramochi-sama, I – ‘

He’s interrupted with a palm that smacks him right in the middle of his face, the force actually enough to push him squarely back on his feet where he’d been stretching on his toes. It’s worth it though, considering Kuramochi looks like he’d swallowed a whole sour lemon.

‘Please,’ he says, voice tight and face turned down in a grimace, ‘never do that again.’

Now smug for his own reasons, Kazuya shrugs. ‘As long as you learn how to get straight to the point…’

‘Yeah, yeah, no need to be a smartass,’ Kuramochi waits a beat, but before Kazuya can do or say anything else to provoke him, he says, ‘I checked the employee directory.’

‘Ochiai-sensei’s office. Did you know we’re doing the quarterly audit these days? Meaning all the data about every technical aspect of the museum is currently being reviewed, which in turn means –’

‘You’ve been snooping in private files?’ Kazuya understands the intent, but this is too reckless even for Kuramochi. Maybe his reasons are selfish, but having the one person he considers a close friend – he will never admit this, not on pain of death – working as the secretary of his mentor is a reassurance when everything else about this game is so uncertain.

It also doesn’t hurt to have an inside-man behind the scenes on the actual playing grounds but –

‘Chill the fuck out, I’m not snooping,’ Kuramochi actually glares at him, affronted, ‘I’m actually supposed to be handling those documents. Helping the auditors and stuff, that’s my job. And if I happened to notice that the number of people working at the museum, full- and part-time, with the initials S.E. were a grand total of three, one who retired this February and two more who’ve worked here five-plus years, before the venue was even decided –’

‘Okay, okay, I got it Sherlock,’ Kazuya’s teasing, but Kuramochi knows him well enough to pick up on the fact that he’s relaying gratitude in Kazuya-speak. ‘So it’s not someone who works for the museum…maybe someone connected to it though? Honestly they could have just used false initials –’

‘That just seems like an awful amount of trouble to take –’

‘Think about it, they could have just left the note unsigned but the initials could be there to send me on a wild goose chase instead –’

‘Who’s tryna be Sherlock now?’
Kazuya sighs his most put-upon sigh before returning his attention to his deconstructed radio. ‘Whatever. I’m not going to lose sleep over this.’

There’s a few moments silence, before Kuramochi ventures, ‘So…you’re not going to reply?’

Something – his pulse? – jumps a bit at that question. Kazuya keeps his eyes trained firmly on the task at hand, rusted bits of metal growing shiny and glinting as good as new under the bent of his attention. ‘Why would I do that?’

‘Come on, Miyuki-kun, don’t pretend the praise didn’t make you at least a little happy – ’

‘I don’t need my opponent to fuel my ego, thanks – ’

‘Are you sure? Even though you’ve been ogling that butterfly exhibit like you’ve met God himself in there?’

To Kazuya’s credit, he doesn’t let himself be stumped for longer than maybe a second.

But already it’s too long. And in Kazuya’s book, too incriminatingly long.

Kuramochi looks for all the world like he wants to give him shit, and Kazuya’s bracing for it, considering it’s the other’s favourite pass-time, so when he actually changes tracks, he’s a little thrown off.

‘Aren’t you curious?’ he presses, leaning in in a theatrically confidential way that makes Kazuya snort, ‘About what kind of person it is? From that highly enthusiastic love-note I don’t imagine they’re older than us, but I don’t wanna discriminate – ’

Kuramochi cuts himself off, startled by the sudden trill of sound emitting from Kazuya’s now assembled radio. A tinkling sound plays, like one of those antique, wind-up music-boxes through the radio-static, and Kuramochi doesn’t have to ask to know that’s no frequency on-air in the present.

‘That’s freaky shit man, change the frequency, I don’t need to hear dead people from whatever century that radio is from,’ Kuramochi’s full-body shudder only makes Kazuya snigger, but he fiddles with the dial anyway.

‘Don’t worry, that’s not what it’s for,’ he says, peering into the tape and trying to tune it just right, ‘It was dumped in one of the storage rooms at the museum since God knows when but that means, inherently, I should be able to – ah.’

The static clears. For a moment Kuramochi thinks the radio’s stopped working again. But then a voice – a voice that doesn’t sound like it belongs, not in this room, not in this time,

‘An announcement for your attention. A new exhibit has opened at the Museum of Art and Illusion…’

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Their footsteps clatter, discordant, over the marble, ricocheting off the high ceiling as they skid past the lobby – they’re lucky it’s after hours, is what Kazuya thinks absently, and the thought is there and gone in an instant, other considerations rushing in to takes its place, but his body moves faster than his mind and there, they’re down the passage, down to the very last door at the very back of the ground floor, and Kuramochi helps him push the giant doors open –

The hall is empty.
Kazuya sweeps his eyes around, head darting from side to side, the tense anticipation winding him up tight untangling all at once and Kazuya doesn’t even get the chance to taste his disappointment before he hears Kuramochi gasp and looks down at the same time and –

He can see the sky on the floor.

The sky, dotted with whispers of clouds after the rainstorm earlier, leaves of trees, the branches swaying in the breeze, highlighted against the dusk, and –

‘It’s the reflection,’ they’re the only ones there, but Kuramochi whispers. Kazuya can relate. ‘The reflection of that window.’ He points across from them, where glass-panelled arches overlook the gardens around the back of the museum grounds, mellow light trickling in.

It is the reflection, across the entirety of the length of the floor, as though someone has inlaid a mirror on to it, yet even before he sets foot into the hall, his heart beating a quick tattoo inside his chest, he knows that it is not a mirror.

The toe of his shoe barely makes contact with the ground when ripples flutter outward, gently disturbing the previously placid surface.

‘Fuck,’ he hears Kuramochi hiss from beside him. Kazuya gets it. His foot is fully planted on the floor now, but it doesn’t sink in, even though the ripples multiplying around them as they cautiously edge inside are definitely mimicking water. He bends over, letting his fingers skim the smooth, cool surface – they leave trails trickling in their wake, tiny tremors that slowly, gently settle as he pauses his motions. He doesn’t even realise he’s let out a laugh, a breathy, awed thing, until it eddies quietly back at him through the large, hollow space.

‘You still sure you’re not curious about your rival?’ Kuramochi asks from somewhere behind him. He phrases it like a rhetorical question.

Kazuya doesn’t even respond. He can’t. His mind is still caught, still processing this room, this idea, this magic, and he has questions and –

His mind trails back, to the butterflies, to the message left just for him inside his own exhibit, the message that disappeared the following morning when it was open for public viewing, and he can’t even deny it anymore – he is curious. Has been for a while now.

Curious about the person who creates such whimsically unreal magic and makes it real and tangible, about the mind that conjures such things up –

About S.E., who wrote to him as though they were on the same side, instead of opposite ends of the board.

Chapter End Notes

i hope you're not put off by the obscure bits of the plot so far, and hopefully it's less confusing and more 'hey i wonder why this is so and so' if that makes sense ;A; we goin' slowburn

thank you for reading!! I'd love to hear your thoughts if you wanna share!
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

this is horrendously late and i'm so sorry ;u; life kind of ate me. but i'm on holiday now, so i'm hoping to put out more regular updates! for folks who've stuck around and are still interested in reading this, thank you! i'll get round to replying to everyone as soon as i can!

also, to preface this: this is loosely based on The Night Circus - so you could say it's my reimagining of that universe, or a story taking place in an alternate universe from that of the novel. The chara arcs and subplots are not going to be similar to or parallel those of the book, so long as I can help it. I still highly urge everyone to read the novel - it's beautiful, original, much more wonderful than anything I could ever write; this fic and the novel stand independent of each other, and there are no major spoilers for the book in this fic (or vice versa) <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Director Ochiai looks unimpressed.

But then again, he always does.

‘What,’ he says, in that sleepy, monotone drawl of his, after letting the silence steep, deliberate, for a few seconds, ‘do you think?’

The simple words still manage to sound damning in the echoes of this empty room.

If Kazuya can call it empty. It’s hard for him not to cast his eyes down – to the illusion of water at his feet, the mirage of a puddle reaching corner to corner in this massive hall. It’s morning now – the sun hasn’t made much of an appearance, tucked between blankets of smokey-grey clouds, but the light is young and fresh, the sway of the tree branches outside the huge windows gentle and lulling.

Absently, Kazuya wishes his mentor were not here. Tangled as he is in trying to read his inscrutable mood, he stays still, forcing himself not to indulge his curiosity, not examine how the reflections on the floor may be different to the dusk-dusted evening the day before.

‘It’s simple,’ he says, noncommittally.

Ochiai hears the ‘but’ without him saying it. A single untamed eyebrow lifts to prompt him to continue.

But Kazuya doesn’t know how.

Has been trying to decipher his own emotions about this hall and its magic and the person it all belongs to all night, an electric wakefulness sizzling down his nerve endings and making it impossible to fall asleep.

‘…it’s simple but it…it makes a statement.’

Ochiai considers him for a moment, and then lets out a huff of audible breath through his nose. Like
most of his mannerisms, Kazuya can’t tell what that means. Warily, he considers his mentor, standing a little distance away – a measure shorter than him, stout, with his hands behind his back, staring at the soft eddies of non-existent water at his feet down his nose.

Kazuya almost feels a little offended, at his lack of reaction – almost feels a little stupid, thinking maybe he himself had been too hopelessly amazed.

‘Miyuki-kun.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘What do you think your competition is like?’

Kazuya falters. Blinks.

‘Sir?’

For the first time since Ochiai had summoned him into his office this morning and bid him follow as they leisurely made their way to explore the museum’s most recently opened exhibit, Ochiai looks directly at him.

If anything, Kazuya hates this even more than how maddeningly unreadable this man is on a daily basis. With their gazes locked, Kazuya has no refuge from the critical intent in those beady eyes, boring into his.


Under those eyes, Kazuya feels like a small child failing to behave. Much like he did when first met Ochiai – much like he did when he left his home with him, hardly old enough to be making those big decisions for himself.

The ghost of a pang echoes in his chest; Kazuya ignores it.

‘This is the second exhibit you’ve seen from your competition,’ Ochiai’s drawl, smooth of inflection, sounding louder and oddly warped in the messy acoustics of this room, ‘what do the nature of these tell you about them?’

There it is again – that keen edge of expectation, and the sharp fear of inadequacy singeing his synapses. Kazuya dithers for a second, and decides there’s no point trying to read what kind of answer Ochiai is expecting.

He gives him the truth.

‘I think they’re…I think their brand of magic is the type you read in books,’ Kazuya says slowly, a small frown gathering between his brows as he finally, finally casts his eyes down, nudging the floor at his feet and marvelling, internally, at how solid it feels, even as those ripples of water immediately flutter outward from where the toe of his sneakers make contact with it, ‘it’s very…fantastical, and larger than life. A very…romantic kind of magic.’

Ochiai hums, dipping his chin a little. Kazuya takes that as his cue to continue.

‘There’s also something…’ he sweeps his mind around a little, searching for the words; he thinks about the blueprints on his workstation at home, the ones he’s been sketching and drawing and revising, sheaves and sheaves of them stuck into boxes, tucked under his desk and his bed and every
other available nook and cranny of his tiny home, ‘they also feel *spontaneous*.’

This time Ochiai’s hum sounds intrigued. ‘How so?’

Kazuya tips his head at the floor, then at the giant windows opposite. ‘This exhibit opened yesterday evening,’ he begins, feeling oddly conscious giving voice to the speculations turning their axles inside his brain all but the entirety of the previous night, ‘that afternoon, or early evening…it’d been raining. When I got here, there were these huge puddles in front the museum…just, still water. I didn’t notice them at first. Not until we’d seen the exhibit and were going back home but…on the way out, I saw the puddles, and the museum gates and the lit-up façade of the building reflected in it, and it just – ‘ he catches on his words here, like a zipper yanking into cotton.

Feels acutely aware of how ridiculous he’d sound, if he were to say *and it felt the same.*

Ochiai is combing his fingers through his beard, thoughtful. ‘So…spontaneous, and fantastical.’

And then, ‘Sounds like a youngling, doesn’t it?’

Kazuya and Kuramochi had pretty much been theorising the same, the latter following him home, badgering him until they ordered pizza and coercing him (Kazuya begrudges admitting that maybe he didn’t have to work that hard for it) into spinning hypotheses about the identity of S.E. As much as he’s cautious, Kazuya can no longer deny that he is also…curious. And so he’d indulged Kuramochi, and he’d indulged himself, and, although it’s at the very back of his mind, like the bare bones of one of his blueprints, a foundation laid with the basic shapes and missing, for the time being, any of the intricate details, he’s got a vague mental image of his opponent.

And having to share that with Ochiai is making him feel…uncomfortable.

Unhappy.

‘Are you saying it might be a child, sir?’ Kazuya asks, intentionally obtuse. He doesn’t know *why*, but there’s some possessiveness here, that he doesn’t understand. Like he’s ten again, and hiding his diaries filled with half-finished prototypes from his mentor’s ever-watching eyes.

Wary of his rebuke…wary of his disapproval.

There’s a glint to Ochiai’s eye that Kazuya doesn’t like.

‘Not per se,’ hands behind his back, Ochiai lifts himself on the balls of his feet and settles back down, not letting the ringlets of water eddy around him before he takes a few steps further into the room; chaotic, unruly currents froth under his feet as he does. The sight makes Kazuya feel a little on-edge – like he’s watching a mirror being smudged. ‘But it’s interesting, don’t you think?’

There’s that reluctance again, coiling slow but distinct around his vocal chords as Kazuya responds, ‘Yes, sir.’

With his back to him, framed as he is by the windows, Ochiai speaks again.

This time, underneath the dragging syllables of his drawl, there’s something steely and impossible to ignore.

‘Miyuki-kun.’

‘Yes, sir.’
'Do you remember why we are here?'

*There it is.*

What it was all working up to, what the entire point was of calling him into his office first thing in the morning had been, to go see an exhibition Kazuya'd already seen, that he was sure Ochiai had already been aware of long before Kazuya’s enchanted radio had brought it to his attention.

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Remind me, please.’

‘The competition, sir.’

‘Right, right,’ he watches Ochiai nod, still standing with his back to him. It takes Kazuya back, suddenly, and without the comforting blur of nostalgia – to locked rooms, stacks of high-school physics textbooks too thick for his child hands to hold without gripping with both, the drone of lessons on bright, lively afternoons he wouldn’t get to feel on his face.

He may have grown older, taller, but that back still stands imposing, daunting, in front of him.

*Blocking the sun –*

‘For the competition,’ Ochiai repeats, huffing out his nose again. ‘The competition that I’ve trained you for, for years.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Why?’

There’s only one answer. ‘To win.’

‘Correct.’ Ochiai wheels around again, strangely graceful despite his ungainly build. With the light to his back now, his face is hidden in shadow. It makes Kazuya feel all the more cornered. He staves the feeling off. ‘And how do you plan on winning, Miyuki-kun?’

Again, only one answer. ‘By outperforming my opponent.’

‘Correct.’ Ochiai steps toward him, measured and leisurely. Kazuya watches the circlets of ripples flurry around his feet, less because of fascination now than because he wishes to avert his eyes from his mentor’s. ‘And in order to do so, you must know who your opponent is.’

Kazuya hears his own breath catch. ‘But the rules – ‘

‘The rules forbid head-on conflict,’ Ochiai interrupts him, calmly. He is standing a mere foot away from Kazuya now, his features brought into focus at this distance, and although Kazuya has never mastered peeking beyond the face his teacher wears into what goes on in his mind, he is adept at reading the meaning of what those features are intentionally arranged into to tell him. Right now, they are a picture of steely demand – unquestionable authority. ‘But that does not mean you fire your arrows with no concept of where the bulls-eye is. I chose you, Miyuki-kun, not only because of your magical prowess but because of your *intellect* – you have a sharp brain, and you are the ideal candidate for a competition such as this because of it.

‘These exhibitions –,’ Ochiai gestures widely across the hall, ‘are your only contact with your opponent. And therefore, they are your only opportunity to learn about them. How their minds work,
how they think. And, most crucially – where their weaknesses lie. And so, Miyuki-kun – ’ another step, and Ochiai is beside him, almost shoulder to shoulder, and then he’s clapped a hand onto Kazuya’s shoulder, ‘it is in your best interests to find out what you can about the other competitor… as long as it is within the parameters of the rules – ‘

There is a pause, as though to let the significance of the words that follow to sink in.

‘ – It doesn’t matter what means you use.’

***

‘What,’ Kataoka Tesshin had been fond of asking, ‘is magic?’

In a rare moment of distraction, Kominato Ryousuke reminisces.

It is late afternoon, the light turning amber beyond his large office windows. Ryousuke considers getting up from his upholstered, high-backed chair to click the Venetian blinds shut, stop those orange-gold rays in their tracks, but he finds he cannot be bothered. Instead, he watches the slats of light angle toward the carpet, throwing patches of the old handwoven patterns into stark, almost unnatural relief.

What is magic?

Haruichi, when he’d been younger, had timidly proposed that it was the impossible. Ryouchi supposes he’d not been wrong. Even at that age, his younger brother had possessed the astuteness to cut straight to the heart of the matter.

Eijun, on the other hand, had enthusiastically compared it the Force.

You know, he’d gesticulate wildly, arms windmilling, eyes afire, trying to communicate with his whole being what he had trouble finding the words for, which ultimately culminated, one rainy afternoon, to renting out all the available Star Wars films and binge-watching them into the night, punctuated with Haruichi dozing, Eijun enacting some of his favourite scenes and completely ruining the delivery of would-be iconic dialogue by shouting them out enthusiastically himself, to an upended bowl of popcorn that got stuck in the very disgruntled housecat’s fur which no one would take responsibility for.

But, Ryousuke considers, a tiny smile picking at his lips unbeknownst to him.

An energy field created by all living things. It surrounds us and penetrates us. It binds the galaxy together. Eijun’s no Obi-Wan Kenobi, but although his way of processing and understanding the world is different from Haruichi’s sometimes frighteningly practical insightfulness, it did not make him any less precocious.

Perhaps that is why Kataoka-sensei had seen so much promise in him – in them.

What, he’d been fond of asking, is magic?

The beauty of that question is that there is no one answer.

Magic is an abstract and an absolute. Magic is like air that cannot be seen, water that cannot be held, fire that cannot be contained, earth that cannot be moved. Magic is everywhere, and in everything, in every blip in the universe, if you just know where to look. In the flurry of a breeze that shakes cherry blossoms out of their branches, or that one moment of stillness as water clears like a sheet of glass to reveal a pair of koi swimming a delicate circle. It’s in the other half of the rainbow no one ever sees,
in the way flowers can grow through cracks in pavements and fire can burn in empty tree trunks.

Some people, like Haruichi, can learn it – can be taught to feel out its presence the way a doctor feels out a tumour, an alien presence in the body. Others, like Eijun, have a born proclivity towards it. What some people call a sixth sense, this ability to tap into the energy emanating from everything, everywhere and all the time.

And then there were people like himself, who didn’t have it, who couldn’t learn it, but stumbled into it all the same...and now it’s stuck to him, like stubborn paint in his clothes, mud in his sneakers he can’t get out no matter how hard he tries.

In the unusual lull of quiet, no pressing paperwork demanding his attention, no commissions pushing deadline, no collectors he need negotiate with, no artists either demanding their work deserved, were entitled to pride of place or needing convincing that they could be doing more, aiming for better, Ryouichi breathes in and he feels –

Lonely.

It’s pulls a bittersweet smile out of him, as he rolls his shoulders, stretches out his arms above his head and letting the joints click, offhandedly wondering if he shouldn’t treat himself to a massage one of these days. The banality of this thought amuses him further. The fact that people – himself included – can go about their days thinking about work schedules and massages when, within these very same halls, a tournament the stuff of dreams and fiction is being duelled out; slowly, perhaps, lacking the fireworks and flair of the modern-day CGI-infused cinematic blockbuster, but mindboggling nonetheless.

The impossible, as Haruichi had aptly called it.

‘What...’ he hears the ghost of Kataoka Tesshin’s voice whisper, clearer this time, as though he were in the room with him, a phantom rather than a memory, and despite the cozy warmth bathing his spacious, modestly decadent office, Ryousuke has to suppress a shudder, ‘is magic?’

Inadvertently, Ryousuke’s eyes are drawn to a framed photo atop his desk, the only one – a faded yellowing thing encased in an ornate trinket at odds with the age and wear of the picture, a close-up of three boys, of elementary school age; two with peachy-pink hair and one with chocolatey brown, smiling. Ryousuke’s eyes linger on the latter, on the flash of teeth as he grins ear to ear, eyes almost squeezed shut to make space for the smile, the cheeky salute he’s giving the camera, the chubby little arm he has thrown around a smaller Haruichi.

Magic, Ryousuke thinks, his heart soaking in the familiar heaviness as a sponge discarded in the sink, the desperation he carries like a shadow descending upon him even as the light through his window changes, as darkness begins to settle into the corners of his room, is a curse.

Even in this photograph, faded as it is with time, it’s impossible for Ryousuke not to seek it out, with the same masochistic urge of picking a scab, fingers digging into bruised flesh until it draws blood again –

The scar on Eijin’s ring finger, faint against the bronze of his tanned skin, encircling the base like a patch beneath a ring left untouched by the sun.

***

‘So...he basically said anything is fair play?’ Youichi asks, dubious.

‘As long as it’s within the rules.’
Youichi feels his eyebrow lift. ‘And these rules are?’ he pushes, with a deliberate drawl – inexpert though it may be, in his opinion the guiding principles behind this whole abstract showdown were – at best – open to interpretation.

Miyuki’s at his desk again, the odds and ends of whatever piece of machinery he’d recently taken apart cleared to make space for a massive in-progress blueprint. The scratching of his pencil as an intricate, spidery structure unfurling across the paper is drowned out by sounds of the evening spilling in through open windows – cars honking, motors revving, the voices of passers-by tuning into focus as they walked right underneath them only to fade out again. Aside from Miyuki’s many self-fashioned lamps throwing a coppery-gold glow through the loft, the streetlamps outside cast their own, somewhat solitary light, fighting for dominance against the various pinks and blues and neon greens of the electronic billboards a street across.

Despite the room for distraction, Miyuki’s pencil doesn’t slow.

Youichi sighs. He gets like this sometimes, gripped in the throes of an idea, some vague concept inside his head that itches and itches at the insides of his skull until he’s found a way to give it shape.

But something…feels different this time. There is a subtle feverishness, nearly imperceptible, but Youichi knows Miyuki. He knows the other has something on his mind.

Getting no answer to his question, Youichi pointedly clears his throat.

‘No forfeiting,’ he lists, holding up one finger, not amused when Miyuki barely spares him a glance, ‘no ties, no ‘rematches’, no repeats of the same exhibit…’

Hands in his pockets, displeased at Miyuki’s lack of response, Youichi considers for a moment before eventually strolling, ever so casual, up to his workbench. There’s a single lamp dangling right overhead, that Youichi has joked often before reminds him of a scene out of a movie in an interrogation room – absently, he thinks maybe it’s appropriate, considering they’re on either side of this plain, somewhat worse-for-wear wooden desk – one trying to tease out answers from the other.

‘So,’ Youichi attempts again, after the silence between them has rolled around a bit longer, and Miyuki’s covered about three-quarters of the sheet in front of him, ‘are you gonna do it?’

Miyuki’s pencil skates over construction paper, and his voice is preoccupied when he mumbles, ‘Do what?’

‘Find out more about your opponent,’ Youichi leans over the desk, avoiding the overhead lamp so he doesn’t end up throwing a shadow over Miyuki’s handiwork; upside-down the sketch reminds him of an inverted tower, or a lighthouse – except it’s far more detailed than just that. The fine lines Miyuki’s been drawing crisscross down the length and breadth of the structure – Youichi is relatively sure it is a structure of some kind, partitioned into levels that clearly indicate a cross-section to map out the interior, the shape of it vaguely familiar yet strange enough that Youichi cannot immediately identify it. There are notes scribbled down the sides of the diagram, packed so closely it’s almost impossible to read. Youichi wonders, as he has before, whether it’s even in a language he recognises.

Miyuki takes a moment to answer. When he does, it’s nonchalant. ‘In a way, maybe that’s the point,’ he murmurs, tapping his pencil point on the desk’s surface before zeroing in near the top of his tower…thing. ‘Ochiai keeps comparing this to chess. Which means I’m expected to try and learn as much as I can about my opponent from their moves to…I guess figure out how they think.’

‘So that you can beat them?’
Miyuki actually pauses this time; his grip on his weapon of choice doesn’t slacken, but he does glance up from his precious blueprints for the first time since Youichi’d let himself in to find himself working away like a man possessed. There’s a serious glint to his eye.

‘I think so,’ Miyuki says, slow, and a frown gathers between his brows. ‘After all…this is a competition. The point of this is to win. I’m thinking maybe Ochiai was trying to…push me back on the right track? Because I mean, the mentors aren’t supposed to be active participants in the challenge. So – ’

Youichi leans his hip against the workbench, arms crossed, subconsciously mimicking Miyuki’s seriousness. ‘So he was trying to help? In an unnecessarily cryptic, roundabout way?’

A faint smirk pulls at Miyuki’s lips. ‘Something like that, maybe. Because if you think about it, up until now we’ve just been doing these…displays. That have no connection to one another. I guess you could say because no one knows what to anticipate, so it’s like the opening move in chess, you just move a random pawn a couple paces and wait to see what the other side will do so you can plan your next moves around that.’

Youichi nods. Blind shows of power didn’t really count as a competition, not really – there’s a lot unclear about this whole deal to begin with, but one of the few concrete things Youichi understand about it is that there has to be an outcome.

Someone has to win.

And for that to happen –

‘So you…what? Have to challenge them to a duel?’ he inquires, in jest, partly because he knows his exhaustive Harry Potter references amuse Miyuki even though he pretends to hate them…

And partly because he’s trying not to let on just how seriously he’s asking the question.

‘Direct confrontation is forbidden,’ Miyuki shakes his head, bracing both his palms on either side of his blueprint, eyes boring down into it. The light catches his glasses and turns them opaque. ‘I think we’re supposed to…outdo them.’

‘Outdo them,’ Youichi parrots back, trying to wrap his mind around the idea. He doesn’t attempt too hard though – he’d learnt early on that with magic, anything is easier to swallow if you don’t think too much about it, ‘so like, if they do a room with fake water as the floor, you make a room that’s got fake walls too or some shit?’

Glancing up, Youichi pre-emptively groans – Miyuki’s face instantly tells him the other has decided to be a shit even before he opens his mouth.

‘Not quite anything as literal as that, Youichi-kun,’ he simpers in that sugary voice Youichi hates, and he exaggerates his grimace so that it shows, getting Miyuki to chortle. And yet, despite the smartassery, Youichi can tell –

‘Then explain better,’ he tosses an eraser at Miyuki, and howls when it hits him squarely in the middle of the forehead. No one said being able to wield magic meant he’d have better reflexes.

But Youichi doesn’t gloat. He’s got a hunch –

‘It’s a challenge, right?’ Miyuki gets round to elaborating eventually, once he’s done with the theatrics. He motions to the blueprint, ‘That means we have to be better than the other person. So far we’ve just been doing isolated exhibits, which have no correlation to one another. For there to be any
proper scale of comparison, we have to do what we do, better than the other person. So…each exhibit has to be…more. Bigger, better, more complicated, more impossible. Until one of us can’t keep up anymore.’

Sticking his hands inside his pocket again, Youichi considers, his tongue pressed into the roof of his mouth. ‘I guess that makes sense,’ he says slowly, ‘so Ochiai-sensei was telling you to get the feel of your opponent to test out their potential, yeah?’

Miyuki nods, ‘That’s what I think.’

‘And this,’ Youichi motions toward the sketch, ‘is going to help you do that?’

Miyuki’s answering grin tells him everything he needs to know.

Youichi doesn’t doubt it anymore.

Miyuki’s excited.

Chapter End Notes

i did say this was slow burn ;u;

also if you have questions about what the actual hell is going on here, i hope to address them gradually as we get deeper into the fic! i hope it'll be a fulfilling ride. thank you for reading! <3
im alive! barely. it's been an extended hiatus but my old pals depression & anxiety kicked my ass so hard i couldn't stomach anything i was writing so i took a break until i could be a bit more forgiving. im so so sorry for anyone who had to wait this long for an update and i don't blame you if you've moved on and are no longer interested in this story. if you're still here a) thank you so much for waiting i don't deserve you b) i hope you enjoy the continuation <3

Haruichi wonders, sometimes, if Eijun-kun knows.

About his own intuition, about his almost uncanny ability to know things before they happen. The technical term, from the books Haruichi has perused on the subject, varies – some call it fortune-telling, and there are those, who read peculiar patterns in crystal balls and tarot cards and tea leaves and sometimes in the invisible aura around you, who have made it into something of a trade. Others call it precognition.

Haruichi is more inclined toward that word. Eijun-kun doesn’t scribble natal charts or read palms or plan his year around the trajectory of stars barely visible against the night sky, in this insomnia-driven city (though he is fond of bellowing *mercury in my Gatorade* at every available opportunity) – Eijun-kun simply knows.

And it's so second-nature to him that Haruichi wonders, sometimes, if he realises this. Realises that he possesses something sharper and keener and far more accurate than an abstract sixth sense.

When he absently starts looking for his phone before it starts to ring, when he skips songs just the right number of times to play the one he's looking for even though his iTunes is on shuffle, when he remarks, on a clement, bright day, *I have a feeling it's going to rain*, and he is never wrong.

So when Eijun-kun falls into the habit of calling his unseen opponent a *he*, Haruichi accepts that this is the case.

And when he rushes into his bedroom this morning with a crazy head of bed-hair and a wild grin, saying *I think today's the day, Harucchi!* , he already knows before they’ve stepped out of the house and hurried down the walk to his older brother’s workplace – the other side have made their counter-move.

Sure enough, when they get to Aniki’s office – Haruichi has to bodily hold Eijun-kun back by the arm to stop him from barrelling right in again, and rapped a few times against the door instead – the older Kominato is already waiting for them.

He greets them with a nod, and that noncommittal smile. ‘I was going to call you,’ he hums, and Haruichi instantly knows this is a lie – Aniki is as accustomed as he is to Eijun-kun’s inherent radar for things like this, if not more. The proximity of the one-floor flat they’ve rented to the museum is no coincidence, nor particularly for simple convenience, Haruichi is certain of this. ‘It appears one of the wings of the museum has indefinitely been put off-limits. Due to ‘on-going renovation’.’
Both Haruichi and Eijun-kun sense the air-quotes around those words.

‘But?’ Eijun-kun prompts. His hands have balled into fists, and he’s so tense the eagerness reminds Haruichi, not for the first time, of a wide-eyed cat eyeing a red-dot against the wall, coiled up and ready to pounce.

‘But,’ Aniki murmurs, walking over to his desk, rounding it, and tapping a few times on the laptop sat open there. ‘I have not planned, authorised or heard the slightest whisper of any such thing before this morning.’

‘So it’s not open to the public? At all?’ Eijun asks, his words quick with excitement, breathless not only from how hastily they’d made the journey here.

‘It isn’t.’

Silence, like sucked-in breaths and an agitated pulse.

And then, like a balloon being ruptured at needlepoint –

‘Can I go in?’

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The Museum of Art and Illusion did not always used to be called that – in its lifetime, it has passed as a theatre, a rest-house, an auction house, a private mansion owned by a billionaire who spent far too little time in Japan to warrant owning one – not particularly a rich history, to justify a place in the history books, but colourful in a personal sort of way.

Only in the last twenty years or so did it begin to take on something of a more indelible identity – the longest the place has spent under one name, serving one purpose. There were a few formal press release styled articles, barely two paragraphs long, in a smattering of newspapers and no where near the front page, when the acquisition was first made. For some reason, the institution, not quite as grandiose as many other relics of a by-gone era but a curious fusion between traditional architecture and obscure elements borrowed from across the seas, had always failed to capture the public’s imagination.

And yet, the acquisition had been made, by one Ochiai Hiromitsu, and slowly, so slow that perhaps it almost passed unnoticed, it was fashioned into something else. The gates were redone, courtyards transformed into arboretums and rose-gardens, a greenhouse built over what once used to be a shabby warehouse holding whatever the previous owners had forgotten or left behind, independent halls erected in the massive grounds beyond the main first building. Painstakingly, and undoubtedly with a lot of money, everything within the grounds was almost fully remodelled – screen doors and wooden beams were preserved in some wings, but in others were knocked down and reinforced with concrete and stone, with the kind of clinical precision of brain surgery. Architecturally, the museum is something of a miracle – nowhere near as large or expansive as the Tokyo National Museum with its sprawling grounds and majestic halls, but a bizarre convolution in miniature that, in theory, should not be able to exist.

But it does, with its unassuming façade and improbable anatomy, and a steady trickle of visitors spill down its veins every day, flowing down the corridors, winding around the grounds, congregating around gift-shops and the smattering of food-carts cleverly positioned around the most popular exhibits – and no one questions why. It exists, with its eclectic blend of ‘interactive’ exhibits, from its underground aquariums to its miniature butterfly park, from its virtual reality rooms to its planetarium.
It is to this destination that the duo had headed out, exiting the main building through a nondescript back door situated at the end of an equally nondescript storage room – Eijun has seen many of those in his explorations of the place, but this one used to be a kitchen once, though barely any evidence of this remains. They step into a tiny but neat yard, where Eijun likes to imagine folks some long time ago would tend to vegetables and herbs for the then occupants of this plot of land, cross over to a stout gate, and through this join the broader, well-kempt cobblestone paths striking south, in the opposite direction to the front gates.

Eijun doesn’t leave the main building often, but he loves this place. He loves the ever-changing personalities of it, loves its many different faces, loves that nothing looks the same as it did the last time. It isn’t magic, not in the same sense as what he can do, but it’s magical nonetheless. As they hurry by, there’s the Hanging Gardens on his left, where some two months ago there was Christmas tree made completely out of faceted glass, refracting light into blinding, shifting rainbows with the movement of the sun – now, there is a completely transparent glass tower, conical in shape, with a sleek winding staircase curling inside its walls, and suspended by cables so fine they’re all but invisible, are earthen pots and window-boxes spilling over with buds and blossoms in more colours than Eijun can name, dangling at different heights but positioned just so that with each new step going up the stairs, you are eye-level with one of the displays in all its glory. A fountain gently bubbles beneath it all, right in the centre – it catches falling leaves and petals all day, and by the next morning it’s all gone and waters are fresh again. Arriving guests don’t know about the crew that come in after closing hours to meticulously clear out the fountain, and lower each of the plants to ground-level to tend to their particular needs, while another team swipes the glass down, poised on scaffolding both inside and outside, until it is as clear as still water. At specific intervals through the day, a soft misting of moisture is spritzed through the glass dome, to hydrate the blooms in-between showings; automatic blinds, remotely controlled from behind the scenes, control the trajectory and degree of light allowed in at any given point, shielding the more sensitive flowers from too-harsh sun, gently bathing others for their dose of morning glow.

And Eijun loves it, because ultimately, it is a microcosm of man’s ingenuity, like some gigantic blown-up Petri-dish, a thriving ecosystem meticulously managed by checks-and-balances engineered with so much complex cleverness they are, in essence, the closest human kind has ever gotten to wielding magic without actually bending the natural order of things. It is fascinating, and exhilarating, and Eijun loves it, loves this place, loves the wonder that floods his senses whenever he steps into any of these halls, and it is this sharp anticipation of the wonder awaiting him that snares his breath as they rapidly approach the planetarium.

Another tower, what once used to be some type of watch-tower during one of this land’s many incarnations – it’s like a protrusion thrusting straight up toward the sky, no ceremony in the slope of its sides, no gentleness in its austere circumference. Granite-grey and contrasting sharply against the soft blue of the morning sky, Eijun has to be careful not to fall on his backside as he tips his head back to squint at its highest point – the structure curves into a dome, barely visible against brightness of daylight it’s silhouetted against, but Eijun’s been up there once, with a bunch of kids visiting for a field trip, and oohed and aahed along with them at the gigantic telescope housed over there, and how it had made the moon look less like a floating off-white disc too far away to be consequential to a rugged sphere disturbingly within reach, looking like a piece of marble, chipped and in need of an urgent polish.

The front gates, with their glass double doors, are locked and shuttered with a metal gate; Harucchi leads them around the back to a smaller door, reaching into the pocket of his jeans for the key Oniisan had given them. As the key turns in its locks, Eijun hovers right inside of Harucchi’s personal space, buzzing almost out of his skin with the anticipation; he all but throws himself bodily at the door once it’s unlocked, stumbling in before his friend can make a move.
And as he staggers, he hears Harucchi’s gasp echo.

*Something’s changed* is the first lucid thought that registers inside his brain as catches his own momentum, slowing to a stop and whipping his head around.

The second is that *that* is an understatement.

It’s not just something – the whole place has changed. Instead of the sleek glossy white of the walls and all that translucent glass, the interior of the planetarium is…empty. Completely hollow, such that the erratic beats of Eijun’s first couple steps into the place are still ringing out in fading echoes as he looks around. The glass-capsule elevator to ferry visitors in between the different levels, all curving along the inner periphery of the tower, has disappeared without a trace, along with the reinforced metal railings circling each floor, visible, usually, from down here, like a tunnel of silver ringlets receding into the distance – there is only smooth, bare and uninterrupted wall, dimly lit by the almost ghostly flicker of light pouring in from an opening near the ceiling, so high up Eijun can’t pinpoint it with his bare eyes.

Eijun drops his eyes back down, neck muscles starting to cramp from all that craning, taking a few tentative steps further inside. Where before, the interior comprised of a central well housing the circular reception desk, resplendent with Mac desktops, sheaves of pamphlets of the structure’s floorplan, informational tidbits about the various exhibits and posters for any upcoming events, there stands only a solitary, old-fashioned ship’s wheel the kind you only see in pirate movies, tall enough to reach almost to Eijun’s chest. It stands there like an incongruity, affixed to the floor, carved out of unpolished, unburnished wood, looking like it’s an unfinished product at a woodwork shop, that someone had left behind accidentally.

‘I…can see why they closed this place off for ‘renovating,’ Eijun hears himself say, and the light humour of his words comes out all distorted and eerie in the emptiness, bent out of their shape.

‘There’s…no way anyone…,’ he hears Haruichi say, a bit faintly; he sounds winded. Eijun thinks he can relate.

This is the most blatant display of magic either of them has ever seen.

Because there is no doubt magic is involved. As appreciative and inspired as Eijun is by human ingenuity, he is also aware it does not stretch to completely reworking a physical structure of this size and scope overnight. It’s *impossible*. In Eijun’s dictionary, the words are all but interchangeable.

But still…to see something of this magnitude…Eijun’s feelings are too scattered for him to place as any one emotion. His feet move toward the ship wheel of their own accord, heels hitting the stone floor (which Eijun can swear the last time he’d come here had been tile) with muted thumps, so overcome by the enormity of what he’s standing in, brain working overtime trying to process how much magic went into this, the skill and the vision, that his head is a fuzzy blank, skin broken out in gooseflesh, and his fingers have already stretched out, just shy of brushing the spartan wood of the wheel when –

‘Wait.’

It’s loud, agitated and sharp, and it pierces through the gloom like the crack of a whip. Eijun flinches at the sound and its smattering of echoes, ripping his hand back away from the wheel and pivoting on his feet to face Harucchi, his stark white face standing out against his berry hair.

*He’s worried.* Of the two of them, Harucchi is undoubtedly the more prudent – undoubtedly the least likely to dive headfirst into a problem without stopping to investigate it more closely. Eijun isn’t
surprised that he’s eyeing the wheel, and the rest of their completely transformed surroundings, warily. So he waits – lets Harucchi walk a slow, deliberate path along the perimeter of the place, grazing his fingertips over the cool stone, lets him peer at the ship wheel with brows furrowed and hands held carefully away, lets him pull out his phone and switch on its flashlight as he hunts the floor for…something. Some clue.

But there is nothing. Nothing apart from the silent invitation embodied by the wheel, the only object in this place they can interact with.

‘Guess there’s nothing else but to go for it,’ he remarks to Harucchi. Harucchi, biting his lip, nods, and scoots closer to Eijun as the latter grips two of the spokes of the wheel. It reminds Eijun, a little bit, of a small puppy, protective, unaware and uncaring of its own size – the image helps settle Eijun’s nerves, all in disarray since stepping into this place as they scramble to make sense of it, a little. Drawing in a deep breath, Eijun bodily jerks the wheel to the right.

Two things happen simultaneously.

Something, a stick, a lever of some kind, springs out of the base of the wheel, around the back. And the floor beneath their feet moves.

Harucchi makes a startled noise next to him, shifting closer; Eijun’s heart, having made a corresponding jump with that first jerk as the ground shifted, seems to have gotten itself stuck somewhere between his ribs. He forgets to breathe.

Almost unthinkingly, Eijun gives the wheel another spin.

The ground moves again.

It moves them.

‘It’s…going up?’ Haruichi murmurs, knees buckled like he’s expecting the floor to give way at any point.

Eijun can’t answer.

Underneath his fingertips, energy buzzes, fluctuating, like a pulse. Regripping the spokes, Eijun pulls again.

It turns with just enough resistance to justify the corresponding movement of the platform beneath their feet hiking them higher, and yet entirely too easily considering the physical mass shifting inside this makeshift elevator.

Mouth dry, heart jackhammering from the adrenaline, Eijun barely notices the cold film of perspiration standing out against his neck or the goosebumps riddling down his arm as he gives the wheel another almighty yank, and another, and another, and they glide, smooth, upwards, and there’s so much to process, so much shifting and moving and clicking into place around him that he forgets how words work, because the higher they rise, the more the featureless grey of the walls they’d encountered when they got here look more like something else –

Because the higher they rise, no matter how Eijun is keeping his eyes peeled open, hardly daring to blink, his brain cannot capture nor make sense of how after each millisecond the colour of their surroundings deepen, ripen, bruising dark and inky and slow, rippling outward and higher, like a gigantic chromatography test, and the grating of stone against stone fades before he’s able to pinpoint it and reduces and mellows to murmurs as the platform scrapes its way higher until it sounds like
running water and the concrete is dissolving right in front of his eyes until between one moment and the next he’s aware that there’s no longer a wall anymore, that they’re no longer enclosed and it’s darker and lighter at the same time and it’s in the same instance that he realises that there are tiny pinpricks of light blinking into existence around him, blossoming out of nothing like the eyes of animals in the dark or jewellery glinting in a closed shop window or, or –

‘Stars,’ he whispers, choked out, hands gripped so tight around the wheel his knuckles lock but he hardly notices, hardly cares, mouth dry and pulse escalated to a fever pitch as he whips his head up, already knowing what he’s going to see –

The tiny opening of light they’d spied from the very bottom of the tower glows down at them now, bright but soft and mystical and even larger, more defined and more breathtakingly beautiful than it had been when Eijun had looked at it through the telescope on his field trip –

And it hits him all at once, and Eijun lets go of the wheel, and there’s a split second’s panic as he does that they’d be sent careening back down to the earth but the ground doesn’t waver, only Eijun does as he finds himself falling, knees hitting the only solid surface left around them as the universe unspools and galaxies swirl and sparkle down at him and the moon continues to beam benignly in the early morning before the museum had even opened.

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Not too far away from the museum, Miyuki Kazuya sits at the edge of his bed, the sheets still half tangled with his legs as they had been as he’d hastily extracted himself from them, startled awake.

His radio whirs with static on his bedside table, exhausted of words. Kazuya switches it off, licking his lips as he tips his head back, trying to reign his composure back in. He’d not expected his tower to be used so soon.

And more pertinently, although he’d suspected…wondered…

He’d not imagined S.E.’s magic would be potent enough to power the whole thing in one go.
i am beyond grateful by all the warm comments you lovely people left for the previous chapter - thank you so much for welcoming me back! it was so nice to hear from people i used to speak more frequently with before, and i promise i will reply, i will! i have a thesis to defend next week so i'm a bit boxed in. but i promise i will reply! thank you so much for waiting, i don't deserve you. to the new folks i've not had the pleasure to interact with before, welcome! thank you for reading, i hope you will continue to enjoy this ride with me <3

nb: this is not proof-read im really sorry for any typos/mistakes

Libraries, contrary to what they tell you, are loud.

At least, they are if you learn to listen to them the way Eijun has.

Books are personal things, after all. Not all of them – the ones that rarely leave the shelf, only checked out because there’s a couple lines of reference a student needed in their final year thesis, just a measly fragment out of five hundred pages, and the ones that never leave the shelves at all, are quiet, the way you’d suppose books are.

But the well-loved ones are the exact opposite. They murmur and hum and whisper, buzz with the residue of their readers’ emotions as they’d thumbed through the pages, strong enough to linger even after their fingerprints have faded, pressed in between the covers along with the words that inspired them. They thrum and bubble and chatter as Eijun strolls down the aisles, louder and quieter as he runs his fingertips along the spines, stopping occasionally to consider a volume and glance over the blurb if the book seems particularly excitable to make its presence known.

Sawamura Eijun’s never had to ask for book recommendations.

But that’s not why he’s here. In fact, it’s been a while since he’s actually been at a library to borrow a book, or to read. The wheels of his trolley hiss against the wood of the floor but he’s been keeping them well-oiled, so he can barely hear them as he picks up their contents one by one, bringing them over to the spots they’d claimed as their own. His boss is quite pleased with his efficiency, but Eijun can’t particularly boast to knowing his way around the Dewey decimal system – he lets the books draw him to where they think he belong, and he can usually trust them as he slides them into place amongst the other tomes.

The truth is, Eijun comes here because of the noise. He likes it – feels comforted by it. It’s the kind of humdrum that seeps through school hallways and family gatherings, and it feels a lot more intimate than the impersonal medley of sounds he’s used to at the museum, or in traffic, or the park. It’s more than that, feels a bit more welcoming than that, a lulling background soundtrack that Eijun can relax again, and for moment at least, forget the melancholy.

Back at the front desk, Eijin pulls one of the volumes recently returned toward himself, begins to flip through listlessly, mind somewhere else. He hasn’t been working here long, but the few weeks since
he’s started have been a reprieve - it’s the only place he spends any meaningful amount of time that isn’t the museum, and isn’t his shared apartment with the Kominatos, and Eijun feels that weird prickle of almost guilt at enjoying the fact that he’s alone.

Not that he hates company – no, no, he absolutely loves company. Loves meeting people and getting to know them, or thinks he must, anyway, with how much he yearns for it.

Pages flutter between his fingertips as he daydreams, wondering, wishing, absently pondering why he felt such a strong pull from this medieval European history textbook, wonders if the previous owner had loved the subject so dearly, wonders whether he himself would have enjoyed school, and the banalities that it entailed. Maybe manga isn’t the best medium to learn about your average school life, but since it’s such a recurring theme, and doesn’t deviate all that much even across genres and Eijun has read so many genres, sometimes he slips and allows himself to wallow, a little, missing things he’s never even experienced – homeroom, roll calls, eating lunches on rooftops…having crushes, being crushed on, extracurriculars. In his hypothetical alternate life, sometimes he imagines being in a literature club, sometimes he’s in archery, sometimes he’s in baseball, and it’s never anything extraordinary, but even the ordinariness of it leave him aching.

Because the daydreams all typically end in the same way. In hard, cold reality, where Eijun has never gone to school and never will, because whatever power that be had ordained that Eijun would be born different – so fundamentally different, in fact, that an entirely different set of rules would have to apply to him.

For the longest time, he thought he didn’t mind that. After all, how could he complain about his gifts? Kataoka-sensei always, always called them that, and Eijun believed him, believed in it. These are gifts, that let him bottle up time and carry it in his pocket and spill it out in his bedroom and watch the minutes dance in the confines of his hands. Dreams don’t stop and fade and disappear when he wakes, but permeate into his reality, and ‘impossible’ is merely a meaningless word that has never truly applied to him. He’s seen things and done things and felt things that fill every vein in his body with a keen gratefulness for being alive, and being given this mystical third eye that lets him see in between the lines along which the world was crafted, and he doesn’t – couldn’t – regret it.

It does leave him feeling very alone, though.

Harucchi tries to understand, and Onii-san tries to understand, and Eijun loves them for it, but it’s always with the bitter rush of bile in his throat that he thinks that they would never be on the same page, not really. The distinction had been made when they were children, when Eijun had been selected to be the champion for this tournament, this odd, ambiguous game that has been the single defining factor of his whole life. The purpose that his existence has been bearing down towards, all along.

Unseeing, Eijun allows another book to fall open on its own, and it does cleanly, midway, where the spine had snapped, and for a moment it’s hard even to let the white noise of the books and their volumes and volumes of intangible history to distract him from the resentment that crackles inside him, making each beat of his heart sore and heavy. That’s the part he hates – the part where, ultimately, despite having the power to bend the world to his will, he has to bend to the will of some long-forgotten contract forged between a dead man and another he has never met. His life, signed away just like that, in exchange for protection, and security, and the promise to learn how to make his magic bloom instead of terrorise those around him, inadvertently sow disaster.

It takes Eijun a moment to realise the books on his desk are vibrating, slightly – the European history text is shuddering, as though an invisible hand were restively rifling through its pages. Gripping the edge of the table, Eijun makes himself draw in a huge lungful of breath, and another, and another –
the cool air, tinged ever so slightly with that distinctive blend of dust-heavy pages and worn leather and fragrant wood, calms him a little.

This is why he never allows himself to dwell on these things, on the unfairness of it all, when he’s not alone. Onii-san and Harucchi worry about him, he can see it and sense it even when he’s not looking, all the cautious half-glances and lingering looks of concern, and it bothers him all the more, and he becomes upset at himself for being bothered when they’re only being sympathetic, when they’re only worried because they care about him and are the only people in the entire world he’s known as family since he’d been taken away from his own, the only people who have any inkling of the fact that the life he’s leading is not one of his choosing but one he was thrust down, and the only way he can ever free himself is by winning this bizarre unfathomable contest.

So Eijun compensates by trying to be as positive and cheerful as he can, and most of the time it’s not so difficult. The nature of miracles is often a prime preoccupation, and the business of creation has is its own kind of addictive high – conjuring images in his mind and then conjuring them in real life is not a simple matter of snapping your fingers and wishing really hard, but more like…visualising an ideal, this perfect image inside of your head, and then sketching it down on a notepad in excruciating, flawless detail. Only a skilled artist can transfer the exact replica of what they had in mind, with all its intricacies and nuances intact, on to his canvass – only a skilled magician can transfer impossibilities into reality.

And for a long time, at least when he was younger and fascinated by all the ways the world could be if he could figure out how, like piecing together a five-thousand piece puzzle with no reference picture, it was enough. Him and Onii-san and Harucchi in their little house close to the lake where they’d catch fish and eat watermelon and try to save drowning ants just with their minds was enough.

Maybe it’s homesickness, Eijun thinks dryly, with a pang that makes his throat hurt and his eyes water a bit, makes him blink a little rapidly. Maybe moving to the city and being thrown in amidst all these strangers and knowing the whole time that he can’t belong with them is just amplifying all the comingling feelings of loss and regret, the loneliness as the realisation solidifies that no one can ever truly understand his very singular circumstances.

No one, at least, except his faceless opponent.

Feeling his thoughts veer toward dangerous territory, Eijun hurries to his feet. He allows the newly-returned set of books to pull him back to their places, their little sighs as he slides them back into place usually affording him a private little giggle from the outlandishness of the whole idea, but today he just feels...bereft, lost, because he has no one to share the laugh with, and –

And it’s not making his job of devoting his grey matter to steer away from his opponent any easier either. Away from his tower, away from the most extravagant display of magic he’d ever seen apart from his own. The phantom sensations of the energy that place had been alive with shiver up his bones again, and Eijun exhales a bit harshly, feeling the goosebumps pimpling his skin as he freezes halfway down an aisle. The bird exhibit had impressed him, and piqued his curiosity endlessly, but this – in comparison this was like seeing the ocean for the first time in your life, and feeling your mind scramble to make sense of the concept of infinity. The steady pulse of power that pumps through his veins like blood until he siphons it as he needs it had been rushing through that place, magnified, and Eijun had felt, his heartbeat strumming so fast he could barely feel it move anymore, the magic leak out of him, teased out and twining, coagulating, with the magic of that place, and folding together into something bigger and greater and more potent than anything he had ever felt, or could begin to comprehend.

Harucchi had had to half carry him out afterwards, his knees shaky and his breath coming in short
unsteady bursts, but Eijun didn’t feel drained, or weak…Eijun felt alive, so alive that the neurons were singing in a frenzy inside of his skull, and his entire being resonating so closely with the essence of that place that it overwhelmed him until he could physically not move out of bed for the rest of the day.

The Kominatos had been worried, he could tell – Eijun was worried too, but for different reasons. Because now that he’d felt…that, he found himself wandering around unable to shake off this feeling. Like he’d lost something important. Like there’s a part of his soul that had been missing all this time, and now he’s irritatingly, naggingly conscious of the void, all the time.

And this worries him.

Because Eijun had already been curious. And now he’s afraid that curiosity has ballooned into something more – something much more compelling, something that’s started fuelling his instincts long before he could become cognizant of them and stop them. Already the guilt of having left that little missive in his opponent’s first exhibit had been eating up at him, but just like the mischief of getting away with always knowing where his friends were concealed when they played hide and seek as children, even though he knew he was cheating, Eijun can feel himself tipping, ever so slightly, too little to be incriminating, but just enough that he could trip entirely…

The only thing holding him back is the look of chagrin he’d seen on Onii-san’s face when he had forced his uncooperative body out of bed to go get water after returning from the tower, hunched in an armchair by himself as though the weight of the entire world had aged him twice his years.

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Telepathy is very much a real phenomenon – some who possess the strain are just more astute at it than others. In fact, if there were a science to it, any good researcher would find that the term is far too broad to encompass the spectrum of talents that often gets classified as the work of a telepath. There are those who are described as charming and persuasive, all too skilled at planting seedlings of thought and ideas, sometimes in the minds of a crowd, sometimes in the mind of one specific target. Not every charismatic leader or crowd favourite is a telepath, but an astonishing number are, and go through life finding others caving to their whims, no matter how unreasonable, rather too easily.

Then there are those who, rather than transmitting the signal, are adept at receiving them. Some who can glance at their sibling or friend or a stranger on the street and infer a rather accurate image of what they have on their mind.

Others, like one petit pink-haired boy named Kominato Haruichi, receives signals too, but not of thoughts.

Feelings are a whole other ball-game – where thoughts, for the most part, have some measure of structure, some clarity, forming themselves into words and images with more defined edges, feelings are less distinct. Feelings are like clouds. They grow and shift and break apart and drift away and gather again, sometimes spry and light and weightless and sometimes brooding and loud and heavy, so heavy they cannot keep it all in anymore.

Haruichi likes that imagery. Eijun-kun was the one who had made that analogy, a long time back, when the two of them had been lying on their backs on the gently sloping riverbank close to their home, uncaring of the damp grass underneath them, prickling against the skin of their necks and arms.

Haruichi remembers that day very, very well – remembers the floatiness inside of him, equal parts
serene and giddy, staring up at the giant, snowy white clouds stippling a clear azure sky, and in that moment, he’d thought, that he wasn’t just picking up the waves of contentment coming off of Eijun-kun, the previous excitable energy with which he had been catching beetles earlier tempered down to something much more mellow. He’d been feeding into it, too.

In that one, insignificant, glorious moment, they had been on the same wavelength. And Haruichi had been happy.

“Hey, Eijun-kun,” he says in the present, paused in the doorway of the kitchen as the front door closes and the safety latch slides into place. “How was work?”

“Oh my God,” Eijun-kun says with the same disregard for volume pitching his voice too loud for indoors that he always has, shuffling out of his shoes, “Someone borrowed a bible and when I asked why since it was out of the Reserve collections so he had to get a special pass from the counter, and he actually said it’s because he thinks his apartment is haunted and he’s going to use a Ouija board to check and thinks it might protect him?? Can you imagine? If you’re scared why would you try to play with a Ouija board in the first place??”

“Did you let him check it out?” Haruichi asks curiously.

Frown tucked between his brows, Eijun-kun pouts, “Well…yeah. I mean I tried to tell him not to irresponsibly contact ghosts and crap but ultimately I can’t stop him, so maybe having a bible might actually help? Who knows?”

Haruichi tips his head to the side, the smile playing at his lips discreetly teasing. “I guess you’ll know when – if – he comes to return it.”

“HARUCCHI. Don’t! I’m being torn apart by this moral dilemma already!” distress evident, Eijun-kun swings his arms around a bit wildly. I even got his number out of the system and saved it on my phone just in case I need to call in the 0.09 per cent likelihood that he summoned Beelzebub into his living-room! I need support.”

“Sorry, sorry,” one palm held out, the other gripping around the mug of tea he’d poured himself before he’d heard Eijun-kun’s keys, Haruichi asks, “Want some chrysanthemum tea? To soothe your nerves from your near brush with Beelzebub?”

Glowering still, but without any heat now, Eijun grumbles, “Yeah, fine. But I’m gonna shower first.”

And he trots by, commenting about something smelling good as dinner bubbles away on the stove and its aromas drift out into the hallway, and as he’s ambling noisily up the stairs as Haruichi rewinds to that moment again, when they’d been kids chasing insects and coming home with grass stains on their clothes. So far away and yet so present, stark and clear in his memory, as clear as the sky had been.

And he reflects, biting down on his lip and trying to push the sudden surge of sadness back, that despite the springiness in his steps, and the exuberance of his actions, Eijun-kun drifts around this house like a raincloud. Not a stormy one, all contained destructiveness and cacophony, but quiet and weighty and morose, the type that opens up the heavens in silence and you glance up from whatever you’re doing to find, to your surprise, that it’s raining.

Soft, almost unnoticed. Lingering, and everywhere.

Not for the first time, Haruichi prays for a way out. Something to stop this tournament in its tracks. Something that would decisively and easily let Eijun-kun win. He prays for a miracle, so they can go
back to their carefree lives before they moved to the city, when days felt like endless stretches of blue sky and fluffy white clouds, and the three of them didn’t have to live like strangers under the same roof, with secrets they couldn’t share, always, always hiding.

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A week passes after Kazuya’s carefully devised tower and its single exhibition day.

Two weeks.

Midway through the third, Kazuya is a little frantic.

Not too much. Nothing excessive. Kazuya isn’t the type to let anxiety or nerves or consternation get ahead of him and render him immobile.

But it does prey on his mind. A little. A lot.

And it’s frustrating, because he’s not entirely sure what he’s worked up about.

He’s come to terms with the potential of his opponent, he thinks. After the initial shock, the disbelief jarring his bones as he realised how the tower had taken barely a few minutes to be powered and unveil its prize when any individual with even a moderate level of magic, like Kuramochi, might only have managed one turn of the wheel, Kazuya thinks he’s made peace with that fact. Yes, it’s astonishing and maybe even a little intimidating, the amount of prowess S.E had displayed in that one act. But he can rationalise it. It makes sense. It had taken someone of Kazuya’s capability to build something like that, so naturally it would take someone of comparable capability to fully unleash it. Whoever his opponent is, they’d been as carefully selected and trained as himself, because they were to rival each other as equals.

This makes sense.

And Kazuya likes things that make sense.

So he is particularly irked by the restlessness that seems to gnaw perpetually at his insides, that makes him switch his radio on first thing every morning and listen intently to the static as though trying to contort the meaningless noise into something of substance. It’s there, all the time, simmering beneath his skin, always patting down over his pocket for his phone because he imagines phantom vibrations which may or may not be texts from Kuramochi because he’d found something interesting about the tournament, or one of the exhibits.

Or S.E.

And Kuramochi does text an exorbitant amount, but Kazuya’s starting to get a bit worried about the way his impatience flares when scurries to grab the device and sees yet another message preview of a meme instead of actual, concrete information.

Almost three weeks.

And no counter move.

And Kazuya just…waits.

Waits, and anticipates, and somehow that grows and burgeons before he has a chance to nip it in the bud and occupies the back of his mind like some kind an irritating app that refuses to close no matter how many times he tries to shut it down.
And as one day spills into the next day and the next day spills into the next week and Kazuya, by rights, should already be working on mapping out his next exhibit because he thrives on planning and prefers to be prepared, he wonders.

The human mind is like that. It strives to understand, flounders when things don’t connect. It doesn’t matter if what it has to work on is as distant and incongruous as could be, it tries.

And despite knowing this, despite all his self-awareness, Kazuya finds himself doing the same. Tries to find security and predictability from what he already knows.

His opponent’s initials, purportedly, supposedly, are S.E. He knows this because a message was scribbled to him inside of his own debut exhibit, signed with those letters. So far both he and S.E have showcased two exhibits each. And –

And…

S.E didn’t try to reach out to him again.

And it could mean a whole lot of things, or a whole lot of nothing, and whatever it is, Kazuya’s not supposed to care, but he hates himself, a little, because despite this, and despite how flippantly he had dismissed it when Kuramochi had quirked an eyebrow at him and asked whether he’d received another fanletter from his rival, he had kept his radio on all day that day, tuned up to let him know if anyone other than himself revisited the tower.

Despite how much he’d fretted, and then tried not to fret, about maybe erasing the opening for communication with his faceless challenger because he’d taken the tower down the following day, and restored it to its original state, so tours could resume and the museum return its regular scheduling.

He tries to reason with himself, because Kazuya likes reason. After all, it’s not like he’d reached out to S.E. Maybe the silence had conveyed that he wasn’t interested in chitchatting, and S.E took the hint. Maybe S.E wasn’t impressed by his tower. Maybe S.E was impressed by the tower, by the sheer magnitude of what it embodied, and he felt intimidated. Maybe S.E had seen it as a power move, as Kuramochi had called it, or a declaration of war, and didn’t want to fraternise with the enemy. Maybe he’d not been fraternising at all, but had thrown out a bait, and decided to abandon it when nothing caught.

And it’s maddening, because Kazuya doesn’t know, and he shouldn’t have to know, but he can’t help it.

And it’s in the midst of yet another aggravating session with himself cross legged at the edge of his bed, sternly telling himself to get over it, to stop obsessing over a person he has never met and only knows by proxy of enough exhibits to count on one hand so he can go get some actual work done, when his radio creaks to life for the first time in almost a month.

***

Kuramochi had already gone home by now, and Kazuya hadn’t bothered to text him, despite the niggling little voice sounding awfully a lot like the guy himself berating him somewhere at the edge of his mind. Kuramochi would like to be there, Kazuya knows this without having to ask, but somehow, right now, the urgency he’s overcome with doesn’t allow room to think about that very much.

Kazuya’s in a rush though. He’d switched out his ratty sleep shirt for a hoodie and kept his
sweatpants on, and his hair is probably a wild tangled mess, but that’s okay, because it’s after closing hours anyway, and Kazuya is running on entirely too much pent-up anticipation to pace himself right now.

He’s in through one of the back doors the staff sometimes use, beelining toward the *Penmanship Through The Centuries* exhibit, not even sparing a nod to the figure parked next to a cleaner’s trolley in the lobby – he too doesn’t mind Kazuya there, doesn’t flinch or look up or dither in his measured sweeps across the marble with his mop, almost as though there isn’t anyone barrelling through the empty museum in the first place.

Footsteps clattering and echoing like a stampede instead of one rather excitable individual, Kazuya’s breathing a bit heavy, lungs working out, as he skids to a stop and the door in question gives easily under the touch of his hand, and then he’s inside and he’s looking at –

Cloth?

No, not cloth, although it does at first glance look like an incredibly long, fine length of dark ribbon. It hovers, twining and looping gently, with a quiet and delicate grace, curling in and over and around itself. Kazuya steps closer, and feels his eyes widen as it glistens wetly under the ambient lighting.

The smell is sharp and unmistakable.

*Ink.*

***

It takes a little bit of puzzling over, and a deceptively simple Google-search with his limited knowledge of the Latin alphabet, but the all-knowing internet informs him that the script indolently furling and unfurling itself as though the air were water and the liquid some mystical sea creature swimming through it, is in English, and is in fact spelling in delicate strokes the passage from a novel.

“ ‘Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?’

‘That depends a good deal on where you want to get to.’

‘I don’t much care where…’

‘Then it doesn’t much matter which way you go.’

‘...So long as I get somewhere.’

‘Oh, you’re sure to do that, if only you walk long enough.’”

It takes Kazuya two and a half weeks to get here, some fifteen minutes to carefully find the right letters of an unfamiliar alphabet so he can search the first couple of words, a few seconds to find a Japanese equivalent he can comprehend, but as Kazuya reads the foreign words, they don’t feel foreign at all.

They feel like…*him*.

Like his meandering journey from his parents’ home to Ochiai-sensei’s tutelage, a journey toward a destination he doesn’t know and doesn’t know how to find, but written out with gentle care by a stranger’s hand.
And he’s telling himself he’s being ridiculous, he’s telling himself his overworked and obsessive mind is now trying to find something he can relate to with S.E by reading meaning into things where there are none, when he reaches out to one the loops of ink nearest to him, and feels the viscous liquid against his fingertips before it retreats, without leaving a mark –

But instead it retracts, all that liquid pooling back into itself and just hovering in a gleaming dark-deep blob before it parts again and this time, instead of a ribbon, it separates and criss-crosses in short but decisive strokes, and Kazuya watches with his jaw hanging open and a drumbeat escalating in his chest as words form in the language he knows, as dainty and majestic as calligraphy, renegade splatters of ink floating by as though splashed from the darting movements of a brush –

“I do wish they would put their heads down! I am so very tired of being all alone here!”

***

The following day, exactly two and a half minutes before Eijun is about to clock out, a bespectacled boy possibly slightly older than him appears at the counter to sign up for a membership card, a Japanese copy of Alice in Wonderland in hand.

Chapter End Notes

there's more to the ink exhibit i'll get into soon :) 

thank you for reading, I hope you enjoyed it!
For as far as Ryousuke can remember, he has been exceptionally good at keeping his cool. When they were younger, even before Kataoka Tesshin and the little boy he'd carried in his arms, brown haired and dazed and a little frightened, had ever walked into their lives, Ryousuke had always been the calm one – he wouldn’t cry, or yell or scream, whether he was hurt, or mad, or confused.

Maybe it was the fact his child-brain had gotten something of a hard reboot when Haruichi had been born – suddenly, he was responsible for a smaller, younger, much more vulnerable human being, left in lieu of his sickly mother, and everyone would always tell him that he needed to be a good older brother, a good boy, someone his small, timid little baby brother could look up to, rely on.

Ryousuke didn’t resent it. It never occurred to him to resent something like that. If someone had asked him, at that point, what he thought about it, being responsible for another human being when he was barely old enough to cross the road by himself, he would probably just have fixed them with the same deadpan stare that unsettles rowdy museum visitors or overzealous artists in the present and asked them, “Who else is supposed to look after him then?”

After all, Ryousuke might have been too young to cross the road by himself, but he was old enough to understand that he and Haruichi only had each other in the world. The little boy would grow up to practically become his shadow, following him around wherever he went, trying to do whatever Aniki would do, striving so hard for his approval – this little boy was all he had as family.

And he accepted it.

When his aunt decided that she could no longer feed the two extra mouths that had been thrust upon her following her brother’s inconsiderate attempts to flee the country to avoid the debt collectors, Ryousuke had accepted it. When they were shuffled through foster homes where for some reason, no matter how generous or miserly or kind or mean their hosts were, they never seemed able to stick, Ryousuke accepted it. When they ended up at an orphanage despite having a lowlife of a father somewhere out there, probably pilfering a pitiful living from gambling or whatever new addiction he might have taken to, to escape reality, Ryousuke accepted it.

He didn’t cry, or throw tantrums, even though on the inside, beneath his calm demeanour, underneath all those still waters, he was angry. So angry that he’d decided he didn’t need any of these selfish, vain, shallow adults who couldn’t find it in their hearts to love two children who had nowhere else to go. So angry that he had decided he would bide his time, make the most of their circumstances, and when the time was right, he would take Haruichi and leave them all behind, and they would make it, they would survive on their own means and in spite of all the whispered poison everyone else would swap about those pitiful little Kominato children, their own dad abandoned them, can you imagine? They’ve not managed to last in any foster home, even though they’re so well-behaved…it’s almost as though they’re cursed…

Ryousuke had kept it together. He’d pretended it didn’t bother him, focused his eyes on the future, on getting out.

Now, he focuses his eyes on the swirling patterns of ink in front of him, and the helplessness that sometimes swam up at him in the middle of the night when he was just a boy, besieged by too many worries, far more troubles than a child too young to cross the road should ever have haunting their
small footsteps, engulfs him.

It’s hard to breathe.

“And when can we reopen this exhibit to the public again?”

The voice is the sound Ryousuke dislikes the most in the world. He loathes it, but perhaps not as much as he loathes the owner.

“I will ask him to remove it by tonight, Sir,” his tongue may as well scald from the effort to remain polite. Beside him, Ochiai’s look of disinterest twists something so unpleasant inside of Ryousuke, he has to bite his tongue to keep his own impassive mask still on.

“You do that,” the other man hums, and Ryousuke thought he would leave, curt and dismissive as ever, and he would finally get to release the breath he’s been holding in, like a pressure-cooker spout, when the other says, after a deliberate sort of pause, “and maybe add that he ought to…work faster in the future.”

For as far as Ryousuke can remember, he has been exceptionally good at keeping his cool. But maybe, after years and years of repressing everything, his composure is too chipped to hold on any longer.

“Excuse me?” he hears the chill in his own voice, frosty and pointed.

Ochiai hardly looks fazed. He waves a careless hand at the looping ink undulating just a few feet away from where they’re standing. “It took him almost a month to come up with this,” he drawls, and every bit of nonchalance in this man’s demeanour is like another dollop of gasoline in Ryousuke’s rapidly climbing rage, “we don’t have time to waste, yes?”

He has better judgment than this, he does – that’s why they’ve come this far, that’s why Ryousuke and Haruichi have always managed to come out of their foster home stints unscathed, no matter what kind of people they were lumped together with. He’d always known what the right thing to say was. Always known the right thing to do. Knew, instinctually, what someone would want to hear to cooperate with him – what someone needed to hear to desist from anything that wouldn’t be in his or his brother’s favour.

But right now, Ryousuke’s ears are ringing, and an ice-cold anger he’s been nursing slowly year after year is coursing like fire through his veins.

“You speak as if we’re in this together,” he says, with a deadly, deceptive sort of quiet – smooth and cold, gaze steely as they fix on Ochiai without wavering, “as if we all agreed to be here. As if any one of us would be here if it weren’t for you.”

The attack doesn’t appear to perturb Ochiai even a little. The lift of his eyebrows, akin to some cheap imitation of surprise, makes Ryousuke’s hands ball up into fists, as he desperately tries to rein the frustration, the anger, churning and simmering and bubbling up and up and up and thundering against his eardrums like a maelstrom and –

Just underneath it, beneath the din, there’s that same helplessness that’d flooded into his lungs, pulling him under, like he’s a deadweight in the deepest, blackest part of the sea, because Ryousuke knows what this exhibit is, Ryousuke recognised the passage as soon as he read it and his heart had sank, fallen out of its place with the abruptness of watching a precious portrait snap off its hook and come crashing down to the ground, shattering right in front of your eyes as you’re forced to watch,
too slow, too incapable, to do anything to stop it.

Save it.

And it’s fitting, isn’t it? Oh so fitting, that Eijun had chosen *Alice in Wonderland* as his muse, because after all, hadn’t he always thought that Alice’s dream had been more akin to a nightmare? A strange, outlandish place where she had to traverse by herself, without anyone to help her, without anyone to guide her…all alone?

Eijun never says, but Ryousuke *knows*. He knows, and he feels, because somewhere along the way, he’d gone from being in a family of two to a family of three, and the fierce protectiveness he’d known all his life for Haruichi was now shared with this brown-haired boy with the loud mouth and big eyes whose arrival had sent shockwaves through all their lives.

The only difference being, Ryousuke had been able to protect Haruichi.

But right here, surrounded by the echoes of Eijun’s loneliness, the dregs of isolation and melancholy staining the ink, loud and dismal and sad, echoes Ryousuke has taught himself to listen to, tuning his senses to learn what seems to come to his younger brother so naturally, is the proof that he had so horribly failed to protect Eijun.

And Ochiai just stands there, uncaring of the little bit of his secret soul that Eijun had left behind in this room, of the plight Ryousuke is tormenting himself with, a sick, perpetual continuation of the anguish he’d known ever since this stupid game had begun, and says to him, “I wasn’t the one that picked your boy, though. Neither was I the one that got you roped into it. I would ask you to take your complaints to the right person, but well…” he shrugs.

Ryousuke can’t help the bark of a laugh he lets out, twisted and wrong in his own ears. “Yes, well, *neither did I*. I didn’t choose to be here, I didn’t ask to be a replacement or a placeholder or whatever the fuck I’m supposed to be here – I didn’t *ask* for this! Kataoka-sensei was the one you signed your stupid contract with!”

“And the contract is binding,” Ochiai continues, smoothly, but there’s a glint to his eye that Ryousuke isn’t used to seeing, a burning heat there that’s unsettling, in lieu of his habitual impassivity, “Tesshin knew what he was agreeing to. It’s a lack of foresight on his part that he decided to die before he could see it through.”

Ryousuke could hardly believe his ears, and he could feel his outrage start to bleed onto his face, contorting muscles and pulling that anger he’d hidden away so carefully beneath humourless smiles that used to unnerve adults out from the lines of his face, and it’s crawling up his throat, too, acidic and burning – but Ochiai gets there first.

“…and let’s not forget. You didn’t ask to be a replacement for Tesshin, but that Sawamura boy didn’t ask to be a replacement for *you*, either. That’s why he’s here, isn’t he? Because *you* refused to be Tesshin’s champion.”

***

Satoru is six years old when he sees one for the first time.

There’s something about the memory that stands out in his mind, like it’s a photograph, still and frozen, preserved behind a pane of glass and pinned to the wall, there, unchanging, whenever he wants to look at it. He’s playing under the bridge again, small mitten-clumsy hands speckled with powdery snow, patting together the base of what, he is determined, is going to be the biggest
snowman Hokkaido has ever seen. Not because Hokkaido had the biggest snowmen, but more because for little Satoru, home was the cozy two-storey house he lived in with his grandfather, and the rest of the world was contained within that word. Hokkaido.

Like most children his age, that word had been just another word to him, not a concept. It’s easier when you’re younger – you can look at something improbable and just accept it because no one has told you yet that this cannot be, no rules and terms and conditions have been imposed on what can and cannot exist. A swing that can catapult you into space is plausible because if you swing high enough you feel as though you’ll be thrown straight into the sky, and colours were probably invented late because all the pictures your gramps show you are black and white, so it must have been pretty dull to live back then when you couldn’t have your shaved ice dripping blue and red, and you could ride polar bears underwater, probably, because they’re big enough and they swim, and dinosaurs could hatch out of the eggs they kept in the museums but probably didn’t for the same reason the eggs in the fridge didn’t hatch into chickens.

So, of course, he doesn’t think there’s anything impossible about building the biggest snowman in Hokkaido.

So, of course, he doesn’t think there’s anything impossible about the woman he sees floating across the water, her long dark tresses floating with her, drifting around a pale column of neck in improbable waves, as though she were underwater.

He does think it’s curious, though. He’s never seen anyone floating before, and there’s something about that woman – about her slight, slim figure, swathed in white, that feels otherworldly, like it belongs in a separate existence, somewhere he can’t reach or touch, the way things exist inside of a snow-globe. The slush he’d held between his hands puddles and soaks his mittens, and the chill seeps through Satoru’s skin and then deeper, a reverse-fever, and Satoru realises that he’s freezing in the same moment the woman, whose face Satoru never got to see, disappears from right before his eyes so seamlessly Satoru has to blink several times before he realises she is gone.

And as much as children have high thresholds for believing the impossible, they also have the keenest sixth senses, and in that moment, sensing his breath puff out in front of his mouth in heaving clouds of steam, feeling the shivers abate as the sharp cold that had gripped him melt just as suddenly away, Satoru knows what he had just seen was not human.

His grandfather, when he recounts the story, stares at him intently, studying his little face, pale beneath his beanie-ruffled raven hair, and Satoru reads the downturn of his mouth as worry, and maybe fright, before he gets pulled into a tight hug.

Satoru has seen many ghosts since then, has a penchant for it, apparently, but that incident under the bridge is the one he remembers most clearly. Perhaps because it was his first time, and because his unprepared mind and body had never experienced the sensory overload that he would eventually, morbidly, get used to. After all, yurei are everywhere – in stations where their human counterparts had fallen on the tracks, beside rivers where they’d drowned, in hospitals where they had breathed their last, roadsid es where they’d taken a step into the traffic without looking. Too many people…to much death, and it had only gotten worse when he and grandpa had moved to Tokyo so he could pursue a prestigious baseball scholarship at one of the country’s best schools.

For his own sanity, Satoru has learned to live with it. With his grandfather’s help, poring through their local library’s host of references, sifting through the somewhat patronising so-called “objective” accounts which described the phenomena Satoru had started seeing on an alarmingly regular basis after that first sighting as plain mythology, to the more reverent essays, penned respectfully by scholars and monks and people like Satoru, which somehow tended to get buried under the dictums
of credibility only to resurface when the existences they spoke about in hushed and careful words made themselves known to someone desperate for answers.

Satoru knows the things he sees are mere shadows of people who are already gone. He’d realised, a couple years older, that the weightless white in which the lady had drifted across the water was the white of a burial kimono, and even later still, darkly, that she had probably been there because she had drowned.

Some people call it a gift, some people call it a curse – Satoru’s grandfather called it a quirk. Just like some kids have a quirk to move their ears just by willing it to happen, or cross their eyes, or burp on demand, or do handstands without ever having been taught, Satoru could see ghosts. They always existed anyway, his grandfather told him, touching his head with a gentleness he could not show with his face or his words, his gaze thawed out with what Satoru would one day recognise as love – you just happen to be better than most at seeing them. It doesn’t have to define you, or affect you, or alter your life in any way. They exist, just like buildings and birds and buses do, and unless they’re in your way, you don’t have to bother with them.

It’s some fifteen years or so later, and Satoru’s grandfather is at their parents’ home now, the latter having returned to Hokkaido from their out-of-town posts to tend to him in his old age, and Satoru is still in Tokyo for college, and as his heart beats rapidly in his chest, clattering off his ribs as he grits his teeth tight and squeezes his eyes shut, halfway hoping that his rampaging pulse will drown out the mournful, bone-chilling wailing echoing through the walls, Satoru thinks, Gramps…you never told me what to do when they ARE in my way.

***

And that’s how he ends up meeting him.

“Oh my God, thank God you’re alive!” is what greets him as he steps up to the counter, and the sound is loud, especially loud in the muffled silence of the library, cracking through the stillness and making Satoru, with his stinging sleep-deprived eyes and head full of fuzz, flinch. And then, “You look awful.”

Satoru smacks his lips, dry from the fact that he didn’t remember to drink any water before leaving his apartment – he’d set out without any destination in mind as it were, having only managed to relax enough to pass out once he’d felt the sunlight dripping into his room burn against his shuttered eyelids, and the tight-laced fear that’d kept him still and barely breathing beneath his sheets had dissipated, slowly, along with that horrible fetid smell threatening to crawl up his nostrils and turn his stomach. He’d woken up with a start when it was well into the evening.

With another sunset lingering in the horizon, Satoru couldn’t take it anymore. He’d grabbed his wallet, phone, laptop and keys, and barged out of the room, and as he’d climbed into the bus, glassy eyed and shivery, he’d been aware of two things – the extreme loneliness he feels, the absence of his grandfather by his side an acute and felt presence all around him, and the fact that he hasn’t been this afraid since he was a small child, watching, wide-eyed, a gaunt-eyed man shambling along by a traffic junction with half his skull bashed in and clothes dyed almost black with blood.

And maybe it was that – maybe it was that hankering inside of him for comfort, for familiarity, that had brought him back to the library. After all, his old-fashioned grandfather had always preferred books to more new-fangled means of getting information, despite Satoru’s sometimes bull-headed attempts to get his equally bull-headed guardian to appreciate the wonders of the modern smartphone, and even though this isn’t the same dimly-lit joint with the age-worn furniture and sagging seat cushions, it held the same feel. The sweet dusty smell of pages, mingling with the artificial scents of carpet cleaner and the air-conditioning – they’re the same everywhere, and Satoru
feels a wave of relief as soon as he buzzes his way in with his membership card.

He isn’t able to get too far, though, before he is stopped in his tracks by someone who, he thinks almost irascibly, is far too loud to be a good librarian.

Despite being sure that his distaste is showing on his face, though, the guy at the counter, the same one who’d looked like he would have a meltdown at the mention of ghosts and bibles the day before, continues speaking, even before he’s made it to the desk.

“So, listen, you said you’re a college kid, right? Yesterday you used your student ID to check out the bible? So, I was thinking, and I was really worried, because you looked like you’d not slept in ages, and I was thinking, you have a bit of an accent too, so you must be from out of town right? And I don’t know if you’ve heard of this before – “

“Excuse me – “

“ – but I watched this video once, on YouTube, y’know how they recommend random videos to you sometimes? So I watched this one about haunted houses in Japan and – “


“ – and I was wondering if you got your apartment at half-price? Because apparently if a house is haunted, people sell it for half-price! To like students and young working adults –“

*Wait – “What?*

Finally, this, out of all of Satoru’s attempts to stem the flow of this guy’s chattering – he must be of the same age as him – seems to get through. He blinks his big brown eyes, cheeks pink (Satoru can’t tell whether because of exertion or embarrassment at realising how loud he was being) and hair flopping messily over his brows, and then he gulps in the breath that he’d evidently forgotten to take before he starts again, voice lower and more measured this time, as though he’d just remembered that he was, in fact, working in a library.

“I did some research,” he says, and pulls the keyboard toward him, tapping in some words with a tad too much aggression which momentarily makes Satoru wonder about the lifespan of keyboards around this Sawamura person, before he grabs the side of his monitor and swivels it so Satoru can see.

“The hits are all actual property websites that specialise in *wake-ari bukken*…they literally rent out apartments that someone might have died in, or even”, he shivers, grimacing , “been *murdered* in, because, you know, their spirits might linger, especially if – “ Satoru shifts his eyes away from the screen to Sawamura at the pause, and catches the furrow on his brow, his mouth curved into something sad, “if…you know, they died while they were sad or lonely or angry – “

“You believe in ghosts?”

It takes a moment for him to register he’d blurted that out, before his brain had even come to process the implication fully.

Sawamura stares at him for a second as though he’s gone crazy, and Satoru bristles, even though a part of him is aware that it’s a weird question to ask when he had been the one showing up at the library looking for reference books about onryo and protective talismans.

“I believe in everything unless I have reason to believe otherwise,” is what the guy retorts, a bit huffily, but then deflates immediately after and Satoru feels his breath catch at the way the guy looks
at him as he says what he says next. “And…besides. If ghosts weren’t real then I don’t think you would be showing up to the library asking for bibles looking like you haven’t slept in days.”

And that’s that. Sawamura is already refocusing back on the screen, and that fear, the one that Satoru has ignored his whole life, the one that he knew his grandfather held close to his heart but refused to tell him, that Satoru could never tell people about his ability, that he could never let anyone know for fear of being judged or bullied or ostracised, unravels like a dandelion held up to a gust of wind.

Softly and suddenly.

It is maybe that, the relief that he had not even known he’d sought all this time, and the enormity of being able to talk to someone about what all this means, without judgment, without scepticism, yawns wide like a chasm inside of him and crumbles the last of guard.

“…I got my place at a discount. I…knew someone had died there.”

Sawamura’s eyes bug out of his head as he stares at him. An understandable reaction, but that doesn’t mean Satoru doesn’t feel the burn of self-consciousness under his skin anyway.

“You knew? And you got it anyway? Why?”

The outrage in his voice pitches so high that it shatters the drowsy still of the library again and this time a disembodied and distinctly annoyed ssshhfollows, probably from someone who doesn’t know the culprit is the librarian in duty, currently flushing brick red from his neckline up.

Satoru would feel gratified and a little smug, were it not for the fact that he’s similarly flushed, and defensive when he snaps, “Why not? Rent in Tokyo is expensive, and I’m just a college student and…” his tongue hits the backs of this teeth, the pause abrupt as he takes a literal millisecond to wonder whether or not to continue, and then decides to hell with it, “…ghosts have never bothered me anyway.”

It’s not an unusual thing to say, Satoru is already thinking, immediately after his mouth had formed around the words, already dissecting them for the ways it might be interpreted, the way he would whenever he felt he might have said something odd, the way that’d become habitual when he’d be caught spacing out looking at something that wasn’t there to anyone else and make up excuses that at one time got him labelled an airhead in middle-school. Surely, anyone who has never had a brush with the supernatural couldn’t be faulted for phrasing it the same way? Surely –

“But not all ghosts are harmless,” Sawamura argues back, lower lip jutted out in consternation, and it should be odd, honestly, that Satoru is standing here in the same shirt he’d slept in with a hoodie pulled over it, at loggerheads with a stranger about one of the most private and closely-guarded parts of his life – but then again the fact that he’d spent the past couple of nights contending with some kind of spirit whose anguished, choked gargles are still ringing against his eardrums isn’t something that happens every day either, “what about the revenge-seeking ones, like Kayako?! D’you even know how the person who died in your flat died to begin with?!”

When Satoru mumbles, Sawamura leans forward, goes, “What?”

“It was a suicide,” Satoru repeats quietly, “they hung themselves.”

There’s a heavy pause.

“Oh my God,” Sawamura groans, under his breath.

Satoru feels that.
“The bible didn’t help, did it,” Sawamura asks tersely.

Satoru is almost tempted to bark out a humourless laugh.

“I didn’t have a Ouija board,” he confesses, and the mingling headrush of hopelessness and exhaustion and the small respite of not having to keep it all to himself makes him dizzy, and strips away the humiliation he might have felt admitting it – though it might also be the fact that he doesn’t remember the last time he’d eaten, too. “I saw it in a movie once, and honestly…it was the first excuse that came to my head when I tried to check out the bible. I just thought having a holy book would make me…safer.” And it was a more risk-free endeavour than trying to procure one from the church (his gramps has always had a healthy distrust of religious institutions – not of faith, because he’s a devout Shintoist, but the people who run it) or from a bookshop (expensive).

“That’s…a really stupid excuse, you know?” Satoru’s about to glare, but Sawamura’s expression isn’t unkind – his lips are pulled into a wry smile, and that gleam in his eyes are what Satoru knows as sympathy.

“You believed me.” He finds himself retorting, somehow unwilling to give an inch, though a part of him is distantly chagrined at the bizarre and unexpected nature of this social exchange, if it can even be called that, as much as it is relieved to just have someone else know.

“Yeah, because I knew you weren’t lying about the haunting part,” Sawamura shoots back, sniffing, “and I’m very good at knowing when someone is lying.”

The thing he’d said to him earlier, the bit about believing in everything unless I have reason to believe otherwise, flashes through Satoru’s mind, there and gone, like a pop-up reminder he’s going to have to look at later.

Right now, he says, “Yeah, well. It didn’t help. That…person. Thing? Whatever it is. It was crying…all night, and it was so cold, and it stank like rotten meat and it just felt… there was so much…anger? There all the time. I’ve never felt anything like that, ever before…”

As he speaks, Sawamura’s face falls, and by the time he’s done it’s morphed into a perfect picture of despair. “You…need to move out. Or get the place exorcised,” he says, seriously.

Satoru shrugs. “I signed a contract. I can’t just up and leave and default on the deposit… and as for exorcisms…like how much would that even cost? How would I know that whoever I ask for help isn’t a con artist or fake or something? It’s just – “

“– a lot.” Sawamura finishes, and there it is again. That warmth, the understanding, devoid of even a hint of judgement. Satoru suddenly feels a lump swell, prickly, at the base of his throat, the scratchiness in his eyes getting worse. The fatigue weighs on him, less like a handicap prepared to trip him, and more like an overly-heavy, insistent blanket.

There’s silence for a bit, the up-in-the-air sort where no one really knows what to say.

Sawamura is the one to break it. “Okay…whatever you decide to do, for the time being you can’t go back to that place. It’s not safe. And…I’m guessing the fact that you’re staying there still is because you don’t know anyone else you can bunk with?”

Satoru nods mutely, trying not to let that sting. He’s never been the best at making friends, and this is a part of town he’s not familiar with, having moved to a different district for university…

“If you don’t mind the fact that I live with two other people, you could bunk with me? Onii-san and Harucchi – they’re my childhood friends and they’re really nice people, and they’d understand! I
promise! And they’ll give you space, though it’ll be a little bit cramped…that’s Tokyo housing for you but – “

Satoru’s head is static, thoughts rolling together and forming slowly, side-effects of too much stress and too little sleep, “You – “ he starts, stops, clears his throat and tries again, “You’re…we don’t even know each other.”

“Yes, we do. You read my name off the tag earlier right?” Sawamura points at his nametag, where a plastic sleeve holds a laminated card with a tiny passport-sized photograph of him, below which is printed in bold Sawamura Eijun, “and I know you’re Furuya-kun because I checked out the bible for you yesterday!”

“That’s – that’s still – “ Satoru’s mind splutters in much the same way his mouth does, because okay yes, Sawamura has a point, but apart from his name and his apparent disregard for workplace decorum policies, there’s still not much he knows about the guy, and vice versa, and he tries to say as much. “We literally just met.”

Sawamura tilts his head to the side, his expression considering. “True,” he contends, then shrugs, and there it is again, that light in his eye that feels mellow and so…so warm? “But I can’t just leave you to deal with something like this alone. I know you’re probably not safe at home right now, so if I just let you go back there and something happens to you, I’ll feel responsible too, you know? Because I couldn’t do anything to help.”

And for the first time in his life, Satoru understands what people mean when they say déjà vu – when they feel they’ve lived a moment before, seen the same things and felt the same way even though it’s inconceivable in a library he’s only recently become a member of and with a person he’s hardly known two days –

But Satoru recognises it anyway, because this moment, in its crystalline clearness, feels just as it had when he had told his grandfather about the floating woman, and he had been scared, but just the fact that he had believed him and promised to be there for him had made him feel so much better.

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Kazuya, technically, could just buy an ebook or an audiobook.

It’s not that, technically, he even needs to read Alice in Wonderland in the first place. After all, he had already established that the ink ribbons spelled quotes out of the book, and he knew the general synopsis of the whole thing. It’s befitting – a lone and confused little girl falling through a rabbit hole and into a world of crazy and unimaginable, perhaps even dangerous, things…

It’s that, Kazuya reasons, even as he winds his way to where he knows there’s a bookstore that’s bound to have a copy of a classic like Alice in Wonderland, a favourite in pop culture references, everything from playing cards to novel adaptations to anime – it’s probably just how perfect the analogy is that’s got him so intrigued to read the book itself.

Probably.

Or, maybe, perhaps –

Kazuya shushes his thoughts, makes a turn, checks his phone again for the directions, because reading isn’t particularly his forte, outside of the textbooks he’s read growing up as part of his training, and then later as his knack for machines evolved into something more involved. He hasn’t told Kuramochi about the ink exhibit yet, let alone the fact that the ribbons change when you touch
them, and that he has a theory that maybe, perhaps –

They change to fit the person that touches them.

Reflects…them?

Even as he thinks this, a part of him wants to feel embarrassed, shake the thought off as too fanciful, and unlike himself, someone so used to dealing with absolutes. Maybe this is why he didn’t say anything to Kuramochi, unwilling to subject himself to the teasing he’s come to expect from him or maybe –

Unwilling to have him unerringly get to the heart of the matter, before Kazuya is ready to be there himself.

Because ultimately, whether he acknowledges it or not, whether he thinks about it or not, whether it takes him a day or week or a month to steer his roundabout way to the conclusion…he wants to get the book because, when he’d touched the ink, and felt its magic tingle through his fingertips, it felt as though the words it had spelt out into the air, though not his words, were for him. From him.

And…

It was a gentle magic. Kazuya’s tower may have been the same in principle, devised to draw something out of the person inside of it, but the ink exhibit was also fundamentally different, because it wasn’t for anyone except himself. It had been for Kazuya to see, for Kazuya to feel, and he can’t put it into words, the way the bold strokes of ink which had carved out those words for him had felt like he had written them there, that the moment he had read them he had known, with an unfaltering certainty, that they were his.

And it had stirred something inside of him, something that had not settled even until now, a storm in a tea cup that swirled and swirled and shifted the landscape, blurring things he thought he knew, tossing his focus away from them to something else.

To S.E. To the water butterflies and the puddle mirrors and the beautifully delicate inkwork he had seen the night before, and how they all struck him – with their sincerity, with their beauty. With the ever-burning curiosity of what the person creating these things out of thin air must be like.

And yesterday, perhaps, Kazuya got an answer.

Maybe S.E. thinks they are Alice too.

Alone and lost and confused in a nonsensical world, with only half-baked answers and ridiculous rules to guide them out.

And Kazuya can’t tell Kuramochi, because Kuramochi can never understand, can he? He will try to, and he will sympathise, but there’s nothing he can do to help.

But S.E. – they know. They are in the same shoes as Kazuya, and where before he had felt a lingering doubt that he couldn’t just project his feelings about his unique circumstances on a mysterious faceless stranger, now, after that exhibit, he feels, and he’s almost ashamed to admit it to himself, connected to them somehow. Relates to them, and to the feeling of being alone and lost on a senseless mission to some sort of faraway goal neither of them can visualise.

So, maybe, perhaps –

He wants to read Alice in Wonderland because he wants to have something in common with possibly
the only person in the world who can understand what it all feels like.

To be in wonderland. To be Alice.

And he’s about to check his phone again for the next turn, the bookstore not far now, when he realises that at some point, meandering in his thoughts as he had been, he must have taken a wrong turn somewhere.

But he recognises this place. This is the university neighbourhood. And just a couple of paces away is the library that he’s vaguely aware of exists, but never had reason to think about, until today.

Until right now.

Kazuya puts his phone away, and heads towards the revolving glass doors, almost in a trance.

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(There are no such things as coincidences.

Or as Kataoka Tesshin had been fond of saying, all coincidences are just magic.)

***

This is how Sawamura Eijun and Miyuki Kazuya meet for the first time:

Kazuya approaches the counter with a copy of the book he’d been looking for clutched in his hand, along with a membership form he had picked up on the way in because as the sign had politely informed him, he needed to be a member to check out the book, and even as he does, he’s wondering why he’s doing this when walking into and out of a bookstore would be so much easier, and easier still to just get it online. But here he is, regardless, standing within the current of his speeding thoughts, unable to shake off the feeling that he’s meant to be here, and he’s arrived neither too early, nor too late, just a second before one Sawamura Eijun is about to clock out for the day.

But Eijun spies the book in Kazuya’s hand, and stills, startled, more than a little, because coincidences are just magic, and the book which had inspired his exhibit not even a day ago showing up here moments before he takes the early leave he’d requested so he could show Furuya his temporary living space doesn’t slide as insignificant by him,

And in the same breath that Eijun notices the book, Kazuya notices the nametag, and everything shifts oh-so-very slightly, and clicks neatly into place.

S.E.

Sawamura Eijun.

And as their eyes meet, Kazuya thinks, faintly, there are no such things as coincidences.

Chapter End Notes

i’d love to hear your thoughts if u feel inclined to share! tq so much for reading <3
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

if you're still here, still reading this or any of my other works - i just want to say thank you, for your patience & your love. it means a lot to me <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Kazuya is stuck, but his mind moves at the speed of lightyears, branching forcefully into tributaries winding in different directions in the slow-drag of seconds it takes him move his gaze from that nametag to the face of the person who owns it, and instinctively, almost thoughtlessly, down to their hand.

Their left hand.

And one very distinct thought rings loud and clear and insisting inside his head –

He isn’t prepared for this.

Yes, Ochiai had given him blanket permission, urged him, even, to scent out the identity of his opponent – yes, he’d not tried to hold Kuramochi back from investigating on his behalf. Yes, he thinks, almost deliriously, mouth running dry and a deafening whoosh stuffed into his ears, he’d hankered for more, more details, more knowledge, about this person whose magic had managed to strike awe in someone who has accustomed to miracles in their everyday life, about the person who was capable of so much but had somehow found a small demonstration of his skill worthy of praise –

Someone whose mind managed to create out of nowhere and nothing, shaping substance out of thin air where the only kind of magic Kazuya had ever known had involved taking the bare bones of something that already existed, and making it into something more.

Yes, the radio, the tower, they’d been for this person, Kazuya can admit that now, in the still-shock of the moment where his self-preservation instincts seem to have withered away – yes, his mindless hunt for a book he had no need to read had been for him (it’s a him, another, separate voice whispers down one of the narrower alleys of Kazuya’s splitting, meandering mindscape, it’s a he, S.E., Sawamura Eijun, so young, maybe a college freshman, maybe a - )

And yet, faced with the person who had become, inadvertently, accidentally, the nucleus of Kazuya’s thoughts, even his actions – Kazuya is at a loss.

But as he stills, buffets, bobbing like a buoy tossed up and down in a storm-troubled sea, Sawamura Eijun is already ploughing through the waves.

“You,” Kazuya hears, through the uncertain clatter of his mind, and panic bleeds into the place behind his heart, cold, because as much as he was allowed, encouraged, to find out about his competition, he’s pretty sure Ochiai had never meant for the reverse to apply as well –

“You – “ the boy hushes, hurrying around the counter and waving a distracted hand with a request to gimme a sec, Furuya, sorry – at another boy Kazuya hadn’t even noticed there yet –

“You’re the one, right?” S.E., the physical manifestation of those butterflies, of those looping circles
of ink, the person who had unleashed every last secret of his carefully erected tower with a few twists of the wheel and the wealth of his magic, breathes at him, a mere foot away, and Kazuya inhales, feeling the air shiver around him and knowing, in his bones, that he’s not just fancying it, “you – the birds? That tower?”

And it’s bizarre, Kazuya thinks, his trains of thought criss-crossing until everything descends into unintelligible white noise, to hear the blatant awe in this boy’s voice – to see it, glowing, bright and almost feverish, in his eyes.

The panic has spliced through his chest now, curving in cold tendrils around his ribs, paralysing him, because as much as he’s been trained to be here, no one has trained him for this –

But where he is still, frozen and prudent, Sawamura Eijun keeps moving. Just like his magic, Kazuya thinks, distant and nonsensical, and isn’t sure what he himself means, and wouldn’t have been able to explain, because in that moment, in the flicker between a blink and the next, the boy has held out his hand, and Kazuya has a moment to stare at the smooth, discoloured band of pale skin around his ring finger, before it closes around his own left hand.

And the moment their skin makes contact, everything is fire.

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Ryousuke can feel it – can feel himself swaying, teetering, his grip slackening on the tight control he’s kept in the palm of his hands from so young an age. Too young an age. He can feel it, in the gaps between his bones, bubbling in his bloodstream, the exhaustion – building up, for years and years, sometimes a thin trickling stream, sometimes a river overflowing its banks, but always, always there.

The regret, the resentment, the hopelessness.

The helplessness.

It surfaces again, as he sits at the dinner table, unsure if he trusts his feet to hold him up any longer. A cup of tea steams away in front of him, Haruichi’s concerned homecoming present when he’d glimpsed his brother’s haggard, exhausted features and known, in that uncanny way of his, that Ryousuke had had a too-long day. His shirt sleeves have been pushed back to the elbows, the cuffs undone and for once not meticulously rolled back – Ryousuke is too tired to think about wrinkles, has yanked the hem of his dress shirt out of his pants, probably paints an odd picture, looking so dishevelled, at least by his standards.

He can tell Eijun is concerned too. He’s jittery, and even though he always is, there’s a look on his face that says plain as day that Eijun doesn’t want to be doing this, at least not right now. Conflict wars on his face, but he stands there, fidgeting, and bites at his lower lip before prompting, “…well?”

And Ryousuke –

Ryousuke can’t do this anymore. He can feel it, simmering inside of him, growing and gurgling, and for a moment he just stares at this boy in front of him – not much younger than himself, and yet… and yet, for years and years, Ryousuke has been the only adult he had in his life, the one to take responsibility for him, take decisions for him, look after him.

Care for him.

In the beginning, he’d thought it was the least he could do. And when he got a little fanciful, a little heavy with sentiment and sadness, he’d think maybe this was karma. After all, Sawamura Eijun had
had that mark burned around his tiny little finger because Ryousuke had refused. After all, Sawamura Eijun didn’t have the choice that he had had, to turn away from the contest.

After all, Sawamura Eijun had practically signed his life away when he was far, far too young and confused and frightened to understand the stakes and the enormity of what he had just gambled away, and for a while there, all those years ago, young but precocious little Kominato Ryousuke had been glad – glad that it had been someone else, glad that it had been anyone but himself.

But it’s hard to run away from the consequences of your decisions when you live with the person bearing the brunt of them every day. Ryousuke couldn’t turn his back on Eijun and what his decision had meant for him when he slept in the same room as him, ate the same meals as him. Played together, sometimes. Watched his younger brother become the boy’s closest friend and confidant.

Watched him grow, and start to wonder why he couldn’t go to school with the rest of the kids. Watched him grow, and have to be told over and over again that he couldn’t play with the other kids, because he might end up showing them things they weren’t meant to see. Things that they wouldn’t understand. Things they could hurt him for – things which might hurt them.

Ryousuke had to watch that eager, innocent light in Eijun’s eyes flicker again and again and again until it became something dimmer, something quieter, and he waited – for the bitterness, for the blame, the shouting and the fights.

Maybe a part of him hoped for it.

Maybe, if Sawamura Eijun had hated them, the whole lot of them – Kataoka Tesshin, and himself and his little brother – it would have been a lot easier to bear.

But he didn’t. Ryouchi thought – thinks, even now – that Eijun is incapable of it. He shouted and stomped his feet and cried when he was denied things, like all kids do, and then let himself be consoled, placated, softly chided when he was crossing a line, and Ryousuke didn’t know what to feel in those moments. Or how. Because here was a little boy who had given away more than he could understand, being bounced on the knee of a grizzled man with a harsh face and a stern jaw, who one could never associate with gentleness – and yet, he’d be there with little Eijun sat acrossways on his lap, rubbing his little back as he hiccuped away after throwing a tantrum. He’d be there, with infinite patience, explaining to Eijun why he couldn’t do the things other kids could do, be the things other kids could be, treating him not like a misbehaving child or a miscreant, but as an equal. As another person with thoughts and feelings that were valid, regardless of the path he was now bound to by a power stronger and older and more unfathomable than anything they knew.

It baffled him, and angered him, infuriated him all the more, because Ryousuke thought – thinks, even now – that Kataoka Tesshin genuinely loved them. All three of them. Loved them and nurtured them like they were his own children.

And yet.

And yet.

He left them with this.

Like this.

Left Ryousuke to fulfil his own role, left him to keep explaining to Eijun why things could never be right or fair in his life.

Except he hadn’t, had he? He hadn’t handed the mantle over to Ryousuke. It would have been
simpler, maybe, if he had. He’d have had another, chance, maybe, to choose. To refuse.

But he’d just left. Just disappeared, one day. The same day he had met with Ochiai the very first time.

The same day Ochiai had given him the offer to take Kataoka’s place.

“This is powerful magic, boy,” he had warned, in that same reedy voice Ryousuke detests, on that drab, airless day, where the heat had emulsified until it hung like an oppressive weight over them all, over their little house, more alone than ever on its small crest, a lone sentinel standing vigil.

“Someone needs to be there to look over him, or it might become more than anyone can control.”

Ryousuke doesn’t remember exactly what had been going through his head that day, in that moment, standing there with his shoulders straight and his face devoid of expression, standing in the way he had again and again and again, every time a new foster family decided not to keep them anymore, every time a new foster family appeared to take them in. Standing, in between whatever the world was going to throw at them next, and what he had sworn to protect.

This time, he took the pledge not just for Haruichi, but Eijun as well.

Sometimes, when sleep eludes him and slips into the dark corners of the night, out of reach of his grasping fingers, he thinks that ultimately he and Eijun are just the same. Eijun hadn’t known, couldn’t possibly have known, the enormity of what he had been saying yes too. And neither had Ryousuke.

Eijun hadn’t had a choice.

And this time, neither had Ryousuke.

But it wasn’t. It never was. It was never as simple as that, and Ryousuke knew because Ryousuke’d hear the sniffles in the middle of the night, Ryousuke would be painfully aware of the blotchy pink of Eijun’s skin when he’d be loud and rambunctious with Haruichi after disappearing who knew where for a while, Ryousuke’d catch him watching the kids from the neighbourhood school coming home, laughing and joking with each other, and trying his hardest to appear as though he didn’t care.

And no matter what he tells himself, what Tesshin had tried to tell him, Ryousuke’s no had been a reason why.

Ryousuke’s no is the reason why Eijun stands on the opposite side of this dinner table, on his feet and ill at ease, eyeing him uncertainly, reluctantly.

Not like they’re only a few years apart but like they’re ages and ages apart. Not like Eijun’d found a bleeding heart needing a place to crash for a few days but like he’s already anticipating, with a simmering defiance, that Ryousuke will say no.

Because Ryousuke always says no, and the guilt of it is ever-present in his veins, coursing thick and hot like bubbling oil.
And Ochiai’s taunts from that morning had caught, like the sparks from a flint.

“Eijun-kun,” Haruichi is saying, shooting looks equal-parts wary and alarmed at Ryousuke as he addresses Eijun, “you know that it’s…risky…”

“I won’t let him know,” Eijun insists, immediate, adamant – the steady glint to his eye is enough proof that he’d anticipated this already, “I promise, he won’t find out about the magic or the museum and I won’t let it interfere with the contest.”

To hell with the contest, a voice rages with the ferocity Ryousuke is used to in the middle of the night, when the unfairness of it all steadily burns away at his sleep and leaves him raw, stinging and angry.

To HELL with it, it screams, even as he just sits there, bereft of words, of the knowledge of what he should do – what the right thing would be to do.

“Ohii-san – ,” and Eijun’s turned back to him now, and his huge eyes are imploring, pleading with him, and Ryousuke can feel the cracks tremor through his defences, thin ice shattering, “please. He has nowhere to go. His apartment isn’t safe – you know he can’t just go to the police or something with a case like this.” Earnest, so completely earnest. Where Ryousuke had spent his childhood, even before meeting Kataoka, nursing his resentment toward the world, somehow, even with the horrible hand of cards he’d been dealt, Eijun had nursed everything else.

Hope, and happiness, and compassion –

“Fine,” Ryousuke hears himself say – senses, rather than sees, Haruichi’s head whip sharply in his direction. “Fine,” he repeats himself, and feels the headrush of a recklessness he’d always known he was capable of, because of his personality, because of his age, but had never allowed himself to indulge. “He can stay.”

The words land hard and soft in that dining room floor – hard because the impact all but steals all other sound, and yet soft, because even with his heartbeat escalating to a feverish tempo he can feel through his entire body, Ryousuke can also feel that imaginary distance between himself and the boy who’d grown to become as precious as his own family collapse, just a little.

“…Really?” Eijun asks, in his own little hush, fists balled up and shoulders raised, eyes wide, wide, wide with the kind of hope his particular brand of curse hadn’t managed to extinguish inside of him. “Is that…is that really alright?”

I don’t know, Ryousuke wants to say, because he doesn’t. And maybe, he thinks, the exhaustion of several years caving in the last of his resistance, fraying him down through the layers and layers of responsibility he had shrouded himself in because he had been convinced, for the longest time, that this was the only way he could look after his brothers, maybe – he didn’t need to.

After all, who was to say what was right, when no one had bothered telling them?

And maybe it’s unwise, the way Ryousuke let’s over a decade of recklessness catch up to him, throws caution to an entire hurricane instead of just a wind, as he says, “It’s okay, Eijun – do what you think is right.” and for once watches that hope he’d been forced to witness faltering over and over flare into a bright, blazing flame.

Just like that, the distance falls away all together, and Eijun has rushed around the table, pulled him to his feet and yanked him into a bonecrushing hug.

“Thank God,” the kid practically yells into his eardrums, and even though Ryousuke winces and
smacks at his forearm, he doesn’t pull away, “I already gave him blankets and my Gudetama
pyjamas!”

He might have no idea what he’s doing anymore, but perhaps he hasn’t all this time. What he does
know is that this is the loudest and freest Ryousuke has laughed since he was a child, where the
world began and ended in their little home, with his little brothers and their wonder for their magic.

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“Did you manage to get any sleep?”

Eijun’d tried his best to tiptoe as noiselessly as possible into his room, right up the stairs and across
the landing, but nestled as Furuya had been in his bed, blankets pulled up to his chin and looking
dead to the world, he’d shifted as soon as the door slid open, hinges noiseless, and fixed him with
bleary eyes.

There’s silence for a bit, a little shuffling, and then, “A little bit.”

Eijun exhales. “That’s good,” he mumbles, then proceeds to just stand there for a handful of seconds,
not knowing what to do. Harucchi is one thing, but Eijun isn’t exactly well-versed on what to do
when there’s someone else taking over his usual abode.

Especially if it’s a person he’d only met yesterday.

After a beat, Furuya turns back to the ceiling and mutters, almost grouchily, “You’re making me feel
awkward.”

The accusatory tone actually makes Eijun splutter. “Well, I’m sorry – “ he begins heatedly, stomping
his way into his room and then remembering that he’d actually come upstairs to check if Furuya was
awake because – “are you allergic to peanuts?”

“What?”

Eijun yanks open a wardrobe drawer to pull out another set of pyjamas for himself, just for the
excuse of something to do. “I asked if you’re allergic to peanuts,” he mumbles, more uncomfortable
because his tendencies of general helpfulness toward strangers never actually end up with them
wearing his favourite sleepwear in his house and he’s not exactly caught up on the protocol for this
sort of thing, “Onii-san was asking. We’re having satay for dinner.”

Furuya considers him for a moment, then shuffles under the covers again, his arms appearing out
from beneath the blankets. “I’m okay with peanuts.” A long pause. “Thank you.”

It’s a handful of words, but Eijun’s got a pretty good inkling that Furuya isn’t the talkative kind. It
doesn’t take away from the sincerity of his thanks though, so Eijun just huffs out a breath, and pulls
out his desk chair, dropping himself down in it.

“Don’t mention it,” he says, attempting to be breezy, managing distracted instead. For all his pretend
nonchalance, Eijun’s reasoning for smuggling Furuya in before he’d gone to tackle Onii-san had
simply been that maybe he’d find it more difficult to refuse if the kid was already inside, snoozing
away.

But…Eijun chews at his lip, the nerves skittering up and down his spine picking up their drumming
again. He’d not expected to get his way this easily. They’d been so careful about it, about consorting
with outsiders, about minimising contact with people who might remember them and look for them,
if they ever needed to leave.
And grateful as he is for how unexpectedly easy that victory had been – a heaviness, keen and barbed, crawls through Eijun, sinking into his flesh. Something was off about Onii-san – so off Eijun had second- and then third- and fourth-guessed even trying to broach the subject with him, considered keeping Furuya’s presence in the house a secret to himself, like he was harbouring a fugitive or his own little wizard under the stairs that the respectable neighbours shouldn’t know about. He’d looked so… so tired. Almost desperate. The sharpness, the alertness that had forever defined Onii-san as the reliable adult in Eijun’s mind had been dulled down to something that sparked alarm in his gut, because Eijun could only imagine what it could be that had him so palpably, visibly troubled –

And could fairly easily conjecture that it had to be something to do with the museum. The contest.

Something to do with him.

It had to be. It always was.

He’d wanted to ask. He’d wanted to climb over the dining-table and grab Onii-san by the shoulders and demand to know what was wrong. Apologise, not even knowing what he would be apoloising for. Beg him to tell him what it was that kept him up at nights, even though he could perhaps guess. Talk it all out together, like family, like the thing they’d always strived to be, just setting aside the hidden things for once and being truly, openly honest with each other.

But he couldn’t, could he? Eijun had his own secret up his sleeve now – a big one, so big that the world had shifted on its axis entirely since he’d picked it up and hidden it within himself.

Was this allowed? Was this right? Eijun didn’t know, but the thin patch of skin on his left ring finger hadn’t stopped prickling, and although he didn’t remember how he’d gotten that mark, he’s more conscious of it now than he had been his entire life.

Just thinking about it almost tips Eijun over – he feels it, the phantom aftershocks that had enveloped his entire body, expanding outward from the focal point where skin had touched skin, before it consumed everything, like a miniature big bang inside of the universe of his being, and in that moment, that’s what Eijun had thought he was – a universe, beyond time, beyond substance, colossal and depthless and full of sparkling, infinite potential.

And the thing is – the thing is – he knew he’d not been the only one feeling it. Knew, without really knowing how, in the very core of his being, that the person whose hand he was holding felt the same. Knew, not just from his mouth (see Harucchi? I knew it was a ‘him’) open round with shock, with the glassiness glazing over his eyes, the dilated pupils, the trembling hands -

- but from the way it felt as though Eijun’d been drifting, and in that moment he had clinked into place, a latch hooked, a coin slotted in, snug and secure, where it was meant to be. Felt, so much, more than he ever had, more than he thought he’d been capable of – felt, all the magic, not just his, but from everywhere, from everything, gather and pulsate and wake all his sleeping cells until every last scrap of his existence was tuned into a plane of being he had not seen or even imagined before… and focused in the palms of their joined hands.

And he’d been everything, all at once – the stars and the sun, the earth with all its millennia of life, history and the future, truth and fiction, here and there and everywhere, and finally, finally –

He felt like he belonged.

And perhaps it’s that – that deluge, that swarm of so much, that sensation of feeling as though he’d held the key to unlocking the universe in his hands –
That right now Eijun feels, even more keenly, more acutely, odd in his own skin.

If meeting that boy had been like being blinded by light after an endless night, then right now it was like the completeness of the dark when the lights suddenly died.

“Did you get into trouble because of me?”

“Huh?” Eijun’d almost forgotten he wasn’t alone. Blinking himself back into the present, he shakes his head a little, latching on to the distraction, “oh…no. No, don’t worry. I was – it’s been a long day.”

Furuya’s sitting up now. He’s looking a little ridiculous, the hair at the back of his head sticking up, eyes puffy and slightly red, the stark yolky yellow of the Gudetama pyjamas standing out sharp against his pale skin. The thought that the lazy egg mascot kind of looks like Furuya momentarily floats through his head, but Eijun quickly files it away – that kind of thing is probably not appropriate to say out loud to someone you’ve known less than twenty-four hours.

“Is it that guy then? The one at the library?”

Eijun tries not to flinch. Furuya can probably tell, because he follows up with a shrug. “You don’t have to tell me,” he says, “it’s none of my business.”

Which is technically true, but –

“Um…could you do me a favour and not mention that to Onii-san or Harucchi, please?” Eijun edges his chair over to the bed, lowering his voice and hoping his urgency and the fact that he’s doing Furuya a huge favour would do the convincing for him. “It’s…uh…”

There’s something about the way Furuya looks at him, something about how clear and completely unreadable his gaze is, that makes Eijun feel as though he can see right through him.

It prompts him into rambling.

“It’s just that…uh…I don’t want them to worry, n-not that there’s anything to worry about!!” his ears are glowing red, he can feel it, and the way Furuya’s stare doesn’t even waver isn’t helping, and if Eijun could eat back his words, he would. “It’s just that…um, they already worry about me and – “

“Was that an ex or something?”

For the second time since he’d come back to his room, Furuya’s bluntness makes Eijun choke, slamming into his words.

“No!” he says, emphatically, slicing a hand through the air for emphasis. The guy just blinks at him. “I’ve never even met him before!”

He regrets it the moment he says it, the moment the mild surprise registers on Furuya’s face, his eyebrows hitching.

“Really?” he intones, sounding deadpan and dubious at the same time.

Eijun shouldn’t, he really shouldn’t but – “Yes! Really!”

“It really didn’t look that way,” Furuya tells him, in no uncertain terms, and Eijun is regretting his impulsiveness all over again – he’d lost all his presence of mind, everything razed away, because the moment he’d seen the book…no, even moments before, while he’d been talking to Furuya still,
telling him when he’d get off work and how far away from his campus they lived, he’d felt it. The same way he always feels things, like a tiny bud of conviction that blooms into his soul and feels whole and absolute, the way he knows when it’s going to rain or when he’s going to get a phone call or when Onii-san is going to come home or when their neighbour’s dog is going to start barking for food.

He’d known, and he’d looked up, seen the cover of the book, and he just – knew.

“That’s the same look you got on your face when the dude came in,” Furuya’s tone isn’t even accusatory this time, it’s just – matter-of-fact and Eijun has to suppress a start, and then feel himself fail miserably at keeping it from showing on his face. “You totally did not look like you don’t know him.”

Eijun squirms in his seat, regretting having said anything in the first place. He is not having a good day thinking before acting today…but at the same time…

“I…didn’t say I didn’t know him,” he admits, albeit a little petulantly. There’s no getting around the fact that Furuya had seen the whole encounter, and if he were to take a step out and view it from the outside…he grimaces. “I just said that was my first time meeting him.”

Furuya regards him for another second, then nods, a quick, short thing. “You don’t have to tell me,” he says again, and Eijun agrees.

He doesn’t have to tell him.

But then again…

His teeth snag on his lip, worrying at the dents he’d left there before.

He has no one else to tell.

There it is again, the prickle of guilt, the needling at the back of his mind, because ideally, he would just be able to tell Harucchi, and Harucchi, with all his patience and his innate way of knowing the ins-and-outs of Eijun’s thoughts better than Eijun sometimes does, would be able to help him dismantle this giant cluster of what he wants, what to do next, what this all means –

But Harucchi would not approve, would tell Eijun to move with caution, would tell Onii-san and –

And Eijun doesn’t want that.

Not yet, at least. The idea of hiding this for any prolonged period from either of them makes Eijun slightly nauseous, because this is way bigger than a tiny note he’d left behind in a glass case, but right now, everything within Eijun is resisting sticking his hand into this hornet’s nest.

“It’s someone I’ve known about a while…” Eijun mumbles, eyes on his knees, hands clasped under his thighs. There’s a flutter-pulse beneath his ribs, and he can’t tell if its fuelled by excitement or apprehension. “Someone who I…look up to? Their work, I mean. I’ve wondered about them a while but I just…I didn’t expect to meet them. And – “ Eijun fidgets some more, un-hooks his hands from around his legs, brings them together to wring at each other, “ – I’d like to talk to them. I’m curious. But – “

Here’s the complicated part. Onii-san had told him to do what he thought was right – and Eijun knows telling Furuya is probably not the right thing to do. He hardly knows this person, and yet here he is, about ready to spill his biggest secret to him. Is he really the type of person who can’t keep anything to themselves without being physically held back?
But is that even really the case here? There’s something about Furuya that instantly had made Eijun sense a kinship, and at first he’d thought it was just his hunger for human connection trying to find associations where there were none but...

“— but let’s just say that Onii-san would likely not approve. Because they – um, let’s say that they’re competition for what we do. Our…er…family business.” Eijun can feel the hysterics starting to tickle his throat, the absurdity of what he’s saying blinking like a neon sign in his mind’s eye. “So you know…we don’t know if it’s as simple as just meeting and talking to this person or if it’ll become something that’s potentially…bad for us…”

Eijun trails away, licking at dry lips, overly warm from the knowledge that he shouldn’t have done this – but also, unhappily, guiltily relieved that there’s someone he can say this to.

This is probably exactly why Eijun should not be trusted to make his own decisions, he thinks with a conflicted mixture of eagerness and dismay.

Unable to make eye-contact, Eijun had shifted his gaze to the window, staring unseeingly out of it as he digs his teeth into his lip again, a nervous tick that’d manifested with worrying frequency over the last couple of hours, when Furuya suddenly says, “You exchanged numbers, right?”

Eijun startles. “Ye-yes,” he can sense himself flushing, even though he’d been the one to suggest it, shoving his phone into the other boy’s hand, into – Into Miyuki Kazuya’s hand.

In the mayhem that had been this day, Eijun hadn’t even had the time to acquaint himself with the name, to start associating it to the person he’d been linked to before he’d ever seen his magic – linked to in ways he can’t even begin to understand, the invisible ring around his finger tingling still like the lingering touch of something hot, something cold, something that had sunk in through his pores and taken root there –

“Then you can just talk to him,” Furuya shrugs again, and rubs at his eye, and Eijun feels instantly terrible about badgering this kid with his problems when he had literally just survived a haunting, which was still so much to unpack that they’d not even gotten round to it yet and – “you won’t know what kind of person he is until you do.”

There it is again. That directness. It’s just a handful of words, maybe the ones Eijun had been looking for, in the way people seek empty assurance to assuage their own guilt, feel a little bit better than they believe they’re supposed to, but it’s not like that.

Furuya means it, and manages to convey it in a few words, and even though Eijun can’t shake off the fact that none of this was supposed to happen, that he’s about to do something very, very serious without telling his Onii-san or Harucchi, it makes him feel almost…good, about it. Strips away a little of the apprehension, and leaves the curiosity and excitement buzzing louder instead.

“Yeah,” Eijun echoes again, a bit distantly, before shaking his head and reminds himself of his manners. “Furuya…thanks.” And a moment later, “You should sleep some more, though. Until dinner’s ready.”

Unexpectedly, Furuya’s lip quirks in something that almost resembles a smirk, and Eijun bristles, because he’s aware that he’s the reason Furuya hadn’t been sleeping in the first place. Before he can say anything, Eijun holds up his hand, palm out, “I know, I know. I’m sorry. Sleep.”

The crinkle migrates from the corner of his mouth to the corners of his eyes. It’s muted but there, and
honest. Apparently all things about Furuya are.

It’s as he’s about to leave the room, pyjamas in hand, that he turns around, mouth opening again before he can stop himself.

“Furuya…this isn’t your first time seeing a ghost, is it?”

There’s nothing, and Eijun thinks Furuya is either asleep or feigning it to avoid answering, which he can respect, he guesses, and turns to definitively leave this time when –

“…no.”

Chapter End Notes

i hate myself for planning a slowburn fic which actually burns slow bc i just want to write romance man but everybody be angsting

End Notes

Let me know if you'd like me to continue!

If you're intrigued by the concept, as I mentioned this is heavily inspired by The Night Circus, though I guess you could say it's the same concept applied to a parallel universe? I'm deliberately being vague about the details of the novel because I think it is best enjoyed when you go in completely blind. My goal is to make these characters and these stories plausible within that universe yet standalone as their own, as a separate story - so yeah, creative liberties were taken ;; If you're curious, I STRONGLY recommend reading the novel, like I cannot stress enough how brilliant and wonderful and amazing and life-changing it is. It is SO magical, one of the best things I've ever read. I can't hope to achieve even a fraction of a fraction of the brilliance that is that book

Also! I realise I've not done this before, because I'm a fool, but if you wanna chat ever, hit me up on tumblr (same name as here)...I miss talking to you guys ;; I can be wildly inactive at times and reblogging memes and cat pictures and raving about something I'm enjoying at random intervals, so bear with me

Again, thank you for reading! I hope you enjoyed! I'll cut off this stupidly long note now!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!