What a Precious Privilege
by holly_writes_things

Summary

"When you arise in the morning, think of what a precious privilege it is to be alive - to breathe, to think, to enjoy, to love." - Marcus Aurelius

Or

MakoHaru Titanic AU! The son of a wealthy businessman, Haru is oppressed and mistreated by the aristocratic society he lives in. His loneliness grows constant and endless, but just as he has truly given up on the world, he is spared by a chance encounter with the optimistic commoner Makoto, who slowly begins to show him the warmth and beauty in life.

//Plot slightly based on James Cameron's Titanic//

Notes

I've been researching and planning this for a while and I'm excited to finally start posting! Beware this is my first time attempting to write a fic so if it's awful I apologize in advance, the OTP called out to me and I could not resist.
This fic is being translated into Russian!

See the end of the work for more notes.
(Prologue) Even if Your Voice Shakes

Chapter Summary

"Speak your mind even if your voice shakes." - Maggie Kuhn

On the shores of the Atlantic, an expedition to recover treasures from the Titanic leads to the discovery of a strange drawing. Across the country on the shores of the Pacific, who is the retired man who knows more about the drawing than he should?

Chapter Notes

Prologue set in 2000 for the sake of 'I-can’t-make-the-surviving-characters-unbelievably-old' :P

There are quite a few OCs in this chapter (I'm afraid it couldn't be avoided) so I apologize in advance. I tried to make them interesting!

~~I don't own Free! or any of the characters but if I did makoharu would be canon~~

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The darkest recesses of the world are neither small nor fleeting; they are sweeping and massive, spreading for thousands of miles, reaching into every sandy corner and cave. There is only the heavy throb of water. The bottom of the ocean is certainly not devoid of life, but it is a mysterious life lived in complete blackness and freezing temperatures. It is a resilient life, a life that adjusts and breaks down elements that are foreign – it is a place that reclaims the objects of mankind.

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A frilled shark, quick and cautious, skimmed over the ocean floor, disturbing several small crustaceans. The shark took no notice of its potential prey and continued forward, heading towards a structure that jutted out of the ocean floor; a bow and handrail, two great masts now splintered. Decades spent beneath the water had made the ship crusty and decrepit; coated with sand and debris, the strange ecosystem had begun to claim it.

Scaling its side, the shark entered through a wide hole in the ship’s flank. Broken glass, fine china, tables, chairs, silverware, and trunks covered the floor. The remains of a grand piano were upturned and in pieces in a corner. The smiling, beautifully young faces in photographs and paintings were left staring at the ceiling, torn from the walls.

The shark swam through the first-class smoking lounge, taking no notice of the table where a young vagabond had made quite the showing at poker, or the armchairs by the fireplace where two old friends had lost their lives. It swam past the staircase that led down to the third-class barracks, a simple hallway where unlikely love had grown and good people had died. It passed the first-class reading room where two young women had realized their position in relation to the world around them. The shark did not visit floors above where a first-class bedroom had become the literary refuge
for two people who never found the right words. It did not visit the deck where another set of lovers laid eyes on one another for the very first time.

Lurking though the ship, the shark followed a hallway that opened into a grand staircase. Balconies lined the visible second floor on either side of the room and stairs cascaded from both sides, converging at a marble landing. From there, two sets of cracked and crumbling stone steps filtered down to the first floor.

An intricate iron dome rose above the staircase, ominous and menacing, although it once held panes of glass that the sun sparkled through on bright days.

Built into the alcove above the landing was an ornate clock surrounded by oak carvings. The hands had fallen off but the carving remained intact: two angels, each hard at work with their own tasks, supported the clock face.

The ship had meant a lot of things to a lot of people, more bad than good, most of them tragic, in fact. But beyond the meanings are the stories, some known, some unknown, most sad, and so startlingly few about the lovers: people who found something beautiful on the ship of tragedy. People who learned to love, how to let it go, how to give it, how to receive it for the first time, how to love life, and how to love themselves. That marble landing and that clock face held a beautiful story for at least two people.

Outside the ship, mechanic whirrs and beeps disturbed the regular hum of the ocean. A submarine came forward through the darkness and light was shed on the sunken ship for the first time in decades.

After almost a century, that story was about to be told.

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Inside the submarine, sensors, dials, and knobs protruded from the walls, each with their own specialized design and function. Large wheels presented themselves from odd places and radars flashed in different shades of neon. Sitting among this large collection of buttons and beepers, Hal Rogers was bored.

He took a bite of a doughnut and sighed. He had almost been excited to be included in this expedition, but after several months planning spent with the Expedition Director, he has lost all enthusiasm. He had entered the submarine without an ounce of wonder, not even bothering to take a peep through the periscope.

He sat brooding in a corner, distancing himself from the rest of the crew. He wouldn’t be needed until they were almost to the ocean floor, so he had spent majority of the 12,000 foot descent eating and looking around the submarine.

Argo was a small, remotely-operated droid that could be controlled from a distance underwater, with a camera that projected the droid’s surrounding to the controller aboard the submarine. As rare as Argo was, finding someone who knew how to guide it was close to a miracle.

This was Hal’s job.

He felt no pride in the rarity or status of his profession, especially given his upbringing the ghetto outside of Chicago, and instead was cynical and defeatist.

“Hal, it’s about time! Get over here!” Andy called from the control room.
“On my way!” he shoved the rest of the doughnut in his mouth, muttering a halfhearted, “Pretty boy,” as he walked over to Andy and sat down at the controls. Almost immediately, Andy was bent eagerly over his shoulder.

“Okay, so this lever here controls the speed and this button controls the hand, and-”

“It’s called the claw,” Hal interrupted, pushing Andy’s fingers away from the button, “and frankly this isn’t your job.”

“True, but I’m the Expedition Director, and what kind of leader would I be if I wasn’t well informed on everything aboard this submarine?”

Hal raised an eyebrow, “You have a degree in archaeology.”

“And a minor in Marine Biology!” Andy said in mock-offense. He had traditional Australian good looks, and was both charismatic and handsome enough to convince their sponsors to make him the head of the expedition, despite several more experienced candidates. Not that it was any of Hal’s business; he was simply a special skills worker. He didn’t necessarily dislike Andy as person, he just disliked that he had to take orders from him.

“How can you let me do my job now?”

“Can you let me do my job now?”

“Yes! Under my steady guidance of course!” He flashed a smile, “As you know, this is a recovery mission. Among other things, we’re after the infamous Nanase Pocket Watch. Katsu Nanase carried it, but appears to have never opened it, and it is rumored to have held the Nanases’ most expensive and secretive possession.”

“Which would be?” Hal asked, skeptic that anything of value could be hidden within the small confines of a hollowed out pocket watch, and further annoyed by Andy’s theatrics.

“No one knows, most likely jewels, it was something so valuable that Katsu Nanase never let it leave his body.” Andy made broad gestures with his hand as he recounted this history lesson. “It is documented by several sources that it mysteriously disappeared as the ship was going down and he refused to get on a lifeboat until it was found, ultimately resulting in his death.”

Hal stared, “So someone obviously stole it.”

“But it’s never surfaced since then! If it made it off the ship there would certainly be records of it, but there aren’t any, so it must still down there. The real question is what could be so valuable that you’d die for it? I won’t deny that our knowledge is limited and it could, realistically, be anywhere,” Hal rolled his eyes and Andy grinned, “but we’ll start by searching Katsu’s room.”

“Which room is that?” Hall asked, running the start-up programs for Argo. Somewhere else on the submarine, a worker was preparing to release the droid into the water.

“It’s one of the first class private parlor suites,” Andy stopped invading Hal’s personal space and sat down in his own chair, but still remained close enough to see the screen.

Hal gripped the control and his eyes narrowed, “There were thirty-nine private parlor suites.”

Andy pinched his cheek, “Good thing you’re getting paid by the hour then! And have more faith in me! I have great instincts.”

A voice mumbled through the submarine’s radio.
“Hello, Ron?” Andy asked through the communicator, “Are we ready to go?”

“The Argo is in the conversion chamber and we’re closing off the doors to the submarine now, it should be released into the water soon, Sir.”

Hal wrinkled his nose, equally disgusted by the phrases The Argo and Sir.

“Righto! Thanks!”

Hal pressed the power button and the screen in front of them came to life, showing the dark water pierced by the light Argo emitted.

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Early morning sunlight filtered through floral drapes, warming the common room of Sunny Sailings Retirement Home in Santa Rosa, California. The room was spacious with peeling yellow walls, creaky wooden floors, and several gaudy couches. It was cozy even though it was clearly falling apart and the only people in the room, two elderly men sitting in front of the single clunky television, both enjoyed living there.

Although they both looked quite old, they seemed content and cognizant, and were talking softly. The smaller of the two smiled and the folds on his face fell into well-worn laughter lines. The larger of the two was wearing thick glasses and looked at the smaller man like he was the light of his life.

“How’s your chest?” he asked.

“Not too bad today,” the smaller man responded.

The larger man reached for the other’s hand and their aged fingers intertwined.

“Good morning!” a nurse entered the room and walked over to the two men. Speaking to the smaller of the two she said, “It’s time for your Ipratropium.” She was young and redhead, and far too cheery considering how early it was.

“Yes, ma’am!” He looked up at her as the television changed programs, “You’re new aren’t you?”

“Yes, Sir! This is my first week!” she smiled showing her dimples before rummaging through all the medicine she was carrying.

“What’s your name?” he had just finished speaking when the larger man tugged on his hand and gestured at the new program.

“I’m Chelsea, it’s nice to meet you!” she was still struggling with the medicine bottles and a few pills fell to the floor, “Um, do you usually take one or two?” she looked up to see that her conversation partner was no longer listening to her, but instead had his gaze fixed on the television.

“I’m here in the land base of a recent deep sea expedition that has an incredibly ambitious goal. With me is Andrew Atkinson, Expedition Director, who dreams of uncovering the sunken ship, believed to be lost forever. I’m of course referring to the RMS Titanic. Now Andrew, the Titanic sunk almost a century ago, and there are many skeptics who believe there is nothing left to find. Perhaps even worse, there are those who claim what you are doing is akin to grave-robbing, what would you say to these inquiries?”

The smaller man leaned towards the television and his brow furrowed, while the larger man narrowed his eyes and turned up the volume.
“Please, call me Andy!” the man flashed his teeth at the reporter and she blushed, “Well, there is plenty to find down there, that’s for sure.” he gestured to the room they were standing in, a brightly lit laboratory, “As you can see we’re standing in our lab room, surrounded by recovered treasures. These things were not meant to sink. They were not meant to be lost forever and therefore should not be left, hidden below the ocean for the rest of time.” he turned inwards, toward a corner of the lab, gesturing for the news reporter to follow him. With a pair of tongs he gently picked up a photo that had been lying in liquid solution and held it up for the camera. “For example, this drawing, this piece of art, would have been lost to the world if it had not been for our recovery efforts. This is something that deserves to be seen by the world.”

The news reporter nodded in agreement as the camera zoomed in on the drawing. It depicted a tall, shabbily dressed young man standing in a room that seemed far too expensive and extravagant for him. The young man was facing the illustrator holding open an expensive looking pocket watch, but instead of looking at the clock face, he was staring up, right where the artist would be, his expression filled with warmth and affection.

The camera zoomed back out, and the reporter began speaking again, “It is a beautiful work,” she commented. “I hope we all find someone who looks at us like that one day. Now Andy, you’re from Australia, correct? How did you become interested in deep sea exploration?”

The smaller man stared at the television for a few more seconds, but with the sudden shift in subject matter he seemed to relax, leaning back against the couch.

He looked back up at Chelsea who had followed his gaze to the television and now was staring intently at it.

“Ma’am?” She blinked and turned back to them, her mouth hanging open like she was in shock, as if the program had troubled her for some reason as well.

She shook her head to clear it and then smiled back at them, “Oh yes! I apologize.”

The smaller man looked up at her through eyes burning with intensity, “Chelsea, can you please do something for me?”

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After the camera stopped rolling, the newswoman thanked Andy and casually gave him her card, saying that he should call her if anything else exciting ‘came up from down under’.

Now inside the small kitchen of their land base, Andy was mixing the proper, and excessive, amount of sugar into his coffee.

He grinned as her saw Hal approaching him, “How’d I do?”

Hal ignored his question, “She really hit the nail on the head with that whole ‘grave robber’ thing.”

Andy’s mouth fell open, “I’m insulted!”

Hal rolled his eyes, “You’re so full of shit.”

“How so?!”

“This piece of art, yes, this piece of art, conveniently drawn by Haruka Nanase.”

Andy chugged his entire coffee before speaking, “Well it is art. Whether it was drawn by the heir to
the Nanase fortune, someone who had constant access to the pocket watch, which the drawing’s subject is holding yet suspiciously ignoring, does not change that.”

Hall rolled his eyes, “So full of shit.”

Andy smiled like it was a compliment and slapped Hal on the back, “We could stand here all day debating this fascinating subject, or we could head back to the submarine and see what else we can find—as soon as you finish that, of course.” He pointed to Hal’s third doughnut.

“Oh gee thanks.”

Andy grinned, “At least you can’t call me unreasonable!”

They spent the rest of the day in the submarine and returned that night much less successful than they had been on their previous outing. They found several small treasures: a pearl necklace, a well-decorated hand mirror, and a cane-head, but nothing close to what they were looking for.

It was a two hour journey in the submarine to the Titanic from their base on the shore of the Atlantic, so when they finally reached the surface it was late and Andy was grumpy. When they walked into the land base an assistant waved him over.

“We received a call not long after you left from an old man with questions regarding the expedition. I had an intern write down his message for you, he-”

Andy turned away from him, “Throw it away, I don’t have time for this sort of thing.”

“Trust me, Sir, you will want to call him back.” The assistant pushed a piece of paper in front of Andy’s face.

Andy squinted at the paper and then his eyes grew wide, his mouth falling open more and more with each line he read.

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“You know it’s impossible right?”

“It’s not impossible, it’s unlikely, which is entirely different.”

Andy strode through the halls of the land base with Hal at his heels, struggling to keep up.

“You can’t actually believe it’s him.”

“I think it could be.”

Hal grabbed Andy by the shoulders and spoke with a strong emphasis on each word, “Rin Matsuoka died aboard the RMS Titanic on April 15, 1912. If he had survived he would have to be-”

“One hundred and six. Like I said, unlikely, but not impossible.”

Andy freed himself from Hal’s grip and kept walking. Two weeks ago they had gotten the impossible call, and Hal had spent every waking moment since then trying to make Andy see reason. Andy was an arrogant, selfish, cocky, sonofabitch, but at least as far as the expedition was concerned, Hal didn’t want him to get his hopes up. Andy was really just a child, he lived in a perpetual state of wonder, and the source of Hal’s antagonism towards him was only that he had to take orders from that child.
Hal had to jog to catch up, reaching Andy just before the door, “Okay, so hypothetically, if he had survived, why hasn’t anyone heard from him until now? He was as well-positioned as the Nanases, that’s why he was traveling with them in the first place! If he had survived it would be incredibly well documented.”

Hal walked through the sliding doors and stepped out into the sun while Andy took the revolving door as was their custom. Andy emerged looking far more profound than someone who had just taken the spinning door should.

“Maybe he didn’t want to be found.” Hal rolled his eyes and pressed his lips together, “Hey, I’m just saying, almost dying, seeing lots of other people die, it could change a person…and anyway, you should be able to ask him yourself here in about,” he checked his watch, “two minutes.”

They stood in silence, and Hal relinquished some small part of his skepticism as the seaside breeze blew over them. Almost exactly two minutes later, the gated entrance to their base opened and a taxi approached them, creaking and bumping. The driver parked next to the curb and shut off the engine. The passenger door opened first and a young woman stepped out of the car.

“H-hello!” she said, ‘I’m Chelsea…um, I’m here because…” she looked around as if she really didn’t know why she was there.

The back door opened and an aged man slowly clambered out of the car. He stood in front of them and grinned.

“Hello! Andy is it?” he reached out a hand, “I’m Rin Matsuoka. This wonderful woman here is the reason I was able to come visit you.” The other back door opened and a second, larger, but also elderly man stepped out. Rin grinned at him, “And this is Sousuke, my husband.”

Andy grabbed Rin’s hand and shook it with enthusiasm, “It’s such a pleasure to meet you! I appreciate you flying all the way out here to help us! This is Hal Rogers, my subordinate.”

“Pleased to meet you!” Rin said offering his hand. Hal raised his hand as well but smacked Andy over the head with it instead. Rin snickered at the two of them, suddenly looking much younger.

They all exchanged greetings and Rin paid the cab driver. Chelsea explained that she worked at the Sunny Sailings Retirement Home and that Rin and Sousuke couldn’t travel without a nurse. Andy bowed to her, taking her hand and kissing it while Hal scoffed in the background.

“Then thank you so much, Miss Chelsea, this wouldn’t be possible without you.”

Chelsea turned red, and couldn’t help but feel ashamed for having her own unspoken motives for accompanying them.

“I-It’s nothing,” she tittered, “honestly, I’m lucky to get to travel!”

“Chelsea, you’re too kind.” Sousuke spoke for the first time, “Rin and I are in your debt for what you’ve done for us.”

“Absolutely!” Rin chimed in, “When we get back I will speak to Mary about getting you a raise.” Chelsea stammered in gratitude as their words sent several more needles of guilt through her heart. Rin turned back to Andy, rubbing his hands together, “So where’s this drawing?”

Migrating inside, Andy led them into the brightly lit lab room. The walls and floor were both a crisp, cold white, and the faint smell chemicals and disinfectants hung in the air. Andy ignored all the other relics cluttering the tables and led them to the back corner.
The drawing was again resting in liquid solution and everyone hung back as Rin approached it. He stood with his back to them, staring down at the drawing without speaking. His shoulders were motionless and a terrifying silence enveloped the room as they all watched him, waiting for his reaction. Rin’s shoulders twitched a fraction of an inch and Hal and Andy exchanged an uneasy glance. Sousuke was about to walk up and place his arm around Rin’s shoulders when he abruptly turned back to face them.

His face broke into a grin, “Those cheeky bastards!”

Relief flooded the room and Sousuke and Chelsea moved closer to observe the drawing themselves.

“Those cheeky bastards!” Chelsea observed.

Rin smiled proudly at the picture, “He really was.”

Andy gestured to the drawing and slapped Hal on the back, “I bet you’re only used to seeing men that attractive on your computer screen.”

Hal rounded on Andy, “I was married! I had a wife! I have a child!”

Andy waved his hand, “That proves nothing.”

“It really doesn’t.” Rin chimed in, chuckling at the pair.

“So I’m guessing you know the guy in the picture?” Hal said, trying to change the subject.

Rin hummed in response, “I sure do.”

“Please, if you’re feeling up to it, can you tell us everything you know?” Andy flashed a smile and Hal rolled his eyes at how shamelessly fake Andy was being.

Rin nodded and looked out the lab’s one window, gazing out at the Atlantic Ocean. The sky was cloudless and the sun rained golden rays down upon the water. The ocean was calm and clear, it shone like crystals and seemed to go on forever, eventually disappearing into the skyline. It was dazzling. Rin grimaced as he remembered a very different version of the Atlantic.

“We were only on the ship for a few days, but a lot of lives were changed.” He paused, the unspoken words, and lost, hung invisibly in the air. “I think the guy in the drawing was the catalyst for most of those changes.”

Chapter End Notes

So that's the prologue! I already have the next chapter done so it should be up soon. Actual 1912 Titanic stuff happens next chapter. Thank you for reading!

*insert lame FMA pocket watch reference*

Historical things:
-Argo is a real thing and was used in the 1985 expedition that uncovered the titanic. Truthfully, ANGUS (Acoustically Navigated Geological Underwater Survey) was probably more helpful in the expedition but I just. Can. Not. Type the word ANGUS I'm sorry I cant take it seriously.
-ALSO the real expedition had an on-the-water base that was accessible by boat and helicopter but that would have been a bit more complicated so for the sake of the narrative Andy and Hal have a land base.
The Days that Must Happen

Chapter Summary

"These are the days that must happen to you." - Walt Whitman

Or

Haru boards the Titanic early, Makoto boards it late, and Nagisa perfectly demonstrates the phrase "love 'em and leave 'em".

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

April 10, 1912

A small stream of sunlight filtered through navy curtains and spilled onto a magnificent carpet. It danced across the foot of a king-sized bed, in which a thin figure was sleeping. The light ran off the bed and stopped just short of golden wallpaper on the other side of the room. Expensive furniture and elaborate paintings decorated the room, but none of the grandeur was of any consequence to the sleeping boy in the bed.

The door opened quietly and a boy with blue hair and dressed in a sharp butler’s outfit entered the room carrying a tray of tea and biscuits. He set the tray down on a table next to the bed and then, showing no guilt or misgivings, threw open the curtains, bathing the room in an ocean of sunlight.

The sleeping boy groaned and burrowed under the covers.

“Nanase-kun, it’s time to get ready for the day, you have a lot to do and the ship begins boarding in about two hours.”

The boy groaned again and then spoke from under the covers, “Rei, close the curtains or I’ll tell my father you called me that.”

The butler smirked, “I will have to take my chances, Sir. We have much more pressing matters to attend to.” Nanase senior insisted that although their Japanese heritage was important, when they were around English society the servants should address them as ‘Sir’ or ‘Mister’.

The boy poked an eye out from under the covers for no other reason than to glare at the butler, when the door opened again, banging loudly as a third teenage boy strode into the room.

“Haru! Are you awake yet? There’s a lot to do today,” he spoke the last sentence in a sing-song voice.

Rei bowed, “Good morning, Mr. Matsuoka. I am attempting to rouse him but he is being rather stubborn this morning.”

“What? Haru, how can you sleep at all?” He walked across the room and Haru noted that he was already dressed, garbed head-to-toe in the latest western fashion, another request of Haru’s father. Rin looked out the giant window down into the street, placed a hand on his heart and said, “Today
we embark on the biggest adventure of our lives!”

“We seem to ‘embark on the biggest adventure of our lives’ at least once a week.” Haru pressed his lips together in annoyance before he sighed and sat up. He knew when he was beaten, and when Rin entered the room, any chance of sleep left it.

Rin spun around and threw his arms in the air, “What can I say? We live exciting lives.” After Rin’s father passed away he had fallen into the care of Nanase Senior and he had been traveling with them for almost a year. While Rin had originally stayed with his mother and sister, Katsu Nanase had swept in, whispering promises of adventure and power into Rin’s ear. Haru’s father had been friends and business partners with Matsuoka Senior, and it had always been their dream that the boys would one day take over their companies.

Haru rested against the headboard and picked up the cup of tea from beside his bed. A bitter taste doused his mouth and he spluttered, spilling tea all over the bed.

Rei was busy laying out Haru’s suit for the day and didn’t look up, but answered Haru’s unspoken question, “It’s English Breakfast tea Sir, I thought it fitting.”

Haru glared, sure that when the ship landed in America, Rei would ‘think it fitting’ to serve him coffee or something else just as horrible.

For the third time the door opened and Rin’s personal butler, Ai, entered the room. “Ah! Matsuoka-kun!” he blushed and bowed, “There you are! I went to wake you at the usual time and you were gone! I’m sorry you had to dress yourself and went unfed, I have biscuits and tea in the next room, I can-“

“Relax Ai, there’s no need,” He spun back towards the window, “I feed on the light of day!”

With his back turned, Rin didn’t notice Rei nudging Ai and reminding him the proper way they should address their masters while in England. Ai blushed, he was inexperienced, but Rin liked that about him; he kept Ai around for his company, not his service.

“I’m sure you do, Mr. Matsuoka, b-but please let me go fetch you some breakfast.”

“I have an idea,” said Haru from the bed, “Rin, why don’t you go with him so I can actually get dressed.”

Rin waved a hand at him and walked towards the door, “Aw fine, don’t keep us waiting too long! It’s a big day!”

“The biggest adventure of our lives,” Haru said rolling his eyes as the pair left, leaving him and Rei alone. “Rei, I’d like to dress myself this morning if you don’t mind.”

“Of course Sir, are you certain?”

“Yes, I’d like to be alone this morning.”

Rei bowed, “Yes Sir, call me if you require any assistance.”

He left the room and Haru fell back onto the bed. He had been rude to his friends, he knew that. They were just all so loud and so expressive, and it was so early. He stared at the ceiling for a few moments before climbing out of bed and walking to the window. Gazing out into the street he tried to muster the excitement for the day that Rin had as he stood in this same spot. Haru turned away and looked at the ground.
Rin was so energetic, so passionate about everything. He was genuinely interested in business and the automotive industries, he wanted to learn and he wanted to have power. Haru wanted to spend the whole day in bed. He didn’t want to face the sunlight, he didn’t want to have to talk to strangers, and he didn’t want to feign small talk. Haru recognized that while the pony show of high society might be right for some people, it definitely wasn’t right for him.

Haru let out another long sigh and turned back to the room. Above the intricate headboard of his bed hung a painting he liked quite a bit. It depicted a small girl standing on a mountaintop. There were more mountains in the background and a raging river running below, and she had her head thrown back and her arms stretched out wide. Haru liked the picture because he couldn’t tell if she was enjoying the mountain air or about to throw herself off the cliffside.

Dreading the day ahead, he looked over at the suit Rei had laid out for him.

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There were no curtains on the windows of the Sleep Cheap Seaside Inn, so early morning sunlight flooded the ground floor hotel room. The wooden floor was cracking and uneven, and the only furniture in the room were two small beds pushed against opposite walls and a wooden desk in the corner. One of the beds was empty, but a large figure occupied the second and was sleeping soundly, unperturbed by the sunlight. Tightly curled in a ball, the boy had wrapped himself around a small sleeping cat, as if to protect her. He slept with a faint smile on his face, breathing deeply.

The possessor of the second bed, smaller and blond boy, quickly entered the room and shut the door.

“Mako-chan! Mako-chan wake up!” he hissed shaking the sleeping figure.

“Wah? Nagisa?” The sleeping boy sat up and the cat jumped to the floor, insulted.

“Mako-chan we have to go now.” Makoto blinked up at him. “Mako-chan! We. Have. To. Leave.” Nagisa shook him by the shoulders for emphasis.

The words finally seemed to register, “Why? What time is it?” he glanced out the window at the early morning sun, “Nagisa we must have at least three hours until they kick us out for the day.”

“That was true until I got us these!”

Nagisa whipped two pieces of paper out of his pocket and shoved them in Makoto’s face. Makoto squinted, reading, and then his eyes opened wide. His brain frantically attempted to process the words ‘White Star Line’, ‘RMS Titanic’, and ‘Boarding Pass’.

“Where on earth did you get those?!”

Nagisa had already been throwing his few belongings into his bag, and turned to him smirking.

“The inn-keeper’s son.”

Understanding dawned on Makoto and he frowned, “I thought you liked him.”

“I do like him! He is very cute!” Nagisa winked, “And ever so generous to me.”

Makoto had a feeling Nagisa was not just referring to the stolen tickets, but declined to entertain that train of thought.

Nagisa’s bag was now packed but Makoto hadn’t yet moved from his place in bed.
“Mako-chan please, get up!”

“The tickets don’t belong to us.” Makoto crossed his arms.

“Mako-chan,” Nagisa walked up to him and put his hands on his hips, “Think about the difference between him and us. Think about it, Mako-chan. He is an innkeeper’s son at a very busy port. He sees and experiences all different kinds of people and cultures.” Nagisa gestured back at the door to emphasize his point, “Now, we have traveled and experienced quite a lot ourselves, but we had to do it the hard way. We had to do it with the world against us. We saw the world while we were starving and gambling and sleeping in the streets. We’ve seen the world, sure, but we’ve only seen the darkest parts of it.” Makoto looked at him with raised eyebrows and Nagisa gripped his shoulders, “Sure, Mako-chan, you look at the world and appreciate everything, you appreciate the week old food and the dirty hotels, and that’s great, it makes you a great person, Mako-chan, but you know the world has never been fair to us. We deserve more and it’s time for us to be unfair back.” Nagisa pointed back at the door, “He will have many more chances, but this is our one chance.”

Makoto stared up at Nagisa, realizing for the first time that while he had never considered their lifestyle uncomfortable, perhaps just a little lonely, Nagisa had been deeply unhappy. He wondered how long his friend had felt this way; they had known each other for about five years now, and Makoto marveled at how little he knew of Nagisa’s life before they had met.

Nagisa took Makoto’s hand as his eyes glossed over, “Mako-chan please, I can’t do this without you. We have nowhere to go…”

Makoto rubbed his temple as spoke the second half of their mantra, “So we go everywhere.” He sighed, “Alright Nagisa, I’ll come.”

“Mako-chan!” Nagisa yelled and squeezed him, he was considerably stronger than someone his size should be. “Thank you!” he pulled away, dragging Makoto out of bed, “You need to start packing, the ship doesn’t leave for a few hours but we need to leave before he wakes up and realizes the tickets are missing.”

Makoto had just bent down to pick up his shirt from the day before when a roar echoed from the other side of the building, making him freeze.

Nagisa smiled weakly, “Too late.”

Footsteps pounded down the hallways towards them, accompanied with many animalistic bellows and shouts. Makoto was frozen in horror and Nagisa slapped him across the face, “Mako-chan! Pack! I’ll get the door.” Makoto watched him grab the chair from the desk and prop it under the door. Nagisa turned and saw him still standing there. “Mako-chan!”

“Oh! Right!” He threw on a shirt and trousers and then began tossing clothes into his bag while Nagisa jimmed open the window. Makoto picked the cat up from the floor and placed her gently out onto the street, she had been a stray he found and fed only the night before, but he was sorry to see her go, “Goodbye Dover, I hope you keep warm.”

The doorknob began to rattle as someone pushed at the other side, shouting profanities all the while. Nagisa smacked Makoto with his bag, “GO!”

They climbed out into the street just as the door burst open, revealing the innkeeper and his son. The innkeeper yelled for them to stop, but Nagisa and Makoto were already sprinting down the street.

Makoto looked back only once, and was never able to forget the sight of the red faced innkeeper and
son, both leaning out the window. The inn keeper was yelling and shaking his fists, but his son was grinning and looked rather impressed.

Although Makoto was against stealing, the wind rushing through his hair was exhilarating and the sun hitting his face promised good things to come, so he couldn’t bring himself to feel too guilty.

In front of him Nagisa stumbled awkwardly and Makoto looked up at the sky and laughed.

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Haru took quite a long time coming down from his room. While Rei had laid out Haru’s most expensive suit, the one Haru wore when making first impressions, it hugged too close to his body, and he spent a long while picking out something different. Finally dressed in a simple and spacious black suit and green tie, he exited his room. He walked down a hallway decorated with several expensive vases and paintings, looking at the ground as he passed a well-dressed couple, thankfully entering the elevator alone.

The luxurious South Western Hotel had been built about forty years earlier and while Haru recognized it as a great feat of architectural ingenuity, he thought it was too large, too expansive for him to feel relaxed inside it. Members of high society preparing to board the Titanic currently packed the hotel, but even with all the rooms booked, the space-to-human ratio was too drastic. Even with so many people inside, it was still empty.

The metal elevator grate slid open to reveal the lobby, and Haru spotted Rin and his father lounging in couches by the windows. He walked over to them and his father glared as he approached.

“It’s about time! We are on a schedule but apparently you’re above that.”

Haru stared down at his shoes and mumbled an apology as his father glanced over his suit.

“I thought that considering all the time you spent getting ready you would at least look presentable, but I obviously put too much faith in you.”

Rin looked away and rubbed his neck while Haru mumbled another apology.

Katsu Nanase was a severe man with little to no understanding of failure. Known, respected, and feared in all the top circles, he had spent the last year spreading his influence. While he worked primarily in the automotive business, the ship industry had recently caught his attention, at least enough for him to buy tickets for the RMS Titanic.

He changed positions in his seat, exposing an ornate gold pocket watch pinned to his side. He was deep in thought and didn’t notice Rin staring at the watch hungrily. Haru observed Rin’s desperation, but Rin staring at the watch was such a frequent occurrence that he had grown unfazed by it.

Haru had heard the rumors of the watch’s contents, and although Rin never believed him, he really didn’t know what was inside it. While his father had frequently waved it in front of him, angrily telling saying that he would one day need to live up to the family legacy, Haru was blissfully ignorant of the watch’s contents.

Rei and Ai appeared and announced they had finished loading the luggage in the carriage and were ready to leave. Having to ride the carriage to the loading dock annoyed Katsu. Although they were taking an automobile with them to America, it had to be pre-loaded onto the ship the night before, just like the rest of the large objects making the journey.

Ai assisted them as they climbed into the carriage, blushing as he took Rin’s hand, while Rei took the
It was a short ride to the boarding area and Haru stepped out onto the dock, greeted with crisp wind and the salty smell of the sea. He took shelter from the wind behind the carriage as his father passed out the boarding passes and then gestured for them to follow him.

The attendant checking the tickets spotted them as they approached and quickly silenced the woman with whom he had been speaking, “Ah, Mr. Nanase! Please don’t mind the line, come on ahead.” He bowed and took their boarding passes, stamped them, then bowed again. “All your rooms are located on the third deck. Mr. Nanase you and your son will be in the adjoining rooms B60 and B62, and young Mr. Matsuoka will be across the hall in B59. I hope you all enjoy your time aboard with us.”

The attendant bowed a third and final time as they left, Rei carrying Haru’s and his father’s luggage into their adjoining rooms and Ai carrying Rin’s things to his room across the hall. They all stood in the hallway as Katsu gave instructions. The ship was to depart soon and he dismissed the four of them with a couple hours of free time before they were to meet on the luncheon deck. Haru and Rin were to make an impression on the other members of high society over a light lunch which would be served by Rei and Ai. After they were all given the day’s itinerary, Rei and Ai preceded downstairs to find their third class room while Rin excused himself to freshen up, leaving Haru and his father standing in the hallway.

Haru’s father turned to look at him, his lip curling, “Get inside.”

Haru shrunk quickly into the room and Katsu followed him, shutting the door. He walked towards his son with his shoulder back and his chin held high and placed a hand on Haru’s upper bicep.

Katsu’s eyes bore down on him and his voice was dark, “At noon, you will come down for lunch. You will socialize with other members of our class and make solid connections for future business. You will be courteous and entertain any young ladies that may be present. You will be engaged, charming, and polite. You will be punctual and under no circumstances,” he gripped Haru’s arm tightly, bruising the skin, “will you embarrass me.”

Haru’s eyes widened and he looked at the floor, nodding. His father let go of his arm and walked to the door, opened it, and stood in the door frame.

“Oh, and change your tie before you come down. Green is the color of the masses, at least dress like you’re going to be taking over for me one day.” Without waiting for an answer, he turned into the hallway, leaving the door open.

Haru held his breath for a few moments as he listened to his father’s receding footsteps, quickly crossing to the door and shutting it once they finally receded.

Leaning weakly against the doorframe, he looked at the room, closely observing the king-sized bed with a canopy and the chesterfield sofa. His gaze swept to the large window with satin curtains, the electric fireplace, the gold patterned wallpaper, and the door opposite that led to an equally extravagant bathroom. He hated it all.

Haru’s whole body quivered as he laid down on the bed. He wrapped his arms around himself and curled into a tight ball, bringing his knees to his chest and squeezing, imagining his skin, blood, and organs all caving in, collapsing inside him. He closed his eyes, not tired but longing to no longer be conscious.

He sat up. He stood and walked to the window, drawing the curtains. He fell back into bed, refusing
to let the sun reach him.

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Makoto was glad Nagisa had woken them so early because it took them ages to board the ship. They waited close to an hour for the health inspection and then another hour and a half to have their boarding passes checked. It took so long that when they finally arrived at their room, a tiny space with only bunk beds and a small desk for furniture, Makoto was feeling considerably less excited and significantly more doubtful about their trip.

New York. Makoto bit his lip. He and Nagisa didn’t know anyone in America, not that they knew anyone in England either. They had spent the last several years traveling the world, but they had never traveled so far in such a short amount of time and with so few plans.

Makoto set his bag down on the bottom bunk just before collapsing into it. Almost immediately Nagisa was tugging at his shirt.

“Mako-chan! C’mon, get up!”

“Nagisa, get off, I’m gonna take a nap.”

“Mako-chan, there’s so much exploring to do! And I wanna see the ship take off,” he gave Makoto a hard shove, “which is going to happen soon.”

The similarities between this conversation and the one they had earlier in the day amused Makoto, at least until he realized he had lost their previous argument, so he reluctantly sat up.

“Fine, fine! I’m coming.”

Nagisa cheered and pulled him out the door.

People were packed shoulder-to-shoulder on the ship deck and Makoto was grateful he was comfortable in crowds. Nagisa led the way, shoving and bumping into people, leaving Makoto to trail behind him apologizing to Nagisa’s victims. Nagisa muscled his way to the railing, which Makoto would have thought impressive considering his friend’s size, if he had not been at that moment fervently apologizing to a large Italian man. Fortunately, Makoto often had to apologize for things Nagisa did and had gotten quite good at it. He bowed and smiled, the man glared at him for a moment before he decided Makoto was not worth the effort and turned away.

Makoto sighed in relief and joined Nagisa at the railing just as the ship’s horn blared, announcing that it was about to depart. All around them people were laughing, shouting, and waving to their loved ones back on the dock.

Makoto’s heart beat nervously against his ribcage as Nagisa leaned far over the railing, waving and yelling just as enthusiastically as everyone else. He moved closer, ready to save his friend in case he slipped and tumbled over the side of the ship.

“Nagisa, do you know someone down there?”

“No, but that’s not really the point Mako-chan! Everything’s changing, I’m waving goodbye to our old lives!”

Makoto wasn’t sure he was as eager or as grateful to say goodbye to everything he knew. He looked up at the sky and then let his gaze sweep over the thousands of happy people around him. He was afraid, but he waved anyway.
I'm sorry it's taking so long for Haru and Makoto actually meet each other, it's just very important to me that I set it up properly! I appreciate everyone hanging in there, and I promise MakoHaru interaction (of sorts) next chapter!

Also next chapter: Tamura-san makes a cameo appearance as The Unsinkable Molly Brown, what's not to love about that?

Historical things:
-Built in 1875 and located in Southampton, England, the South Western Hotel was the resting place of many of the Titanic's first class passengers before the ship set sail.
The Value of a Moment

Chapter Summary

"Sometimes you will never know the value of a moment, until it becomes a memory." - Dr. Seuss

Or

Rei is concerned, Rin puts a businessman in his place, Nagisa risks lung cancer, Haru draws a stranger, and Makoto gets a funny feeling.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Nagisa and Makoto stayed on the deck longer than most people after the ship departed. At first Nagisa kept running from one side of the ship to the other, constantly finding something new and exciting to point out. He eventually grew complacent as they drew farther and farther away from the shore and were enclosed by ocean on all sides. He finally settled with leaning against the railing with his arms folded and looking out at the waves.

Conversely, as he lost sight of the land, Makoto grew more and more nervous. He stared at the ocean, all-encompassing and expanding eternally in every direction. Claustrophobia began to sink in as he realized his whole world had shrunk to the size of the ship. He mopped the sweat off his forehead and tugged at his shirt collar, wondering why the ship had begun to feel much smaller.

Nagisa glanced at him out of the corner of his eye. "Don’t be nervous Mako-chan! Look down at the water.” Makoto couldn’t imagine why that would make him feel better but he did as Nagisa instructed, “See how far away it is Mako-chan? We have to be at least fifty feet above the waves. The ocean can’t get you up here!” Makoto swallowed and nodded, he wasn’t convinced but appreciated his friend’s attempt to calm him.

There was a loud rumbling noise and Makoto began to sweat again, imagining the ship scraping the ocean floor or encountering mechanical issues. He simmered in his self-induced terror for few moments before he heard Nagisa giggled beside him. Nagisa was staring down at his stomach and rubbing his neck, “Eh, sorry Mako-chan, we never ate breakfast.”

Makoto realized he was fairly hungry as well, and a feeling of dread washed over him, “Um, Nagisa, do you know if the ticket includes meals?” he thought back to the small amount of bills tucked in his bag back in the room. “I can’t imagine that it wouldn’t be…still, we should probably try and make some money just in case there are any extra expenses.”

Makoto wrinkled his forehead and was busy chewing his lip when an expression of pure evil broke across his face. “Let’s go ask some of our neighbors if they wanna play cards tonight,” he winked, “I’ll make us some money.” He smiled, pulling the corners of his mouth up absurdly high, exposing all his shining teeth, and his eyes burned brightly. Though Makoto recognized the dramatic difference in their sizes, Nagisa terrified him when he wore that smile.

Makoto sighed, although he was not a strong advocate for gambling, he acknowledged that most of
their income came from Nagisa’s skill at cards. “Alright but let’s go look for the dining room first, maybe they’ll have potatoes.” He hoped the mention of food would excite his friend more than the thought of gambling, and to his relief, Nagisa licked his lips.

“Lead the way, Mako-chan!”

While unfortunately not serving potatoes, the third class dining room still provided a much heartier meal than Nagisa and Makoto had eaten in years. Maneuvering around the many people crowding the dining tables, they filled their plates with roast beef, green beans, and biscuits. They both ate close to their stomachs’ capacities and then strolled back to their room, laughing and joking lazily.

Standing outside their door Nagisa paused, ”Say, Mako-chan, can’t we ask some of the neighbors now?” and without permission or warning, he turned and began banging on their neighbor’s door.

Their neighbors to the right were a pair of tall Irish twins named Niall and Ethan who were traveling to New York to live with their distant relatives. Judging from their clothing and mannerisms, the twins were in the same financial situation as Nagisa and Makoto. They didn’t take much persuasion before agreeing enthusiastically, excited by the possibility of earning some money.

“Allright, great! Do you wanna meet in our room at around seven tonight?” Nagisa asked.

“Sounds good!” they said in unison. They said goodbye and Nagisa, who, thrilled with his success so far, skipped down the hall to their neighbors on the left.

He knocked and immediately a large, red-faced British woman answered. There was a small child hanging onto her skirts, and inside the room and Nagisa could see several other children shouting and playing on the bunk beds.

“Well?” the woman asked impatiently, putting her hand on the door frame. Nagisa’s eye grew wide as he saw it was larger than his head.

“Ahh hello ma’am! We’re from next door!” deciding cards were out of the question, Nagisa smiled at her far more innocently than he should have been able to. “We just thought it’d be nice to pop by and say hello to all our neighbors.” He looked down at the little girl clinging to the mother’s skirt and waved at her. She giggled but quickly ducked behind her mother when she saw Makoto towering behind Nagisa. Makoto’s shoulders slumped at her rejection, and he pouted during the rest of their conversation with the mother. The door finally closed and Nagisa exhaled loudly, “That was terrifying.”

Refusing to let one failure discourage him, Nagisa wrapped on the door directly across from their room.

“Just a moment!” a high pitched voice called from inside. Judging from the feminine voice, Makoto and Nagisa reached the shared opinion that cards wouldn’t interest this neighbor. To their surprise, when the door opened there stood a small silver-haired Japanese boy, half-dressed in an expensive butler’s outfit.

“Hello!” Makoto started, “We’re from across the hall, we-“

“Oh wow you’re Japanese also!” Nagisa interrupted, grabbing the stranger’s hand and shaking it quickly, “I’m Nagisa and this is Makoto.”

“N-Nitori Aiichiro,” he stuttered his name and bowed to them, “it’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Well Ai-chan, what are you doing aboard the Titanic?”
Ai turned red at the use of the childish honorific and was leaning away from Nagisa with eyes so wide that Makoto was compelled to intervene, “We’ve been going door to door asking some people in the hall if they like to play cards tonight and were wondering if you’d be interested?”

Ai seemed relieved by Makoto’s calm tone, “Ah...um, well I’m not really one for cards,” he admitted while rubbing his neck, “my roommate might be interested though. You just missed him, but I can ask him when I see him.”

“Alright thanks!” Makoto smiled kindly. Nagisa began firing off questions again, but Ai interrupted him.

“I apologize but I have to go meet my masters in about ten minutes and I need to finish getting dressed…”

“Ah sorry to keep you then! Thanks again!”

“Yes, thank you, Ai-chan! Hopefully we’ll see you tonight!”

Ai bowed and closed the door.

Makoto and Nagisa lingered awkwardly in the hallway. Makoto was honestly considering taking the nap he had missed out on earlier when Nagisa gasped.

“Mako-chan, I almost forgot!” Makoto raised an eyebrow and Nagisa darted into their room. A few moments and several loud crashes later, Nagisa appeared holding a box of Blue Ribbon Cigars.

“Where on earth did you get those??” Makoto shouted, standing dumbfounded as Nagisa broke the seal on the box, pulled out a cigar, and began inspecting it.

Nagisa’s only response was a smirk as he briefly recalled the smooth skin and bony hips of the innkeeper’s son. “Mako-chan, have you ever had a cigar before?”

“You know I haven’t and I’m pretty sure you haven’t either! We should just sell them, we don’t know anything about cigars.”

“Only because we’ve always been too poor to afford them.” Nagisa countered, “C’mon Mako-chan, come smoke one with me! We’re on an adventure and I want to smoke a cigar on the deck of the Titanic.” He whined for a while and Makoto eventually conceded, sighing as he allowed Nagisa to pull him down the hallway.

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Rei gently shook Haru awake, the sleeping boy groaned and blinked a few times allowing the broken remnants of a dream to fade away.

He sat up in bed, “You didn’t have to waste your break. I can get myself up.”

Rei smiled, “I know you can, this was simply precautionary. I thought it might be a good idea to change your clothes also, as it might improve your father’s mode.” Haru thought back to his previous conversation with his father, “Even if you just changed your shirt and tie.”

Haru mumbled a quick “Fine,” before climbing out of bed. He stood in front of the ornate floor mirror while Rei buried himself in a suitcase, finally pulling out a fitted white shirt and navy tie.

Rei removed and folded Haru’s old tie and then started with his blazer. “You shouldn’t sleep in your
suit jacket,” he chided, “it’ll wrinkle.” Haru mumbled and apology as Rei removed the victimized jacket. Five years ago, in what was probably one of the kindest things he’s ever done, Haru’s father had agreed to take in thirteen year old Rei. Haru suspected his mother had greatly influenced his father’s decision, probably in hope that the starving orphan would grow to befriend her introverted son. Haru quickly came to consider Rei his friend more than anything else, even if the butler rarely dropped the pretense of their master-servant relationship.

As he removed Haru’s shirt, Rei’s eyes narrowed as his gaze traveled over the bruise forming on Haru’s bicep. The corners of his mouth twitched downward and for a small moment unmistakable concern filled his face, before it was quickly smothered by a butler’s indifferent mask. Haru’s head was tilted towards the ground and he missed the fleeting look.

Rei cleared his throat, “Haru…” he looked up; while he had long ago given Rei permission to call him by his first name, Rei rarely ever chose to do so. The last time Rei had used his first name was shortly after Haru’s mother had passed away. He fidgeted with his hands while he and Rei watched each other in the mirror. Moments passed and the silence built to a near unbearable roar before Rei chose to break it softly, “Are you alright?”

Haru let out a shaky breath and looked back down to break eye contact, “Y-yes. I’m fine…thank you, Rei.”

Rei nodded and began dressing him, not mentioning Haru’s intense trembling as he buttoned his master’s shirt. He quickly and skillfully tied Haru’s tie before checking his own, plain pocket watch. “It’s about time to head down.”

Haru’s eyes travelled over himself in the mirror, he stared at his own apathetic eyes and slumped shoulders before he nodded. Rei opened the door for him as they exited the room. They climbed down a flight of stairs, but before they entered the promenade deck, Rei stopped him and cleared his throat. “Mr. Nanase, it may not be my place to say so, therefore please forgive me if this in any way offends you,” he brought up his right hand and gently held Haru’s arm, right where he knew an ugly bruise was forming, “but I believe you can do this.”

Haru’s eyes widened and he tried his best to smile convincingly at his friend, “That means a lot, Rei.”

The butler nodded and then moved to the door, swiftly pulling it open for his master and revealing a spacious room with large windows and walls decorated with real ivy. Underfoot was a checkerboard tiled floor and around them were several wicker tables and chairs.

Katsu spotted them immediately, “Ah Haru, Rei, it’s about time!” Haru’s father sat at the head of one end of table with Rin on his right. Haru sat on his father’s left, and Rei quickly folded a napkin and placed it in his lap while Ai poured him a glass of water.

At the head of the other end of the table sat a beefy man Haru recognized as Jacob Astor, a titan of industry and one of the richest men aboard the ship. Seated next to him was his wife, Ann, and next to Rin was their daughter, Marie.

There was a large amount of chatter as Katsu and Jacob discussed a variety of topics in business, while Rin and Marie conversed about their plans once they landed in New York. Rin signaled for Ai to pour him a glass of wine instead of water, and then turned back to Marie, “Well then, over the next few days I’ll have to spend as much time getting to know you as I can.” Ai’s eyes grew wide and his head snapped to look at Rin right as he began pouring the wine, resulting in a substantial spill all over the table. Rei looked on and sighed before continuing to serve everyone appetizers.
Katsu shook his head, “Honestly Ai, you’ve been in my service for several years now, when will you stop being such a disappointing butler? That was an expensive bottle, it will be coming out of you paycheck.”

To the relief of everyone who was witness to Katsu’s usual punishments, Ai got off fairly easily. If they hadn’t been in polite company Ai’s punishment would have been much more severe.

Ai nodded and then began attempting to mop up the wine, apologizing frantically to Rin, “Ah don’t worry about it Ai, I can just move next to Haru.” He pointed to the two remaining seats.

Katsu shook his head, “We’re actually waiting for two more.” They all looked at him in confusion, and Katsu met Jacob’s eyes as he spoke, “The 'new money'.” Jacob nodded slowly in understanding just as the door swung open and a middle aged Japanese woman entered, “Ah speak of the devil, Mrs. Riko Tamura! It is a pleasure to officially meet you.” Katsu smiled from his place at the table.

She bowed at them all before taking a seat and addressing Katsu, “Nanase-san, the pleasure is mine.” Haru saw his father’s eye twitch at her use of the Japanese honorific.

“Where is your husband? I was looking forward to discussing some possible business with him.”

She smiled sadly, “Unfortunately Arata is feeling a bit seasick so he won’t be joining us.”

“So you came without him?” Ann Astor interjected, crinkling her nose.

“I believe I am capable of having lunch and socializing without the guidance of my husband.”

An uncomfortable silence followed her words as the conservative opinions of the Astors clashed silently with the open-minded beliefs of Riko Tamura.

Katsu cleared his throat, “It’s a shame he’s not feeling well. I must admit I had an alternative motive for asking him and Jacob to dine with me today.” Katsu ended the tension and transitioned smoothly, “While your husband and Jacob have no doubt built impressive industrial empires, I can’t help but notice that neither of them have chosen to expand into the transportation business. I believe it would prove to be quite lucrative if-”

“Ah Katsu, you can cut your pitch short,” Jacob interrupted, he sighed deeply and then continued, “Katsu, I respect you as a gentleman which is why I have to speak honestly with you. I realize the automotive industry is currently your main project, but I must warn you it is simply the current popular whim of society. It’s certainly prominent right now, and I’m sure so far it has been rewarding for you, but I would advise against making it your primary investment. To be frank, automobiles will never be able to achieve permanence.” He energetically slammed a palm down on the table, “Railway transportation will always prevail simply because that’s the way it has always been done.”

Katsu opened his mouth with a counter argument prepared, but Rin interrupted before he could say a word, “Because that’s the way it has always been done? Forgive me Mr. Astor, but that seems like a rather dangerous way of thinking, and certainly a dangerous way of doing business, don’t you agree?” Rin leaned back in his chair and clasped both hands behind his head, “While it’s true railways have been the primary mode of transportation for the last eighty years or so, what about before that? I guarantee you in 1830 there was a well-known carriage maker who believed railways would never take off because a horse and carriage was the way it has always been done,” Rin took a sip of wine, “and where is that carriage maker now I wonder?”

Silence followed Rin’s words as everyone stared at him with varying degrees of admiration. Marie and Ai were watching him with sparkling eyes, while Katsu leaned back in his chair crossing his
arms and smiling smugly.

Jacob Astor stared slack jawed at the teenager before his face finally broke into a smile and he let out a booming laugh, “You’ve got quite the prodigy here Katsu! What does your own son think on this matter, I wonder?”

After finally being addressed Haru shrunk back in his chair, looking from Jacob to his father with wide eyes. “I… I think automobiles will probably be successful,” he spoke quietly, looking down at the table, “but I hope some trains still stay in operation… I just prefer the atmosphere.” He glanced up at his father and quickly realized he had said the wrong thing, though he was unsure where exactly he had gone wrong; he had simply spoken his mind.

Jacob snorted, “Say Katsu, you expect me to have confidence in our business when your own son prefers your competition?” Rin looked away from Haru in embarrassment, and Riko watched him sympathetically.

“Unfortunately, Haru has yet to gain a knack for business practice and formalities. I advise you to disregard all he has to say on the matter; his opinions are largely based on naïve idealism and inexperience.”

Riko Tamura frowned at Katsu and felt the need to defend the poor boy, “I agree with your son, Katsu. Trains have a certain aesthetic that automobiles just aren’t able to mimic.”

Katsu glared while Haru nodded to her, without making eye contact he mumbled, “Thank you, Tamura-san.” His father’s face further twisted in disgust and Haru stood up, “Please excuse me.” He left quickly without looking at anyone. He heard Rin call out to him as the door swung shut but he kept walking, wiping the back of his hand across his eyes as he went.

Back inside the luncheon room, Katsu smiled apologetically to the rest of the table, “I don’t know what I’m going to do about that child. Rei, please go after him.” Rei nodded and silently exited the room.

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There were several other passengers taking a post-lunch stroll around the deck, like Makoto and Nagisa, they were not used to eating such an expansive meal.

With all his persuasive power, Nagisa had convinced Makoto to take one puff of the cigar, which immediately made him cough and hack horribly. Makoto was pretty sure Nagisa was enjoying the cigar about as much as he had, but Nagisa continued to smoke it stubbornly, and Makoto made sure to stay upwind of his friend.

Nagisa sat sprawled on one of the deck’s benches, giving off an air of self-importance far too great for someone of his social status. Every time he exhaled his face would harden as he tried to look unphased and suppress his coughs; he considered the cigar an accessory more than anything else.

Nagisa leaned his head back and inhaled through his nose, welcoming the unpolluted sea breeze. He closed his eyes, enjoying the sun’s warmth raining down on his face. Suddenly the pleasant glow disappeared, leaving his face cold. He opened his eyes in search of the sun’s thief and his mouth fell open as he saw the attractive young man standing above him.

Nagisa immediately noted he was Japanese as well, and the man was tall and slender, dressed in an upscale butler’s uniform. His eyes traveled to the young man’s face and his breath, already weakened by the cigar, stopped completely. His face was incredibly handsome, all curves and angles,
beautifully backlit by the sun. Nagisa decided he would gladly surrender the sun as long as it continued to make the stranger’s face look that stunning.

The young man noticed him staring, and Nagisa smiled up at the stranger with wide eyes, “Hello! Are you looking for something?”

The man bowed quickly. “Sort of...I thought my friend might be out here, but it appears I was incorrect.” His brow furrowed and he looked lost in thought for a few moments before he shook his head and straightened his posture, “I apologize for my rudeness, I’m Ryuugazaki Rei, it’s a pleasure to meet you...?”

“Hazuki Nagisa,” they shook hands, “and this is my friend Tachibana Makoto.”

“Nice to meet you,” Makoto said pleasantly, “we don’t mind helping you search for your friend.”

“Ah no, that’s not necessary. He’s always disappearing, though I appreciate the offer. What brings you two aboard the Titanic?”

Nagisa took a puff of his cigar and cracked his neck from side to side before shrugging, “Adventure.” Theft, Makoto thought inwardly, but that didn’t stop Nagisa from looking up at Rei with a mischievous gleam in his eyes.

Rei smirked, “Is that so...”

Nagisa offered him the cigar and Rei began blowing smoke rings across the deck. Nagisa watched his lips roll and move with promising potential. Nagisa took back the cigar and attempted his own sensual smoke rings, but his eyes began to water and he soon dissolved into a coughing fit. Rei patted him on the back and offered him his handkerchief, concerned although inwardly laughing at how adorable his new friend was. Rei took back the cigar and demonstrated again, this time giving tips.

Makoto tuned out of their conversation shortly after he heard Rei advising Nagisa to use his throat. He took a few steps back, allowing them to talk privately. He had known Nagisa long enough to recognize when his friend was interested in someone, and Nagisa was utilizing all his classic flirtations.

Makoto leaned against the deck’s railing with his back to the ocean, looking around the deck. All around him were people talking and laughing after their hearty lunch, and Makoto had the strange feeling that someone was watching him. Although no one on the deck seemed to be paying him any attention, his skin was tingling and the hair on the back of his neck was standing on end. He was about to turn and head back inside the ship when he spotted the culprit; raised above him on the first class deck stood a young man who was gazing at Makoto. He had dark hair and was well dressed, and Makoto smiled kindly up at him. The boy’s eyes widened and he quickly looked away.

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Idiot. Haru chided himself for allowing the stranger to catch him staring.

After fleeing from the luncheon, he had grabbed his sketchbook from his room and then proceeded to the first class deck.

He knew he would be in trouble for leaving the lunch so abruptly, but he honestly believed it would have been much worse if he had remained there. Surrounded by people who were impossible for him to connect with, who were simultaneously discussing topics he wasn’t interested in, he had panicked. Afraid that he might do or say something to that would strain the tension and make his father furious,
he had chosen to flee.

Drawing was usually able to calm his anxiety, but he was feeling increasingly frustrated as he attempted a few different people on the deck below him with limited success. It was then that Haru had first noticed the tall brown haired stranger and his blond friend talking to Rei. Haru assumed his father had sent the butler to look for him and considered moving away from the railing to a less visible position. However, Rei now seemed engrossed in the conversation he was having with the short blond boy, and Haru decided it was safe to remain standing at the railing.

He watched the brown haired boy move away from Rei and his friend and spent several minutes drawing him before the stranger caught his gaze. Cheeks still burning, he quickly glanced down at the young man. To his relief, the boy was no longer looking up at Haru and had instead turned towards the sea.

With the boy’s back to him, Haru safely begin drawing him again. He stared down at his sketch book with his brow furrowed. He erased the mouth he had drawn previously and started to draw that mouth again, smiling this time, the same smile the boy had given him. Although the stranger turning to look at him had been a surprise, what shocked him the most had been that smile. Haru had been expecting a sneer, maybe even profanities, but instead he had received a grin that shone with warmth and kindness. As he continued to draw the stranger, Haru found himself smiling slightly as well.

“A friend of yours?” Haru’s pencil froze as he heard the unmistakable chill of his father’s voice.

****

Not wanting to make the young man uncomfortable, Makoto turned away from him, electing to watch the ocean instead. His skin still tingled, and he could tell the stranger was still watching him. He allowed himself to relax, remembering what Nagisa had said earlier and thinking that the waves really did look far away. He suddenly heard a raised voice coming from above and looked up where he boy had been standing, seeing that a man had joined him. Almost immediately, Makoto decided he did not like this man.

His face was contorted with anger, and he was gripping the boy’s arm while speaking quickly. Although Makoto couldn’t make out the words, he understood they were not pleasant, and he frowned deeply as he continued watching. The man had pulled the boy closer to him and was now speaking with his mouth just a few inches from the boy’s face while the boy stood submissive and powerless, staring at the floor and occasionally nodding.

Suddenly the man turned his head and glared directly at Makoto. He wore an expression of mixed disgust and accusation, and the look alone was enough to fill Makoto with fear. He took a step back, regretting the action immediately, and stared up at the man defiantly.

They broke eye contact as a boy with red hair joined them and his gaze flitted from the man to Makoto. They exchanged a few words and then all three turned and began walking back inside the ship, the man leading the timid boy with a firm hand on his back. The red haired boy cast Makoto a glance filled with confusion and mistrust before turning and following the other two men.

Makoto watched them leave and while he did not understand all he has just witnessed, he was certain he did not approve of it. He stared up at where he had first seen the dark haired boy, and a strange feeling rose in his heart. It wasn’t a premonition or foreboding, but more like an unmistakable feeling that something had begun. He felt as if his brief interaction with the boy had set something in motion, and they now had no choice but to allow pure inertia to carry them wherever it willed.
Next chapter: Makoto and Haru actually talk to each other barely like WOW finally.

I'm sorry the background ships are getting developed faster than MakoHaru, even though it is sort of intentional *nervous laughter* I promise MakoHaru fluff and angst is coming!

Historical Stuff:
- Third class passengers technically traveled four to a room but i made the executive decision to change that because it either would have meant adding more OCs or having Makoto, Ai, Rei, and Nagisa all share the same room and I can't even imagine how badly that would go.
- Picture of the Verandah Cafe!
- Picture of the third class dining room!
- Jacob Astor was in fact a real person and the richest man aboard the ship, he was often dubbed "jack ass" by the press. His wife was named Madeleine and not Ann, however given the way I portray Ann in this fic I didn't want drag Madeleine's name through the mud, so their are some changes to their family dynamics. They did NOT have daughter named Marie, Madeleine was 18 aboard the Titanic and pregnant with Jacob's first child at the time. He died when the ship went down while she survived, however I am not sure how much I plan on sticking to their historical accuracy, especially since I've changed quite a bit already.
- Tamura-san's character is based on off of the famous survivor Molly Brown, whom there will be more about later ^.^
“I think the reward for conformity is that everyone likes you except yourself.” - Rita Mae Brown

Or

The Tamuras take no shit, Nanase-senior drops a bomb, Rei gets an unexpected visitor, Nagisa feels something new, Rin has good intentions, Ai tries his best, Makoto finds comfort in the stars, and Haru thinks he’s found a solution.

YIKES this break between chapters was longer than I was hoping. Up until now, I was writing while on Winter Break so I had much more free time. Even so, I will try my very best to update every 1-2 weeks!

ALSO extra special thanks to my beta Candice for editing this chapter, I know it was bitch to edit.

I listened to the Boueibu ED (I MISS YOU) the whole time I wrote this I hope it doesn’t show.

After their conversation on the ship’s railing, Katsu had confined Haru to his barracks until that evening. He closed the door, snidely stating he would have to spend dinner rectifying the damage his son had done. Haru was probably a little too satisfied with being sent to his room like a small child, but he honestly cherished the solitude.

Haru sat cross legged on the bed and continued to draw the stranger, exercising his memory. The more he familiarized himself with the stranger’s face, the more he realized just how handsome it was. Still, it wasn’t as if he had never drawn a beautiful face before; he had drawn some of the most youthful and attractive faces in high society without much interest or concentration. And yet, there was something about this particular face that absolutely captivated him.

Although he was slender, if not slightly underfed, the stranger was also tall with a broad chest and shoulders. Tan skin stretched over the stranger’s strong jaw and high cheekbones, and a roman nose peaked above upturned lips. In the few seconds they shared eye contact, Haru had seen eyes so green that they shone brightly, even from the deck below.

He was beautiful by all definitions of the word. But for all his beauty, Haru was certain that was not the reason the stranger’s face fascinated him.

As he filled in the irises, he thought that perhaps it was because the face was completely genuine.
The stranger didn't give the impression of overwhelming innocence or virtue, but his face was completely and totally honest. Haru looked at that beautiful face and was certain he was not seeing a mask. Feigning nothing, the stranger was simply and humbly himself. He appreciated that honesty, but more than that, he was amazed at how unashamedly the stranger had worn it.

Haru lived in a world where everyone wore a mask or was feigning something, usually both. Some people feigned confidence, while others feigned their past, some feigned a sense of humor, and others feigned success. He had even seen many young women taught to feign stupidity. Earlier at the luncheon, Haru had spoken as no one other than himself, and while he didn't think it was wrong to do so, it hadn't resulted favorably for him.

Haru grimaced, it was growing repeatedly clear that being genuine was not appreciated in the world of the elite. His eyes glossed over and he squeezed his pencil in frustration, envisioning the rest of his life without the freedom to say what he truly thought or do the things he longed to do.

He glanced up at the wall clock across from his bed and realized he should have already started dressing for dinner. Unwilling to leave his room but knowing his father would make him regret it if he did not, he sighed and climbed out of bed.

He rummaged through his suitcase for a few minutes before finding his eveningwear and dressing himself. He struggled with the buttons on his waistcoat and only half-decently fixed his tie before finally pulling on his tailcoat.

He tried not to wonder why Rei hadn't come to fetch him this time. Had his poor performance at the luncheon let his friend down? As he pulled on white gloves, he decided he would make sure this social event was a success. He entered the hallway and went down to dinner preparing to feign two things of his own: confidence and interest.

****

Every night at seven o'clock, over five hundred people would descend the ornate grand staircase and enter the dining room. The formal dining hall was so grandiose and extravagant that it rivaled those Haru had seen in the most luxurious hotels and restaurants across Europe and Asia. The walls were painted a crisp white, and the portholes were elegantly concealed by opaque, backlit glass windows.

Haru immediately felt overwhelmed as he entered the dining room. All around him, people were bustling and chattering. Guests continually rose from their oak chairs to speak to someone at another table, and waiters maneuvered through the crowd, pouring drinks and taking orders. The ship supplied waiters for the evening meal so Rei and Ai weren't working, and while Haru thought they deserved a break, he missed the familiarity.

A hand slapped him on the back and he turned to see Rin grinning at him. “Isn’t this exciting?” He was dressed similarly to Haru, except he had elected to wear a bold white tailcoat instead of the standard black. Rin led them to their table where Katsu was already seated, looking professional and intimidating in a tall top hat with the shining pocket watch pinned to his side. Rin jabbered as they went, “…and the dining room’s location at the center of this ship is supposed to give us the smoothest ride possible.” He mentioned the grand light fixtures and linoleum floor tiles before they finally sat down next to each other, joined shortly by the Astors.

Tamura-san and her husband sat down, completing the table from earlier with the addition of Arata Tamura. There were still two more empty seats, and Haru assumed more people would join them later. Waiters placed various hors d’oeuvres on the table and Haru began nibbling on oysters. After everyone had food in front of them, his father engaged the other two businessmen in conversation.
“Arata, I was sorry to hear you weren’t feeling well earlier.”

“Thank you Nanase-san, Riko passed on your sentiment and I appreciate your concern. I’m feeling much better now.” Recently the Tamuras had been making waves in the upper circles with their unconventional background and liberal ideology. They had emigrated from Japan to the Western coast, eventually settling in Colorado. There, Arata’s engineering efforts proved instrumental in the production of an ore mine, and the Tamuras became wealthy overnight.

“Well I’m glad to hear it! I already spoke with Jacob about this earlier, but I have a business proposition for you if you’d like to hear it. Jacob, if you lend me your ear again, I may change your views.” Katsu began describing the automobile industry, drawing from his personal relationship with the CEOs of major producers and knowledge of specific models. Rin backed Katsu, occasionally adding information and making arguments of his own, and gradually increased his presence in the conversation. Haru watched Rin’s interaction with Arata Tamura and Jacob Astor, noting the characteristics that made him exceptionally persuasive.

Jacob sighed, “I’m sorry Katsu, but there’s just too much competition for me to feel comfortable about investing. You know my stance on the permanence of railways, but even aside from that, the shipping industry is gaining momentum, and I feel it would be a wiser investment.”

Rin and Katsu both opened their mouths to respond, but to everyone’s surprise, Haru cut in before they could do so, “Mr. Astor I doubt executives in the automobile and shipping industries are concerned with the competition the other displays. No one intends to drive their Model T across the ocean, any more than one would attempt to travel across the countryside in a ship. If you’re looking for lucrative business, then I advise you to invest in both.”

The whole table stared as he finished speaking, and Jacob and Katsu had their mouths open. With wide eyes, Haru glanced around at them all before electing to stare intently at the table.

Rin grinned at his friend and followed up on Haru’s comment, “And indecently, this past year, the automobile and shipping industries have both grown while railways have remained stagnant.”

Encouraged by his friend’s participation, Haru spoke again, and from there he and Rin ran a wonderful debate with Mr. Astor and Mr. Tamura. Rin led with sarcastic hypotheticals, and Haru backed him with facts and statistics he had memorized. Katsu sat back in his chair and allowed the two young men to spearhead his argument; he folded his hands under his chin, impressed by their ability to combine and support each other.

“This past year, there were 500,000 motor vehicles in the U.S alone. That number is only projected to increasing in 1913.” Haru finished speaking, and he and Rin stared at the two men intently, waiting for a response.

Finally, Jacob Astor looked at the table and rubbed his neck. Sighing, he simply said, “Katsu, you’ve got my attention.”

Katsu grinned and spoke for the first time in quite a while, “I’m so glad you’ve come around, Jacob! After dinner we can discuss investment options in the smoking lounge.”

Jacob shrugged and gestured to Haru and Rin, “You’ve got convincing representatives. If they’re the young minds going into the industry then I can't help but feel confidently about the future of automobiles.”

“I can give every assurance that they will not fail your investment.” Katsu looked at his son briefly, and Haru could sense the threat behind it. “What about you, Arata? Will you be joining us after
dinner to discuss a contract?”

Arata Tamura sighed and straightened himself in his chair, “Nanase-san, I know you are aware of my origins, and I apologize, but this isn’t a topic I know enough about to invest in. Even if I were educated on automobiles, I doubt your proposal would interest me. I’m happy where I am financially.”

Katsu chuckled, “That may be, but you can’t honestly be opposed to increasing that sum.”

Riko Tamura spoke for the first time, “Katsu, when I married my husband, he was a poor man. We already have more than we could have ever dreamed of and are more than thankful. We would never desire more.”

Jacob cut in, “Letting you wife make business decisions for you, Arata? You are a daring man.”

“My wife is my partner in all things, business especially,” Arata answered evenly, “and I don’t appreciate your assertion that she is less capable than anyone else at this table.” An uncomfortable silence settled and Haru looked at Tamura-san and her husband. They made no effort to hide their background and it was clear that neither of them were wearing masks. He looked at them and saw truly genuine people; they weren’t feigning anything, and they looked happy.

He wondered how they had managed to achieve such a feat. The waiters had only served two courses, and while the dinner was going well, the effort required to wear the mask had left him feeling rather drained.

While Haru was lost in thought, a man and young girl approached their table, the man waving excitedly.

“Oh, Katsuuuuuuuuuuu!”

Haru watched his father’s face drain to white.

“William!” Katsu stood and stiffly shook hands with the man. While usually the master of false kindness and affections, this smile was clearly strained, “I…I was not aware you were aboard.”

Haru had never seen someone so pleased to see his father; the man, William, grinned and pulled Katsu into a hug that was clearly not reciprocated, “It’s been far too long!” He beamed, “And you remember Sophia of course.”

Katsu, now wearing a deeply lined from, kissed the back of the girl’s hand, “You’ve grown into a beautiful young woman since I last saw you.” He spoke as if someone was holding a gun to his back, and the girl wiped her hand on her dress after he had turned away. Her green eyes flitted to Haru and he looked away quickly.

William was practically bouncing with excitement, “Sophia isn’t the only one who has grown!” He turned to Haru, who had no recollection of this man but politely stood to shake his hand, “You’ve gotten quite a bit taller since your toddler days as a bachelor.” Haru blinked at him, not understanding the meaning behind his words. “I’m excited to discover what type of man you’ve grown into!”

Katsu cut in, “It’s not surprising you don’t remember the Stockwells, you were quite young and we didn’t see each other oft.”

“Ah such harsh words! You make us sound like strangers,” William nudged Haru, “he likes to pretend he has forgotten the eventual union of our families...”
“I...I’m sorry? I...” Haru’s gaze flew to the girl, as if she could tell him it wasn’t true, but she was staring resolutely at the floor. William clapped him on the back and continued speaking, but Haru didn’t hear him.

Understanding had hit him like a tidal wave, drenching Haru in despair and making him weak at the knees. As his internal world fell to pieces, the world outside continued moving in blissful ignorance.

William pointed at Katsu’s side, "Is this the infamous pocket watch?" He turned to address the entire table, “He didn’t carry it when I knew him, so seeing it in person is quite a thrill for me!”

Katsu tried to suppress the old habit of glaring at him, “Why don’t, um...why don’t we sit down?”

As it was, Haru couldn't stand any longer and half-sat, half-collapsed back into his chair. He gripped the table and gritted his teeth. Sophia had seated herself while the men were talking, and when Haru turned to look at her she was still staring down at the floor. As he watched, her lip quivered.

Katsu glanced at his son with narrowed eyes as he and William took their seats, quickly engaging the rest of the table in conversation.

Haru had never had much control of his life up until now; where he went, what he wore, whom he met, were all decided and dictated by his father. He had, however, always thought there must be a limit to that control. He had thought that there were some variables in his life that even his father wasn’t possessive enough to manipulate, surely there was a line even his father would not cross.

Now he was faced with the sheer inaccuracy of this assumption. He felt like he was sinking. As every prospect of freedom was stolen from him, he fell deeply into despair and hopelessness.

Haru stood up, “Please excuse me. I need to use the restroom.” He fled the room quickly, not giving anyone a chance to try and stop him.

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At seven o’clock, Nagisa bounced across the hall and knocked on Ai’s door, fidgeting with his hands as he waited for someone to answer. Makoto had left the room, giving Nagisa space to do what he was best at, and Nagisa was practically hopping in excitement.

The door suddenly opened and there stood a familiar face, though not the face of the timid, silver-haired butler. Because of their similar professions and nationality, Nagisa probably should have been able to guess the identity of Ai’s roommate, but that didn’t stop him from shouting “Rei-chan!” in surprise.

“Nagisa-kun?” Rei looked slightly surprised but not displeased. “Ah, can I help you?” Nagisa stood there opened mouthed and unable to respond, and thankfully, Ai appeared at Rei’s shoulder.

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“Oh! Nagisa-kun, I’m sorry I forgot to mention it to him.” He turned to Rei, “Nagisa-kun and his friend came by earlier asking if we’d be interested in playing cards tonight.” He paused, looking from one to the other, “Eh, do you already know each other?”

“Yes, we met out on the deck earlier,” Rei answered, going slightly red. “Ah...sure, I’ll play, I have no other obligations tonight. Will you be joining us, Ai-kun?”

Ai shook his head, “I think I’ll just spend the night in the room, thank you though.”

Nagisa and Rei both tried to convince him to join them but Ai was resolute in his decision, so Nagisa eventually led Rei across the hall and into his room. His attempt to produce long, confident strides
made him stumble in the doorway, and he entered the room with a burning face. Niall and Ethan were already seated and had been waiting patiently.

“Hey guys, this is Rei-chan, he’ll be playing with us. Rei, this is Niall and Ethan.” They all exchanged greetings and Nagisa sat down on his bed. He pulled out a deck of cards and skillfully began shuffling. “Alright boys, what are we playing?”

There were the standard suggestion of poker and black jack, and then Niall and Ethan began to excitedly discuss their favorite card games from Ireland. Nagisa considered himself strongest at poker; however, with the addition of Rei as a fourth player, winning became the second most important objective of the night.

“How about a partner game?” Nagisa glanced up at Rei through his long eyelashes, “Are you guys up for bid euchre?”

They all shrugged in agreement. Rei was familiar with the game but not entirely confident in his skills, and hoped he would be a useful partner to Nagisa.

As Nagisa worked on removing every card below nine from the deck, a standard in euchre, Rei couldn’t stop touching his hair. He’d intended to spend the night reading and although he wasn’t displeased with the night’s turn of events, he wished he had been able to make himself look more presentable.

Nagisa dealt them each five cards and flipped the top card of those remaining in the deck, revealing spades as the trump suit. “What currency do you guys wanna play with?” Due to their constant travels, they all had a scattering of money from all over and none of them had yet exchanged their money for U.S. currency. They elected to use the British monetary system, with each round of play worth two shillings, one supplied by each team.

Ethan, who was setting to the left of the dealer, Nagisa, chose to pass, meaning the play was on to Rei. His brow furrowed as he stared at his hand. He only had one spade, the rest were hearts and diamonds, so he chose to pass. Niall passed as well, giving Nagisa the chance to name a different suit as the trump suit.

He placed one shilling in the center and, winking at Rei, laid down the king of hearts. They each played their own heart card, the nine, ten, and queen, and the round went to Nagisa.

From there, it was a slow start for each team and they each made grievous errors in the following rounds. Rei forgot the key rule of euchre, that the jack of the trump suit is the most powerful, while the twins chose a poor trump suit for themselves several times in a row.

As Niall and Ethan already shared their wealth, they didn’t have a concept of each other’s money. However, Rei and Nagisa didn’t share funds and had to take turns biding for their team. Rei gazed into his wallet guiltily. He had a large scattering of shillings and pence, as well as several pound notes he was sure none of the other players possessed.

Rei and Nagisa eventually began to pull ahead. Nagisa carried their team on his own for several hands, allowing Rei to grasp the flow of the game, before he eventually began to win rounds of his own. Every time each player’s hand dwindled and it grew close to the time for Nagisa to re-deal, Rei was able to guess the cards held by each player with surprising accuracy.

After roughly an hour of play, Nagisa laid down the jack of diamonds and enthusiastically pulled the money towards himself, “You guys up for another round?”
The twins had already lost close to two pounds and looked at each other nervously. While they leaned their heads together to debate, Nagisa smirked as he caught Rei’s eye. The butler grinned at him and Nagisa felt his heart flutter.

“Eh, I think we’re gonna bow out for the night.” Ethan finally announced. Rei thought that decision was wise. While he was happy to win money for Nagisa, he felt guilty for taking so much from the twins.

“Ah alright! Come by any time if you feel like playing again!” Nagisa said.

The twins both nodded to him and smiled. However, when they entered the hallway, they made eye contact knowing they would never willingly play against Nagisa and the butler again.

Back inside the room, Rei moved to sit next to Nagisa on the bed.

“You were amazing, Rei-chan!”

Rei waved a hand, embarrassed, “Hardly.” He hid smile behind his hand as he watched Nagisa attempt to divide their winnings. With twenty shillings to a pound, Nagisa was struggling to hold and divide roughly forty coins.

Several dropped shillings rolled under the bed and Rei pulled out his wallet, “Here Nagisa-kun,” he pulled out two pound notes, “these should be easier for you to carry.” He handed the two bills to Nagisa and began filling the coins into his wallet. He dropped several on purpose, as they probably wouldn’t all fit anyways, and forced the clasp shut with brute strength. Finally, he turned back to Nagisa.

“Wow Rei-chan, this is incredible! I’ve never touched the actual bill before.” He furrowed his brow in confusion and then held out one of the bills, “This one’s yours.”

Under any other circumstances, Rei could have spent forever looking at the blond haired boy, but this time he had to look away. “Nagisa-kun I want you to have my half, I really don’t need it.” He hoped he didn't seem arrogant in this assertion, but the truth remained that although they were both living in the same third-class barracks, there was still a drastic difference in their usual living habits. The most prominent being that Rei always had shelter and food provided for him. He couldn’t say the same for Nagisa.

Nagisa’s eyes grew wide, “But Rei-chan, you earned that money.”

Rei grimaced, “I know you could have earned just as much without me.”

Nagisa blushed slightly. While what Rei said was true, he was already content with the amount of money they had ended up winning. Besides, he and Rei were alone in his room, sitting on his bed, with their shoulders brushing, and that alone made Nagisa feel like he had won a lot more than money. In the current situation, Nagisa could only look away and mumble, “Why do you care so much whether or not I take the money?”

Although Nagisa was not looking at Rei, he could tell the butler was being sincere when he answered, “Because I think you deserve it.”

His face turned a deep red and Nagisa had to change the subject. “Are you going back to your room now?” He knew this was a risky move, but he considered it the best way to gauge the butler’s feelings.

“If you want me to.”
Nagisa simply shook his head.

And so, leaving the matter of the money unsettled, they just talked. Laying on Nagisa’s bed with their heads propped on their hands, they faced each other. They talked about the places they had been and people they had met, the bazar foods they had eaten and strange creatures they had seen.

Nagisa started his personal history with his meeting of Makoto, and while Rei was curious about Nagisa’s life before that, he figured he had left it out for a reason. They told jokes and described their favorite memories, and finally, when they ran out of things to talk about, they kissed.

To Nagisa’s surprise it was sweet, short and safe. To his confusion, it was innocent.

They pulled apart and smiled shyly at each other. Rei scooted towards him and placed a hand on Nagisa’s lower back, pulling the blonde boy closer. Rei’s hand moved slowly downward and slid into his back pocket and the butler squeezed him once. The butler’s enthusiasm surprised Nagisa, but Rei quickly removed his hand and placed it once again on Nagisa’s waist.

They continued kissing sweetly, pausing every once in a while and Rei would simply hold him tightly. The entire situation was new to Nagisa, and it never lost its innocence. He had been treated like a street rat, a failure, and a thief. Not quite to his discontent, he was often treated like a piece of meat. As he lay in Rei’s arms he realized that, for the first time, he was being treated like something precious.

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Back inside the first class dining room, the table was beginning to notice Haru’s extended absence. Rin was again seated next to Marie Astor, but uneasy thoughts occupied his mind and he was not giving her the same attention he had earlier.

“Well now Katsu, it’s beginning to look like we’ve lost your son.” Jacob joked, and while Katsu smiled genially, Rin could see a vein popping in his forehead.

The news of the engagement had clearly shocked Haru, it had been news to Rin as well. He was torn between concern for his friend and a deeply rooted, well taught commitment to obligation. He drummed his fingers on the table and then stood up, “Please excuse me, I’m going to the restroom as well.”

“Look for Haru while you’re there,” Katsu said and Rin nodded politely before quickly exiting the dining room.

A few minutes later, Rin found himself walking along a hallway in the third floor barracks. He hadn’t gone to the restroom or searched for Haru, but instead went where he felt he needed to go. He pinched the bridge of his nose, assuming his friend has gone back to his room. Even if he had found Haru, Rin was currently facing inner turmoil and wasn’t sure what he would have said.

He knocked on a door to a third class room and waited. Ai came to the door a few moments later and immediately became flustered, “Ah! Matsuoaka-san!” He bowed deeply and Rin rolled his eyes at the excessive gesture. “Do you need my assistance?”

Ai blushed, “Of course Sir! Please come in, eh…” he stopped talking as he realized the barracks were probably far more simplistic than his master was accustomed to. “I’m so sorry I don’t have any food or drinks to offer you…” he began frantically pushing clothes off his bed.
Amused, Rin watched him from the doorway, “Actually Ai, I was wondering if maybe you wanted to join me in my room? You can help me christen a new bottle of wine I bought in South Hampton.” Ai quickly agreed and was glad to leave his embarrassing quarters.

Up in Rin’s extravagant room, with its richly embroidered curtains and meticulously carved furniture, Ai knew he was the thing most out of place.

Rin gestured for him to sit in an armchair by the electric fireplace while he went to get the wine. Ai sat on the edge of the chair, looking around the room and biting his lip. Rin returned shortly and poured each of them a glass before collapsing in the armchair across from him. He took several big gulps, while Ai only sipped from his cup and fidgeted nervously. The Rin sitting across from him had none of his usual bravado or tenacity, he just looked tired.

“M-Matsuoka-san are you alright?”

Rin finally met his eyes and waved a hand, “I told you, you don’t have to call me that unless Katsu’s around.” Ai’s eyes widened and he nodded. “And not really.” Rin let out a long sigh and rubbed his forehead. “I don’t know what to do.”

That didn’t give Ai much to go on, so he sat silently and gave Rin time to collect his thoughts. Eventually, Rin sat up, “Haru’s engaged.” Ai frowned and opened his mouth in surprise, but Rin cut in before he could say anything. “Yeah, it was news to everyone. Him especially. I just don’t know what I should tell him. Katsu making that decision for him was definitely unfair…but what had he expected? We would have been expected to find wives in the next few years anyways.”

Ai’s dropped his gaze to floor and was momentarily lost in his own selfish train of thought. He immediately felt ashamed and once again gave Rin his full attention.

Meanwhile, Rin kept speaking and his speech grew increasingly urgent. Ai wondered how long Rin had been holding in his irritation. “But even before the news of the engagement, he made no effort to fit into our society. He’s never even tried; there was never an ounce of effort, and I guarantee he wouldn’t be so unhappy if he just tried.” Rin sighed and poured himself another glass of wine, “But see, I think that, but then I also think that maybe I don’t quite understand the position he’s in? I don’t have a father controlling me. Katsu is definitely a severe man, but I don’t think all his expectations are unreasonable. How should I support Haru while simultaneously telling him he has to simply grin and bear it? How should I handle this? Am I being too hard on him? Do I just not understand? Am I a bad friend?” Rin collapsed back into his chair as if to mark the end of his monologue.

Ai took this as his cue to speak. While he personally thought Rin was flawless, both physically and internally, he knew his friend would appreciate actual advice instead of simple ego-stroking. “I don’t think you’re being a bad friend. I think it’s important to keep in mind that while the two of you inhabit the same world, you come from different places…and also that everything you see on the surface might not be all that’s there.” Ai’s lips began to tremble, “You never know what other people might be thinking or feeling. I think the fact that you care so much, the fact that you’re so concerned…it makes you a really great friend, Rin.”

Rin groaned and leaned forward, “You’re absolutely right. I’m bringing the ideals I was raised with to the situation and that’s unfair to him.” Rin smiled for the first time since they had come up to his room. “Thanks, Ai. You’re so much more level-headed than I am. I knew you’d say what I needed to hear.”

Ai turned red, “Y-You’re welcome! And if you ever need it, need advice…or anything, you can ask me.”
Rin grinned at him, "Good because I don't know what I'd do without your service!"

They spent the rest of the night far more cheerfully, laughing and telling jokes. Rin placed an upside down vase on his head as an imitation of Katsu's top hat, and Ai laughed so much that hundred pound wine came out his nose. At some point they ditched their glasses and instead took turns drinking from the bottle. Occasionally their knees would bump against each other, and every time Ai's heart beat a little faster.

He couldn't deny that his relationship with his employer confused him, and he remained uncertain how to proceed with the feelings that existed inside his heart. However, as he watched Rin laughing, Ai realized he was simply grateful that he had been able to cheer him up. He took another swig from the wine bottle and hoped that one day he'd be able to tell Rin that he thought he was wonderful in so many ways.

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Makoto stared up that the stars. He was the only one on the third class deck and took advantage of the free space by lying on one of the benches. The bench was much too short to fit his whole body, and his legs dangled off the end comically, but it was comfortable enough. More than that, it served purpose.

As the sun went down, Makoto couldn't see the water through the darkness. Already feeling claustrophobic, the inability to see more than a few feet beyond the ship's railing terrified him. It had been that, coupled with the dizziness the rocking of the ship induced, that caused him to flee to the ship's deck.

If he laid on his back and stared straight up at the sky, the rest of his surroundings fell away and he could pretend he was anywhere. The stars grounded him; they remained stagnant despite the ships rocking and helped with his dizziness.

As Makoto thought about this, he realized it probably sounded a lot more profound than he intended. He had stumbled upon the healing power of the stars accidentally. He had no desire to gamble with Nagisa, so he left the room, stumbling around aimlessly for a while before chancing upon the empty deck.

Makoto vaguely wondered how well Nagisa was doing tonight. When they were around fourteen and Nagisa had first started gambling, there were several nights where he spent all their money on a single hand; more than once he had run high debts that forced him and Makoto to flee the city. Fortunately, while Nagisa wasn’t formally educated, he was a fast learner at things he deemed worth learning. Within a year he had become formidable in most card games, and after another year, he had become almost impossible to beat.

Alone on the deck, Makoto laughed at all the strange situations his friend had gotten him into, their current position aboard the Titanic being one of them.

When he met Nagisa five years ago, they had both been dirty and starving and hopeless. He wasn't sure if he could call them orphans; while Makoto had a clear view of his own history, Nagisa's remained a mystery. Regardless, they had both been homeless and unwanted, seen as urchins more than children.

The first night they met, Nagisa had comforted Makoto and patiently let him grieve. Once he had stopped crying, Nagisa immediately offered to go in search of the man who had killed Makoto's family in a robbery gone bad. Makoto still remembered how the tiny adolescent had stood up, cracked his knuckles, and said, "Let’s get this son of a bitch."
He had thanked Nagisa for his offer, but Makoto didn’t want revenge. He knew that more than anything it would just make him feel soiled. He tried to live the way his family would want him to. While his lifestyle wasn’t exactly innocent, he tried to keep it honest as possible, and more than anything he tried to live happily.

After that night, although Nagisa had never shared his origin, they never separated. It was Nagisa who had come up with their, 'we have nowhere to go, so we go everywhere' mantra.

Makoto was quickly jerked out of his memories as he heard heavy footsteps approaching him. Unsure if he was allowed to be on the deck at this hour and slightly afraid of getting in trouble, he remained lying flat as the footsteps pounded towards him. He only sat up after the stranger had passed him, watching the figure slow as he approached the bow of the ship. As Makoto watched, the figure climbed over railing and turned to face the darkness of the ocean. The figure relaxed his muscles and leaned forward, suspended above the waves by just his grip on the railing.

Makoto stood and approached him slowly, stopping a few feet behind the boy.

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Haru hung his head, defeated. The freezing rails chilled his fingers and fear churned in his stomach as he watched waves beating against the ship.

He bit his lip, this had never been an option before. Honestly, this wasn’t even what he wanted, but his life was full of things he didn’t want, and of all those things, this seemed most promising at the moment. This was the lesser of the hundreds of evils that were about to swallow him whole.

He took a few deep breaths and attempted to gather all his will, reminding himself of the things that had led him here. He flexed his grip on the railing.

“Hi.”

Haru jerked in surprise and had to work hard to keep from falling before he was ready. He turned back quickly and shouted at the stranger standing behind him, “Who are you? What are you doing here? Leave!”

“I’m sorry!” the stranger held his hands up apologetically and took a couple steps backward, “I didn’t mean to scare you!”

Haru blinked a few times as he realized he recognized the stranger’s high cheekbones and strong jaw. It was the young man he had seen on the deck earlier that day, and his bright green eyes were looking at Haru with overwhelming concern.

Chapter End Notes

FINALLY IT'S HERE! Tons and tons of wonderful makoharu-ness next chapter! From the very first stages of planning this fic, next chapter is one i have been SO excited for. I already have some of it typed and will try to get it up quickly, I don’t wanna leave you guys hanging for too long after the way this chapter ended.

Also major apology but this fic will probably will be pretty OC heavy. I’m really sorry for the insertion of Sophia's character and the engagement announcement, it wasn't
something I had originally planned and I really didn't want to include it, but it sort of became necessary and i can assure you that she will be awesome so please dont worry!!
"Stars are not small or gentle. They are writhing and dying and burning. They are not here to be pretty. I am trying to learn from them." - Caitlyn Siehl

Or

Makoto and Haru speak for the first time, Rin continues to have good intentions, Ai almost gets his chance, and Rei and Nagisa are interrupted.

The elements conspired to isolate the two boys as they stared at each other, making their first encounter pure and uninterrupted. The voices aboard the ship grew quiet, the water stilled, the night air became stagnant, and their world hung in silence. A mutual feeling of mixed shock, fear, and curiosity held them there, unmoving.

Then, shattering the fragile, quiet world that had been established, the stranger spoke. “I’m Makoto.”

Haru could only stare. He had expected a member of staff, or possibly his father, or literally anyone other than the kind-faced stranger.

As if given the cue that their private world had been cracked open, the wind suddenly rose from the water and blew across the ship, biting at their faces and ruffling their hair. Haru looked away. He had spent hours in his bedroom staring at the charcoal face of this young man, and yet, now confronted with the real thing, Haru found it difficult to look at him.

Ignoring Makoto’s introduction, he hung his head and mumbled, “Please, just leave.”

“I’m really sorry,” and it sounded like he meant it, “but I wouldn’t feel right about that.”

“Why not?” Haru’s voice rose as irritation prickled his skin. "It’s none of your business.”

“I don’t know what will happen if I leave.”

Haru scoffed as if it was obvious, “I’ll jump.”

Makoto was silent for a few moments and when he finally spoke, he sounded closer, “I really don’t want you to, so I can’t leave.”
“So? I want to.”

“Why?”

The gentleness in his voice made Haru falter. Why was he asking? It wasn’t like this involved him. How could he possibly get this stranger to understand all the different reasons that had led him here? The big things and the little. His betrothal certainly, but also the million little rules and formalities that occurred daily, which only served to claw at his heart and strangle his soul. Instead of describing each of these in detail, he answered concisely, and it held more truth than all of his other reasons.

“If I jump… then maybe I’ll be free.”

He expected Makoto to laugh at him immediately, but when his comment was met with silence, Haru waited, and then turned back to look at him. Makoto had moved a hand up to his chin and was squinting as if thinking.

“Well… maybe. I suppose I can’t pretend to know what happens when you die.” He looked at Haru with a pained expression, “But I know that you will die sometime, even if you don’t tonight… so why not wait a little while, if you’ll be free eventually?”

The fact that Makoto hadn’t immediately dismissed his opinion shocked Haru, and he was unable to say anything for several moments. Eventually, he shook his head.

“I have nothing to wait for. There’s no reason to… I would rather be free as soon as possible.”

Makoto looked thoughtful again, “I think I have to disagree. I think there are still some things here to live for, before that time comes.”

Haru was getting irritated again and turned back to the ocean, “You don’t know me, you know nothing about my life, how can you possibly say that? If there are so many things worth living for,” Haru looked down into the dark depths of the water and poured all the bitterness he felt towards the world into two short words, “name one.”

Waves lapped the side of the boat lazily, and Makoto was silent for a few moments.

“Look up.”

Still with his head tilted downwards at the ocean, Haru frowned. Slowly, straightening his shoulders and stretching his neck, he raised his head.

The moon hung as a simple claw in the sky and tonight the stars had taken center stage. They glittered above him, easily numbering in the thousands. Each one shone differently, and yet, in a combination of writhing and dying and burning, they lit the sky. Had they been here this whole time? Why hadn’t he seen them until now? The longer and harder he looked, the more he saw. The ocean and sky behaved uncharacteristically; through whatever twisted laws of nature that allowed this phenomenon to occur, they reflected each other. The water sparkled with crystals formally bound to the sky, and rivers ran through the stars, altering constellations and connecting lonely planets. Haru stood open-mouthed, astonished and in awe.

Finally, not knowing what else to say, he simply asked, “The stars?”

“Aren’t they beautiful tonight? That’s a reason right there, you should live because there will be more nights like these.” Haru tore his gaze away from the sky and turned to look at Makoto, furrowing his eyebrows. “And while it’s true that I don’t know you, or anything about your life, I know there are some things that we can all live for.”
He paused and while Haru would never admit it to himself, he wanted so desperately for Makoto to continue, to give him more reasons. “We can all live for things like sunny days and the smell during the rain. We can live for the simple fact that there are kittens we’ve yet to hold and delicious food we’ve yet to try. We live because there’s so much out there to enjoy. You should live because there are people you’ve yet to meet, and because you could fall in love any day.”

Makoto finally finished speaking and Haru saw that the thousands of stars were reflected in his eyes. As Haru watched, those eyes slowly filled with tears.

Haru turned back to the stars. He thought he would maybe like to see them again.

“Please.” Makoto's voice came out strangled as he raised his hand, offering to help him over to the safe side of the railing.

If Haru wasn't already convinced, the innocence and pain in that one tearful please should have been enough to pull him over the railing all on its own. Instead however, Haru slowly reached his hand out and grabbed Makoto’s fingers.

He climbed carefully, not wanting to fall to his death after he’d decided against it.

He curled the fingers on his right hand tightly around Makoto’s, and Makoto held his other hand out wide, ready to assist whenever Haru needed. Haru had just begun to lift his first leg over to the safe side of the railing, when strong waves sent the ship rocking viciously from side to side.

He fell forward, landing in Makoto’s outstretched arms, and they both crashed to the ground. They landed in a tangle of arms and legs and their foreheads smashed against each other loudly.

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Both growing hot from the wine, laughter, and heat from the fireplace, Rin and Ai migrated to Rin’s private promenade deck. Raised several stories above main deck, they both welcomed the cool night air and leaned against the railing lazily.

The crisp wind cleared both their thoughts, chasing away the effects of the wine. Unfortunately, Rin would have preferred that his brain stay jumbled.

“Marriage.” He sighed and slumped his shoulders, resting most of his weight on the railing. “It was never something I’d considered before. I didn’t think I needed to think about it yet. But now, maybe I have to?” he groaned and sunk even lower.

“What about you?” He rolled his head to look at Ai and smirked, “Ever thought about settling down with someone?”

Rin thought he probably knew the answer to this question. They spent so much time traveling that it was unlikely Ai had known anyone long enough to develop a deep relationship with them. Even if he had, Ai was so shy that Rin doubted he would be able to make his feelings known.

To his surprise, Ai opened and closed his mouth several times before finally shaking his head, “I won’t get married until you do.”

It was hard to miss the gloomy edge to Ai’s words, “Oh? Why is that?” Rin frowned. Had their travels really been keeping his friend from finding someone? Was he lonely? Did Ai regret working for him? Rin rose from the railing and turned to face the butler, “Hey, you know it wouldn’t matter to me right? I know you wouldn’t let it affect your work,” he grinned and placed a hand on Ai’s shoulder, shaking him playfully, “I’d be happy for you.”
Ai shook his head and gave him a pained smile.

Rin moved closer to the butler and frowned. Haru had once told him that he had an uncanny ability to say all the wrong things, and Rin hoped this wasn’t one of those times. “Is everything okay?”

Ai’s chest rose and fell quickly. Working to suppress his nerves, he slowly opened his mouth, “I-

“Hey, do you see that?” a movement behind the butler distracted Rin. He maneuvered forward and around Ai, and then leaned far over the railing, squinting. “Is that…?” from this distance he could make out two figures down on the main deck of the ship. “Haru? Is he being attacked?!?” He watched as the two bodies fell to the deck floor.

Ai was trying to still his beating heart from the thrill of his near-confession, and stood, speechless, as Rin tore back into his bedroom.

“Shit, what time is it?” He looked wildly around the room, and finally spotted the clock displaying eight thirty, “Ai, go down to the dining room and get Katsu, bring him to the bow of the ship. If you hurry he should still be there.”

With that, he sprinted into the hallway, leaving Ai standing dumbstruck on the balcony, ever in Rin’s wake.

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Ai had caught Katsu just as he was about to migrate to the smoking lounge. He frowned deeply at the butler’s words and then turned to apologize to Jacob Astor, saying he’d join him shortly. Katsu then told Ai he would head to the bow of the ship alone and instructed him to fetch Rei and bring him there as well.

He sprinted to the third floor barracks, first checking his and Rei’s room, finding it empty, and then crossed the hall to Nagisa’s room. Not bothering to knock, he charged into the room.

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Nagisa lay in a state of confused comfort with his face pressed against Rei’s chest and the butler’s arms wrapped around his waist. On one hand, Rei was warm and gentle, and Nagisa could hear the steady beat of his heart through his shirt. On the other hand, Nagisa didn’t understand why the butler was still wearing his shirt.

In his experience, and he liked to think he had plenty, the night should have taken a very different turn after he and Rei had kissed. Instead, they shared just a few short kisses, and then Rei seemed content with holding him close for the rest of the night.

“Nagisa-kun,” neither of them had spoken since their first kiss and Rei’s voice was soft. Nagisa felt the butler start to pull away and he unlatched his fingers from behind Rei’s back. While Nagisa found the entire situation foreign and slightly frightening, he missed the closeness of the butler’s body. “What are your plans once we land in New York?”

Nagisa leaned back and looked at him in surprise, “Why?”

The butler’s lips parted at the same moment the door flung open.

“Rei-kun there’s an emergency!” Ai burst into the room and then recoiled in shock. “Ah sorry! I should have knocked!” He blushed and bowed unnecessarily. When he stood upright once again, he kept his gaze fixed on the floor.
Rei stood from the bed, fully attentive, “What has happened?” he looked dignified and collected, and only a slight blush dusted his cheeks.

“Nanase-kun has been attacked.”

Rei’s eyes grew wide, “Haru?”

Ai nodded, “At the bow of the ship. Matsuoka-kun and Nanase-sama are heading there now.”

Rei took several purposeful steps toward the door before pausing. Turning back into the room, he knelt by the bed where Nagisa was still laying, “I’m sorry, Nagisa-kun, but I have to leave. Can I make it up to you tomorrow?”

Nagisa simply stared at him, finally nodding once.

Rei squeezed his hand and smiled kindly at him, “Thank you, Nagisa-kun. Goodnight.”

Ai watched this entire interaction in awe of how easily it was executed, and didn’t notice Rei stand and walk to the door.

“Ai-kun, are you coming?”

He jumped and then nodded, following Rei into the hallway and shutting the door behind them.

Nagisa stared at the door for a solid minute after they left, and then finally rolled onto his back, pulling a pillow over his face.

He frowned. Something was poking him uncomfortably and he wiggled for a few moments in vain. Reaching a hand around himself, he pulled a one pound note and a scattering of shillings from his back pocket. Nagisa tilted his head to the side and furrowed his brow. He had folded his one pound and placed it in his bag under the bed, and last he knew, Rei had placed all the shillings and his one pound in his wallet.

Nagisa’s eyes widened as he recalled the single time the butler’s hand had reached at his backside. Had Rei used Nagisa's momentary distraction to slip his half of their winnings into his pocket? Nagisa usually used that method to steal from his lovers, and clutched the money to his chest when he realized Rei had used the same technique to give him something instead.

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Haru and Makoto both groaned, but both felt fine other than the slight pain in their foreheads. Makoto had broken most of Haru's fall, and Haru blushed as he realized he was still straddling him.

He scurried off of Makoto and scooted a few feet away. They stared at each other in silence and wind blew across the deck.

Unhappy that they lacked any immediate conversation topic, Haru chose to introduce himself, “I… I’m Haru by the way.”

Makoto smiled, “It’s nice to meet you, Haru.” He held out his hand. This time, without pressure and immediacy, Haru was able to study that hand. It wasn’t really soft, but its movements were. Large and warm, it caressed Haru’s chilled fingers. Haru blushed and Makoto held his hand for several seconds too long.

Footsteps pounded towards them and their heads snapped up, quickly releasing their grip on each
other. Rin ran towards them and froze when he saw Haru sitting on the deck. Recovering, he stormed over to Makoto, “What the hell is going on?”

Makoto held up his hands and leaned back, “I-I think there’s been a misunderstanding.”

Rin grabbed him by the collar, “Is that so? Because I saw you pull him to ground. Do you know who-”

“Rin, stop it.” Rin turned to see that Haru had stood up and was now glaring at him. Haru frowned, thinking that Rin was behaving far too threateningly, considering Makoto was still sitting on the deck. “You’ve got it all wrong.”

Just then another, slower, more dignified set of footsteps approached. They all turned watched Katsu leisurely walking towards them. He stopped a few feet from the three boys, and his gaze traveled over Haru, Makoto, and finally Rin, who was still standing with his hands curled into fists.

Katsu placed his hands in his pockets and addressed Rin, “Well? What has happened?”

Rin pointed an accusing finger down at Makoto, “This man attacked Haru.”

Haru glared at his friend, “That’s not what happened.”

Katsu ignored his son, still addressing Rin, and Makoto frowned at the obvious neglect, “Where were you at the time? Weren’t you going to the restroom?

From his position below Rin, Makoto was the only one who saw him blush, “I…I did. Afterwards I was looking for Haru and I saw this man pull him to the ground.”

Irritation raged in Haru’s heart and he moved in front of Rin, facing his father, “I said that’s not what happened.”

Katsu pressed his lips together and observed the three boys. “Rin, go get a member of staff.”

Haru grabbed Rin’s arm to stop him from leaving, “Hold on a second!”

Suddenly, two new sets of footsteps echoed across the deck as Rei and Ai joined them. Rei quickly surveyed the scene, only shocked when he saw Haru’s alleged attacker. “Makoto-kun?”

“Eh?” Rin made an incoherent noise of confusion at Rei’s recognition, and Haru looked curiously from Rei to Makoto several times.

“Rei, do you know this man?” Katsu asked.

“Yes. He’s staying in the room across from Ai and myself.”

Rin cast a glance at Ai and then scowled, “Well, it seems your neighbor attacked Haru.”

Suddenly, two new sets of footsteps echoed across the deck as Rei and Ai joined them. Rei quickly surveyed the scene, only shocked when he saw Haru’s alleged attacker. “Makoto-kun?”

“Eh?” Rin made an incoherent noise of confusion at Rei’s recognition, and Haru looked curiously from Rei to Makoto several times.

“Rei, do you know this man?” Katsu asked.

“Yes. He’s staying in the room across from Ai and myself.”

Finally reaching the limits of his patience, Haru interrupted, “I said that isn’t what happened. He… I… I was leaning over the railing, trying to see the waves, and I slipped. He kept me from falling.”

Katsu considered his son for a moment, and Haru tried desperately to keep the small parts of his lie from showing in his face. Katsu turned to his butler, “Rei, what do you know about this man?”

He responded immediately, “Although I only met him briefly, I have a hard time believing he is responsible for the crime he is accused of committing. As far as I know, he is an honest young man.”
Katsu brought a hand to his chin and studied the situation a few more moments, before turning to Makoto for the first time, “Well, it seems you’re a hero then. I apologize for the misunderstanding.”

Rei offered his hand to Makoto and helped him from the deck. “It’s really no problem.”

Katsu squinted at him for several moments, “I’m assuming you want some sort of compensation for the trouble,” he raised an eyebrow, “or perhaps, a reward?” He withdrew his wallet from inside his jacket and pulled out twenty pounds, offering it to Makoto.

Makoto stared at the money but made no move to take it, “I'm sorry, Sir, but can’t accept that.”

His reaction shocked the three wealthy men as well as the two underprivileged butlers.

Katsu made a show of looking over Makoto, his eyes traveling from his tattered pants to his shabby shirt. “You don’t look like someone who can afford to turn down money.” He sneered, “Don’t make a decision you’ll come to regret just because of some misplaced pride.”

Makoto showed no signs of insult or antagonism when he answered, “I’m not prideful, Sir. And I’m certainly not turning down the money because I think I don’t need it. Truthfully, I’d love to have it.” He cast a smile in Haru’s direction before continuing. “I just don’t think I should be paid for doing the right thing.” While he obviously couldn’t say it in their current company, Makoto thought the biggest reward was the simple fact that Haru was standing next to him with his heart still beating.

Even if the situation had been different and Haru’s father was offering him money for some other reason, Makoto doubted he’d have taken it. This man gave the impression that he had removed or outsourced every positive emotion from his heart, leaving him filled with nothing but smokey darkness. That, coupled with the way Makoto had seen him treat Haru, made Makoto want absolutely nothing to do with this man.

Everyone was still staring at him, still not recovered from his refusal of the money. Rei and Ai shared an approving glance while Rin and Katsu scowled. Haru’s lips parted slightly in surprise, and warmth rushed through his chest. Earlier that day he had spent hours drawing this man, thinking how genuine his face was. Now he knew that Makoto didn’t just look it, he actually was.

Katsu snapped his wallet shut in irritation. “Well, if that’s the case, then I simply bid you thanks.” He surveyed the five boys in front of him, “If there’s nothing else to discuss, then my party will now take our leave.”

He gave a pained nod in Makoto’s direction and began to lead Rin and Haru, as well as the two butlers, away from Makoto and inside the ship.

Haru turned back to look at Makoto several times as they crossed the deck, wanting to say something but afraid to do so in the company of his father. He settled with simply mouthing, thank you, just before he walked inside.

Makoto smiled at him and then gestured his head towards the stars, as if to say, don’t forget!

****

Katsu dismissed Rei and Ai, and quickly said goodnight to Rin, before forcing Haru into his room. Shutting the door behind them, he put his hands on his hips and glared at his son.

“You should be proud, for the first time I actually have no idea where to begin.” He strolled over to Haru and squinted, and Haru had to work hard to not take a step back. “How about we start with why you were out on the deck, the third class deck, instead of the restroom like you said?”
“I needed some air.” He spoke slowly, “I was feeling a little overwhelmed after what Mr. Stockwell said at dinner.” Haru looked up at his father and even though his heart was pounding and his hands were trembling, he glared. “When did you decide that? How long would you have waited to tell me?”

Katsu rolled his eyes, he didn’t look guilty or ashamed, he just looked inconvenienced. “Before tonight, I had only met William twice. Once, when you were a small child, you also met him, although I doubt you remember. The second time I met him, you were fifteen. We were attempting to merge two of our companies, but neither one of us trusted the other enough to go through with the plans. I suggested the engagement as a way to cement the ties of trust between our families. The deal was successful and has proved to be quite prosperous for both of us.”

Anger rose in Haru’s chest and tears stung his eyes, “Did you ever think that maybe I should get to decide whom I marry?”

“I thought that if I left it up to you, you would have no doubt made a disappointing decision. The Stockwells are a well-positioned family and Sophia is much sought after. You should be grateful I was able to set up such a favorable match for you.”

“I’ve never even talked to her!”

Katsu looked unphased as his son raised his voice at him for the first time in years, “Not true, you spoke as small children, the first time I met the Stockwells.”

Haru stared at his father in disbelief and finally looked down at the floor. “Did mom know?”

For mere milliseconds, Katsu’s face contorted. Rima Nanase was possibly the only ray of light to ever touch his heart; she held the ocean in her eyes, and Katsu had quickly been swept away. Haru had those same eyes, but none of her drive or tenacity. The fact that his weak and timid son owned eyes that could push and pull the tides, was nothing but a tragedy to Katsu.

The flash of pain left his face in less than a heartbeat and his answer came out detached and unfeeling, “This was right around the time Rima got sick. I didn’t think it necessary to trouble her.”

Haru shook his head at the ground but didn’t respond. His question had added a large amount of weight to the conversation, so much so that neither father nor son could carry it. They stood uncomfortably, not speaking or looking at each other.

Finally, Katsu broke the silence. “Take all of tomorrow to yourself, do whatever you want, use the time to get over the shock of the engagement, use it to come to terms with almost dying, I don’t care. Just come to dinner tomorrow and talk to the Stockwells.” Katsu turned and began walking out of the room, “Same rules as always, be polite, engaged,” he stopped in the doorway and turned to his son, making every effort to appear unshaken, “and do not embarrass me.”

Haru watched his father go, unable to pin down and identify the emotions rising in his chest.

That night, he spent a long time standing by his window, looking out at the ocean of stars. Somehow, they didn’t look as brilliant as they had when Makoto was by his side. Eventually, he climbed into bed. Just before sleep could claim him, he realized he had left the curtains open. Deciding one night wouldn’t hurt him, he rolled over and let them be.

****

Rin had a difficult time falling asleep that night. He tossed and turned as mistrust burned in his chest and suspicion whirled around his brain.
He knew he saw two bodies, Haru and Makoto, fall to the deck. But before that? Had Haru been leaning over the edge? He punched a pillow in frustration, finally accepting that it had been too dark for him to tell what was happening at the end of the ship.

Even if that area had been well lit, he doubted he would have been able to say for sure. As he replayed the scene in his mind, Ai’s pained face filled every frame prior to Makoto and Haru’s crash to the deck.

Guilt replaced the rage in his heart and his mind stopped spinning; Ai had obviously been struggling with something when he and Rin had stood on the balcony, and he had interrupted him. Rin rolled over and frowned into the darkness as he wondered what the butler had been about to tell him.

****

Ai and Rei returned to their room, both weary from the night’s events and deeply lost in their own thoughts.

Rei took the top bunk while Ai took the bottom, and they both laid awake for hours.

Just before the butlers had been dismissed, Rin had pulled Ai aside.

Make sure you be careful, he had jerked his head back in Makoto’s direction, you know, in your room. Now, Ai lay in his bed, warmed by Rin’s concern, although he was sure it wasn’t unnecessary.

“Rei-kun?” came the smaller boy’s voice from below.

“Yes?”

“How did you do that?”

Rei frowned at the ceiling, “Do what?”

“That…with Nagisa-kun. How did that happen?”

Rei’s eyebrows relaxed and he understood what Ai was really asking, “Well, we spent time together, we talked, I read his reactions. Then, when the time seemed right, I made my feelings clear.” He paused, “Although, I would say he is probably more difficult to read than Nagisa-kun.”

Ai turned red and chose to feign ignorance. “I…I don’t know who you’re talking about.”

Rei frowned again and propped himself up on one elbow, leaning slightly over the edge of the bed so he could see Ai’s face below him. They stared at each other for several seconds. Rei raised an eyebrow.

Finally, Ai groaned loudly and covered his face with a pillow. “Why is it so hard?” his voice came out pitifully strained and muffled.

Rei smiled kindly at him and then lay back down. “Just be there for him when he needs you…and when the time is right, be honest.”

****

Although he had sat on the bottom bunk while playing poker and had laid in it with Rei, Nagisa’s inner child demanded that he claim the top bunk for sleeping.
Makoto watched disapprovingly from the bottom bunk as Nagisa spied from the peephole, and told his friend what had happened that night.

Makoto left out the part about Haru intentionally putting himself in danger. He felt that the conversation between the two of them at that moment had been too intimate and emotional to share with other people, and he didn't want to betray Haru's trust.

Nagisa only half-listened to Makoto’s story as he squatted by the peephole, waiting for Rei and Ai to return to their room. Despite his inner turmoil and the questionable emotions rising in his chest, Nagisa hoped that Rei would come say goodnight to him. He was ultimately disappointed as Rei and Ai headed straight into their room, but Rei cast a glance across the hall right before he closed the door, sending butterflies through Nagisa’s stomach.

Makoto and Nagisa both laid down for bed, and despite having slept in filthy alleys and on stone floors, Nagisa had a hard time sleeping on a marginally comfortable bed. He tossed and turned, and in one terrifying wave, realized he wished Rei’s arms were still around him. He kicked his blanket off himself and groaned loudly.

“Everything okay?” came Makoto’s voice from below him.

Nagisa rolled onto his stomach and leaned over the side of the bed so he could see Makoto, letting his arm and head dangle freely over the edge. “No.”

“Was it cards? I never asked how you did.” The last part came out as a yawn, and while Nagisa was wide awake, Makoto felt just a few seconds away from sleep.

Nagisa rolled his eyes, “Obviously it went well. It’s not that.” He pouted, “Mako-chan, what do you know about love? What is it?”

Makoto was far too tired for this conversation, but tried to answer his friend the best he could, “I think it’s caring for someone deeply. But...it’s also more than that. It’s really knowing them and them really knowing you, the best and worst parts of you, and then choosing each other anyways.” Nagisa frowned, unsatisfied with this assertion, “To be honest Nagisa, I don’t really know what it is.” Makoto yawned and rolled over, and just before slipping into sleep he managed to mumble, “But I think I would like to be in love.”

****

Katsu Nanase entered his room that night and poured himself a glass of whiskey before he began undressing. He removed his tie, and then carefully unpinned his pocket watch from the side of his vest.

He moved to sit on his bed and palmed the watch between his hands. He had obviously heard the gossip surrounding it. This made him smirk; people and their rumors were truly stupid.

He pushed the pin and the watch squeaked slightly, releasing the mainspring and freeing the top cover. He pulled it open and the ocean smiled back at him. Hurricanes spun behind pair of brilliants blue eyes and a smile like the sun’s rays shown up at him.

He stared at the photo for only a few seconds before snapping it shut and wiping at his eyes. He confined all his pain, grief, and love between the walls of that pocket watch and emerged the same stern and cruel man others had learned to fear.

He rose from the bed and continued undressing for the night, placing the watch inside the room’s safe and locking it before laying down. He drifted off quickly and slept untroubled.
//historical inaccuracy alert// even though some first class rooms did have private promenade decks I'm 90% sure it still would have been impossible for Rin to have seen Haru and Makoto from his position BUT SHHH JUST PRETEND IT'S PLAUSIBLE.

Also I really hope everyone enjoyed Makoto's mini-speech about the things you should live for. That wasn't just Makoto spewing corny things, I actually believe everything he said, so I hope you guys liked it! I know you have to be very VERY careful when writing a scene where one character talks another down, and I hope I did the scenario and pairing justice <3

EDIT: Candice drew a beautiful piece of art for this chapter, and you can find it on tumblr and DA :)
"Look at your feet. You are standing in the sky. When we think of the sky, we tend to look up, but the sky actually begins at the earth." -Diane Ackerman

Or

Makoto and Haru have breakfast, Nagisa is suspicious, Rei is overworked, and Rin doesn't know how to talk to women. Literally everyone is tired.

Chapter Notes

I realize "it's been 84 years" since I've updated and I want to sincerely apologize! Part of it was midterms, but I also had a really difficult time writing this chapter for some reason. It came to me in a lot of different bits and pieces, so I hope it's alright. It's by far the longest chapter I've written so far, and because the wait was so long I tried to make it a super good chapter, so I hope you enjoy reading it!

April 11, 1912

Sunlight poured into the large bedroom, bouncing off the glass light fixtures and sending a rainbow of sparkles around the room. These little gems of light danced across the floor, ceiling, and bedspread, but none of their brilliance was of any importance to Haru, who was fast asleep in the bed.

The bedroom door creaked open at precisely eight in the morning and Rei quietly entered the room. He stalked over the window out of habit, and stood directly in front of the pane before he realized the curtains were already open. His eyes widened and he turned his head to look at Haru, still sleeping peacefully. He turned his gaze back to the window and smiled down at the deck for a few moments before going to wake his friend.

Haru blinked up at Rei a few times and then frowned.

“Good morning, Mr. Nanase. I see you left the curtains open.” Rei smiled at him, “It’s nice to see you letting the sun in every once in a while.”

Haru pulled the covers over his head, “It was an accident.”

Rei chuckled at his friend, “I’ll take what I can get. I already spoke with Nanase Senior and I believe he said you wouldn’t be joining the rest of us until dinner? If that’s the case, where would you like to dine for breakfast?”

Haru poked his head out from covers, “What are the options?”
Rei immediately held out a small stack of menus, and Haru sat up to take them reluctantly. “There is
the Verandah Café and the Café Parisien, or if you would prefer, I can have food brought to your
room from the À la Carte Restaurant.” Haru chewed his lip, “Your father is eating in the Verandah
Café.” Rei supplied helpfully.

*Then not there*, Haru thought immediately. He frowned, an idea vaguely starting to form in his
mind,

“I think I’ll eat in the Café Parisien.”

Rei nodded, “Very good, Sir. They are supposed to have an excellent breakfast selection.”

Still mentally assembling his plan, he said, “Rei, what room number are you staying in?”

Rei raised an eyebrow, “One hundred thirty-five on the D deck. Why?”

“Just curious.” Rei nodded and began to rummage through Haru’s trunk for a comfortable day suit,
thinking he knew the real answer to his question. “Rei?” the butler looked up, “Do you think you
could find the suit we bought in London? The new one?”

Rei hid his smirk from his employer and nodded, beginning to search for one of Haru’s most
expensive suits.

****

On his way to the third class communal restroom, a drowsy Niall was stopped in his tracks by the
sight of a finely dressed gentleman proceeding down the hall towards him. He stared as the young
man approached then passed him with a bowed head. In the few seconds Niall had seen him, he was
able to take in his pressed shirt and tie, expensive suit jacket and polished shoes. He contemplated
turning to continue watching the gentleman, but immediately thought better of it. Certain his eyes
were playing tricks on him, he chided his envy and resolved to head straight back to bed once he
relieved nature’s call.

Haru found Rei and Ai’s room and then slowly turned a hundred and eighty degrees. He had been
conscious of the stranger’s stares on his way down the hall,

and he arrived at Makoto’s room feeling
far less confident than he had up in his bedroom. *I’m just thanking him, that’s perfectly normal,* he
told himself, but he still stood unmoving.

Steeling his nerves, Haru raised his fist and knocked three times. To his surprise, the door opened to
reveal a short blond boy rubbing his eyes.

“Hi, how can I help yAHHHHOUUU?” The last part came as a yawn.

Haru stared. He had not prepared for this scenario and a strange noise escaped his throat. “Eh…I’m
sorry to bother you. I was looking for someone named

Makoto…is he…?” He trailed of awkwardly.

The boy raised an eyebrow and moved to stand defensively in front of the door. “Haru, hi!” He blushed, realizing he stood in his pajamas in front of the finely dressed Haru. “Eh…
do you need something?”

“I was wondering if you’d like to join me for breakfast?” his voice came out high pitched and terrified, “To... to thank you for last night.”

“Sure, I’d love to! Um...” he looked down at his pajamas, “just let me get dressed.”

Makoto changed while Haru and the blond boy, who he learned was named Nagisa, conversed out in the hallway.

“Ah... so have you known Makoto long?” Haru asked awkwardly.

“Five years.” Nagisa spoke slowly, as if to say, longer than you. “How did you find this room?” Nagisa squinted at him and Haru squirmed.

“My butler, last night he said their room was across from Makoto’s, so I just found his room and then turned around.”

To Haru’s relief, this seemed to distract Nagisa from his inquisition, “Rei-chan?” he tuned his gaze to the butler’s bedroom, “Or Ai-chan? Do they both work for you?”

“Oh have you met them already?” A petty idea crossed his mind, “Rei has worked for me for the last five years, and Ai works for my friend.”

Nagisa glared at him for his mockery but quickly recovered and instead stared intently at Rei and Ai’s door, chewing his lip. Not sure what else to say, Haru shuffled his feet.

“What is Rei-chan doing today?”

Haru opened his mouth to reply just as Makoto stepped out into the hallway, wearing a just a t-shirt and trousers that, while simple, were far superior to his pajamas.

“Sorry to make you wait!”

“It’s no problem, are you ready?” They bid a quick farewell to Nagisa and Haru led the way to the upper decks.

Nagisa snapped out of his distraction too late to ask where exactly they were going or when Makoto would be back, and could on watch suspiciously as the figures of his friend and the stranger disappeared down the hallway.

****

“Where are we eating?” Makoto had trailed Haru in silence for the last few minutes and began feeling anxious as the aristocrat led him to the increasingly extravagant parts of the ship.

“The Café Parisien.” Haru answered immediately.

Makoto nodded, nerves mounting as Haru led him to the B deck and inside the first class café.

To his astonishment and relief, the restaurant didn’t emit the grandeur he had feared. While still certainly refined and expensive, the overall impression was charming rather than intimidating.

A waiter led them to a wooden table with wicker chairs, handing them menus and promising to return shortly. Makoto flipped open his menu but ultimately neglected it, instead choosing to look around the restaurant.
Live plants were situated strategically around the room and lattice structures decorated the walls and windows, giving the impression of an upscale sidewalk café. Lost in observation, he failed to notice the server return and begin addressing him.

“What would you like to start with, Sir?”

Makoto blushed and hurriedly looked down at his menu, ready to select the first thing he saw, until he read the list of exquisite dishes listed. Images of haddock, smoked salmon, baked apples, and tarts sprung from the pages and after a few moments he closed the menu once more.

He met Haru’s eyes once and then spoke towards the table, “I…I’m sorry but I don’t think I can afford anything here…”

Haru stared at him in surprise, “Don’t worry, it’s included with the ticket.”

Makoto spoke even lower, embarrassed and wishing the server would go away, “Maybe for you, but I’m not a first class guest.”

“You are my guest.” Haru spoke firmly and then turned to glare at the server, who had begun tapping his pen impatiently on his notebook, “We would like to start with green tea, fruit, and toast. Later we would like two tomato omelets and éclairs to finish.”

The waiter nodded and snapped his notebook shut rather loudly before departing.

“…Sorry.” Makoto said quietly, his eyes still fixed on the table.

Haru frowned. Makoto hadn’t done anything wrong; if anything, it had been the waiter’s fault. However Haru didn’t know how to tell him that, so he simply mumbled, “Don’t worry about it.”

They sat in awkward silence until the waiter returned with their tea, fruit and toast, laying a variety of jams and butters in front of them.

Makoto watched as Haru took a piece of toast and spread an orange jelly across it. “What’s that?” He immediately felt childish for asking.

“It’s marmalade. It’s one of the few English foods I’m fond of. It’s good, you should try it.”

Makoto spread marmalade on his own piece of toast and nibbled curiously at a corner. To his surprise, it was delicious. He pulled the food away from his mouth and stared at it in awe, and Haru brought his cup of tea to his lips to hide his smile.

They ate quietly for several minutes, enjoying their meal and their charming view from the window, until, despite his best efforts to suppress it, Makoto broke the silence with a long, echoing yawn.

Haru fought another war with the corners of his mouth, barely managing to keep them down. “Do you usually wake up so late?”

Makoto glanced at the decorative circular clock hanging across from the window, its gold-flecked hands reading only half passed nine. Late? He let out an embarrassed chuckle. “Honestly, I hardly ever wake up before ten, and usually it’s later than that.”

Haru gaped. He hadn’t woken up past ten in years, although, admittedly, that was probably because he wasn’t allowed to. “That’s…uh…that’s impressive.”

Makoto chuckled, “I just don’t having anything to wake up for.” Haru gave him a curious look and
Makoto rushed to explain, “Not like that! I…sorry. I just meant I usually don’t have any obligations that I have to make sure I’m awake for, I didn’t mean…” They stared at each other.

Haru finally looked down at the table, “No, it’s okay.” He fiddled with his napkin, “Like I said earlier, I want to thank you properly for last night and for your, um…discretion afterward.”

Makoto shrugged, “It honestly didn’t seem like my business to tell everyone. And you don’t have to thank me,” he smiled, “anyone could have found you, I just got lucky.”

Haru blushed, not daring to let himself think that maybe he had gotten lucky as well. “Still, I really appreciate you not telling my father.”

Makoto made a face, “He seems very…severe.”

Haru couldn’t contain the laughter at the massive understatement and Makoto chuckled along with him. “Yes, I suppose you could say that.”

Glad the mutual embarrassment had faded away and encouraged by the light turn of the conversation, Makoto ventured to ask for further details, “Has he always been that way?”

Haru took a hasty sip of his tea and coughed a little, “More or less.”

“That must have been hard to grow up with, I’m really sorry.”

Haru slumped his shoulders in response and looked down at the table, shrugging, and said nothing more.

Realizing he had made an error and not wanting to force Haru to discuss anything he didn’t want to, Makoto chose to change the subject. “So who was the other boy from last night? He was the only one I didn’t recognize.” It wasn’t his cleanest transition, but Haru looked up and seemed more than willing to continue the new topic.

“That was my friend Rin,” he rubbed his neck, “I’m really sorry he threatened you…”

Makoto shrugged, “It all worked out fine in the end.”

“He can be a bit rash, but he’s a good guy overall. His father and mine were good friends, and when his father passed away last year, he started traveling with us.”

Having a hard time navigating away from depressing family dynamics, Makoto chose not to comment on Rin’s father and instead focused on the end of Haru’s statement. “That’s exciting, are you doing a world tour?”

“Yes and no. We’re mostly traveling for business; the trip is supposed to be for me and Rin to make connections.” His expression darkened and he stabbed a piece of cantaloupe rather violently. Makoto couldn’t miss Haru’s sour expression, but declined to inquire further, not wanting to make him uncomfortable again.

The waiter returned with their omelets and they carried a light conversation as they ate, steering clear of anything tied to the night before. Haru listened in disbelief as Makoto relayed the way he and Nagisa had acquired their tickets, and Makoto sat in awe as Haru described the famous places he had been.

Although they were both avoiding certain topics, Haru was amazed at how easy it was to talk to this near-stranger and how naturally replies sprang from his lips. Similarly, Makoto couldn’t believe how
comfortable he felt. Siting in a first class café, poorly dressed by the standards of the other guests, he felt completely at ease.

Although their conversation was trivial and simplistic by many standards, it felt important. Like the parts of a clock coming together, each response exposed how the different gears in their minds worked, every nod and sideways glance slid together pieces and knobs of their personalities. It ticked away stubbornly, as every smile revealed the fine subtleties of their hearts.

****

After Makoto and Haru had left Nagisa standing open mouthed in the hallway, he had returned to his bed and attempted to reclaim some of the delightful dream he had been having.

He had been running through a sunlit field with long grass, smiling and giggling as some unknown person chased him playfully. Every time the mysterious person came close to catching him, he would immediately change direction, leaving his pursuer farther behind.

Sleep, however, was not willing to be reclaimed, and he laid awake, glaring up at his ceiling and wondering if Makoto was alright. Around eleven, he got dressed and headed to the third class dining room alone.

Thrilled that they were serving potatoes today, he piled his plate high, and scanned the room for someone he knew. He spotted one of his neighbors, the large English mother, attempting to wrangle her several children, but recognized no one else.

Nagisa eventually elected to eat alone and took a seat in the back corner of the room. He ate slowly, putting aside his disgruntled thoughts for the first time that day, and allowed his mind to wander to thoughts of Rei-chan. The butler hadn’t said specifically when he’d come by, and it wasn’t even noon yet, but Nagisa felt impatient nevertheless.

“Oi, small guy!”

It hadn’t been a good day so far and Nagisa looked up with murderous intent. “Can I help you?”

Two Russian men, one bald and one with a beard and both taller than Makoto, stood in front of him, “Oh man check out that look in his eyes.” The bearded one said to the other before leaning down to speak to him, “No reason to get angry, my brother and I are just lettin’ people know there’s gonna be some festivities happenin’ here tonight and thought you looked like the type who’d enjoy a good party.”

“Is that so?” Nagisa raised an eyebrow.

“There’s gonna be booze, music, lotsa pretty ladies…” The man nudged Nagisa’s arm, knocking the speared potato from his fork.

Wishing to simply be rid of the two men, Nagisa sat up straight, folded his hands under his chin, and batted his eyelashes. “To be honest, ladies don’t really interest me.” He winked.

The man recoiled so fast that he knocked into his bald friend behind him, and stared at Nagisa in disgust for several seconds before turning and leading the other man away.

As Nagisa finished eating, he chuckled to himself about the extraordinary power of a wink.

He headed back to his room, thinking he might actually be able to fall asleep now; his stomach was full and his brief interaction with the rest of the world had left him feeling exhausted. As he turned
down the hallway to his room, he spotted the familiar back of a retreating butler.

“Rei-chan!”

He turned and his face immediately broke into a smile, “Nagisa-kun! I was just about to see if you were in your room. Have you had a good day so far?”

Nagisa hesitated, “Not bad.” he lied. Rei smiled at him and he looked at the ground, shuffling his feet. “So uh, did you wanna do something? I don’t know what you had planned already, but we could walk around the deck, or visit the smoking room,” he faltered as Rei struggled to suppress a yawn. Taking a closer look at him, Nagisa saw dark circles under the butler’s eyes, “or we could just relax in my room if you’re tired.”

Rei gave him a relived smile, “Thank you, Nagisa-kun. I’m afraid I don’t have very long though, this is just my break between serving breakfast and lunch.”

“You really work hard, don’t you Rei-chan?” Nagisa asked as he led them into his room.

“Some days more so than others, usually it’s fine though. I just didn’t sleep well last night.” They sat on the bottom bunk, Nagisa fiddling with the blanket and Rei biting his lip. “Where is Makoto-kun? I’m surprised-” Rei stopped speaking when Nagisa sprung up and grabbed him by both his shoulders, suddenly reminded of his missing friend.

“Tell me about your employer! Is he a trustworthy guy? He came by ridiculously early and took Makoto away to breakfast, and they still aren’t back. He gave off sort of a suspicious vibe, I don’t trust him. Rei-chan! Why are you laughing?”

Rei was doubled over, clutching his sides, “You have nothing to worry about,” he said between gasps, “I assure you, Haru has no ill intentions.”

Nagisa released him and sat back down with a humph, allowing Rei’s laughter to subside. Finally regaining his composure, Rei turned to look at the unconvinced, slightly pouting Nagisa. Rei bent down and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. “Really though, I’ve known Haru for a long time, you don’t have anything to worry about.”

Nagisa blushed furiously, “If you say so…he said you’d been working for him for about five years?”

Rei nodded, “That’s about right. I was living on the streets at the time-”

Nagisa’s mouth fell open, “You?”

Rei laughed, “It’s that hard to believe huh? I had lived in an orphanage most of my life, but, you know how it goes, the older kids are usually turned loose once they reach a certain age. I was caught trying to steal food from the Nanase’s storehouse, and instead of getting the law involved, they gave me a job and a place to stay. In a lot of ways, it was like they adopted me.”

Nagisa begrudgingly had to admit that if what Rei said was true, Haru and his family didn’t seem like the worst people.

“I’ve been meaning to ask you, Nagisa-kun, I-well, I’ve been wondering since last night, why were you on your own when you met Makoto-kun? Where were you living before that?”

Rei’s question startled him, dragging his thoughts past the realm of shame and pushing them into the resting place of all things repressed.
“Oh you know! Nowhere in particular, just here and there, all over Asia. I spent some time in India, they’ve got some spicy food there like you would not believe! Then-“

“Nagisa-kun,” Rei said,

“And in Vietnam I saw these giant leathery animals called elephants, they could have easily crushed me or you-”

“Nagisa-kun!”

“In Korea I almost-”

“NAGISA-KUN!” Rei finally shouted. Nagisa stopped talking and turned to look at him, eyes full of fear. Rei put a hand on his shoulder and smiled kindly, “You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to. It’s not my business and I don’t plan on forcing it out of you.” Rei wrapped his arms around Nagisa’s shoulders, squeezing him gently. “I promise I won’t ask again.”

Nagisa shrugged and looked away, not returning the hug, “I don’t know what you’re talking about. That’s really what I was doing at the time.”

Rei simply nodded, keeping his arms around Nagisa’s shoulders. They sat like that for at least ten minutes, Nagisa still resolutely looking away from the butler, until he felt something tickling his neck.

Turning to investigate, he saw that Rei was beginning to nod off; his head bobbed up and down slowly and his hair occasionally brushed Nagisa’s skin. Any animosity was instantly extinguished by the simple motion, and Nagisa sighed and leaned his head on top of Rei’s. What should he do? He was tempted to lay Rei down and fall asleep next to him, but he was sure the butler had other obligations he couldn’t miss. Reluctantly, he shook the butler awake.

“Rei-chan, you fell asleep.” He spoke softly, and Rei’s eyes blinked open slowly.

Groaning, he unwrapped his arms from around Nagisa and pressed his palms into his eyes. “I’m sorry about that, Nagisa-kun.”

“It looks like you were more tired than you thought.”

The butler nodded. “I should probably head back now.” Turning to Nagisa he said, “The dining hall is one of the areas where the ship supplies servants, so I should be free around seven. Is it okay if I come by then?”

“I don’t mind, but are you sure you wouldn’t rather sleep when you get off work?”

“Not to worry, really, I’m fine.”

Nagisa smirked, “Okay but if you fall asleep again I won’t wake you up as gently as I did just now.” He aimed his second wink of the day at the butler.

Rei’s eyes widened in tentative curiosity and he wondered what on earth that could mean. “It won’t happen again,” he promised, “see you at seven, Nagisa-kun.” He kissed him on the cheek once more and then stood to leave.

“Seven.” Nagisa said with a smile.

Rei blushed and closed the door behind himself. Heading back to the stuffy and intimidating
atmosphere of the elite and aristocratic, Rei slapped his cheeks a few times in an attempt to wake himself up.

Katsu called over to him the moment he entered the Verandah Café. “Ah Rei, I meant to mention it to you earlier. Both you and Ai will be working during dinner from tonight onward, I can’t stand another night of this ship’s abysmal service.”

Rei’s heart sank, “Ah Sir, if it isn’t too much trouble, can I please have just tonight’s dinner off? I have a previous commitment and—”

Katsu silenced him with a look. “Rei, you have this job because you are the butler that doesn’t cause trouble. However, in comparison to Ai, it would not be difficult to find another butler who shines.”

Rei gulped and then nodded, “My apologies, Sir.”

****

Makoto and Haru spent the better part of their meal in long conversation, and it was well past eleven when the waiter approached them asking if they would prefer chocolate or vanilla éclairs.

“Both.” Haru answered quickly and the waiter left, returning shortly with four éclairs, sprinkled with sugar and drizzled in syrup.

“They look delicious.” Makoto remarked.

Haru nodded, “They are. Éclairs are another foreign thing I’m fond of. When we were in France I had one with every meal.”

“Wow France also?” Makoto had been to many of the same places as Haru, but he seemed to have a very different, and often times, more pleasant trip than Makoto had experienced at those same places.

Haru nodded, swallowing a bite of his éclair, “We were there in August last year, right when the Mona Lisa was stolen from the Louvre, and we had a hard time getting out of the city. Security was extremely tight for travelers and they checked everything, and we obviously travel with so many trunks. We became incredibly behind schedule and my father was furious.”

“The Mona Lisa?”

Haru nodded, “Apparently they still haven’t found it.”

“Ah…” Makoto poked at his éclair nervously. He was pretty sure he’d heard of the Mona Lisa before, but considering the life he and Nagisa led, it didn’t do them much good to know which famous pieces of artwork had gone missing and which ones hadn’t.

Haru noted Makoto’s slightly confused expression and immediately felt guilty. “Have you ever been to France?”

Makoto nodded, “Once. It was a few years ago, Nagisa and I spent a few months there shortly after we met. The only thing I remember from the whole trip is Nagisa getting in a fight with a street performer.”

Haru choked on his éclair, “How on earth did that happen?”

Makoto grinned, “Well Nagisa has really quick hands right? So he started holding low-key gambling games to trick tourists and get money, like ‘which cup is the marble under’ type stuff. The thing is,
nearly every day he set up his station right in the middle of this square where a mime had been preforming for the last couple months. After the first week of this, the mime approached Nagisa to let him know he couldn’t keep taking his performance area, but he mimed the whole thing. And I’m sure Nagisa understood the point he was making, but every day he kept going back to that same spot and feigned ignorance whenever the mime tried to communicate with him. Well this went on for about a month and a half, and eventually the mime lost his patience and showed up right in the middle of a game Nagisa was playing with some tourists. He was absolutely seething, making rude hand gestures and everything.” Makoto paused for dramatic effect.

“And?”

“And that’s the story of how Nagisa got punched in the face by a mime.”

Haru burst out laughing and Makoto joined him, remembering Nagisa’s swollen, pouty face as he said, Mako-chan, I’m tired of France, let’s go somewhere else. They both shook with laughter and clutched their sides, and their voices rose to a volume well beyond a level generally considered acceptable. Haru realized they were getting unpleasant stares but couldn’t bring himself to care all that much.

“Would you like to go for a walk around the deck?”

Makoto nodded, shoving the last bit of éclair in his mouth and Haru left a few bills on the table as a tip for their waiter. Walking outside, they were greeted by the warm sun and chuckled sporadically, still recovering from their fit of laughter.

“That’s an incredible story. Really strange, but incredible.”

Grinning, Makoto rubbed his neck. “You could say Nagisa keeps things interesting.”

“I got the impression he didn’t like me.”

Makoto laughed nervously, “I’m sorry about that, he’s usually not suspicious of new people. He and I are protective of each other, so I’m sure he was just trying to look out for me.”

Haru nodded, “Rin’s that way.” He laughed and looked up at Makoto, “Hey, both of our friends don’t like each of us, Rin doesn’t like you and Nagisa doesn’t like me.”

Haru found the situation far more humorous than Makoto and was once again double over in laugher.

Makoto watched him in surprise and finally chuckled, “Hopefully that’ll change.”

They lapped the deck several times, enjoying the sunshine and sea breeze, both feeling comfortably warm.

Haru cast him a sideways glance, “If you don’t mind me asking, where were you before you met him?”

“How, Nagisa?” Makoto rubbed the back of his neck, “Well for a couple months before I met him I was living on my own, and before that I lived with my parents.”

Haru looked at him apprehensively. He knew that most people in Makoto’s position, those without a definite home, had lost one, or in many cases, both of their parents; he knew Rei was a perfect example of this.
Makoto noticed his unease and smiled sadly. “My parents were killed several years ago.”

“Oh…I’m sorry.”

“They didn’t have much money and we didn’t have any relatives nearby that I could live with, so I didn’t have many options when they died. I ended up wandering around Japan and eventually met Nagisa. At the time, meeting him was exactly what I needed.”

Haru’s voice was hoarse, “What were your parents like?”

Makoto was silent for a moment, considering his question and looking out at the ocean. “My mom loved to look at the sky. Looking back, I think it’s probably because she wanted to travel, I think both my parents did. It didn’t matter if it was night or day, she loved the sky. When it was night she would take me outside and explain all the constellations. In the daytime, we would lay in the grass and watch the cloud shapes.” He paused and smiled to himself, “She always said that the sun is the brightest star only from our perspective. My dad was more of a realist, but he was still a good father, he’s the one who taught me to read. He would always tell my mom and I that our eyes were going to go bad from looking at the sun all day. They were good people. I’m who I am today because of them.”

As Makoto finished speaking, Haru had to look away. He hadn’t been looking at the sun, but he felt blinded nevertheless.

****

After lunch, Katsu and Jacob had retreated to the first class smoking room, followed by Rei, leaving Rin to entertain Ann and Marie Astor in the lounge. Decorated in the French Louis XV style, the lounge was spacious and comfortable. Elaborate wooden carvings covered the walls and large windows allowed a plentiful supply of natural light into the room.

Ai was preparing their tea in the corner of the room while the three socialites sat by one of the windows, Marie and her mother on one couch and Rin across from them in an armchair.

The two women prattled on about the latest marriages, fashion, and general gossip. Rin watched as they talked, nodding and making noises in agreement whenever necessary, but otherwise completely removed from the conversation.

“I saw Mrs. Tamura out on the deck earlier wearing a full skirt.” Marie stated passionately, “Can you imagine?”

Ann scoffed, “It must be her upbringing. Do you really expect her to know what is appropriate and what is not?”

“But we’ve seen her wear hobble skirts, we know she has them!” Marie insisted, “What excuse is there then, for her to be out in something like that?” She turned to Rin, “Don’t you agree, Mr. Matsuoka?”

Rin snapped his head in her direction, blinking a few times. What had they been discussing? “I…uh, yes? Yes absolutely.”

Marie smiled happily and Rin breathed a sigh of relief. He looked over to where Ai was preparing their brew, catching the butler’s eye. Rin discreetly inclined his head in direction of the provided liquor selection, asking him to pour something hard into his cup.

Ai glanced at the selection, *which one?* he mouthed.
Rin had to make an effort not to visibly cringe as Marie began talking about hats. *Anything*, he mouthed back.

Ai smiled at him and nodded, and Rin gave him a thumbs up, hidden from the ladies’ view by the armchair.

Ann ignored her daughter’s plea for a new feathered hat and addressed Rin, “So your friend, young Mr. Nanase, is engaged, is he not? Last night he seemed rather surprised by the prospect.”

“We were all surprised, it seems the arrangement was made several years ago without his knowledge.”

“That’s not terribly uncommon, though,” Ann argued. “Personally, I don’t see much potential in the boy, I fear for the Nanase’s company in his hands.”

“I think he will surprise you.” Rin said dryly.

“What about you, Mr. Matsuoka? Do have plans to settle down with anyone anytime soon?” Marie asked with interest.

Rin chuckled, “While professionally it may be wise to think about settling down, I can’t think of a single person in this world whom I fancy enough to marry.”

“Such a cruel thing to say to lady!” Marie pouted.

Rin reached over and squeezed her hand, “Surely you know that I mean you no personal insult. I just don’t see myself falling for someone and getting married anytime soon.”

Ai approached with their tea just in time to witness this caress and set the tray down a little too loudly, making both the ladies jump.

“Oh I’m sorry! I will be more careful in the future, please forgive me.”

Ann glared as he handed a cup of tea to her. Taking a sip, she immediately wrinkled her nose. “Butler, this is dreadfully weak.”

Rin sipped his cup, but the alcohol made it impossible to discern if she was correct in her assertion.

“I’m terribly sorry Ma’am.” Ai bowed, “Would you like me to prepare another pot?”

“Don’t bother, I doubt there would be much improvement. Can you at least manage to procure some biscuits so that we don’t have to endure this brew alone?”

“Right away, Ma’am.”

They watched him go, mother and daughter looking down their noses and Rin looking concerned.

When he left, Ann turned to Rin, “Mr. Matsuoka, it is unfathomable to me that you were unable to find a more worthwhile butler.”

“Now Mama,” Marie tittered, “Mr. Matsuoka certainly must be keeping the butler out of charity, not inability to find another.”

Rin tilted his head to the side and smiled sweetly, wishing to throw the weak tea in both of their faces. “He…makes up for his lack of skill in other areas.” *He’s a far more worthwhile person than either of you could ever hope to be.* “He is great company.” *Far better than either of you.*

Reaching the end of his patience, Rin snapped, “I apologize if I’ve offended you with the notion that my butler is a person.”

She gasped as if he had struck her across the face.

At that moment, Ai returned with an array of biscuits. “I wasn’t certain which brand you preferred, so I brought several. There are-”

“Don’t bother!” Ann snapped, “Marie dear, we’re leaving.” She stood and began to depart.

Marie remained seated and pouted, “Mama please let us stay! I’m sure Mr. Matsuoka meant nothing by-”

“Clarissa Marie Astor, gather your coat and stand right now, we are leaving.”

Marie stood unwillingly and both ladies headed for the exit.

“See you at dinner,” Rin called after them.

As mother and daughter retreated, Marie turned and looked back into the lounge. The abysmal butler was rubbing his neck and smiling shyly, and Rin turned to him and grinned, making her glare.

“Mama, you were far too rude,” she huffed.

Inside the lounge, Rin finished his polluted tea and poured himself a pure batch from the pot Ai had brought them. Now uninhibited by taste of alcohol, he could accurately judge the brew.

“Ai…this really is awful.”

Ai colored, “I-I’m sorry Sir, I’ll get it right ne-”

Rin laughed and waved his hand, “Don’t worry about it,” he smirked, “after all, you made them leave.”

Ai laughed nervously, “Still, I will try and improve.”

“It really doesn’t matter.” Rin shrugged and gestured to the couch, “Have a seat if you want.”

Ai hesitated and then sat. Other guests in the lounge cast them disapproving looks, but Rin ignored them. “I’ve been meaning to ask you, last night, before everything happened, what were you about to say?”

Ai blushed and bowed his head, thinking back to Rin squeezing Marie’s hand. “It…it was nothing.” He looked up at his employer and forced a smile, “It’s not important.”

Rin studied him and then cocked his head to the side, “You know you can tell me anything right?”

“Absolutely.” Anything but this. “And the same goes for me, you can tell me anything too.”

Rin grinned, “I think I’ll take you up on that then. Something I’ve wanted to ask you since last night, did you think Rei’s assessment of that stranger was accurate? When he said Makoto was trustworthy, do you agree with him? What is your personal opinion?”

Ai bit his lip, not knowing how to give Rin’s the bad news, “To be honest, I really do think Rei was correct. To me at least, Makoto seems like a good guy.”
Rin sighed and scowled down at his tea, “I trust your judgement, but I can’t bring myself to trust him so readily.”

“We’ll just wait and see how everything plays out.” Ai said optimistically.

“Honestly I’m just hoping last night was the end of the whole matter and we never have to be bothered by it again.” He leaned forward and gripped Ai’s shoulder, smiling, “Thanks for your giving me your opinion.”

“No problem!” Ai squeaked.

****

Makoto and Haru had spent the entire day on the deck, talking and laughing as the hours passed by them steadily and the sun rose and fell in the sky.

Haru stood back and watched as Makoto walked to the ships edge and looked out over the railing. The sun was about to set on the Atlantic and the dying rays fell across his face, highlighting his high cheekbones. It was something beautiful, straight out of a painting, and Haru wanted to take the moment and frame it, preserve its beauty. Makoto suddenly broke the illusion and turned to look at him, nodding at the railing beside him, inviting Haru into his picturesque world. Stunned, he stood unmoving for a few moments. He moved to stand next to Makoto just as the bottom of the sun touched down on the waves.

They watched the sun go down in silence, their shoulders brushing occasionally, enjoying the privacy of their world.

Haru knew very little about wishing moments would last forever; he doubted the universe listened to such requests, and if it did, he doubted that moments like this took precedent over others.

If time is the only constant in the world, then it is also never idle, and the ever sinking sun reminded him this moment would not forever.

"Earlier you asked if my dad had always been that way. Growing up, he was always severe, but there was this period, right before my mom died, when he was different."

Makoto turned to look at him, “I’m sorry about your mom.” Haru nodded once but resolutely stared out at the ocean.

"She was a good parent, and I loved her.” Haru gripped the railing, “Three years ago, she was diagnosed with consumption. My father spent every waking moment by her side and caring for her; it was like he forgot about order, duties, outward appearance, he acted like a human being.” Haru stopped to let out a shaky breath and Makoto smiled at him in encouragement. “She lived just two month after the initial diagnosis and my parents and I spent that entire time together. My father and I were never close, but during that time, the three of us were a family. After she died, he became even colder than before and turned into the man you met last night.”

As he finished, his comment was met with silence as they both stared out at the setting sun. Eventually Makoto spoke, “I’m so sorry. You should always feel like you have a family, not just in the middle of tragedies.” He paused, uncertain if he should continue, “Last night, you said you wanted to be free. What did you mean by that?”

Haru looked down at the deck. How could he explain when he didn’t really even know himself? He didn’t know what it meant to be free, only what it meant to be imprisoned. “I...I can see my whole life, already planned out and decided on, right up until I die, and I’ve had no say in it. Every choice
so far has been made for me, I’ve never decided anything for myself and it doesn’t look like I’ll ever get to.” Haru’s eyes glossed over and Makoto stepped towards him. By reflex, Haru immediately recoiled.

Makoto panicked, “Sorry! I didn’t mean to scare you. I…” They stared at each other. Makoto wordlessly held open his arms.

Haru simply continued to stare. Eventually, he took a few tentative steps forward and then stood still as Makoto hugged him. Keeping his arms at his sides, he spoke against Makoto’s chest. “In this world we are our choices aren’t we? That’s how it works right? The choices we make define who we are. If I’ve never decided anything, then who am I? Am I even a person? Why am I living?”

Makoto spoke, “You’ve made at least one choice though.” Haru looked up at him, “Last night, you chose to live right? No one made you, you decided that for yourself. If that’s the only choice you’ve ever made, then I’d say you’re doing well so far.”

Haru stared at him in astonishment and just as the final rays of the sun disappeared on the horizon, he stared to cry. Finally wrapping his own arms around Makoto, his tears soaked into the taller boy’s shirt.

Makoto spoke gently, “There’s something else that you can live for, that I didn’t mention last night. You can live for your mom, and live the way she would want you to.”

Haru sniffled, “Why is it so hard?”

“It’s beautiful.” Haru looked up at Makoto with wide eyes, and Makoto turned to look back out at the ocean. The sun had disappeared, but deep reds and purples still bled through the water. “Life is hard, but it’s beautiful privilege.”

Extracting himself from Makoto, Haru wiped his eyes. “Thank you.” he murmured.

Makoto shook his head, “I should be thanking you, today was really enjoyable.”

Haru was on the verge of returning the compliment when something about Makoto’s statement struck him as strange. “Today was?!” knitting his eyebrows together, he looked out where the sun had set. The pieces of information all clicked together inside his brain and he swore loudly.

“What? What is it?” Makoto looked concerned, “Is everything okay?”

“No, I forgot about dinner,” Haru said placing both hands on him temple, “it’s must be in less than fifteen minutes. How could I forget? My father-”

“Go get dressed then.” Makoto said.

Haru froze after this obvious suggestion. Go get dressed, of course, if he hurried he might be able to make it in time. Yet something kept him anchored on the deck, making him unwilling to leave. He pretended he didn’t know what that something was.

“Come with me.”

“What?”

“I’m serious! Come to dinner, I kept you out all day and we haven’t eaten since breakfast, you must be hungry.” Haru argued.
Makoto shook his head and backed away, looking frightened, “I really don’t think that will go over well. I’m-”

“Please?” Haru pleaded, “I don’t want to go in there alone again. I…I know it probably won’t go over well, but I think if we got you some appropriate clothes and you behaved politely, and why wouldn’t you? Then I think it’ll be okay.”

Makoto chewed his lip, “Won’t your father be angry?”

“Yes, but he can’t show it as long as we’re in front of other people.” Haru insisted. He knew he couldn’t ignore his father’s wrath by staying in public forever, but if the dinner went well, then why would he complain? “If he says anything, I’ll say it’s a reward for your actions last night.”

Makoto still looked nervous but consented, “I’ll go if you want me to.”

That made Haru falter. “Only if you want to.”

Makoto smiled in response.

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They walked briskly to the D Deck, and Haru scanned the people passing by for anyone, any business connection or investor who owed his family a favor, who could help.

Seeing a familiar face, he took a chance and called out to her, “Tamura-san!”

She was wearing an elegant evening dress and was clearly already on her way to the dining hall, but she smiled kindly at him even so, “Hello Nanase-kun! You’re cutting it a bit close aren’t you?”

Haru chewed his lip and tried to smile, “That’s kind of the problem. I’d like my friend here to join us but he doesn’t have a suit. I’d let him borrow one but none of mine will fit him. Do you think your husband would be willing to lend us one of his?”

She looked at the giant standing behind Haru, looking at the ground and blushing furiously. She liked the look in Haru’s eyes, and she saw beginnings of a storm brewing behind them. Willing to do anything to encourage that newfound spark, she took the shabbily dressed young man by the hand and began pulling him down the hallway, back the way she had come, “Leave it to me!” She called, “Nanase-kun, we’ll meet you at the grand staircase, at the clock!”

Haru watched them go, terrified and exhilarated. He caught sight of himself in an elegant mirror hanging in the hallway, and was surprised to see that he was smiling.

Chapter End Notes

And that’s that! Thank you for reading!

Next chapter: Tamura-san ships makoharu even more than I do.

Also I’m sorry I literally have no explanation for the mime story jfc I was try to show the difference between their experiences ignore me. Also here we have displayed how little I actually know about France because they talk about the fucking louvre/ and /mimes/ like there you have it that’s France in a nutshell.
**If feel i should add this simply because the wait for this chapter was so long-I don't ever plan on dropping this fic, regardless of how much time passes there will EVENTUALLY be an update**

Notes:
- The Mona Lisa was stolen by night guard in August of 1911, and was missing for over two years, eventually found in 1913. Not relevant to the story but still interesting (and hilarious in my opinion), Picasso’s friend Apollinaire got involved in a huge story about nicking stuff from the Louvre in the middle of 1911 and Picasso got dragged in as well, not long after that, the Mona Lisa was stolen. So basically at some point in history there were people who thought Picasso stole the Mona Lisa.
- At the time, full skirts were primarily worn outdoors, for picnics and such, while hobble skirts were the popular everyday wear. Still, Marie was being rather hypercritical.
- Also there is a large debate over the spelling of Café Parisien, so I decided to go with the spelling included on the deck plans published by the White Star Line. Here's a picture!
- Picture of the First Class Lounge!
A Company of Wolves

Chapter Summary

“A company of wolves, is better than a company of wolves in sheep's clothing.” - Anthony Liccione

Or

Makoto makes aristocrats lose their cool, Haru is reminded of a harsh reality, Nagisa gets a taste of his own medicine, and Rei and Ai lament missed chances.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Makoto was slightly thrown by the abrupt turn his night had taken and remained silent as he allowed the smiling woman to pull him through the ship. She introduced herself as Riko Tamura, and he stammered hard when he told her his name.

She chatted merrily as she led him out of the inner ship and up to the deck that held the first class cabins. They passed several doors and Makoto wondered vaguely if one of them led to Haru’s room. Not for the first time that day, Makoto became aware that he was receiving demeaning looks from the other passengers. He stared hard at the ground, embarrassed, but Tamura-san ignored their sneers and defiantly ushered him into her room.

Makoto was struck at first by the space of the room, several times larger than his and Nagisa’s small cabin. Fine furniture with detailed upholstery was placed strategically around the room, and the bed would have easily fit his large frame several times over; but what most amazed him was the fireplace opposite the bed. Makoto wasn’t sure how Nagisa felt, but he had passed a chilly night with few blankets. Impressed and slightly intimidated, he stood awkwardly by the door, not daring to venture farther into the room.

Tamura-san laughed at his wonder, “Fancy huh? I’m still getting accustomed to rooms this size myself.” She strode past him and began rummaging in one of her many trunks that lined the far wall. “I think I have the perfect suit for you.”

She turned back to look at him and chuckled, “You’re allowed to come in! This is the suit my husband proposed in. At the time he didn’t have the money he does now, so it’s not as nice as some of the other suits you’ll see tonight, but it should be good enough.” She held up a basic black suit, devoid of any flare or decorative features, but elegant nevertheless.

Makoto approached her nervously, “Thank you so much, I’m incredibly grateful, but…if your husband proposed in it, are you sure it’s okay for me to wear it?”

Tamura-san waved her hand, “Oh please, it’s been years since he’s been able to fit into it. I don’t know why he even bothers keeping it, it’s like he thinks he’ll wake up one day with the body he had at eighteen.” She started giggling, “Although, I think he’d settle for just the hair.”

Makoto laughed as well, her light hearted conversation made him feel more comfortable and he
gingerly took the suit she held out to him.

“Well, what are you waiting for?” She smiled and pointed to a tri-fold dressing screen.

Makoto disappeared behind it, nervously glancing over the suit and blushing as he removed his own clothes.

He pulled on the slacks first, not wishing to go without pants any longer than necessary, and then buttoned the white collar shirt with shaking fingers. Finally pulling on the jacket, he emerged from behind the screen.

“I’m sorry, but could you help me with this?” He held out the silk green tie she had given him.

She beamed when she saw him, and beckoned him towards her. Makoto reddened as she took the fabric from him and wound it around his neck.

“I-I really appreciate all your help.” He said, “I don’t know what we, Haru and I, would have done without you.”

She smiled, “You seem kind and giving, I root for people like that, and you looked like you could use the help.” She finished his tie, “There.” Tamura-san patted him on both shoulders and looked him over approvingly, “Well don’t you look handsome.”

Makoto looked at himself in the large mirror over her dresser; never in his life had he worn something this expensive and he tugged at the borrowed clothing nervously. The pants were the right length and the jacket left just enough room for his shoulders; all things considered, the suit fit him surprisingly well. He bit his lip, not exactly sure how to process his appearance.

Tamura-san noted his unease and smiled kindly, “Here, come over to the sink, let’s see if we can tame your hair a bit.”

Various combs, jells, and colognes later, she finally deemed him ready, and they exited her room together.

Makoto followed Tamura-san blindly and his nerves mounted as they walked back down the hallway where he had first met her.

She held up a hand, stopping him in his tracks.

They stood on a large, U-shaped second floor. Below them the grand staircase and entrance to the dining hall were visible, and above them sparkled a large glass dome. Built into the landing between the two floors was a detailed clock face, and Makoto, putting two and two together, finally understanding what Tamura-san had meant when she told Haru to meet them at the clock.

Tamura-san gestured for him to wait as she approached the railing and peaked over the side before quickly returning to him.

“Alright, Nanase-kun is waiting there.” She grinned, “I’m going to go ahead of you, once I start down the steps, count to two-hundred and then come down yourself.”

Makoto gulped and nodded.

She gave him a reassuring smile and patted him on the shoulder, “Don’t be nervous, there will be some intimidating people in there, but I will explain the situation to my husband so remember that he and I are on your side.”
“Thank you.” Makoto let out a shaky breath, “I’m in your debt.”

“Never.” She smiled once more and then turned the corner, descending the stairs.

****

Haru waited on the balcony of the grand staircase, halfway between the entrance hall and the second floor. He felt foolish simply standing there and tried to stay as out of the way as possible while other first class guests of all ages passed by him, some giving him odd looks.

At that moment, Tamura-san appeared at the top of the staircase alone. Joining him on the balcony, she smiled, “He should be down any moment now.”

Haru flushed and nodded, “Thank you so much, we really would have been lost without you.”

She flashed him a smile and shook her head, “Think nothing of it, I’m glad I could help.” She looked him over, “What is it with you boys,” she tittered, “and not being able to tie ties?” She brought her hands up to his neck and quickly and skillfully fixed his lopsided knot. “That should do it!”

“Thank you.” he mumbled, blushing.

Shuffling his feet, he lost his balance and accidentally bumped his shoulder against the clock. He looked up in fear, worried he had damaged the hands or the carvings. Fortunately, it appeared to have been made well and ticked on stubbornly.

Tamura-san giggle slightly at him, “Did you have a bit of a run-in with Honor and Glory?”

Haru stared, “I…sorry? I don’t think I understand.”

She gestured at the clock, “The carving, it’s supposed to be Honor and Glory crowning Time.”

Haru looked from her to the clock curiously, “What does that mean?”

She laughed, “Well that’s the question isn’t it? Honor is the figure on the left and she appears to be hard at work writing something on a tablet, but what? Things that through remembrance will withstand time?”

Haru frowned, “What kind of things would those be?”

She shrugged, “Great people who did great deeds…or perhaps bad people who changed and then did great deeds.” she paused, “Maybe even great loves?”

Haru inhaled a small, quick breath and looked back at the clock face.

Tamura-san continued, “Glory is on the right, and at her feet you can see a laurel wreath.”

That sparked something in Haru’s brain, something from a book of ancient myths he had owned as child.

“That’s a laurel wreath usually mean victory?”

She nodded, “So perhaps it means victory over time?”

Haru’s eyes sparkled, love that achieves victory over time?

“And then finally you have the globe placed under Honor’s foot, suggesting that it has been
conquered.” She laughed, “Although I think it unintentionally represents the arrogance of mankind more than anything else.”

Haru chuckled lightly with her, still staring at the clock face.

“Anyway, it’s just something to think about! I’ve talked far too much so I’ll be heading down now, good luck!” She smiled at him once more and then disappeared as quickly as she came.

As Haru watched her leave, the clock hands struck seven and its bells began to chime, making him jump. He look around wildly but froze as when saw Makoto standing at the top of the staircase in front of him.

Haru thought that Tamura-san had done an incredible job dressing Makoto for dinner. His hair had been styled back, slicked up and out of him face, held in place by product. His face glowed with the use of some sort of lotion, and as he drew closer Haru caught a whiff of some foreign smell, a mixture of cinnamon and musk. By all accounts, Makoto looked incredibly handsome, and yet Haru wouldn’t dare say he looked better than he had before.

Makoto looked handsome in an intimidating and powerful way that Haru was used to seeing in ballrooms and banquets. Makoto looked beautifully threatening, and he did not look like himself.

Finally reaching the landing, he gave Haru a tentative smile, “Hi.”

Haru didn’t respond and instead furrowed his brow, watching him apprehensively.

“Is everything alright?” A look of overwhelming concern filled Makoto’s face.

“You...you look nice.” Haru finally managed to say.

Makoto blushed, “Thanks...although it’s really all Tamura-san’s doing, she’s a miracle worker. You look good too.”

Haru exhaled in relief at Makoto’s reddened and bashful expression, which so greatly contrasted his suit and formal appearance. Makoto gave him another encouraging smile putting his fears to rest.

Haru smiled back at him, “Are you ready?”

Makoto couldn’t truthfully say that he was, but he knew it would be impossible to delay the event, so he simply set his jaw and nodded firmly.

“Don’t worry, you definitely look the part.”

Makoto nodded once more, but fidgeted in his clothes nevertheless.

Turning their backs on the crowing of Time, Haru led Makoto down the staircase and into the dining room.

****

Due to the life he had led and the places he had been, Makoto was familiar with crowds and cramped settings, but never before had he seen such a large amount of finely dressed people converging in one area. He hung closely behind Haru, afraid that if he lost sight of him for even a moment, the mere atmosphere of this room would swallow him whole.

Haru stopped walking and leaned in so that Makoto could hear him over the crowd, “Don’t worry, you deserve to be here just as much as everyone else.”
Makoto opened his mouth to say thank you, but Haru quickly began leading again, his cheeks blushing furiously.

From across the dining room, Rei saw the pair of them approaching before anyone else. He quickly nudged Ai and nodded in their direction.

“What on earth is he doing?” Ai whispered.

Rei gave him a worried look and shook his head.

At that moment the pair reached the table where Katsu, Rin, the two Tamuras, two Stockwells, and three Astors were already seated.

Haru wasn’t sure if it was luck or misfortune that Katsu saw them first.

“Haru, finally, I was beginning to think you weren’t coming.” Looking behind his son, his eyes fell on Makoto, “And who is this fine gentleman with you? Will you be joining us?”

Makoto fidgeted, “Ah, we actually met last night, Sir, it’s a pleasure to see you again.”

Katsu’s stared up at the two in confusion until, in a single heartbeat, he comprehended the situation and his expression darkened. A vein began popping in his forehead and he gave Haru a look filled with so much rage that a hundred charging bulls could not have imitated it.

The rest of the table remained unaware of the newcomers until Rin, who had been entertaining the rest of the guests with a story from his childhood, stopped speaking mid-sentence to stare at them. The entire table followed his gaze and all at once, nine pairs of eyes were on them.

Haru took a deep breath, I’ve brought a guest to dinner tonight. “I-

“I have invited a passenger from third class to dine with us this evening.” Katsu interrupted.

Rin choked on his wine and turned to him incredulously, while the Tamuras watched him suspiciously, and everyone else stared in confusion. Katsu however, only met Haru’s eyes, and his son was the only one who could sense the promise of punishment behind them.

“There was an incident last night and this young man proved to be quite the hero… I thought inviting him to dinner would be the proper reward for his bravery.” He spoke through gritted teeth, displeased with the charade he was forced to perform, but he preferred to not enlighten the table to his son’s disobedience. He spoke to Makoto, “My apologies, I don’t think I got your name when we met previously.”

Still standing behind Haru, Makoto gulped, “M-Makoto Tachibana. It’s a pleasure to meet all of you.”

They all stared back at him until thankfully a middle aged Japanese man broke the silence, “It’s a pleasure to meet you as well! Come sit! I’m sure we’re all hungry, no need to keep standing around.”

Haru was obligated to sit next to his father, and Makoto missed the comfort of his presence; he could feel Rin glaring daggers at him as he moved around to the other side of the table, taking the only open seat between Tamura-san and a young lady with soft brown curls.

“Let’s do a few more introductions just to keep everything clear, there are quite a few of us dining tonight.” The man introduced himself as Tamura-sans’s husband, and Makoto shook hands with men at the table while inclining his head politely to the ladies.
The man named William Stockwell received him warmly enough and Jacob Astor appeared rather indifferent to his presence, but Rin seemed intent on crushing his fingers during their handshake, earning himself a kick under the table from Haru. The blonde mother and daughter duo, Ann and Marie Astor, both looked him over disapprovingly, but the young lady to left, Sophia Stockwell, gave him a quick smile before looking down at the table.

After Makoto had greeted everyone, Rei brought him a glass of wine and then he and Ai began to serve the hors d’oeuvres, regularly casting Makoto encouraging smiles.

Looking up from his food, William Stockwell spoke towards Katsu, “While the others are more accomplished at keeping a straight face than myself, I am certain we are all extremely interested in our guest. What was this heroic deed that earned him a place at our table tonight?”

Katsu took a sip of wine and smirked at Makoto, “Unfortunately, I was not present at the time, I am sure that Mr. Tachibana would tell a far more exciting tale than myself.” Everyone’s heads turned to look at Makoto and Haru glared at his father. “Would you care to thrill us with the details?”

Makoto and he gulped, “S-sure, um...well, last night I was out on the deck pretty late because my friend was using our room.”

Rei fumbled the plate he was holding, recovering just before scalloped potatoes fell onto Marie’s elegant updo.

Makoto continued, “I was sitting at one of the benches and heard someone walk by, the deck had been previously deserted so I was interested in who it could be. It was Har-”

Tamura-san caught his eye and minutely shook her head.

“Mr. Nanase. He was looking down and the waves and...and I saw him slip on some water that was on the deck. I was able to save him from falling overboard.” Makoto finished speaking and looked around at the several impressed faces, “I really just happened to be at the right place at the right time, it was nothing special.”

William laughed, “Quite the modest fellow!” he exclaimed.

Tamura-san raised her glass, “A toast to the man of the evening for his bravery and courage.”

Makoto blushed furiously as ten glasses rose into the air.

A low chorus of, “To Makoto Tachibana,” rang across the table and Haru held his glass highest of all.

To the man who saved me.

Katsu remained tight-lipped during the toast, and of all the gazes fixed on Makoto, he found Katsu’s glare to be by far the most frightening.

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When there was no sign of Rei at seven o’clock exactly, Nagisa was not worried. At ten after, he remained confident; perhaps Rei was being kept a little over time or wanted to change out of his butler’s uniform before he came over. However, at half passed seven, it was clear to Nagisa that the butler was not coming.

Nagisa had been around the world, he had been romantically involved with all kinds of people for a
variety of reasons. When he left most of them, they were generally missing something valuable, cash or heirlooms; those he had not stolen from, he had instead left with a wicked, unpleasant memory. In the revolving door of his romantic entanglements, he had turned the sheets several times over; but the fact remained that he had never been the one spurned. It felt like shit.

This realization triggered a series of emotions. He thought about going to find someone else to spend the night with, it would have been easy enough. He thought about throwing overboard all the money they had won together, regardless of whether or not he needed it. He thought about breaking down the butler’s door and demanding an explanation.

Worse than the pain and embarrassment of being stood up was the fact that it was impossible for him to work through his emotions without some sort of introspection.

Unwillingly and without warning, he remember the heat during the summer of 1910. He remembered creeping vines, tall cypress trees, and the smell of wild lavender. He remembered a sea of daisies and a dimpled smile as the sun set on the Italian countryside. Nagisa thought of a young man with beautiful freckles.

It had been late May when Nagisa and Makoto found themselves traveling through rural Italy. In a small village located on the rolling hills of Tuscany, they met a kind family who offered them lodging in exchange for work in the vineyards. In one of the neighboring cottages lived a large family with several sons, and Nagisa was immediately drawn to the youngest, Luca, because he was the only one with freckles. Luca spoke no Japanese, while Nagisa knew very little Italian. They communicated through body language and fragmented English, and spent the summer lost in the hills and hedgerows.

One night when the air was thick with moisture and heat lightning lit the sky, they watched storm clouds brew in the distance.

“Una tempest è in arrive.” Luca said.

Nagisa made a confused face and then laughed, “Sorry? I haven’t learned that yet.”

“What do you call?” he pointed to the dark clouds.

“A thunderstorm.”

“I see the,” Luca paused and then spoke slowly, “thun-der-storm, and I realize…” he blushed and looked at the ground. “Ti amo.”

Nagisa stared at him, his lips slightly parted, and then looked away, “I haven’t learned that yet either.”

After that night, Nagisa went out of his way to avoid Luca. One night shortly before they left Tuscany, he came to the cottage in search of Nagisa. Ever good-natured, the family they were staying with sent him up to Nagisa and Makoto’s room. Nagisa made Makoto answer the door while he hid in the closet.

There was an even larger language barrier between Luca and Makoto, but he was eventually able to express that he did not know where Nagisa was.

“I-I think he is mad at me.” He looked at Makoto with pleading eyes, “What did I do?”

Makoto shook his head, “Nagisa…doesn’t really talk to me about that stuff. I’m sorry.”
The boy nodded, and quite tears began to fall from his eyes, staining his freckled cheeks. In the most fluent and unaccented English he had ever spoken, he said, “Please tell him that I miss him.”

Makoto promised he would and smiled sympathetically. Luca eventually left, thanking him for his help.

Nagisa emerged triumphantly from the closet. “Why can’t you lie that well all the time, Mako-chan? I thought-” he stopped speaking when he laid eyes on his friend.

Makoto was sitting on the bed, hanging his head, fist balled around the sheet.

“Mako-chan…”

Makoto looked up at him, eyes slightly wet, wearing an expression of utter disappointment, “You should value people more, Nagisa.”

They left Tuscany the next day, purely because of Nagisa’s unrelenting insistence.

He shook his head vigorously, mentally returning to inside the cabin. He had never realized just how much he hated that memory until this moment, and further distressing, he had several others just like it.

He pressed his palms into his eyes, this line of thought was not helping. Feeling pathetic, he wished Makoto was there.

He dropped his hands, suddenly seething. Speaking of, where the hell was Makoto? Rei had said that Haru was a trustworthy person, but Nagisa had only believed him on the grounds that Rei was a trustworthy person.

Frustrated even further, Nagisa pummeled his pillow a few times before finally taking a seat on the bottom bunk. As energetic and outgoing as he was, at that moment, he felt extremely alone.

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Makoto wasn’t sure if the dinner was going well or not. He had spoken much at all after his introduction and toast, and the rest of the table had moved on to topics he was not familiar with. They discussed famed restaurants, the latest clothing designers, and important people they knew, and Makoto truthfully didn’t have much to add to the conversation.

Tamura-san leaned over to encourage him, “Try speaking with someone, they’re still just people.”

Makoto nodded nervously and listened in on the conversation between Arata Tamura and Katsu Nanase.

“He told the board of directors the company was doomed, of course I fired him.” Katsu said nonchalantly.

“I’m sure Mr. Whitley did it with the best interest of the company in mind though.” Arata argued, “His assertion that you don’t have a fast enough method of delivering your goods wasn’t necessarily wrong.”

Katsu glared at him, suddenly disgruntled, “Eventually we would have realized that issue and corrected it on our own. His declaration cast doubt on our company, and now investors are afraid to do business with us.”
“He knew you wouldn’t be happy with what he had to say, but he told you his honest opinion anyway, his intentions—”

“If he knows his words will be ill-received, a wise man does not speak.” Katsu said.

Arata let out an exasperated sigh, “You’re incorrigible.”

Makoto leaned toward them slightly, “If you don’t mind me interrupting,” he looked at Katsu, gulping, “I…I would argue that that’s not really the purpose of an opinion.”

Haru looked alarmed and Tamura-san grimaced, I didn’t mean speak to him.

Makoto continued, “If you’re only going to speak your thoughts that appease others and not yourself, then why think at all?”

Arata looked at him approvingly, but Katsu and Jacob both scoffed, and even William, who had till this point seemed rather fond of Makoto, eyed him pityingly.

Katsu smiled rather condescendingly, “I recognize that in an ideal world what you are saying might be true, but given the constraints of the world we live in,” he gestured to the rest of the table, “a world where we have business partners and investors, potential clients and connections, what you truly think is rather dangerous. I’m afraid it’s something you just wouldn’t understand.”

Makoto shrugged, “It’s true that I might not be familiar with your world, but I think most people appreciate honesty, regardless of social status.”

Katsu shook his head belittlingly, “That honestly you speak of will often cause conflict, and conflict does not breed good relationships.”

The volley of eyes turned back in Makoto’s direction, waiting for his response. He was unnerved by the attention he was attracting, but refused to concede Katsu’s point.

“I wouldn’t say conflict is necessarily a bad thing though. If two people don’t agree then they can discuss it with an open mind and possibly come to a compromise. I don’t think you should decline to speak your opinion simply to avoid this conflict. And also,” he took a deep breath, “if you’re dishonest with each other, not just in business but other things as well, then you won’t trust each other. I think that is essential to any relationship.”

Haru had been watching in awe as Makoto went toe-to-toe with his father and blushed warmly at those last words.

William was nodding slowly, “I think both sides are making decent points,” he said, turning to address the clearly riled Katsu, “however, this is hardly pleasant dinner conversation, let’s move on to something more—”

He broke off, looking betrayed as Jacob began arguing in favor of Katsu, “Your argument depends solely on the genuinity of both parties. What if one side is speaking falsehoods, simply to cast doubt on the opinion of the other?”

Katsu nodded in agreement, “Exactly. Suppose this business scenario. These last few years have seen a large amount of work reform, setting restrictions on the ages of workers, how many hours they can work in a row, and the minimum wage they can be paid for their work. Limitations have also been placed on supervisors and authority figures in the company, making it so that they can only perform discipline in certain ways. Suppose a worker for your company begins complaining that one of your most trusted supervisors is displaying misconduct. Doubt is cast on the character of that
supervisor, the business becomes under fire from the public for abusing their workers, the company receives tremendous pressure to fire the supervisor.”

Arata Tamura attempted to step in, “I think we’ve already taken this far too far-”.

Makoto answered Katsu readily, “I think in that situation you should ask the other employees if they are aware of any mistreatment. If they support the original worker’s claim, then the supervisor definitely deserves to be fired. The other supervisor should be looked into as well, since the company failed to properly screen them before.”

Makoto met Katsu’s gaze and the rest of the table could feel the animosity growing between the two of them, both too far too gone in the conversation to halt for anyone.

Katsu let out a cold cruel laugh, “You’ve completely missed the point. It no longer matters whether the supervisor was committing misconduct or not, at that point the seed of doubt has already been planted, the company has lost credibility and the supervisor has lost his job, because of the word of a single worker. That is the power of opinions and why you should speak them lightly.”

Jacob cut in and addressed Makoto, purely to antagonize them further, “In addition to that, your argument depends solely on the integrity of the workers.” He spoke through a mouthful of filet mignon, “You cannot expect them to uphold a high moral code.”

Marie Astor tugged on his sleeve, “Daddy this is hardly pleasant dinner conversation, please let it go.”

She was ultimately ignored as her mother rushed to agree with her husband, “Indeed, you cannot expect moral integrity from the working class, because it’s not just fault of the class is it? The problem lies within the poor breeding, it’s something inherited.”

Ironically, she perhaps should have followed Katsu’s advice, because her opinion was not well received by several people at the table.

Her assertion that all of the lower class were dishonest agitated Rin, and he opened his mouth to counter her by praising Ai as the most trustworthy person he had ever met.

Haru was ready to speak for the first time, moved to action by the sheer hypocrisy of her statement; he knew better than anyone that the higher class contained an incredible amount of lying, dishonesty, and manipulation.

Makoto was aware that he had already earned an argumentative reputation for himself, but was angered enough to speak regardless. He had to admit to himself that Nagisa wasn’t the most trustworthy of people, but he had never stolen from anyone who could not quickly recover from the loss. Similarly, in their travels, some of the poorest people he’d met had also been the most honest.

While the three boys all moved to speak, an unlikely voice rebuked Ann Astor before any of them could get a word out.

“I think the lower classes will often times surprise you.” Sophia responded coldly.

Stunned silence met her words, and Ann sneered, “And what exactly are you basing that opinion off of my dear?”

Sophia turned away and did not answer her question, not out of embarrassment or cowardice, but because she simply did not wish to speak with the close-minded woman any further.
Rin took the chance to turn to give Ann Astor a piece of his own mind. This simple action broke the last fragile shred of civility, and with it the dinner dissolved into the most pretentious and flamboyant fit of chaos imaginable.

Ann Astor’s opinion of Rin was sullied even further as he engaged in a shouting match with her and her husband while Marie tried in vain to mediate the two parties. Arata failed to restrain himself any longer and told Katsu exactly what he thought of him, using a variety of colorful adjectives from fascist to inhuman, and William angrily chided anyone who would listen.

Makoto stared at them all in stunned silence. Leaning over to Tamura-san and whispered, “Did I do this?”

She smiled at him wickedly, “A strong case could be made for yes. Although, I’m glad you did, I never thought I’d hear Marie Astor make an intelligent comment.”

Feeling like an utter failure, Makoto looked over the table in dismay, until when he spotted Haru, hand pressed hard against his mouth, eyes watering as he tried not to burst into laughter. They caught each other’s eye and Makoto suddenly found it hard not to smile. Sticking his own fist in his mouth, he and Haru both lost themselves in silent laughter as the aristocrats verbally abused one another.

“Alright that’s enough!”

William Stockwell, finally losing his patience, slammed a fist down on the table and startled them all into silence.

“Mrs. Astor, I’m sure my daughter meant you no disrespect. I think Mr. Tachibana brought some fair points to the table, both of you,” he pointed to Katsu and Jacob, “are educated men, you certainly can handle some healthy idea sharing. Jacob, I personally don’t think your wig is exceedingly noticeable, but if Mr. Matsuoka feels differently, it was rather rude of him to say so.”

Rin reddened, “Ah…no, it’s not really noticeable. I apologize.”

William nodded approvingly, “And you,” he turned to Katsu, “shame on you for always bringing business to the dinner table. You’ll bore the rest of us to death, I daresay Arata’s accusations weren’t far from the truth.”

Katsu Nanase was not used to being reprimanded, and looked absolutely stunned. He recovered quickly however, and turned to the table forcing a good-natured smile, “My apologies everyone, I sometimes have a hard time distinguishing whether a situation call for business or entertainment.”

With his apology, the table effectively moved on from their debacle, and there was a scattering of occasional laughter as they realized their own silliness.

Once the conversation had progressed far enough, Katsu leaned over and spoke quietly to William, “It’s been several years since we last saw each other, so perhaps you don’t recall; no one dares speak to me that way.”

William took a dramatic bite of his steak and said, “I think you mean I’m the only one you let speak to you that way.”

He drew away, laughing at Katsu’s appalled expression.

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After William’s intervention, the dinner’s atmosphere had improved tremendously, Makoto was
polite, charming, and modest. They were on the seventh course of their meal, duck and lamb, and he had won over everyone except Katsu, Rin, and Ann Astor.

After they had recovered from the disagreeable conversation, most of the table held a collective interest in the newcomer, and Katsu glowered as Makoto responded humbly to Jacob’s question about the third class cabins. Marie asked him about his family, and the table listened sympathetically as Makoto, open and vulnerable, recounted his parent’s deaths.

Haru watched Makoto with wide eyes, feeling uncharacteristically warm and wearing an expression of newfound bliss. Every once in a while they would meet each other’s eyes, momentarily suspending them both, held motionless by the other’s gaze, before sharing a brief smile and looking away shyly. When Makoto spoke, Haru listened more attentively than anyone, and the wiser minds at the table quickly became aware of their affectionate glances.

The clever eyes of Sophia Stockwell caught the interaction before anyone else, both humored and annoyed by the situation’s irony.

Tamura-san smiled fondly as their fleeting looks reminded her of her youthful days with her husband, but she feared they were being a bit too obvious with their affection.

Katsu recognized the threat immediately, and developed an aggressive determination to destroy the budding relationship; whether or not it passed beyond that of simple friendship, he was unsure. He glared as Makoto thanked Rei for placing a loaded plate in front of him.

“What are your plans once we arrive in New York?” William addressed the table.

“I think my wife and I are on a bit more of a leisurely trip than the rest of you,” said Arata Tamura, “We plan to visit Baltimore and Chicago before crossing the Canadian border.”

“I’m assuming you’re going to visit the falls then? I’ve yet to see them, you’ll have to tell me all about it!” Arata nodded and William turned to the three Astors.

“Boston.” Jacob answered through a mouthful of food, far more interested in his duck than anything else.”

William turned to Makoto, “What about you?”

“I’m honestly not sure,” Makoto rubbed his neck, “my friend and I came across our tickets pretty unexpectedly so we didn’t have much time to plan. Neither of us have been to America before though, so we will probably stay in New York for a bit.”

“A man without a plan is a man that will always surprise you.” William said with an expression of mock-wisdom. “And what are you three?” he turned to Haru, Rin, and Katsu.

“We’ll also be staying in New York for a while,” Rin answered, and Haru caught Makoto’s eye with a small smile, “we have business with the Rockefellers.”

“My daughter and I are staying as well,” William said with a smile, “so it’s possible the three of us will encounter one another during the time, fate works in strange ways after all!”

“Not so strange,” Katsu interrupted. He turned to Haru and Rin, “I’m afraid our plans have changed.”

Haru’s heart sank.
“Once with ship lands we will immediately head to the West Coast, there is an up-and-coming oil company I would like to partner with before another company gets the chance.” Katsu took great pleasure in observing the fallen faces of Haru and Makoto, both with drooping shoulders and downcast eyes.

They weren’t the only ones upset however; William also looked genuinely disappointed, “That’s a shame, I was hoping we could dine together at Delmonico's.”

Cruel and merciless as ever, Katsu saw the opportunity to deliver the final blow to the budding friendship between his son and the commoner.

With a wicked smile he said, “Don’t fret William, we will certainly see each other again shortly. After yesterday’s reunion I’m sure both my Haru and your Sophia are eager to carry on with the wedding plans. Perhaps late this summer?”

Haru, ever familiar with looking at his father in horror, this time neglected his habit and turned to look at Makoto in terror. His anger at the immediacy of the wedding was pushed aside, and he felt nothing but anxiety for Makoto’s reaction. It felt imperative that Makoto know the truth about himself and Sophia Stockwell. He couldn’t explain the reasons behind the feeling, he just knew he wanted so badly to shout across the table that it wasn’t how his father had made it sound, that he had no feelings for the English heiress.

Makoto had frozen with a fork halfway to his lips and allowed himself several seconds to process what Katsu had said. He looked down at his plate, his mouth hanging open, unconsciously setting down his fork and bringing a hand up to rest overtop of his heart. He felt disappointed, although, he wasn’t really sure why. He looked up and saw Haru giving him a pleading look from across the table and Makoto smiled kindly back at him. He glanced at Sophia sitting next to him; she was very beautiful, and he hoped Haru would be happy.

William was rather taken aback by Katsu’s sudden suggestion, but quickly recovered and clapped his hands together in excitement. “Really? That’s wonderful! I didn’t expect you to be so forthcoming, Katsu!” He turned to his daughter and grinned, “After all these years, what’s a couple more months?”

Sophia herself was looking about at enthused as Haru and looked coldly back at her father, saying nothing.

Rin, Rei, and Ai looked on angrily as Katsu and William engaged in wedding planning and the rest of the table’s conversation moved on without them. Rei and Ai took everyone’s orders for dessert and then disappeared into the kitchens.

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“Did Mrs. Astor have the ice cream or tarts?” Ai called across the kitchen.

“She had the tarts, Marie had the ice cream!” Rei shouted back.

Around them, servants and cooks bustled throughout the kitchens, calling out orders and clamoring over the dishes of limited quantity. Steam from the ovens and heat from the stove tops made the air sticky and unpleasant, and sweat dripped down Ai’s forehead as he juggled five plates.

“There’s a shortage on the tarts,” a cook called to them, “it’ll be a few minutes.”

“Take your time!” Rei answered, joining Ai and setting his down his plates to catch his breath.
Grateful for the chance to discuss the night’s events, they moved away from the center of the room as they waited for the tarts.

“I’m surprised Katsu changed our plans,” Ai said, “hadn’t he been trying to meet with the Rockefellers for a long time now?”

“He had, but we both know why he changed them,” Rei said bitterly, “and why he’s suddenly so eager to go through with the wedding.”

Ai looked at the ground, feeling rather defeated.

“Do you Haru had told him yet?”

Rei shook his head, “I don’t even think he had processed the information himself yet, I can’t imagine he has told other people.”

“What if Katsu’s just doing this to deter Makoto?” Ai had a hopeful edge to his voice, “Then maybe he’s not actually considering having the wedding later this summer?”

Rei sighed, “I suppose, but even if that is the case, it can’t be put it off forever.”

Ai’s face fell. He looked at back at the door to the dining room and spoke quietly, “Do you ever why things have to be this way?”

Rei looked at the kitchen’s clock, seeing it was just after eight o’clock. He hadn’t had single moment of escape to let Nagisa know he wouldn’t be able to make it tonight; he had tried to sneak away several times, enlisting Ai to cover for him, but had been unable to make it down to their third class barracks.

“I try not to,” he said, “but yes. Sometimes.”

Ai followed his gaze, “Dinner’s almost over…do you think he’s angry with you?”

One look at Rei’s face made Ai immediately regret his question.

“Forget I said anything, I’m sure he’ll understand once you explain everything.”

Rei simply nodded, looking doubtful.

Ai searched fervently for a different topic, “Well, regardless of Katsu’s reasons, it’s a shame we aren’t going to be staying in New York, I’d always wanted to see Central Park.” He blushed as the guilty corners of his mind conjured an image of himself and Rin sharing a peaceful carriage ride through the park.

Rei cast a pained look back at the kitchen’s clock. *Neither of us have been to America before though, so we will probably stay in New York for a bit.* “I’m rather disappointed myself.” He murmured.

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Rei and Ai eventually brought the last course out to the table, laying various desserts in front of them, and everyone chatted merrily. Makoto and Haru, each for their own reasons, hung on the sidelines of the conversation.

Everyone who had previously noticed the affectionate looks they shared now saw that they were missing each other’s glances. Haru would look away the moment Makoto would turn to look at him and vice versa, always looking away too early or looking at too late.
Dinner concluded at an alarmingly rapid rate, and suddenly everyone was standing, bidding goodbye to one another and promising more encounters in the future, and just like that, Makoto’s fateful night spent in wolf’s clothing came to an end.

Arata kissed his wife on the cheek, “I daresay I shall see you shortly.”

“Not too soon,” she smiled back at him, “enjoy your time with the boys.”

“And you likewise with the ladies.”

Makoto watched in confusion as she turned to address Sophia.

“Will you join us in the ladies lounge?” Tamura-san asked, “I hear Marie has offered to play piano and perhaps sing for us.”

“Oh yes you must come!” Marie Astor moved around the table and hung on Sophia’s arm.

Sophia attempted to detangle herself, “I apologize but I have a previous engagement tonight, thank you for the invitation.”

Marie whined, “Sophia dear we have so much to talk about! There’s all the latest gossip and of course we must discuss your recent engagement!”

Makoto intentionally tuned out of their conversation and jumped as a hand slapped his back. Turning, he found himself face to face with William Stockwell.

“Will you be joining us in the smoking lounge?” he asked with a grin.

Makoto tried to force a smile that he definitely didn’t feel. The dinner alone had left him feeling drained and he really didn’t want to continue this facade any longer, he felt certain he was not cut out for it. He wondered how anyone who lived in this elite and exclusive world could truly be happy.

“I don’t think so, I have enjoyed my evening with all of you, but I…I should probably be getting back to the third class barracks.”

“Indeed it is perhaps best not to push your luck.” Rin interjected coldly.

“Nonsense!” Arata boomed, “Of course he’ll be joining us for some gentlemen’s talk! I’m sure he has many thrilling stories that would go brilliantly with brandy and cigars.”

Makoto rubbed his neck, feeling mentally and emotionally defeated. Perhaps worst of all, Haru, the main source of his encouragement and energy, hadn’t so much as looked at him since Katsu had mentioned the engagement. Makoto wondered if he regretted inviting him to dinner.

“I really appreciate the offer but-“

He stopped mid-sentence. While everyone was distracted saying goodbyes, Katsu had taken the opportunity to pull Haru several feet away. Makoto couldn’t hear Katsu’s words, however he could see plain as day the look of utter terror on Haru’s face.

After a day spent seeing Haru relax, laugh, and smile, a day spent learning the many and colorful complexities of his soul, seeing him now, once again looking hopeless and teary-eyed, angered Makoto to his very core.

Confidence rose in his chest and he felt invigorated by an intense desire to protect.
He did not know exactly how he would achieve that, but at the same time he knew that it did not mean abandoning Haru to the will of his father, especially when Haru was bearing the brunt of Katsu’s anger because of Makoto.

He squared his shoulders and held his head high as he turned back to William and Arata, “On second thought, I greatly appreciate the offer and will gladly take you up on it.”

“Wonderful!” William exclaimed.

“I’m glad to hear it.” Arata Tamura had followed Makoto’s gaze and frowned minutely in Katsu’s direction, “Katsu, we’re leaving now!” he called.

Katsu’s turned to them and his expression darkened for a fraction of a second before he replied genially, “Certainly! Let us head in together!”

He turned towards the dining room’s exit, Haru trailing behind him, head hung toward the floor. They grouped at the door, waiting for everyone before they headed back up the staircase.

Rin joined them last.

“Sorry,” he said, “I couldn’t escape.” He jerked his head in the direction of Marie Astor, who had made quite the show of bidding him goodnight.

William’s eyes bugged out of his head and he slightly motioned to Jacob Astor standing a just a few feet away from them.

Rin, realizing his mistake, went white with fear, but thankfully Jacob didn’t seem to have heard Rin’s remark about his daughter.

Together, the six men made their way out of the dining room and headed together towards the first class smoking lounge, trailed by Katsu’s two butlers.

Through some maneuvering, Makoto positioned himself directly behind Haru, keeping his eyes fixed unwaveringly on Katsu.

Although he knew logically that there had been no real change in his preparedness, education, or upbringing, he felt far more confident now than he had the entire evening.

As they entered the lounge, Makoto felt ready to defend Haru from whatever hatred or abuse might be thrown at him.

Chapter End Notes

PROTECTIVE MAKOTO TO THE RESCUE.

Next chapter: All six of our boys in the same room at the same time.

Notes:
-Pictures of the grand staircase from above and below.
-This link gave me literally all the information about the grand staircase's clock and I would have been lost without it, there's a picture in the link as well.
-Picture of the first class dining room which I should have included in the AN of chapter
4 oops (also please feel free to ignore the fact that the tables did not have enough seats to
fit all the characters I had in this chapter TTuTT)
-All the Italian was literally thanks to google translate so I apologize if there are any
errors!!
-Katsu had business with the Rockefellers, a wealthy political and banking family, a la
the Rockefeller Center.
-Delmonico's: one of the oldest restaurants in New York, you may have seen it in
pictures or films.
-These (X, X) are the only two pictures I could find of the kitchens, there were two
chefs and roughly seventy cooks.

I will probably spend the next week editing/rewriting the first few chapters (I physically
cringe every time I look at the prologue). Once April is over and I bid goodbye to my
freshman year of college updates should come much more quickly!

Extra special thanks to Candice for being the biggest motivator in the world, I probably
wouldn't finish anything without her.
Raising the Sunrise

Chapter Summary

"In life’s poker game, the optimist sees the pessimist's night and raises him the sunrise." - Robert Brault

Or

Rin meets his match, Rei is in hot water, Nagisa is a cockblock in this universe as well, and Haru learns the stars aren't bound to the sky.

Chapter Notes

*walks in five years late with a starbucks* here's the new chapter! *jumps off cliff*

//not important but I changed the spelling of Sofia to make it more English so, Sofia ----> Sophia/

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Decorated in deep reds and browns, the first class smoking room was overwhelmingly masculine. Dark mahogany paneling lined the walls, and large stained-glass windows overlooked the space. Either standing by the fireplace or sitting comfortably in fine leather chairs were mobs of rail barons, shipping magnates, international publishers, and other millionaire businessmen.

Hazy with smoke, the room made Makoto cough instantly, and many drunken bellows and whoops of laughter filled the air, making him think immediately of a gentlemen’s club. Not that he had ever stepped foot in one; the silk waistcoats, gold watch chains, and general pompous atmosphere simply fit what he had imagined.

William Stockwell led them to a table at the center of the room and Makoto sat down feeling exposed and out of place, but resolute in his mission to remain strong for Haru’s sake. Rei and Ai brought them a cart containing a large collection of alcohol and tobacco, and everyone made selections except for Haru, Makoto, and Arata Tamura. Katsu loaded a pipe with tobacco while Rin, William, and Jacob Astor puffed on cigars, all sipping from different brands of wine, brandy, and whiskey.

The moment they were all situated with their own personal vices, William clapped his hands together, “Well gentlemen, what would you all say to a game of poker?”

Rin smirked, “Are you willing to make it interesting?”

“Naturally! How about it then?”

Rin and Jacob Astor agreed enthusiastically. Katsu and Arata Tamura less so, both shrugging in agreement. William turned expectantly to Makoto and Haru.

“Um, I-I think I’ll sit out,” Makoto stuttered, “I don’t have a lot of money to play with, and to be
honest, I’m terrible at poker and cards in general.”

“I don’t really enjoy gambling,” Haru said simply.

William looked scandalized at the pair and then shook his head dramatically, “If you say so.”

The five players gathered closer to the table and Rei brought them a deck of playing cards, while Haru and Makoto sat awkwardly on the outskirts of the circle. Makoto tried to catch Haru’s eye, only to find him looking pointedly in the other direction. Makoto’s heart sank, and he wondered just how much Katsu’s scolding had affected him and if Haru was afraid to interact with him because of it.

The thought immediately crushed Makoto, but if his fear turned out to be true, he definitely didn’t want to do anything to make Haru’s situation worse. Dread filled his bones as he wondered if Haru was angry with him.

Outside of Makoto’s thoughts the world continued revolving and Rin was shuffling the deck, “So what are we playing boys? Straight? Seven card stud? Five card draw?”

There was a minor argument between William and Jacob before they decided on five card draw, a type of poker where each player was initially given five cards with the option to trade in up to three of them in hopes of achieving a better hand.

Everyone placed an initial ante of five pounds into the center table - the “pot” - and Rin dealt the cards. They all gazed at their hand, occasionally making eye contact and reading each other’s reactions.

“I’ll raise it five.” Arata eventually said with a shrug, adding five extra pounds to the table.

“I’m out.” Katsu folded immediately, placing his cards on the table, but everyone else met Arata’s challenge, placing their own five pound notes at the center.

“That was rather quick, Katsu! I remember you playing with a bit more gusto!” William teased.

Katsu leaned back in his chair and shrugged, not seeming too disappointed with his loss, “I was dealt a bad hand.”

William frowned, “That never stopped you before.”

Katsu narrowed his eyes and looked away as Rin traded out one card while William and Arata gave up two. Jacob, to no one’s surprise, traded out a total of three cards.

They all examined their new hands, trying to observe one another’s reactions while remaining stoic themselves.

“Well gentlemen, it the spirit of living all or nothing, I’m going to raise it fifteen.” William said mischievously, placing two notes in the pot, “Which of you cares to dance with me?”

Arata let out an exasperated noise, “You’re ridiculous. I fold, you better have a wicked hand.”

William shrugged and smirked, looking remarkably like Rin, “Who knows?”

Jacob met the fifteen pounds readily, but both Rin and William ignored any threat he might pose; he had the money to spare and there was little to no amount that would make him fold, regardless of how poor his hand was. Instead, William and Rin focused on each other, Rin scrutinizing the Englishman before him and William doing his best to look apathetic.
“I’ll meet your fifteen,” Rin finally said, “and raise it ten.”

Shocked silence met his words and it was William’s turn to scrutinize, Jacob having already placed another ten pounds at the center of the table.

William pressed his lips together and squinted, eventually adding ten pounds to the pot without speaking.

All bets placed with a total pot of one hundred and twenty pounds, more money than Makoto had ever seen in his life, they revealed their cards.

As expected, Jacob had nothing, and William chuckled as he laid down his hand, revealing only a scattering of low value cards and the Ace of Spades.

“I’m positive you were bluffing!” He looked challengingly at Rin, “What do you have?”

Rin cleared his throat, “First I would like to thank you gentlemen very much for this first game, playing with you all has truly been a pleasure. You are all such worthy opponents, and I’m blessed to play among you.”

“Yes, we are all quite magnificent, what do you have?”

Rin continued rambling, and the only people familiar with Rin’s habits, both Haru and Katsu, knew from his excessive theatrics and courtesies that he had a good hand, and wanted to make the biggest show of it possible.

“Alright we get it, just-”

“Gentlemen, I present you with,” he set down his hand, revealing five cards of the same suit, “a flush of clubs.”

This statement was met with exasperated groans from both William and Jacob as the pot was pushed towards the fiery haired youth.

After this initial round they continued enjoyably, Katsu and Arata winning one round each before dropping out of the game permanently. Rin and William fought an evenly brutal battle, leaving Jacob decimated in their wake after every round. After three quarters of an hour, Rin began to pull ahead, winning almost every round while Ai stood in the background, flushed and starry-eyed.

As the game progressed, Makoto began to question why exactly he was there. He had been prepared to defend Haru from his father’s abuse, but at the moment Katsu wasn’t paying his son much attention; in fact, he looked rather bored. Sitting with his legs crossed, Katsu stared into space, absentmindedly rubbing a gold chain that disappeared inside his suit jacket between his thumb and forefinger.

With this development, Makoto found himself without a purpose, and spent half his time desperately trying to catch Haru’s eye, the other half watching impossibly large amounts of money change between William and Rin, joker and knave.

After another half hour of play, William found himself utterly defeated by Rin’s cleverness, and sighed exasperatedly, “That’s it! I’m out! Best of luck to you, Jacob, this kid’s a real card shark!”

William moved and sat next to Makoto and they watched in silence as Jacob, who refused to become discouraged, essentially handed Rin his money on a silver platter.
“Are you sure you don’t want to play?” William asked.

His question startled Makoto had gone unaddressed for a long while, “Sorry? Oh, no I don’t think so. Thank you though, but I’m honestly terrible at any type of cards.”

William nodded sympathetically, “Well, if you are as unskilled as you say, it’s really quite a shame. I know that’s how a lot of...” he paused, reddening as Makoto watched him curiously, “people who are struggling financially make good money through cards and gambling. It’s a good skill to have if you want to make some quick cash.” He grinned, having navigated the sentence as respectfully as possible. “I could show you some of the tricks if you want!”

Makoto was rather taken aback by the offer, “Thank you, from what I’ve seen your skills really are incredible.” This obviously wasn’t entirely accurate, but William puffed out his chest regardless. “But I’m honestly a lost cause. My friend I’m traveling with is a genius when it comes to cards. I’ve never seen anything like it, so he usually supplies most of our money, I’d be much worse off if it wasn’t for him,” he finished sheepishly.

“He can’t be that good,” Rin had been eavesdropping and made this comment while reclining in his armchair and counting all his winnings thus far.

Makoto opened his mouth to defend Nagisa’s talent, but William spoke first, turning to Rin and wiggling his eyebrows, “Well let’s test your theory,” he challenged. He received curious looks from everyone at their table before he turned once more to Makoto, “bring the boy here! Where is the little devil? Maybe he can give Mr. Matsuoka a run for his money.”

Rin’s expression darkened, “Tch. Doubtful.”

Makoto felt rather uneasy about brining Nagisa into this atmosphere, but before he could think of a way to diffuse William’s enthusiasm, Rei spoke from behind them, making all six men jump.

“If you don’t mind me interrupting, Sir,” He spoke to William, “I know the friend Mr. Tachibana is referring to, I could fetch him for you if that would help settle this disagreement?”

William clapped his hands together, “Excellent! You better prepare yourself!” He teased Rin, who rolled his eyes and cracked his knuckles, watching Rei quickly exit the smoking lounge.

****

Rei walked as fast as he could back to the third class barracks, sometimes running when he knew no one else was nearby, and reached Nagisa’s door just two minutes after leaving the smoking lounge. At the door however, he hesitated. It was just past nine-thirty, two and half hours after he had promised to meet with Nagisa, and Rei was uncertain what would greet him once he knocked.

Gulping, he raised a fist and tapped three times on the door. Immediately he heard noises from inside the room, a small yelp and thud, but after a few more moments the door didn’t open.

“Nagisa? It’s Rei. I’m really, really sorry for not coming earlier tonight.” He paused, trying to find the right words, “I...I understand you probably don’t want to see me right now, but—”

The door suddenly flew open and Rei caught a split second view of Nagisa with one hand on the doorknob, the other raised to Rei, his fingers positioned in a very aggravated gesture, before he quickly and forcefully pulled the door shut again.

A resounding BANG echoed through the hallway and Rei stood dumbfounded, still processing what had happened.
“Did...was that...was that supposed to be you slamming the door in my face?” He had to press a hand to his mouth to stop from giggling.

Nagisa’s voice rose from behind the door, calling Rei a variety of colorful curse words before ending with an incredibly loud and hostile, “Go away!”

“I definitely understand if you’re mad at me, you have reason to be, but I have a proposition that could really help you.”

“I don’t want your help!”

“Please hear me out,” Rei was growing desperate, afraid that with every second that ticked by someone would change their mind and decide they didn’t want to see the famed commoner with a knack for cards. He suddenly had a flash of brilliance, “I can take you to Makoto.”

There was a long silence followed by a slow creak as Nagisa opened the door once again, standing with his arms crossed.

“What exactly do you want me to do?”

Rei spoke quickly while Nagisa glared daggers at him, explaining how Makoto had joined Haru and the other gentlemen in the smoking lounge after dinner and how Makoto had downplayed his own skills but bragged about his friend’s.

“Oh so they want another commoner to ogle at? Like some bazaar circus act? Some kind of strange, exotic beast? Well no thanks, I have more self-respect than that.” Nagisa wasn’t sure why he said that; considering the various wicked things he had done for money, he knew it wasn’t true.

Despite all his best efforts to remain calm, Rei started to become impatient, “It doesn’t matter why they want to see you!” He took the unwilling Nagisa by the shoulders, “You could make a lot of money, I’ve seen your skills and you could easily make fifty times what we won last night, have you ever even seen that much money in person? Nagisa, I know you’re angry with me, you don’t ever have to talk to me again,” Rei’s chest tightened as he said it, “but please, please do this, for yourself and for Makoto. It could seriously help both of you.”

Nagisa met his eyes and glared defiantly at him for several more moments before pushing Rei’s hands off his shoulders.

“Fine, I’ll go! I’ll entertain the pompous nobles if it will make you leave me alone.” He crossed his arms, tapping his foot impatiently, and Rei cocked his head to the side in confusion. “Well I don’t know the way now do I?” Nagisa said sarcastically, “Lead the way, Ryuugazaki-kun.”

Rei’s lips parted in surprise and he pretty sure that shouldn’t have hurt as much as it did. He took a deep breath, dreading what was coming next, “…Actually, I was thinking that maybe it would be best if we changed you into some nicer clothes?”

Nagisa raged, ranted, and bellowed, but eventually consented to wear one of Ai’s old butler uniforms, sans the gloves.

He emerged from his rooms looking simultaneously sophisticated and childish, pout intact, and Rei fought down the corners of his mouth because more than anything, Nagisa looked unbelievably cute.

“What?” Nagisa snarled.

“N-Nothing!” Rei said quickly, still struggling not to smile, “You...you tied your own tie.”
“OF COURSE I TIED MY OWN TIE WHAT KIND OF IDIOT DO YOU THINK I AM?”

“I didn’t think that I just—”

“I CAME OUT OF THE WOMB WITH THE UMBILICAL CORD TIED INTO A GODDAMN SAILOR’S KNOT DON’T PATRONIZE ME.”

“Sorry! I didn’t mean….it’s just impressive!” Rei said, quickly holding up is hands in a peaceful gesture.

Nagisa gave him a look filled with hostility before gesturing again that Rei should lead the way, following him with arms crossed.

As he led the disgruntled Nagisa towards the first class smoking lounge, Rei wondered once again what exactly Nagisa had been doing before he met Makoto, and how he really had come to learn such a skill.

****

With the money he had one playing Niall and Ethan, as well as what little he had before the ship departed, Nagisa entered the dining room carrying just over three pounds.

Rei worried that the inflated and threatening environment would intimidate Nagisa, but the vagabond poker player strode through the room confident as ever, ignoring the other gentlemen’s stares as he tackled Makoto from behind.

“Mako-chan, you’re alive! I was afraid you’d been kidnapped!” Nagisa squealed, casting an accusing glare in Haru’s direction.

“I said I’d be gone a while! Nagisa I’m obviously fine,” Makoto spoke in a hushed whisper, embarrassed, “You can let go!”

Nagisa ignored him and hung on, caring little about the scene he was causing, “You said you’d be gone a while but that was twelve hours ago!” he whined.

Makoto stopped struggling and looked in surprise at the small clock resting above the fireplace, had it really been that long? Feeling slightly guilty, he rested a hand on top of Nagisa’s head, “You’re right, I could have made a better effort to keep you informed. I’m sorry, Nagisa.”

Nagisa reddened and looked away, finally releasing his friend. “Don’t worry about it, Mako-chan,” he mumbled, “after all, it wasn’t your fault.” He suddenly cast a threatening glare at Haru.

Rin stood up immediately, “Watch your place commoner.”

Nagisa turned to Rin and look several steps toward him, “What did you call me?” he glared fearlessly up into Rin’s eyes, who met his gaze with clenched teeth and balled fists.

Everyone in the room had stopped their own conversations and had turned to stare silently at them, waiting curiously to see what would happen. The fire crackled in the background as Rin and Nagisa glared intensely at each other, neither likely to back down. Rei and Makoto looked on in fear, both doubting the original plan to bring Nagisa here.

The severe atmosphere was broken by a single booming laugh, making Nagisa and Rin break each other’s gaze, their rage suddenly simmered down to mere shock. Speechless, the entire room turned to gape at William Stockwell, who was bent double, clutching his sides and laughing hysterically.
He laughed for easily twenty more seconds before straightening himself and, wiping at his eyes, clapped a hand on Nagisa’s back, “I like him already!” he looked around at the rest of them, “What? Does spunk count for so little nowadays?” He grinned, “Now this has all been very entertaining, but I believe this was not the reason this kind young man agreed to give up is evening! Now gentlemen, who is playing?”

Rin silently took his seat and began shuffling, still glaring at Nagisa. Katsu declined immediately but Jacob agreed, as did two other gentlemen, one with a large mustache and one with a monocle covering his left eye, all intrigued by Nagisa.

William turned to Arata Tamura, “Are you joining us?”

Arata’s keen eye swept over Nagisa who, while clearly out of place, looked like the most serious poker player he had ever seen.

“I think I’ll sit this one out.”

William followed his gaze to Nagisa and chuckled, “Probably wise! But poker is a game of sink or swim, you’ll never get better unless you’re thrown to the sea!”

Arata looked from Nagisa’s clever, calculating eyes to William’s wide, happy ones, “You’re going to sink.”

William let out another booming laugh before sitting back down, their table now more than a little cramped with the additional players and many onlookers.

William, Jacob, Mustache, Monocle, and Rin all put five pounds into the pot.

Nagisa reddened slightly, “I…uh, I only have three pounds to start with.”

Rei was already opening his wallet to spot Nagisa the money when William cut in, “No problem! We can lower the pot value to start out with, how about a pound a piece?”

They all nodded in agreement until Rin interrupted, “As if we all have such a low-value bill readily available. It won’t work, he can start out on a debt.” He cast a challenging glance to Nagisa, “Or perhaps this was a poor plan to begin with?”

Makoto started sweating and nudged Nagisa, “Maybe you shouldn’t do it, we can-”

“There won’t be any debt,” Nagisa declared, meeting Rin’s gaze, “deal the cards.”

William was far too entertained by Nagisa’s presence to effectively play poker, and subsequently made several bad decisions before realizing he had a hand of absolutely nothing. Jacob presumably also had nothing, and both Monocle and Mustache folded early on.

“I’ll raise it twenty.” Rin said, placing a single bill at the table’s center, now housing a sizeable pot.

“I’ll meet your twenty,” Nagisa said without hesitation, “and raise fifteen.”

“That’d bring you up to a debt of fifty five pounds, are you sure?” Rin mocked.

Nagisa smirked, “It’s only a debt if I lose.”

Far less calm than Nagisa, Makoto sat watching the two of them, fervently biting his nails. In the past when Nagisa had made poor bets, they more often than not had to flee the city under the cover of night. However, stranded hundreds of miles from anything resembling land, it would be difficult for
them to escape while aboard the ship.

Rin cracked his neck and then added another fifteen pounds at the center. The final bet placed, he began his regular spiel, “I’m really so sorry to do this to you in the first round,” he began, not sounding sorry at all, “especially after you’ve played with such cheek and gusto,” he laid down his hand, “but I’ve got four of a kind, Jacks.”

To Rin’s outrage, Nagisa had not been listening, and instead was watching the man with the large mustache signaled Rei for a cigar. Nagisa waved at Rei, “I’d like one as well.”

Rei hesitated, “Oh…Um, I—”

“Those are only free for the first class passengers,” Rin cut in, looking far too cheerful about that fact.

Nagisa glared at him, “Oh, okay.” He laid down his cards, revealing the two, three, four, five, and six of hearts – a full house. “Will the pot cover it?” Amidst several impressed gasps and Rin’s slack-jawed gape, Nagisa pulled the pot towards himself, and at Rei’s instruction, traded seven pounds for a cigar.

Rei handed him a match and Nagisa lit the cigar, and everyone watched as he blew perfect “O” shaped smoke rings across the room.

Rin’s teeth audibly ground together and William laughed at the cheek, while Makoto as able to breathe for the first time since the game had begun.

As the deck was re-shuffled, this time by William as Rin was still frozen, Rei bent down and whispered in Nagisa’s ear, “I see you’ve been practicing.” He gestured at the smoke rings.

Nagisa turned to look at him and gave him a smile filled with mock-sweetness, “I had several hours alone this evening to practice. Go away, I’m still mad at you.”

As the cards were dealt once more, Rei backed away from the table as if stung and poured William another glass of brandy, his hand trembling.

****

Over the next half-hour the crowd around them grew steadily while Rin’s temper grew exponentially. Nagisa had won almost every hand, Rin only winning the ones where Nagisa had dropped out early, and his success had drawn a crowd of people around their table, many of which had pulled up chairs and demanded to play him.

As the masses pushed in on them and forced everyone shoulder to shoulder, Katsu began fidgeting in his seat. He spent ten minutes crossing and uncrossing his legs, pulling his jacket tightly around himself before finally standing.

“Pardon me, I’ll be back in a moment.”

His seat was immediately filled with another onlooker and his departure went relatively unnoticed as at that same moment Rin lost another enormous pot to Nagisa.

Only Haru and Makoto noticed Katsu’s departure, and as Nagisa began shuffling the cards for another round, Haru stood also, quietly excusing himself from the crowd. Makoto watched him disappear into the throng of people, wanting to follow him but anchored to his seat by fear and self-doubt.
Haru headed to the quietest corner of the smoking room, grateful for his father’s absence and the chance to escape the Nagisa’s sudden group of fans. He sat in an armchair beside one of the room’s many windows and leaned against it, closing his eyes.

The pane was cool and refreshing against his forehead and he took several deep breathes, taking time to rejuvenate himself in this secluded corner. He thought about the healing day he had experienced, and how it had shone brightly against the many dark days that preceded it. He thought about his father, both before the death of his mother and as he was now; how he didn’t love him but still felt guilty about that fact. He thought about Sophia, and realized that as resistant as he was to their wedding, she probably felt the same way. He thought about his future, a journey already mapped out, ever major event planned and ready to be orchestrated. He thought about Makoto, realizing that one person, no matter how caring or good, could not change his life. He thought about the coming days, and how an entire continent would soon divide him and that one person.

Haru felt an overwhelming desire to see the stars.

Opening his eyes, he had a split second view of his own eager expression, just before it faded to one of disappointment. The night sky had been drowned out by the cold light inside the ship, and instead of a sky full of stars, the smoking lounge and his own defeated expression reflected back at him. In this room, in this society, he couldn’t see the sky.

In the glass he spotted Makoto making his way through the smoking lounge. Haru didn’t move to wave him over, he simply watched as Makoto glanced around the room, taking several steps in various directions before finally spotting and approaching Haru. They made eye contact through the glass and Makoto stopped a few feet from him, shuffling his feet awkwardly.

Makoto looked out the window, “Can you see anything?”

Haru kept his eyes on Makoto’s reflection.

“The stars.”

Makoto squinted out the window and then laughed, “Your eyes must be a lot stronger than mine then! Do you mind if I join you?”

Haru shook his head and Makoto sat down across from him. They made eye contact a few times without speaking, and Haru searched for something to break the silence.

He cleared his throat, “Nagisa is really amazing, I’ve never seen anyone beat Rin like this.”

Makoto laughed, “Nagisa’s a wonder, I don’t know how he does it.” He hesitated, “Although, he probably isn’t improving Rin’s opinion of me.”

Haru gave a small smile, “Probably not.”

With that brief but unpleasant conclusion, they fell again into an uncomfortable silence.

****

The first class reading and writing room was, in essence, everything the first class smoking lounge was not. Its decoration was overwhelmingly feminine, with white paneling on the walls, velvet curtains, and intricate designs on the ceiling. While most men retired to the smoking room after dinner, the ladies in turn would travel to the reading and writing room to chat while sipping tea and coffee.
Amongst actresses and the wives of politicians sat Riko Tamura, Sophia Stockwell, and Ann and Marie Astor. They chatted away, all varying degrees of involved in the conversation.

“Can you believe him though? Inviting that commoner to dinner! What was Katsu thinking?” Ann Astor addressed Sophia, “I can’t help but worry for your future my dear, marrying into such a family…”

“How very kind of you to worry on my part,” Sophia said icily, “however I think the lower classes will often surprise you.”

Ann frowned but Tamura-san grinned, “Well said! My husband is a perfect example. Before I married him, I was from a solid middle class family. He was poor as thieves and look where we are now!”

Sophia leaned forward slightly and her eyes shone with interest, “Is that really true?

Tamura-san smiled, “Of course, I almost didn’t marry him because of it. I wanted a rich man,” she shrugged, “but in my heart I knew I loved Arata. Before I met him I was determined to stay single until a wealthy man presented himself; I wanted comfort for my father and someone who could give to the tired old man the things I longed for him.” She smiled a bit sadly, “I struggled hard with myself in those days. I loved Arata, but he was poor. Finally, I decided that I’d be better off with a poor man whom I loved than with a wealthy one whose money had attracted me. And look where I am now! Riding first class on the world’s largest luxury liner, sipping tea with you fine ladies.”

Sophia grinned and clinked tea cups with her, and although Marie looked rather unconvinced, she did the same. Ann however, crossed her arms and made a sour expression.

“I think you will admit that is a rather isolated case.” She said through gritted teeth, “You shouldn’t go filling these young girls’ heads with false hopes and nonsense. Sophia has a right to be concerned, who knows what kind of company young Mr. Nanase will bring around the house if that is the example set by his father, he-”

“Mrs. Astor,” Sophia interrupted, “I am also troubled by my upcoming marriage; however, my concern is the product of legitimate reasoning and not illusions of superiority.”

In the stunned silence, Sophia began rummaging in her beaded purse, eventually pulling out a pack of matches, cigarettes, and a theatre length cigarette holder.

Ann looked scandalized, “Surely you don’t plan to-”

Sophia struck a match, lighting the end of her cigarette and inhaling deeply.

Marie began emitting small, dainty coughs, wrinkling her nose and placing a white-gloved hand over her mouth while Ann fanned the air, “Such an awful smell.”

Sophia exhaled the smoke directly at her, “You kiss the tobacco stained mouth of your husband, do you not?”

For the third time that day, Sofia left Ann absolutely scandalized.

“Unbelievable.” She stood, “I will speak to your father about hiring you a maid or governess or someone to your manners. Others will not endure your vulgarity as passively as I have. I am leaving, goodnight ladies.” She turned to her daughter, “Marie?”

“I would like to stay here if that’s alright with you mama.”
Ann’s eyes flashed briefly to Sophia, “Fine. Don’t be too long.”

(Of course.)

Marie waited for her mother to exit the room before dropping the hand she had placed in front of her mouth as a smoke barrier.

Riko yawned and stood as well, “I’m sure you two have much to discuss without old ladies like me interrupting.” They both disagreed with her immediately but she waved them off, “Now, now, I was young once too. You girls need company of people your own age. I hope you two can help each other out. Don’t get into too much trouble!”

(Of course not!” Marie flashed a sugar-sweet smile, dimples on full display.

“Honey, you’re going to ruin lives with that smile.”

“Me? Never! Goodnight Mrs. Tamura!”

They both waved to her as she exited the writing room, and Sophia was rather sad to see her leave, not looking forward to time alone with the selfish and narrow minded Marie Astor.

“I absolutely adore your cheek.” Marie said, sliding closer to her, “I know mother dislikes it but I find it quite charming. I daresay you’ll ruin a few lives yourself!” she giggled.

“I certainly don’t wish to,” Sofia paused, throwing her a glare, “unlike you.”

Marie glanced at the door once more before tilting her head to the side and giving Sophia a smirk so devilish it countered all of her previous innocence.

“Now, now, I have claws as well.”

****

Back inside the smoking lounge, the main players of Nagisa and Rin’s poker game had decided to take a small break from their game, all stretching their legs and having their drinks refilled.

It was during this time that Rin pulled Ai aside, “I need you to do something for me.” Rin gripped him by the shoulders and met his eyes, “Go stand behind him and signal to me what kind of hand he has. Wink once if it’s a bad hand and two if it’s-”

“Rin!” Ai gasped in horror. He immediately realized his informality and bowed quickly, “I mean Matsuoka-kun, s-sorry.” He straightened and Rin looked rather irritated, “But I think that such a tactic is beneath you. If you work hard I’m sure you can beat him with just your skills.”

Rin looked annoyed for a while longer, glancing down several times at Ai’s large, disappointed eyes.

He heaved a great sigh, “Dammit, Ai stop making that face.” He rubbed his neck, “I probably couldn’t live with myself if I knew you were ashamed of me, I won’t cheat.” He looked at the ground, “I’m just frustrated.”

“I know you can do it Matsuoka-kun, you’ve played some of the best players across the world. Remember Poker Alice? And that Danish prince? They were unbeatable,” Ai blushed, “un-until you.”

Rin grinned at him, “Thanks, Ai. I really appreciate it.” Feeling slightly more confident, he turned back to their poker table, making a mental notes about each person seated. Counting them, he
frowned. “Ai, where are Haru and Katsu?”

“Katsu left the room, I’m not sure where exactly he went, but Haru went that way,” Ai pointed deeper into the smoking lounge, “I believe Mr. Tachibana is with him as well.”

Rin ground his teeth together and muttered a quick, “Thanks,” before taking off in the direction Ai had pointed, leaving the discouraged butler behind him.

Rin spotted the pair from quite a distance and slowly snuck towards them. He join a large group of gentlemen standing in the room’s center and watched them while blending in with the crowd. They seemed to be sitting in silence, both looking in opposite directions, but too many people kept passing in front of him to be sure, and he began to doubt this group as an effective spying location.

Crouching low and making sure neither Haru nor Makoto were looking his direction, he darted behind a sofa roughly ten feet from them. He didn’t have time to celebrate the successful maneuver however, the moment he dove behind the sofa, he collided with something very solid and very disgruntled.

“Oi! Watch it!” the figure hissed at him.

Rin stared for several moments at the small boy he had knocked to the ground before realization dawned on him.

“What are you doing here?”

Previously crouching on all fours and now sprawling on the ground, Nagisa glared up at him.

“I’m obviously spying-the same thing you’re doing apparently. I have to make sure he doesn’t hurt Mako-chan.”

“Make sure Haru doesn’t hurt him?!” Rin screeched.

Nagisa made several quick gestures indicating Rin should be quiet, “Shut up! Are you seriously that stupid? Do you want them to hear you? Go away, I was here first.”

Rin’s nostrils flared, “Don’t forget you place rat, you maybe be sitting in the first class smoking lounge but remember which cabin you’ll be returning to when tonight is over. I can have you thrown out of here in an instant.”

Nagisa glared and then put a hand to his chin, “Are you sure? I think if I waved all of your cash in front of security I could easily convince them I was a first class passenger.”

Nagisa was rather proud of his sly insult, however he immediately thought it perhaps should have gone unspoken. Rin was positively shaking with rage and he grabbed Nagisa by the collar with one hand while the other balled into a fist.

Nagisa gulped and held up his hands to signify his surrender, “Okay, okay, we are both obviously hiding behind this couch for our own reasons, let’s just…graciously…share the space.”

Rin still looked murderous and Nagisa was about to make a daring attempt at escape when Makoto thankfully started speaking.

Nagisa somehow expressed the statement, ‘if you kill me you won’t hear what they’re talking about’ with just a facial expression, and Rin begrudgingly released him, turning his eyes to Haru and Makoto.
“So the West Coast? That sounds like fun, you’re going to California I’m guessing?”

Haru shrugged, “I’m not sure, my father really hasn’t told me anything about it yet.”

“You probably won’t be there long though, right? At least that’s what your father told Mr. Stockwell.”

Haru’s shoulders slumped, “You mean because of the wedding.” It wasn’t a question, “Yes, I suppose not.”

Makoto opened his mouth to ask more about Sophia and their engagement but ultimately thought better of it. There had been very little conversation in their private corner of the smoking lounge, and what had been said was certainly not upbeat or encouraging. It was as if Katsu’s words at dinner hard served as both a harsh reminder for Haru and an unpleasant revelation for Makoto, removing all the progress they had made that day. They now had a difficult time making eye contact, let alone finding the words to speak to one another.

“Haru, I…I’m really sorry about dinner. I shouldn’t have argued with your father like I did. I feel like I made everything worse for you.”

Haru looked up at him for the first time in a long while, “What are you talking about?”

It came out blunt and candid, and he sounded genuinely and profoundly confused.

Makoto hesitated, “Well he looked so angry after dinner, I thought-”

“I’m glad you came to dinner.” Haru met his eye and said it without hesitation, “It’s true that my father isn’t happy, but I knew he wouldn’t be. I’m honestly really glad you were there, and even though I didn’t expect it, I’m glad you argued with him. It’s been a long time since I’ve seen someone openly disagree with him.” He smiled for the first time since dinner, “I was impressed. I think everyone was.”

“But what about after we leave here? Once you are alone won’t he…?” Makoto trailed off. He didn’t know what Katsu would do once he and Haru were alone, and that perhaps made him worry more than anything.

“You shouldn’t be so quick to blame yourself.”

“I…I just worry about you.” Makoto felt embarrassed the moment he said it. It wasn’t like they had known each other very long, and he didn’t have the right to say it like he had been worrying for years. “I don’t want you to think that I think of you as…as my responsibility or anything. I just want you to be happy, and I’m worried that you aren’t, or that things will happen that will make you unhappy.” He blushed even deeper, “I felt that way since the moment I saw you.”

Haru thought back to the morning before, when Makoto had caught Haru drawing him from the deck above. He blushed and looked at the ground, “I didn’t think you had realized that was me.”

The both smiled shyly and Makoto was on the verge of saying Haru would be hard to forget when Haru spoke once more.

“Makoto I…I’m glad you saved my life, and I’m glad I got to meet you. That made me happy.”

Makoto inhaled sharply and his mouth opened in surprise. When he finally spoke his voice was
weak, “Haru, can…can I–”

“Yahoooooo! Mako-chan!!” Nagisa sprang up seemingly from nowhere and into their bubble, making Makoto emit a small scream and Haru jump several feet backward.

“Nagisa! What on earth - you terrified us!”

Nagisa stood before them, rubbing his neck and looking slightly bashful, “I was doing something I shouldn’t have. I’m sorry Mako-chan, I didn’t understand.” He felt bad for interrupting, but they were clearly having a moment and he couldn’t stand eavesdropping anymore. It had been intimate and heartfelt, something he and Rin shouldn’t be a part of, especially when Haru was looking at Makoto like he put the stars in the sky.

Before Makoto could question him further, Nagisa met Haru’s gaze, “I’m sorry for the way I treated you earlier, it sounds like Mako-chan had fun today. Thank you, Haru-chan!”

“Haru-chan?” Haru gaped in horror.

Makoto laughed, “It means he likes you.”

Nagisa hopped onto the couch next to Haru, putting an arm around him and chatting away merrily.

“Terrific.” Haru mumbled, but gave a small smile, happy he was finally accepted by Makoto’s closest friend.

Conversation flowed easily with Nagisa’s arrival and he talked at length about all the money he had one, almost three hundred pounds.

“It wouldn’t be nearly as much if Haru-chan’s friend wasn’t stubborn, bad at poker, and didn’t carry so much cash on him.” Nagisa made sure he spoke loud enough for Rin to hear him from behind the couch.

He suddenly swiveled in his seat and called across the smoking lounge, “Rei-chan! Over here!” he waved both his arms exaggeratedly.

Rei had been making his way across the lounge pushing a cart of liquor and tobacco and hesitated briefly before he began to walk towards their group. Stopping a few feet from them, he was about to ask Nagisa if he would like to buy another cigar when something on the floor caught his eye.

“What are you doing?”

Rin’s bright red face suddenly popped out from behind the couch.

While Makoto and Haru stared at Rin in confusion as he offered a dubious explanation, “I…you see I dropped something and-” Rei moved to speak to Nagisa.

“I thought you were still mad at me?” he looked both hopeful and afraid.

“I should be,” Nagisa started by giving him a threatening look, “but because of you I’m currently holding three hundred pounds, because of you I don’t have to worry about food or a place to stay for a long time, because of you I-” Nagisa trailed off, growing embarrassed. Running out of things to say he simply shrugged and smiled, ”because this is the ship of dreams, I’ve decided to give you a break.” He pointed a finger at Rei, “But don’t let it happen again.”

Rei gulped, “Never.”
Outside of their private conversation, Rin was growing tired of offering half-formed explanations.

“You know what? It doesn’t matter what was doing, I can do what I want.” He looked around for a change of subject and noticed the thinning population of the room, “Our party will be going soon. Haru, we should leave.”

Without saying anything more, he turned his back to them and began walking towards where William, Jacob, Arata, and the newly returned Katsu were sitting.

When he was gone, Nagisa snickered, “You rich people sure go to bed early. Mako-chan we should celebrate!” he waved all his winnings in the air.

“Nagisa I’m not really-”

“I’ve got it! At lunch today some Russian guys came by and told me there was going to be a party in the general room tonight, they were jerks but still, it should be fun!”

Makoto hesitated, “I really don’t think-”

“Haru-chan and Rei-chan should come to!” Nagisa ignored Makoto and pointed after Rin, “But don’t invite him.”

“Nagisa that’s mean!” Makoto chided.

“I don’t think he would come anyway.” Haru looked slightly gloomy and Rei shook his head.

Makoto looked at Haru, “Well, it could be fun?”

“It will be fun!” Nagisa exclaimed, “C’mon Haru-chan, Mako-chan and I have spent time in this stuffy place, now let us show you how the other side has a good time.”

Makoto frowned, pretty sure that Nagisa meant how he had a good time; Makoto had very few memories of parties, and all of them ended with him having to stop Nagisa from fighting someone twice his size.

“I…um, I really don’t know if I’ll be able to get away.” Haru mumbled. He still had to face his father’s wrath, and depending on the length and severity of the lecture he was about to receive, sneaking down to the general room for a festivities he couldn’t even imagine didn’t seem wise, let alone possible.

“I’ll go down with you,” Rei offered, “once we get back to our cabins why don’t we change clothes and I’ll wait for about half an hour for Katsu to go to bed, and then I’ll come up to your room. If he’s awake we can say I forgot to lay out your clothes for tomorrow or some similar task, and then I can show you the way to the general room.”

Haru was still uncertain, “I really don’t-”

“Yay! Thank you, Rei-chan!” Nagisa sprang out of his seat and squeezed the butler tightly, much to Rei’s embarrassment. “It’s decided then! Haru-chan and Rei-chan will meet us in the third class general room!”

They chatted for a few minutes before all finally standing to follow Rin, Nagisa pulling Rei ahead while Makoto and Haru trailed behind them.

They walked slowly and Makoto gave him an understanding smile, “You really don’t have to come
if you don’t want to. I know it’s dangerous for you and I don’t want you to get in any more trouble just because Nagisa can be a little pushy.”

“No I-I think it would be fun. I…”Haru attempted to return his smile, “I’ll try.”

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Rin’s walk back to the other gentlemen in their party was long and lonely; he didn’t understand why was everyone so willing to accept and trust the street-rat duo, and why Makoto and Nagisa had become well-liked by everyone so quickly.

When he reached the table of the older gentlemen, William greeted him enthusiastically.

“Rin! Where’ve you been? I’ve had a bit more luck since you and the little devil left.” He waved a stack of bills around dramatically to the annoyance of the other players, “We’re about to play our last game, do you care to join us?”

“I’m not really feeling up to it, thank you though!”

“Suit yourself! I’m able to win one more without you anyway!”

William, Arata, and Jacob all requested their own hand, and to William’s delight, even Katsu chose to join in. Rin watched them from a few feet away, mulling over what he had seen and heard.

They were growing closer, that much was clear. He was glad to hear Haru say he was happy, but couldn’t understand why he couldn’t be happy with the normal things people of his class were. Of all things, why did a third class vagrant make him happy? Rin’s brow creased as he thought of Makoto. When exactly did he become qualified to worry about Haru? They barely knew each other. Rin worried about Haru. Rin had the right to. They had known each other through the deaths of Haru’s mother and Rin’s father. There was a time when they were close, when they supported each other. When exactly had it all changed? The year he had spent traveling with Haru and his father had, more than anything, pushed them farther apart.

Rin let out a groan and ran a hand through his hair.

“Matsuoka-kun?”

He turned to see Ai looking up at him with wide eyes.

“Is everything okay?”

“Yes everything’s fine, just tired. Thank you though!” Rin gave him a weak smile and there was a noticeable droop in his shoulders, “What…um…what are your plans for tonight?”

Ai glanced at the lounge’s single clock, seeing it was already approaching ten-thirty, “It’s pretty late, I’ll probably just go back to the room and read a bit.”

“Oh that…that’s nice.” Rin was able to keep most of the disappointment out of his voice, “What are you reading?”

“It’s a book of short stories and poems by Marianne Abbot. I don’t really know a lot about poetry, but I like her short stories. They’re just a little sad sometimes, but the main reason I’m reading it is to help with my English.” Rin looked at him curiously, “I can speak it just fine, but…but I have a hard time reading it.” Ai looked at the ground, embarrassed.
“Well that’s nothing to be ashamed of!” Rin insisted, “It’s great that you’re trying to get better!” he hesitated, “If you want…I could try and teach you? I don’t know how good I’ll be at it, but it doesn’t really help if you don’t have someone to teach you the words you don’t know.”

“If-if you really don’t mind…I’d really appreciate it! Thank you so much, Sir!”

Rin rolled his eyes at the *sir* and smiled good-naturedly, “Sounds like a plan, after we leave here you can run back to your room and grab the book, and then we can meet at my room?”

Ai nodded enthusiastically, hardly believing his luck.

As the last poker game concluded and Jacob Astor won his first round of the evening, Haru, Makoto, Rei, and Nagisa returned.

Similar to the ending of dinner, their evening in the smoking lounge ended with much conversation and long-winded goodbyes.

William Stockwell pulled both Makoto and Nagisa aside and said several times how much he enjoyed their company and that he hoped they would meet again, stating that he wholeheartedly believed they were going great places.

Arata Tamura agreed with the statement, drawing from his own experience to talk to them about the importance of hard work and perseverance. Nagisa nodded along, not listening at all and instead thinking ahead to the drinks and music of the third class general room, but Makoto listened intently.

He recently felt very motivated to improve his station; he didn’t have skill at cards like Nagisa, so he was willing to take any advice he could get.

A few of Nagisa’s new fans called him over to say goodbye, leaving Makoto and Arata alone.

Makoto fidgeted nervously, “How…um, how do you want me to get this suit back to you?”

Arata smiled kindly, “I already spoke to Riko about it and we both are in agreement that you should keep it.”

Makoto was stunned, “Are…are you sure? If you got engaged in it then I can’t possibly, you’ve done so much for me already, I-”

“Neither of us are willing to take it back,” Arata paused, rubbing his chin, “Do you know how the story of how my wife and I got married?”

Makoto shook his head.

“It’s quite a story. Riko said she would like to see it retold.” Arata Tamura held out his hand, “It was a pleasure to meet you.”

Makoto was confused but took his hand regardless, “I owe you so much.”

“Not at all.”

Several feet away, Katsu, now returned from his mysterious voyage outside the smoking lounge, had sought out his son and was pulling Haru roughly by the arm.

Makoto saw this out of the corner of his eye and, breaking his handshake with Arata Tamura, took several steps in their direction. Haru’s terrified expression made the blood rush to his face and he quickened his pace; he wasn’t sure exactly what he was going to do, but he didn’t follow Haru into
the smoking lounge to do nothing.

Reaching them in just a few strides, he raised a firm hand to place on Katsu’s shoulder - when a voice suddenly called out to Katsu, stopping all three of them.

“Hey Katsu!”

He spun around, snarling, “What?!”

Frozen in surprise, Makoto still stood with his hand raised, quickly lowering it after Haru gave him a curious look. Turning, he saw William looking a bit like a kicked puppy, eyes wide and hands held up in a peaceful gesture.

“I was wondering if we could stay behind and talk for a bit? There’s some stuff I’d like to discuss with you, wedding talk and such.”

Katsu ground his teeth together but begrudgingly let go of his son, “Fine.” He leaned towards Haru, whispering, “I’ll be up shortly.” Before heading back into the center of lounge.

Haru looked desperately at Makoto, unsure exactly how this would affect their plans, and Makoto unfortunately didn’t think he had an answer.

They both cast a pleading look at Rei who approached them quickly, “We’ll do it just like planned,” he whispered, “they probably won’t talk for long.”

“And remember, you don’t have to come if it gets too dangerous.” Makoto added, still slightly flushed.

For the second time that night, Nagisa appeared out of nowhere, “Don’t say that, Mako-chan!” He turned to Haru, “Mako-chan really wants you to come.”

“Nagisa!” Makoto wailed, both embarrassed and betrayed.

“What are you all talking about?” Rin demanded, appearing behind them with Ai at his heels.

“We were certainly making fun of your abysmal poker skills!” Nagisa trilled in a sing-song voice, and he took off running as Rin made a lunge for him.

They all watched in amusement as Rin chased Nagisa out of the smoking room and into the hall, ultimately leaving the lounge in fairly high spirits.

When they reached the staircase that led to their separate barracks they found Rin doubled over, mumbling threats between pants, while Nagisa practically vibrated with energy.

They said goodbye once more, Rin casting a few final glares at Makoto and Nagisa, before Rin and Haru headed upstairs to their first class lodging while Ai, Nagisa, Rei, and Makoto descending the stairs to the third class rooms.

As he climbed the stairs, Haru thought of the night’s coming events, those he was certain of and those he was not. He was afraid, but as he glanced behind himself once last time, Makoto’s smile and the look in his eyes told him not to worry.

Chapter End Notes
Oh my I never thought I'd finish this chapter! Special thanks to everyone who kept me motivated with sweet comments you are all wonderful <3

I was in Target the other day and I saw a very cute Café Parisien sign and I just had to buy it?? I realize that writing this fic has probably made me incapable of not buying any Titanic merch i come across for the rest of my life.

tbh I did a stupidly large amount of research on the symbolic meaning of specific playing cards and every character DOES have their own assigned card (which was dumb of me because the meanings change depending on what source you're looking at sigh). They may or may not all get shown however because 1) I doubt I'll ever have Haru and Makoto ever sit down and play cards and 2) I HATE writing the poker/euchre/card game parts oh lord do i hate them.

Next chapter: fluff everywhere for every ship oh my god the fluff (and minor angst too) also next chapter: Haru handles alcohol even worse than me (queue: fun story from my life next AN)

Historical Things:
- **Picture of the first class smoking lounge!** You will see that it had fucking stained glass windows. I KNEW THAT, I knew it and I wrote the Haru/window reflection part anyway and I couldn't bear to remove it after I realized my mistake. Why did I do that I KNEW THEY WERE STAIN GLASS, smh @myself.
- **Picture of the first class reading and writing room!**
- **Poker Alice** who Ai mentioned Rin beating was a famous poker player in the US in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. She was taught to play by her husband and used the skill to acquire a large amount of wealth, using her good looks to distract men at the poker table.
- For cigarette holders there are four different lengths, the one Audrey Hepburn is usually seen holding is opera length and the longest at 16-20 inches. Sophia is using one size shorter, theatre length which is 10-14 inches.
- [EDIT] I knew i was forgetting something, gdi. The part where Tamura-san talks about how she came to marry her husband is almost a direct quote from Molly Brown, the woman her character is based off of; I just changed the arrangement and tense a bit to make it fit better.
Haru and Rin ascended the stairs to the first class barracks in silence, both of them leaving the smoking lounge with plenty of thoughts to occupy their minds. Rin’s frown deepened with every step they took, and Haru was caught somewhere between wanting to say something comforting but uncertainty if such words would be welcome.

Thanks to Nagisa, Rin had lost quite a bit of money, although Haru knew that the blow to Rin’s pride was greater than any monetary loss he had suffered. That aside, Haru also knew that his loss to Nagisa was not the only cause of his friend’s foul mood.

At another time, when they were younger and when things were not necessarily happier but at least simpler, Haru certainly would have offered words of encouragement. Tonight however, he didn’t know what words to offer. Tonight, he held his tongue because he simply did not know how to talk to Rin anymore.

They reached their hallway still in awkward silence and Haru placed a hand on his doorknob, fully intending to leave without a word to his friend, when Rin suddenly spoke.

“Hey, I know today has been sort of…odd, but you know that at the end of the day, I’m on your side right?”

Haru didn’t meet his eyes, “Yeah…yes, of course.”

It was an effort, Haru recognized that, but it was an effort that should have been made some other time, in some other way, at a time when Haru truly needed it. Not necessarily too little too late, but still not enough to bridge the gap that had grown between them these last few years.

Rin looked around awkwardly, “Okay…uh…good. Goodnight then.”

“Night.” Haru said, quickly entering his room and shutting the door.
He collapsed on his bed, amazed that despite the chaos of dinner and excitement of the smoking lounge, his night was not yet over.

He rolled over to watch the clock that hung on the opposite wall; it was rather small with a delicate porcelain face. Roman numerals encircled the clock face and it took Haru a little longer than it usual would have to deduce that it was almost eleven. The pendulum swung back and forth menacingly, and Haru stared at it, waiting for his father to come and offer whatever punishment he thought necessary.

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Several floors below, the first class smoking lounge was nearly empty and William and Katsu chose armchairs with a prime location by the fireplace. It was a monstrous thing, large and elegant, made out of marble, with two sculptures of merlions standing guard on either side. A small circular clock was placed on the mantle above of the fireplace, and above that hung a large seaside painting, depicting one large cruiser, one small rowboat, and many, many sailboats. Exquisite and striking as the fireplace was, neither of the two men found it particularly impressive or intimidating.

William sipped a glass of scotch while Katsu puffed on a pipe; William had said nothing after leading Katsu to the fireplace; the Englishman simply hummed a lighthearted tune and tapped his fingers rhythmically on his armchair.

Katsu cleared his throat, “You wanted to speak with me?”

William shrugged, “Well we didn’t get to speak after dinner yesterday, although that’s rather understandable. It’s been a while so I just wanted to chat.”

So really, no reason at all, certainly no pressing reason. Katsu frowned.

“If that’s all you wanted then you shouldn’t have requested my company.” He glared, “I am quite tired and you were exceptionally energetic all evening.”

“No more than usual. Although I suppose you wouldn’t know that, would you?” William grinned, “It’s been far too long, though I would argue it’s not me that has changed.”

Katsu ignored him and shifted in his seat uncomfortably, “Business is going well I trust?”

“To tell you the truth, not particularly. Sophia’s not happy. She prefers Australia, says she can actually breathe there, that the London air is filthy. Funny, but I didn’t notice at all. I guess I’d gotten used to it...not being able to breathe. It’s odd, the situations you’ll become accustomed to.” Katsu simply grunted and William continued, “But there’s nothing left for us in Australia. Free the convicts - fine! But what then happens to the warden’s family? I watched my father try for years,” and for the first time all evening, there was bitterness in his voice, “well, all that you already know. He died a very poor man.”

“It seems as if you’ve done well for yourself though.”

“I’ve tried, but there’s just nothing there for us anymore. I couldn’t keep Sophia there. London was somewhat profitable, but ultimately things didn’t end well there either. I only hope she will be happy in New York.”

“She’s not much like you.” Katsu observed, thinking it was just easier to keep William talking – their silences were uncomfortable.

William smiled once more, and it wasn’t his usual smirk or cheeky grin, but a smile of love.
“Not at all, I often think that is for the better. Besides, what an utterly boring world this would be if we were all the true products of our parents.” He paused, rubbing his chin between his thumb and forefinger, “Haru isn’t much like yourself, or Rima for that matter.”

“You are correct.” Katsu’s features hardened, “He has none of her strength…nor mine.”

William continued to contemplate, still rubbing his chin, “Perhaps not, but he has his own. Once he finds a reason to be strong, I believe he will be.”

Katsu snorted, “I do not respect men who cannot be strong simply for themselves.”

“Well, you wouldn’t.”

“And by that you mean?”

“You’re rather selfish, so of course you’d think that.”

Katsu scowled, “Why should I sit here and let you insult me?”

William shrugged, “I’m not sure, but you are.” He stood from his chair and took several steps forward until he stood directly in front of the fireplace. Backlit by the flames, he was silhouetted dramatically, with one hand in his pocket and the other swishing scotch around his glass.

Katsu looked away from this striking scene uncomfortably and reached a hand around to his waistcoat, feeling for his pocket watch, finding it missing. He passively put his hand back beside himself, frowning again.

“So that’s where you disappeared to earlier.”

He looked up to see that William had witnessed this small action.

“Pardon?”

“You were taking it back to your room, right? Too many people?”

“Crowds make me uncomfortable,” Katsu’s face was stiff, “they increase the threat of sticky fingers, and with the addition of commoners...well, I wouldn’t take any chances.”

William turned back to the fire, “So untrusting…” he said it quietly, only to himself.

They sat in silence for several more minutes, Katsu puffing on his pipe, hoping the subject was dropped, and William staring profoundly into the fire, watching the flames dance. Still with his back to Katsu, he was the one to eventually break the silence.

“You know, I think I’ve finally figured it out.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

William turned and pointed at Katsu’s bare left side, the usual location of his pocket watch.

“Everyone thinks it’s hiding something incredibly grand and valuable, but is also somehow secret, a jewel worth more than this ship or a scrap of paper that could topple governments. Even I thought so. Of course it wouldn’t matter to anyone if you weren’t as private and mysterious as you are. If, for example, our friend Jacob Astor were to carry a watch the way you do, everyone would surely excuse it as mere idiocy, but I digress…I’ve got it figured out, and it’s something so simple...” He gave Katsu a tired smiled, suddenly looking very different, several years older - a wiser and sadder
man. “She gave it to you, didn’t she? And now everyone thinks it’s the container of some great treasure…that is certainly irony. Or perhaps there’s a lesson in there somewhere?” He shook his head, “I should have known sooner. She’s the only other thing you’ve ever cared about that much.”

Katsu’s cigar had frozen at his lips, neither choosing to inhale or pull it back down, he observed William through the smoke, contemplating how to answer.

“You’re….closer than most,” he said finally.

“I know I have expressed this sentiment in the past, but I truly am sorry about Rima…she was a wonderful woman.”

“You say that, but only one of us attended the other’s wife’s funeral.”

William suddenly stood up straight, looking stern and defensive for the first time that night.

“That’s unfair.”

Katsu was silent.

“You know why I couldn’t go.”

Still Katsu said nothing.

“You honestly can’t blame me for not being there.”

Katsu finally snapped, “I quite intend to!” He stood up and his voice quickly became enraged; not his usual cold, controlled anger that operated more as a default setting than true emotion, this anger had hostility simmering at its core. “I’ve grown tired of this conversation. I’m going to bed.”

“Well I don’t intend to apologize,” William said to Katsu’s retreating coattails, “She’s dead you know, let the dead rest!” he shouted this at the closed door, not sure if Katsu had heard him and hoping he hadn’t.

He downed the remainder of his scotch in one gulp and threw the glass into the fire, watching it shatter into hundreds of tiny shards. The mess was larger than he had expected and he immediately felt guilty. He waited up until the cleaning crew arrived, giving them each twenty pounds and apologizing for the mess.

Meanwhile, Katsu climbed the stairs at a near-sprint, reaching his room, his face hot and chest heaving. He left the lights off and stumbled across the room in the dark, loosening his tie, he blindly searched the liquor cabinet on the opposite wall and grabbing the first bottle he came across. Neglecting a glass, he drank straight from the bottle.

Sitting on the edge of his bed, he was suddenly assaulted with a memory that had been clouded and repressed: the same magnetic silhouette backlit by a different fireplace. The same words spoken in a breathy whisper.

“She’s gone you know, so it’s okay…you don’t have to feel guilty.”

He fell into bed, full clothed, tossing and turning, his son’s punishment completely forgotten.

****

In the third class barracks, Makoto was definitely not panicking. He changed clothes several times, hindered by the fact that he had a grand total of five stained shirts and three pairs of frayed trousers.
He eventually decided on his least-worn pair of pants and the button down shirt the Tamuras had given him, neatly folding the expensive suit jacket, slacks, and tie and placing them inside his tattered bag.

Finally, feeling as content as he was going to with his ensemble, he looked properly at Nagisa for the first time since they had entered the room. His mouth fell open.

“Why is your shirt unbuttoned so far?!”

Nagisa looked up at him in surprise, his shirt unbuttoned to about halfway between his collar bone and belly button, and his expression quickly changed to one of pity.

“Poor Mako-chan, so innocent.” Nagisa looked him over, “What about you? Why is your shirt buttoned all the way to the top?”

“Why? What’s wrong with that?”

“It makes you look like a prude! Aside from that, you only button the collar when you’re wearing tie.”

Makoto reddened, “Well how was I supposed to know? How do you know that?”

Nagisa ignored his question and took it upon himself to undo Makoto’s top button. He tried for a second but Makoto forced him away.

Nagisa let out an exasperated sigh, “Mako-chan, you need to be more outgoing.” He let out an exasperated sigh at Makoto’s bemused expression, “Start by picking a style: You could be intense, like a storm, Or delicate like a flower, or - my favorite - alluring, like a siren.” He raised his voice, “All of those are better than shying away from everything like a turtle.”

“I…I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Nagisa gave him and exasperated look and eventually turned away. When he wasn’t looking, Makoto undid one more of his buttons.

****

Across the hall, the two butlers were preparing for their night with considerably less commotion. Rei changed his clothes calmly, dressing-down his butler’s uniform by removing his jacket, cufflinks, and tie.

Ai was less at ease than his patient senior; he knew Rin had only offered to help him with his reading, an offer that hardly suggested romance, but he was excited nevertheless.

When they had first returned to the room, Rei had been surprised to see Ai pulling out a different shirt and trousers to change into instead of his pajamas. He chose that moment to inform Ai about the party, apologizing for not mentioning it sooner, but the younger butler had blushed and stammered something about being busy.

“Ah…” Rei smiled knowingly at him, “well I hope you have fun then.”

Ai blushed even more deeply, “Thanks…same to you!”

He finished changing first and Rei wished him luck once more as Ai left the room, clutching the book tightly to his chest.
Rei finished changing about ten minutes later and was just about to let the door swing shut behind him when something silvery caught his eye. Ai’s rooms key lay on their room’s sole desk, innocent and forgotten. Sighing, he closed the door behind himself, leaving it unlocked.

Out in the hall, he could hear Nagisa’s high-pitched antics, muffled slightly but still clearly audible, and Rei couldn’t repress a small smile. He dawdled in the hallway a little longer than was necessary, allowing his mind to wander forward a few days, wondering just what would happen to all of them once the ship landed. He lingered just long enough to reach an unpleasant conclusion, before finally starting his journey up to Haru’s room.

He knocked and was quickly ushered into the room. “He came back about ten minutes ago,” Haru whispered. “He hasn’t come by yet.”

They both turned suspiciously to the door that adjoined the father and son’s rooms, as if they expected it to suddenly fly open, raining wrath down upon them.

Turning back to his friend, Rei saw that Haru looked more tense and anxious than usual; he was pacing and biting his lip, while his eyes continually darted to the clock.

“It might not be a good idea to wear your dinner suit down to the third class general room,” Rei spoke quietly, but Haru flinched horribly.

Rei apologized quickly and Haru looked down in surprise, as if he had forgotten what he was wearing. “No...I um, you’re probably right, I should change. So um…just a plain shirt and slacks or...?”

Rei took up as much time as possible picking out something for Haru to wear, distracting him with a discussion of fabric and color. While they debated, ten minutes passed, then twenty, and suddenly the sound of Katsu’s low snores rumbled through the wall.

“Well would you look at that? Good things are happening tonight.”

Haru gave the cheerful butler a weak smile, “So is this alright then?” He gestured down to his navy button-down and black trousers.

Rei nodded, “Although it probably won’t matter that much too…interested parties. Are you nervous?”

“No.” Haru knew Rei knew this was untrue, but he lied anyway.

“Good, there are several people down there who are not willing to let anything happen to you, so you have no need to worry. Are you ready?”

Haru was not, but he nodded nevertheless.

Rei led the way out of their room and down several flights of stairs, winding in and out of hallways, and they both heard the party before he saw it.

Walking into the third class general room, the thing Haru first truly became aware of was the music; more lively and energetic than any concert or opera he’d been forced to sit through, it was spontaneous, loud, and demanded to be heard.

The room itself was simple; the walls were white, the lighting was poor, and the long benches and table were placed carelessly around the room, but unlike the finest lounges and banquet halls he had seen, the third class general room was decorated with colorful, vibrant people.
At the center of the room sat the band; Haru spotted a ukulele, accordion, harmonica, and, incredibly, a bagpipe, all playing without sheet music or instruction, with a remarkable amount of harmony.

All around the band people danced; strangers would accidentally brush shoulders and then readily take a spontaneous jig around the room, returning arm in arm like they had known one another for years.

Men both taller and broader than Makoto sat in one corner, arm wrestling and telling jokes, while numerous young ladies had left them to it, and danced freely nearby.

Haru followed Rei closely through the crowd trying in vain not bump into anyone, apologizing profusely whenever he did.

Rei suddenly stopped and spoke loudly over the music, pointing to the far corner of the room. “They’re over by that table.”

Makoto and Nagisa each stood holding cups of some fizzy ale, looking far more at ease than they had just an hour ago in the smoking lounge. With them were two blonde boys, one of whom was standing and appeared to be yelling at the other, who was wavering back and forth in his seat. Makoto was half-heartedly attempting to mediate their argument but stopped the moment he spotted Haru and Rei, waving them over with a smile.

As they approached, Haru caught a few words of the argument the two blonde boys were having. “You’re supposed to be playing with us, you stupid git!”

The one seated at the table reeked of alcohol and slumped forward, mumbling something about incoherently. The sober one of the pair continued shouting in the background as Makoto greeted them.

“Hi! Was everything okay?” He directed the question to both of them, but cast a brighter smile to Haru.

Haru however, was not feeling conversational and Rei answered for them, “No problems at all! Katsu is currently fast asleep.”

Nagisa spotted them for the first time, “Yay! Haru-chan is finally here! Mako-chan you’re being rude, he doesn’t know the twins!” he chided, pulling Haru away from Rei and Makoto, both of whom were baffled, as Haru was suddenly Nagisa’s new best friend. “Haru-chan these are our neighbors, Niall and Ethan….erm, sorry I don’t think I got your last name?”

“Aetkin!” the one who standing, Ethan, supplied helpfully. He held out his hand to Haru, “Nice to meet you!”

Haru’s mouth suddenly felt very dry and he had a hard time finding words, “L-likewise.”

Below them, Niall groaned a few times and Ethan pointed down at his brother, “Ignore this idiot.”

Niall was currently face down on the table, but glared up at his brother with his one visible eye. “Thas r-rude.”

Nagisa let out a laugh and addressed Haru once more, “They’re from Ireland, Rei-chan and I got to know them pretty well last night over cards - which reminds me!” he reached into his pocket and pulled out a crisp twenty pound note. “I recently came into some funds and I felt badly for taking all your money.” He grabbed Ethan’s hand and forced the twenty into his palm, “Consider this a ‘thank
“you’ for playing with Rei-chan and I!”

The Irish boy looked from Nagisa to the money in his hand several times, mouth hanging open.

“You’re joking.”

“Nope! Keep it - we gotta help each other out after all!”

“This…this is incredible, thank you so much!” He shook Nagisa’s hand vigorously and elbowed his brother, “Show some gratitude ya drunk bastard.”

Niall let a low groaning noise and gave Nagisa a thumbs up, spewing a few words of English and Gaelic, and several others that were most likely nonsense.

Ethan pressed his lips together and look around at the rest of them, “Earlier today we told the band we’d be able to play with them,” he explained, suddenly leaning down and shouting in his brother’s ear, “DO YOU REMEMBER THAT? THE GUITAR? YOU’RE SUPPOSED TO BE PLAYING IT!”

With what looked like a large amount of effort, Niall raised himself up, “I can’t play c-c-cos I’m heartshick, not cos I’m drunk.” Ethan made a disgusted noise and Niall grabbed his arm, “She said she’d be comeee!”

“She said she’d try, so either stop whining or pass out already.”

Niall looked at the rest of them with droopy eyes and held up a hand, hiding his mouth from his brother, as if that his next words were completely inaudible, “He’s just mad cos she b-broke his nose once.”

Beneath Ethan’s roar of that was your fault! Nagisa cackled and nudged him several times, “At least this way people can tell you apart!”

Niall burst into a fit of drunken laughter but Ethan looked unamused, self-consciously bringing a hand up to his crooked nose before sighing, “I’m gonna get back to the band, if he gets too bothersome or passes out, come find me.”

Nagisa poked Niall’s forehead and he almost teetered backwards off his chair, “What if he throws up?”

Ethan shrugged, “Hang him over the side of the ship.”

He cast one more look at his brother, mumbling something inaudible before leaving and rejoining the band, picking up the fiddle and joining into their jaunty rhythm easily, receiving many cheers of the crowd.

Once he was gone, Nagisa clapped Haru on the back, making him jump, “So, Haru-chan, what do you think?” Nagisa spread his arms wide and gestured to the room, “Much better than the posh and hoity-toity right?”

“It…it’s nice.” Haru stammered, not sure exactly what he could say about this wild atmosphere, still uncertain if he truly found it enjoyable or not.

This was considerably more terrifying than any dinner or gala he had ever attended. At a ball, he could at least predict the general flow of events; it was always the same droll conversation and boring people. Suddenly forced into this environment, he had no experience with what to say or how to act.
In this frenzied room, with this untamed crowd, he felt as if anything could happen, and terrifying as that was, it also excited him.

“It’s better with a drink!” Nagisa declared, shoving his unfinished cup of ale into Haru’s hand.

“Oh, no I um-“

“Keep it! Rei chan and I are about to go dance anyway.” Rei looked at him in surprise as this had not exactly been discussed between them, but shrugged and gave them a carefree smile. Nagisa’s eyes flew from Haru to Makoto, “Unless you two were planning to join us?”

Makoto’s face reddened at Nagisa’s question; when it came to dancing, he wasn’t exactly sure of his feet. One glance at Haru’s face him that he felt the same, and Makoto answered for both of them, “I think we’ll stay here for now. We’ll…uh…we’ll keep Niall company.”

Nagisa looked tremendously disappointed in both of them. “If you say so! C’mon Rei-chan!” He took off towards the center of the room, pulling an all too willing Rei along with him.

Makoto and Haru sat down across from Niall and Haru suspiciously took a sip of the drink Nagisa had given him - to his surprise, it wasn’t bad.

“This…is good.”

Makoto laughed, “One of Nagisa’s many talents is the ability to pick out decent tasting alcohol.”

Makoto took a sip from his own cup and then placed it back on the table, his lips sparkling with a few lingering drops of ale. Haru stared at them, noticing for the first time a small scar on his bottom lip. Haru watched it as Makoto spoke, trying to memorize its shape and size so he could add it to his drawing later.

“Haru?”

Haru blinked, “S-sorry, what were you saying?”

Makoto gave him a dazzling smile, “I’m glad you were able to come.”

Haru looked around at the intimidating crowd, the overwhelming band, and Rei and Nagisa dancing freely in the room’s center. He looked back at Makoto’s smile.

“Me too.”

In the background Niall let out a drunken sob from the table, startling them both.

****

Ai climbed the stairs to the first class barracks slowly, feeling a bit like he had misled Rin. It wasn’t that he didn’t know how to read English; he had a rather strong foundation in the basics, but he always struggled with longer words and complex sentences, while lengthy essays and documents completely left him completely lost.

The book he clutched to his chest contained various poems and short stories, hardly what one would call challenging, and he had bought it mainly to build his vocabulary. From what he had read so far, he guessed its target audience had been young ladies.

The door swung open moments after he knocked revealing a grinning Rin, still wearing his dinner clothes but looking marginally more disheveled; his shirt was untucked and his tie hung loosely from
his neck. With a smile, he beckoned Ai into his grandiose room, an action Ai still was not used to; its
ewness and all its implications made his heart race.

“So what have you brought for us?”

Ai showed him the book, “Time (More than Enough): A Collection of Poems and Short Stories by
Marianne Abbott.”

Rin did not look exceptionally impressed, “I’ve never heard of it.”

“I don’t think it did very well; I bought it at a discount store.”

The book wasn’t exactly old, mostly it just appeared well-used. The publication date was right
around the turn of the century, but it looked like it had been handled and read many times. Ai
wondered if that meant its words had left most readers unaffected, or at least, not affected enough to
wish to keep it.

Rin led Ai to the fireplace and sat in the same chair he had the night before, gesturing for Ai to do the
same. Ai’s movements were stiff and he once again sat on the very edge of his chair.

“Wine probably isn’t a good idea tonight,” Rin joked.

Ai forced a laugh. He was suddenly feeling very nervous, “No…probably not.”

Rin sat up straight, fully attentive, and gave him an encouraging smile, “Whenever you’re ready.”

Ai nodded, opening the book with trembling fingers. His mouth felt very dry and his face began to
feel incredibly warm. He knew that Rin was supposed to be helping him, so errors were obviously
expected, but he felt embarrassed regardless. Turning to a poem he had not read yet, he cleared his
throat.

“Lines Written In an English Inn.”

Cheeks burning, Ai began the poem. He stuttered almost immediately, and had to slowly sound out
and work through two words (hal-lu-ci-na-tions and cat-a-lyt-ic). The poem wasn’t terribly long, but
he read slowly and it took him quite a while to get through it. After his initial stumbles he took a few
deep breaths and continued on, reading more calmly; he hit a few more rough spots but eventually
finished the poem feeling like he had done a relatively decent job. He looked up at Rin rather
apprehensively, awaiting judgment.

Rin was sitting very still with probing eyes, and Ai felt a bit like he was sitting before a judge or
critic. Rin eventually let out a hefty sigh.

“Absolutely terrible.”

Ai’s heart sank, “I-I’m sorry, I thought—”

Rin carried on with the wave of his hand, “I mean your reading was fine but the performance was
certainly lack luster! You read it like someone was holding a knife to your chest.”

Ai wanted to tell Rin that was what being with him always felt like, but since he was having trouble
simply meeting Rin’s eyes, it felt like the wrong moment to admit that.

“I don’t uh…I don’t think I know what you mean. What exactly was wrong with it?”

Rin continued his criticism with passion and Ai wondered if his reading truly had offended him.
“Well first of all what on earth was with your vocal progression? You shouldn’t mumble, it makes the listener think you’re not taking the poem seriously. Confidence really is key and your reading actually was pretty good, and if you do happen to stumble over a word or two then use it! Make it part of your performance.”

Ai nodded slowly, still feeling fairly lost.

“I know this isn’t really why you’re here.” Rin admitted, “Reading out loud helps more than reading in your head, because this way you can hear your mistakes. However, being able to read out loud with passion makes you enjoy what you’re reading more, it makes you really feel it, and what’s the point of reading otherwise?”

“I…I think I understand what you mean. What should I do differently?”

Rin grinned, “Simple, you are not a statue. Let yourself feel the poem and move with it, use your voice, your hands, your whole body. Do you mind if I show you?”

Ai felt tangled vines of heat begin to creep up his neck as he quickly shook his head, handing over the book.

Rin flipped to the same page Ai had been on and stood up, holding the book open with just one hand. He began speaking, and Ai suddenly understood what he meant. Rin began performing, and Ai felt like he was truly hearing the poem for the first time.

“Centuries have attributed countless delusions
To love, and its confusion.
Mere illusions and hallucinations and misconceptions,
The devious alterations of one’s perceptions:
The ode of the cynic, the unenlightened, the blind,
Preachers of adoration deceiving the mind,
Swearing it deceives us to see
That the sunsets are dyed more deeply,
That the rising sun shines more brightly.
This is hardly the fault of intense infatuation,
Never discredit your own observations,
When it feels as if the night
Is warmer, has an absence of fright,
It is truly because it has lost its cold,
It is the stars blessing your lovers’ hold.
The setting sun truly is more deeply ablaze
And the rising sun more deserving of praise.
The pleasant worldly corrections,
Are simply how the universe gives direction.
These are the quivers and quirks of its heart,
These are the sounds and letters love imparts.
And the universe cares deeply for nothing more
Than soulmates, and lovers’ rapport.
I am no stranger to the siren call of amore.
With a bakers son I first learned to explore.
And once the infatuation had reached its end,
I fell sweetly for a childhood friend.
And most recently I shall reveal to thee,
I fell severely - for a man of the sea.
He shall never know
The loving words I wish to bestow;
Sights set on the exotic East, he left,
And never before then had I truly wept.
On his fate, there has been no news,
But on his handsome form, I sometimes muse.
I wonder at the look upon his face
Had I pulled him into a deep embrace?
Had my feelings ever left my lips,
Had I ever spoken the affirming script.
If my love had ever been released,
Would the man have set sail out East?
Long I waited for his return,
Yet in those years, I have learned
That the will of the heart
And the will of the world
Do not always align,
And the wills of both me
And the man of the sea
Might never entwine
And for many years of passing time,
Of books and cleverness and a school bell’s chime
The stars and cosmos are wiser still,
And that wish of mine remains unfulfilled,
Our fates remain written by that starry quill.
His loss pulled me much asunder,
Yet tonight I shall pass in quiet slumber,
For one day the man of the sea shall be forgot
And with much swiftness I will be brought
A love that is infinite and cosmic,
Timeless and catalytic.
And so it goes,
For all who follow
The stars’ compass rose.”

Rin finished speak and Ai was in awe. He didn’t have the time or vocabulary to properly explain to Rin just how incredible he thought his reading was, he just opened and closed his mouth like a fool.

Rin handed the book back to him with a small smile, as if he had not just done something miraculous, “Here, try another one.”

But Ai was not ready to move on.

“Do…do you think what the poem is saying is true? That the universe works for some people to end up together?”

Rin scoffed, “No of course not. I think you shouldn’t wait for the world to bring you things, you should go get them yourself. If you want to be with someone, you should be with them and not let anything stop you, not fear, not common sense, and certainly not the universe. I frankly couldn’t care less if the universe isn’t happy with who I ultimately choose.”

Ai couldn’t help but feel a little betrayed by this answer and didn’t respond.

This made Rin’s grin fall and he suddenly looked ashamed, “Did I disappoint you?”

“N-no, It…it’s just surprising to hear you say that after you read the poem with so much passion.”
“Well, I at least owe that much to the author, don’t I? After all, while I find the poem’s premise fundamentally flawed, it might be her truth. And, well, it’d be nice if our true love was just brought to us, instead of having to fight and struggle to find them for ourselves. I think that’d be quite a wonderful thing, no matter how unlikely.”

Ai looked at the ground and gave a smile that seemed to be made of disappointment more than anything else, “It does seem as if the universe has better things to do than grant all our wishes.”

Rin nodded and then shook his shoulder, chiding him playfully, “Be careful you don’t fall for every pretty set of words! It’s a poem’s job to sound nice, but that doesn’t mean all of them are good.”

Ai looked up at him and couldn’t help but give a real smile, “Should I try another one?”

“Absolutely! And the most important advice I haven’t given you yet: remember your audience. In this case, there’s no one else here; it’s just me, so you don’t have to be embarrassed.”

Thinking that was quite impossible, Ai turned to the next poem.

****

With satins and silks, gold ornaments and jeweled trinkets, the first class reading and writing room was decorated with things far prettier than the bleak conversation about to unfold within it. Even the women inhabiting it bore hearts and minds far too grim for their sugar-sweet smiles.

With a mind like a storm and a heart of the wild, with cheekbones like high, perilous steeples, Sophia sat motionless, fazed by Marie’s sudden declaration that she, in fact, also had claws.

“I…am not sure what you mean. However, I actually have somewhere to be so I shall being going now.” She placed her cigarette holder back inside her handbag and snapped it shut.

“Wait Sophia dear, please don’t leave! I couldn’t resist challenging you slightly but I promise shall play nice!”

This small plea did little to sway Sophia’s determination and she stood up, “I can’t imagine for what reason you would like my company.”

“Simply to talk, we are not so different as you pretend.” Sophia raised an eyebrow and Marie continued, “The only difference between you and me dear, is that while you would readily slap someone across the face, I am more inclined to put a knife in their back.” She tilted her head to the side, “I find that fascinating.”

“How charming.”

They readily met one another’s eyes, their gazes quickly turning harsh and icy.

There is much documentation detailing the ways in which lending the mind to queries of love and pondering the workings of the universe can benefit the mind and fulfil the soul; it is certainly thought-provoking and enriching – if you have the time for it.

While gentlemen are often afforded the liberty and luxury to entertain the hypothetical, women are far less lucky. Women must deal with the immediate, the reality before them. They must laugh at all the right times, they must be intelligent but never too clever. They must act and react and follow the rules, and they do not have time for hypothetical discussions of the universe.

The growing tension between the two women who had learned this lesson well, was suddenly
broken by the squeal of a third who was still far too innocent to know it.

“Ooooooooh pretty!”

Across the room, a lone little girl suddenly scampered towards them with tiny, uncertain steps. She stopped at Marie’s feet and began assaulting the many bows and flowers on her dress, tugging and pulling, much to the horror of the blonde debutant.

“Ah, darling, no don’t—don’t touch that, the repairs with be quite expensive, no stop—where is your mother? Please stop doing that, this was specially made, very unique, don’t—” She stood up to better fend off her attacker and Sophia realized for the first time just how short she was; pulling in at an inch or two below five feet, Marie was truly a doll in every sense of the word.

“Oh for goodness sake,” Sophia snapped, losing her patience at this ridiculous display, “here, hold this.” She forced her purse into Marie’s hands.

Her hands now free, she bent down and scooped up the little girl, holding her tightly in her arms.

“Hello dear!” she said with a smile, “What’s your name?”

The little girl seemed unfazed by her sudden change of location, and she grinned up at Sophia, with two of her front teeth missing.

“Elsie!” she proclaimed proudly.

“Who leaves a little devil like that alone?” Marie snapped.

“What are you talking about? I think she’s darling. Besides,” Sophia sniffed, “your mother left you alone.”

“Oh very funny! At least I know better than to ruin Chanel!” Marie clutched the hem of her dress, which, to be fair, Elsie had completely shredded.

Sophia ignored her and turned back to the little girl, “Have you lost your mother?”

Elsie shook her head vigorously, “Mama went to the powder room.”

“I see, in that case, would you like to spend some time with us?” Sophia looked her over, “How about I fix your braid for you? It’s coming a bit loose.”

Elsie looked at her in horror, suddenly shrieking and trying to wiggle out of her arms, “No! No braids! They hurt! Braids are bad!”

Marie cast her a glare of extreme irritation but Sophia spoke to her softly, “Shhh don’t cry dear. How about I remove it for you then, would that be alright?”

Elise sniffled and nodded, allowing Sophia to gently set her down. Sophia joined her on the floor moments later and diligently began to loosen her plaits.

“Do you have a comb?” she addressed Marie.

“Why would I.”

“So you don’t?”

Marie glared at her before fishing through her own clutch, pulling out a small golden comb, inlaid
with pearls.

They sat in silence for several moments; Marie assessed the damage to her dress from a satin couch while Sophia worked intently on Elsie’s raven locks from the floor. The little girl had been right, the braid were pulled incredibly tight, and it made Sophia angry – Elise had to be no older than five. It looked like she had tried to pull them out herself and in many places her scalp was red and irritated.

Marie observed Sophia’s diligence from above, eyeing the dark haired little girl with narrowed eyes. With a deceitful mind and a heart that had long burned with anger, with doe eyes wide with feigned innocence, Marie quietly released the clasp on Sophia’s handbag and pulled out her cigarette holder.

Sophia looked up just in time to see Marie execute a perfect French inhale.

“Impressive.”

Marie grinned wickedly at her, “Was I convincing earlier?” She began emitting the same dainty, girlish coughs she had earlier, waving her hand in front of her nose, looking truly as if the smoke made her ill.

Sophia curled her lip, “You’re quite the actress.”

“I am sorry about that; I had to appear irritated in front of mama. It wouldn’t be good if she saw me now - but Sophia dear let’s not fight, I truly wish for us to be friends.”

Sophia had to laugh at her, “Mere moments ago you were telling me of your affinity for placing knives in peoples’ backs!”

“I was simply stating that we fight our wars differently.”

“What nonsense! This is simply how I live, I am not fighting any war.” Sophia knew that Marie was navigating their conversation far more calmly but she couldn’t bring herself to care, “You just like having an excuse to be cruel to people.”

Marie cackled, “Oh please do not think I need an excuse!” She looked down at Sophia with pity, “Doesn’t a new war begin every morning when you arise? Isn’t each day a battle against obedience, a battle because of the body you’ve been placed in?”

This answer took Sophia by surprise and she didn’t answer, refusing to consent to anything Marie said, whatever truth her words may hold.

“So then,” she began uncomfortably, “what rules do you break, besides smoking?”

“Oh not many, I really can’t risk falling out of my parent’s favor, as long as I sit quietly and behave well they give me everything I could ask for.” She faltered in a way that suggested this was not completely true, “But I do break a few rules. Men like their women with a slight rebellious side,” she waved the cigarette around, “nothing they feel they couldn’t control of course.”

Her answer fell on offended ears, to Sophia, this reason was absolutely repulsive.

“And that’s your sole motivation? Do you think of nothing else?”

“As an only child, only daughter, to wealthy parents, what else can I think of? You are in the same position as me, you must know. Besides,” she shrugged, “I do enjoy it; watching heirs and princes and politicians trip all over themselves, all the while wrapped around my finger. I find that very entertaining. It’s like a flip of the system you see, I take young men who believe themselves to be
masters of the universe and make them obedient to me alone. Men are willing to do so much for you if they adore you. Did you know I have a mountain named after me?"

“I can only hope it’s a small one.” Sophia spoke through gritted teeth, “And does the same tragic fate await Mr. Matsuoka?”

“Oh my, he is cute isn’t he? One of the more tricky ones, though. I shall catch him, I always do.” Her expression darkened momentarily as she thought of his troublesome butler.

“And you find that fun do you?”

“Controlling those who will so readily control their future wives and daughters? Yes, I find it fun.” Sophia sneered at her, “I’m surprised you haven’t been married off already.”

“There have indeed been close calls.” She admitted, meeting Sophia’s eyes for the first time in a long while, “Do you think me wicked?”

Sophia gave her an answer far more clear than a simple yes or no.

“You break hearts for fun.”

While she recognized her own deception and wickedness, Marie still did not enjoy being disliked despite them, “I break the hearts of men who will one day marry women that they will spend the rest of their lives controlling and demeaning and abusing. It will happen to me, and to you, and to that sweet little thing there.” She pointed to the oblivious Elsie, now with her hair in soft curls, her bangs loosely tied back with a scarlet ribbon, “So please allow me to have my fun.”

Thinking Marie was neither right nor wrong, but still refusing to admit there was any truth in her words, Sophia changed the subject.

“Are you implying that young Mr. Nanase falls into that category? That category of men, I mean.” Her voice was weaker than it had been previously, now lined with fear.

Marie rubbed her chin and pursed her lips, “Do I think he will be cruel to you? No. You honestly could do much worse. He seems quite timid, and frankly, not very interested in you. I doubt he would ever shout or be violent; most likely, he will just ignore you.”

Sophia refused to let her lips tremble, “The most I can hope for is a husband who ignores me?”

Marie gave her a sad smile, “You’ll be one of the lucky ones.”

Sophia had reached the end of her patience, “I don’t understand why you must be so bitter! You act as if real love does not exist in this world! Don’t you want a husband and children? A family?”

“I am bitter because we are going to receive that whether we want it or not!” Marie cast an ugly glance at the Elsie, and for the first time she appeared to fully lose her composure, “I am simply speaking the truth. It is the truth that is cruel, not me.”

“And if I don’t accept it?”

Marie took another puff from the cigarette holder, “Then I’d have the utmost respect for you.”

They looked at each other once more and this time their gazes were neither approving nor challenging, simply understanding – until the silence was broken by a sudden voice, cold and scolding.
“Elizabeth Renee Parks, what on earth are you doing? Stand up this instant, the ground is filthy!”

A woman with large earrings and wearing far too many furs crossed the room towards them, grabbing Elsie by the hand and jerking her out of Sophia’s lap.

“Good lord what has she done to you?” The woman looked over her daughter’s new hairdo and cast a heinous glance at Sophia. “Keep your hands off my child. Who is your mother? I will be speaking with her about your behavior.”

Sophia stood up, “Oh I encourage you to do so! You’ll find her six feet under, you’re quite welcome to go there yourself!”

The woman looked as if she had been smacked, which indecently, Sophia had considered. She eventually left them without another word, dragging the crying Elsie away by the hand.

Sophia took several steps after them, more than willing to put her plan into action, when Marie stood to stop her, “Don’t. You’ll just get her in more trouble.”

This did little to sate Sophia’s anger and her nostrils were still flared, her breathing hard.

“Here.” Marie passed Sophia back her cigarette holder and lit a match for her, watching as Sophia inhaled deeply, blowing smoke over the pair of them.

Marie smiled, “You stay sane in you ways, I stay sane in mine. Let’s call it a truce then?”

If Sophia hadn’t still been reeling, she probably would not have nodded.

“So then, I’m quite curious,” Marie leaned towards her, “do you intend to marry young Mr. Nanase?”

Sophia ignored her question and smoke slowly rose in coils above their heads; it became clear from the expression on her face that in her mind’s eye she was not seeing their well-light writing room.

“You know, as of late, I have not always felt so sane.”

Far from disappointing Marie, this answer simply saddened her, “Sophia dear, I know you don’t have your mother, and while your father seems very kind, I am certain there must be many things you are unable to tell him. I, well I would truly like to be your friend.”

Sophia observed her for several moments, eventually looking down at the floor. “I would like to have a friend,” she admitted.

Sophia finished her cigarette and lit another, and the two of them reached their first peaceful silence since the night began.

“You got it wrong by the way.”

Marie looked up at her in surprise, “Oh have I? Which part?”

“While I would never underestimate the power of a well-placed slap, people who cross me are more likely to meet my fist, rather than my palm.”

Marie gave her a devious smile, “How charming.”

****
Keeping the heartsick Niall company was, to say the least, engaging; with many hiccups and pauses, he spoke endlessly about the wit, intelligence, and beauty of the woman who had kept him waiting. For the first half hour or so, Makoto tried to comfort him, but there were only so many ways he could express the sentiment, and Niall didn’t seem to hear him anyway, so they mainly sat in silence and let the pitiful Irish boy pour out his heart.

“She’s like… she’s like nature, like a heavy rain or wind,” he hiccupped, “actually exactly like wind. Kinda like I’m being pulled along and barely hanging on, she’s the wind and I’m…well I’ve…” he furrowed his brow and looked down at the table, like he has lost the right words.

“You’ve been swept away.” Makoto didn’t seem sure where to look, he glanced down at the table, then at the lively crowd around them, then to Niall, and then ever so briefly to Haru.

Niall blinked a few times and then pointed at him, “Yes exactly! This guy knows what I’m talkin’ about.” He squinted at Makoto, “Uh…what’s your name? I’m Niall.”

Makoto tried to explain that they occupied rooms next to one another, but the Irish boy seemed to suffer from alcohol-induced selective hearing and once more began speaking of the great love of his life.

“She’s the real reason we’re going to America, she told me she was leaving England and that was going to be it for us, but what could I do? Ethan’s angry with me, but the day before the ship was going to leave I panicked, I couldn’t be without her. We bought tickets from a street vendor at twice the regular price, we weren’t even sure if they were legitimate. That day I swear I heard her calling to me, bewitching and magnetic, pulling me in, like a siren.”

Makoto twitched and let out an uneasy laugh at that last statement, and Haru eyed him curiously but eventually became distracted by a small fly buzzing around their table. If someone had asked him, Haru would have retracted his previous statement; this ale was not good, but great. He had initially drank because he didn’t know what else to do with his hands, but he quickly started taking larger gulps, enjoying the taste and light, warm feeling that had spread through his body. He was currently nursing his sixth cup.

Makoto had not been watching how much Haru had been drinking; it never crossed his mind that he might need to, and he was entirely unaware of Haru’s increasing inebriation. Although to be fair, anyone would look sober next to Niall.

“I’ll be back!” Makoto stood to get another drink, only his third if Haru was remembering correctly, which it was quite possible he wasn’t.

With Makoto’s departure, Niall looked properly at Haru for the first time, squinting, “Do I know you?”

Haru looked at the Irish boy, and, while his vision was a little blurry, he was certain he had never seen him before.

He shook his head, “You don’t look familiar.”

“Huh.” Niall squinted for a few more moments before gasping as if he had just remembered something, “Oh and she’s got these eyes…they’re so bright and refreshing, they make me feel like I’m running through a forest.”

Haru blinked a few times, processed this comparison, and then turned his head to look after Makoto. Niall followed his gaze, looking between the two of them a few times. He placed a heavy hand on
Haru’s shoulder, “Good for you, man.”

“What?”

Niall raised your voice, “I said good for you! I don’t judge, love is love.”

Haru blinked and frowned, “No I heard you, I’m just not sure what you mean?”

Niall didn’t say anything more and simply gave him a funny look as Makoto sat back down, holding two drinks. He passed one to Haru with a smile.

After another half hour, Niall seemed finally out of things to say about the love of his life and Haru’s head was feeling very heavy. He tried to rest it on his palm, only to have his cheek slip and his head fall forward, banging roughly against the table.

He pulled himself back up wearing goofy grin, gleeful to find that, against all logic, that had not hurt a bit.

Makoto however, was less at ease.

“How much did you drink?”

“Just—” Haru hiccupped, “just a bit.” He wavered precariously in his seat, oscillating forward and backward, and Makoto placed a hand on his shoulder to steady him.

Thanks to Nagisa, Makoto had much experience caring for those who had become slightly too intoxicated, and it was unlikely Haru would offer something he hadn’t seen before.

He turned to Niall, “I’m going to take him outside for some fresh air, um…” to be honest, the Irish boy didn’t look any better than Haru, “will you be alright by yourself?”

Niall blinked several times and then waved his hand, “Of course! I’m fine. I’m hardly drunk at all!”

Makoto watched him uncertainly for a moment before nodding and placing an arm under Haru’s shoulder, helping him stand.

“C’mon, let’s go this way.”

Haru tried to bring his drink with him but Makoto sat it back down on the table, “Nope, you’ve had enough.” He let out an exasperated sigh as Niall began reaching for the glass. “You too.” Makoto took the glass from his hands and chugged it, setting it back on the table, empty.

Niall frowned at Makoto as they began to leave, “Rude!” he called after them.

Makoto navigated through the crowd keeping a protective arm tightly around Haru, trying to avoid the most chaotic parts of the room. He wasn’t blushing and certainly wasn’t feeling embarrassed to be holding Haru this closely, he was far too focused on the task at hand for that.

Haru was not entirely sure what was happening, but also not bothered at all by that fact. He felt a little dizzy and his head had gone all fuzzy, but Makoto’s arm was around him felt warm and safe and told him not to worry. It was as Rei had said, no one was going to let anything happen to him, and with no one else did he feel that more acutely than with Makoto.

They passed Nagisa and Rei who had been dancing, and Makoto spoke a few words to them that
Haru didn’t catch, pointed over to Niall, and then began to lead him away once more.

Haru turned back to look at Rei and Nagisa for just long enough to see Nagisa place a small kiss on Rei’s cheek while the butler blushed and stammered incoherently. Haru looked from them to Makoto, so close to him and so warm, that small scar just a few inches from him. A soft and barely audible “Oh…” was the only way his fuzzy brain could express his sudden realization.

Makoto, currently concentrated on making it safely through the chaotic crowd, did not hear him.

The deck outside was like a different world. It wasn’t exactly quiet, the music from the general room was still audible, but it was dulled, adding a subtle rhythm to the background while the gentle sounds of the sea too center stage. The deck was empty, as it should have been for half-passed midnight, and the water was calm.

Makoto led him to the deck’s railing and Haru leaned against it, closing his eyes and listening to the water.

The night air seemed to have done Haru good and Makoto allowed himself to relax slightly. More than anything Haru looked incredibly peaceful; no one would have ever guessed he had hit his head on a table just five minutes ago. Makoto smiled at the thought of this and allowed himself to relax just a little more, thinking that Haru looked very pretty. His head was thrown, lips were slightly parted, and his long, dark eyelashes cascaded over his bottom lids.

Through whatever mysterious ability, Haru seemed to sense this break in fortitude and capitalized on Makoto’s moment of weakness.

Eyes springing open, Haru suddenly grabbed Makoto by the hand.

“Can we dance?”

The speed of which it took Makoto’s ears to pick up this statement, his brain to process it, and his cheeks to blush, certainly broke many world records.

“But I-I thought, um…why…why didn’t you want to inside?” He stalled.

Haru didn’t let go of his hand and attempted to pull him away from the railing and towards the open space on the deck, “I like the music of the ocean better.”

“Not too impressed with Ethan’s fiddle?” Makoto chuckled nervously, “I-I dunno, I’m kind of too embarrassed…” While this was true, he also said it to dissuade Haru, since he could think of several reason why dancing in Haru’s current state was a bad idea.

Haru hiccupped, “I was too, but I have discovered that alcohol does wonders for embarrassment.” He raised Makoto’s arm and attempted to spin underneath it, becoming tangled in his own feet.

Makoto caught him around the waist just before he landed painfully on the ground, “It doesn’t do a whole lot for standing though, does it?” He let out a small chuckle, “I think for right now the best place for you to be is right here.”

He walked Haru over to one of the deck’s many benches and sat him down. Haru’s spine was apparently on holiday because he remained upright for barely a moment before sliding slowly sideways along the back of the bench, eventually ending up on his back. Haru readily accepted this, laughing and fidgeting until he got comfortable. Once he had stopped giggling and was properly situated, he looked up at the sky.
“Wow.” He said it with all the wonder and amazement of a child.

Makoto sat down beside him, following his gaze.

“You said your mom used to tell you the con…constel…c-con…?” he frowned.

“Constellations?” Makoto had to work very hard not to laugh.

Haru nodded eagerly.

Makoto smiled down at him, “She did.”

“Can you tell me some?”

Chapter End Notes

Rest in Peace
Holly and Candice
Killed by THE POEM
YOU KNOW WHICH ONE
(in all seriousness it ruined us both we struggled so hard and it wouldn't be nearly as good without her help)

Okay so to address the 2+ month wait, this chapter was going to be roughly 20k, and decided to split it up for the sake of maintaining consistent chapter length, so I have another 10k chapter nearly done and ready to post, so their should be a very short wait for the next chapter for once. This chapter is mostly a preamble to all the dramatic fluff and angst of the next one, so I hope you enjoyed this sorta-slow chapter, next one should be much more eventful.

Also I've been laughing for like three weeks because [this gif] is basically Rin during this chapter.

Historical things:
- Picture of the fireplace in the first class smoking lounge
- The painting above the fireplace, Plymouth Harbor by Norman Wilkinson, was lost when the ship went down, but was painstakingly recreated by the his son. X
- Coco Chanel WAS active as a designer at the time, though she mainly designed hats, but just because her name is easier to recognize than other designers at the time, I went with Chanel.
- Picture of the third class general room!
- [EDIT - i always forget something] Where William talked about his father he was referencing how Australia was initially used a penal colony to relieve some of Britain's overcrowding in prisons (which you probably knew from any basic world history class tbh). The last boat bringing prisoners arrived in 1868 and most convicts were freed in the following years. Obviously, this was not to the benefit of the warden and his family, which is why William was being especially salty.
All My Stars

Chapter Summary

“Yours is the light by which my spirit's born: - you are my sun, my moon, and all my stars.” — E.E. Cummings

Or

Nagisa’s subconscious is out to get him, Rin falls asleep too early, Rei is patient, and for Makoto, past and present align.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Haru’s innocent request echoed across the deck - empty except for themselves and quiet except for their voices. Haru lay on his back on one of the benches, still rather intoxicated, while Makoto sat next to him, hesitating.

“I…” He looked up at the sky and knew this was different from the night before. The night before, the constellations and stars and planets had all blended together, their edges had frayed and the lines dividing them had vanished. The night before, he and Haru had been strangers. Tonight, Makoto knew that thinking of each star as a set of some larger picture was an entirely different matter, and he wasn't sure if that detracted from their beauty or added to it. But he was also sure that tonight, he and Haru were no longer strangers. “I can try.”

Exercising his memory, he tried to remember the last time he had looked up at the constellations with his mother. When their names didn’t immediately come to mind, he scratched his head and tried to think about it more logically; spring constellations in the Northern Hemisphere, so…

“Hydra!” he pointed excitedly at the sky, surprised with his own capabilities, “Right there, do you see those several stars and how they kind of look all twisty and coiled like a snake?” And suddenly the floodgates of his memory flew open, “And over there is the Centaur! And to the right is Berenice’s Hair, and just below that is the Air Pump, and-”

“Hydra.” Haru had his hand raised and a finger pointed to the sky, following Makoto’s movements, “…Guitar, Ber-Bernadette’s Chair, and…Fair Lump.”

Makoto couldn’t suppress a chuckle, “Close, the Centaur, Berenice's Hair, and the Air Pump. They are easier to remember if you know the stories behind them.”

Haru looked at him expectantly.

Makoto blushed, “W-well it’s been a while and I’m not nearly as good a storyteller as my mom…but I can try.” He cleared his throat, “Well the Centaur is tied to classical Greek mythology. Centaurs were a race half-human and half-horse, they loved to drink and were quarrelsome and ill-bred. They were loud and energetic with volatile tempers. Except-”

“Like Nagisa?”
Makoto laughed at the comparison, surprised he hadn’t thought of it before. “Yes, like Nagisa. The constellation represents the leader of the centaurs, Chiron. Unlike the others of his race, Chiron was wise and scholarly. He was especially knowledgeable when it came to the art of war and became a famed trainer of aspiring Greek heroes. Because of his accomplishments, when Chiron died the gods placed him among the stars.”

Haru raised his hand and pointed to it once more, “The Centaur.” He wore an expression of extreme concentration despite his drunkenness, and his new pupil’s interest made Makoto smile.

“Very good. If you look just to the right of that, those few dim stars make Berenice’s Hair. It is one of the few constellations with a connection to a real person. Queen Berenice of Egypt was famed for having beautiful, silky hair, and she was very proud of it. Shortly after becoming queen, her husband rode off to war with Asia. She promised the gods that if her husband returned victorious she would shear her hair. He returned home triumphant and she fulfilled her vow, shaving off her locks and leaving them inside the temple to her gods. The next morning the hair was missing, but that night one of the king’s advisors pointed out a new collection of stars, explaining that the gods had placed her hair in the sky.”

To Makoto’s surprise, Haru frowned up at it, “That’s not very exciting.”

“Oh?”

“It’s just some hair up there among heroes and monsters.”

Makoto chuckled, “I’ve never thought about it that way. There are some other pretty simple ones though, just below Berenice’s Hair is the Air Pump, one of the modern constellations. It was first mapped by a French explorer in the 1700s so there isn’t any mythology or story tied to it. There are a lot of constellations like that though, so for those my mom created her own stories to help me remember them.”

A shadow of a smile crossed his face as he said this and he tore his gaze from the sky, looking down at the deck. Makoto had made peace with his past, but that also didn’t mean it wasn’t painful at times. While he thought of his parents often, he rarely had to remember them this vividly. While his mother remained one of his favorite people in the world, it had been years since he had thought of how they used to lay in the soft grass on summer nights, or how she would tell him these exact same stories for hours, until he would fade into sleep, dreaming or daring adventures and epic travels.

Just as he could feel his lips begin to quiver, the pain of his past was interrupted by the wonder of the present.

“You look sad.”

And what an enchanting present it was. Haru looked up at him through red eyes wide with concern and Makoto had to smile, “I...I’m sorry. Is it better now?”

Haru said nothing and still watched him uncertainly, and Makoto decided he wanted to share the precious memories of his past - painful though they may be - with the special present he had been given.

“Long ago there was a very rich and powerful King. He was not a good King; he was selfish and extremely ignorant of the suffering of his citizens. Their land had many problems, it was dry and arid with no wind at all. The air was stale and stagnant, and over the years it had become extremely polluted with smoke and dust - much of his kingdom was plagued with respiratory illnesses. Despite this, the King remained selfish and greedy. However, for all these awful qualities, he loved his
Queen dearly and more than anything. But he was fearful, she had a very weak constitution. For all her status and wealth, the Queen was no luckier than the citizens her husband ruled. The Queen’s illness had worsened with her age and eventually she was only able to make small movements, spending most of her days in bed. The King knew his wife was dying. Determined not to lose her, he locked himself in his room and gathered as many books as possible on health and the atmosphere, and began inventing. He messed with all sort of mechanisms and gears until, through several filter systems, he had created a way to produce purified air and cleanse her lungs.

“Beside himself with joy, the King left the Air Pump alone and rushed to his Queen’s bedside, professing that he would save her life. Seeing that his Queen had grown incredibly weak, he immediately returned for his invention, only to find it missing. Enraged, he sent his soldiers to search every corner of the kingdom. After ten days of searching, the Air Pump was discovered in the household of none other than the King’s most trusted advisor. The man had been using the invention to help his dying son, a small boy of maybe three. Enraged, the King placed his advisor in prison and rushed back to his Queen’s bedside, only to discover that he was too late; she had died just minutes before.

"He ran to his room and didn’t open the door for seven days, refusing to speak to anyone. On the seventh day, one of his attendants called through the door to him, saying that the advisor’s son had passed away the night before. The King cracked the door open just an inch and ordered the advisor freed from prison with generous compensation, and then closed the door once more, resuming his miserable solitude. He drank himself to sleep and awoke suddenly in the middle of the night. The first thing he noticed was that the Air Pump was missing - he had thrown it into the room’s corner after his Queen's death - but found he couldn’t bring himself to care. Aching and hopeless, he walked out onto his balcony. To his amazement, he was greeted by a terrific breeze. It swept across his kingdom like a storm, blowing away all the dust and dirt and illness, and the people breathed clean air for the first time in their lives. The King stood in awe, not knowing that the universe had taken pity on him and placed his invention in the sky. From there, the Air Pump belonged to everyone, and blew winds across the earth."

Makoto finished this story without immediately launching into another, and as Haru stared up at the constellation – nothing impressive really, just four small stars – and he decided the story was far more impressive than the constellation could ever hope to be.

Makoto looked back down at the deck, “That story was my mom’s favorite.”

While Haru was drunk, he was not an idiot, and he certainly could still hear the small tremble in Makoto’s voice. He listened intently, hearing two small sniffles. He sat up and turned so that he could look at Makoto properly.

“Thank you for telling it to me.” Haru whispered, “It was my favorite too.”

Tears swelled in Makoto’s eyes and his cheeks flushed, and the more upset he felt the more disappointed in himself he became; he felt like he was ruining their present.

“I-I’m sorry,” Makoto stammered.

“It’s okay to be sad. I think sometimes it’s even good to be sad.”

Makoto tried to smile for him, “But I’m happy, too.”

“Well then, that’s good, too.”

Haru’s vision still blurred around the edges and he placed all of his weight on his hands, leaning
forward until Makoto’s whole face came into focus. He raised one hand, cupping Makoto’s face and, ever so gently, swiped away more impending tears with his thumb.

Makoto’s eyes were wide and watery, so close to him, so green and kind and bright. They were the healing kind of eyes, radiant and refreshing, like running through a forest. Niall’s drunken prose sprang to his mind and Haru thought it suited Makoto perfectly. He wanted to be closer, closer to that warmth, to those green eyes and that tiny, intriguing scar that marked his bottom lip.

Haru leaned forward mere centimeters, and this, incidentally, was a mistake, because the one arm that had been holding him finally gave out, and he fell heavily into Makoto’s lap.

All previous intentions forgotten, Haru began giggling like a madman. Makoto gulped as he helped him sit back up and tried to calm his own frantic heart.

****

The third class general room had left Rei feeling completely drained; they had been dancing for hours and while his feet and back were beginning to ache, Nagisa seemed to have limitless energy.

Surprising still, Nagisa didn’t seem to be very drunk. Rei wasn’t sure if he simply hadn’t drank very much or if he had just built up an incredibly high tolerance, but he assumed it was probably the latter.

Both possibilities aside, Nagisa was certainly the life of the party.

More than once he performed impromptu songs to the band’s music. Without a microphone or other equipment he simply created lyrics on the fly, receiving thunderous cheers and applause. He wasn’t the best singer, but they say ninety percent of being a performer is in your stage presence, and Nagisa certainly had that.

He also put Rei through his paces, spinning him endlessly and demanding that Rei lift him. Rei’s spinal cord was in splinters because, ‘that girl over there got lifted higher Rei-chan lift me higher!’

Despite his feeling that he was barely keeping pace with Nagisa, and aside from his various aches and pains, he knew it would have been difficult not to enjoy himself in Nagisa’s presence.

Nagisa soared through the room in a special combination of laughter and charisma. His enthusiasm seemed to grow with every dip, spin, and lift, and Rei worked hard to make sure they were well executed.

That resolution aside, there had been one lift of rather poor quality where Rei had nearly lost Nagisa to gravity, but Nagisa simply giggled and kissed him on the cheek, promising that they could try again.

These many factors were why, after Makoto had left them, quickly explaining that someone should probably look after Niall, Rei found himself feeling rather relieved.

Nagisa pouted and turned to Rei, “I don’t see why we have to end our fun to watch over him, he’s not our brother after all.”

“Why don’t we watch him for just a little while?” Rei offered, “I could use a short break.” He admitted.

Nagisa turned to look at Ethan, who was still playing enthusiastically with the band and had drawn a rather large crowd of female onlookers.
“I guess I don’t have the heart to pull him away from the spotlight.” He sighed.

In search of the dismal Niall, they headed to the same corner they had left hours earlier. They reached the table only to find it empty and looked at each other nonplussed.

“Don’t worry, we’ll find him,” Rei reassured, “how much trouble can a drunk man get in after just two minutes?”

He said this in ignorance: over the timespan of his life, Rei had spent very little of it drunk.

A sudden commotion rose from behind them and they turned to see Niall, drunk as ever, shouting and making rude hand gestures at two very large men.

Nagisa paled as he realized they were not just two large men, they were two large men he knew. The two Russian brothers he had met earlier that morning in the third class dining room were now standing red-faced, bearing the brunt of Niall’s insults. The one who had invited Nagisa to the party – the one Nagisa had successfully scared away with false flirtations – had a fist curled around Niall’s collar.

“Les go agin!” Niall demanded, struggling against the Russian man’s hold, “One more!”

While Nagisa was not eager to become involved, Rei calmly walked right up to them, “Pardon me gentlemen, is there a problem? I would appreciate it if you released my friend.”

The bearded Russian turned his attention to Rei. “Oh, are you willing to pay the twenty pounds he owes me? I didn’t realize.” Quick as a viper, he released Niall and grabbed ahold of Rei’s shirt instead.

Rei swallowed but maintained his calm tone, “How did he come you owe you that much?”

The man sneered, “I didn’t trick him if that’s what you’re getting at. He walked up to me proud as ever and wagered twenty pounds that he could beat me in an arm wrestle. It’s not my fault he’s sloshed.”

“He obviously doesn’t have that much money,” Rei said evenly, “you shouldn't have made a wager with a drunk man.”

“He said his brother was holdin’ onto it for him, and if he’s not,” the Russian pulled Rei closer and he received a strong whiff of rotten breath, “he better find a way to get some money fast.”

By this point, they were drawing a rather large crowd of interest and the second man seemed to grow uneasy, suddenly gripping his brother’s arm, “Oi, Nikolai, let him go.”

They spoke several heated words in Russian, Rei still sweating nervously in the man’s grip, before the bearded one, Nikolai, roared in English, “A bet’s a bet Anatoly! I’m simply holding a man to his word.” He turned back to Rei, “So what’s it gonna be? Is he going to pay up, or am I going to beat the daylights out of both of you?”

With this violent suggestion, Nikolai had officially crossed several of Nagisa’s lines and he finally stepped out from behind Rei.

“I dare you to lay a finger on either of them.”

Nikolai’s gaze landed on him for the first time. “Well what are the odds?” He shoved Rei roughly away and made for Nagisa, “I see you made it to the party.”
“Thank you so much for the invitation.” Though Nagisa met his glare without fear, he wasn’t stupid. He knew his odds against a man this size, but he was unwilling to excuse Nikolai’s treatment of his friends. Determined to land at least a few solid blows, Nagisa squared his shoulders and solidified his stance.

Just Nikolai raised a fist and Nagisa prepared to dodge it, a booming voice made all five of them jump.

“What’s this? Didn’t you boys ever learn to only pick on people your own size?”

A large woman stood with her hands on her hips, looking disapprovingly at the lot of them. She was wearing overalls smudged with dirt and appeared to be about middle aged, but the dark skin of her face still blossomed with youth.

Nikolai turned his back to Nagisa and sauntered over to her instead, “Like you?” he gave her an ugly grin.

She smirked up at him, “Sonny, that’s pickin’ on someone too big for you.” She turned her head to the side and spat on the floor, making Rei cringe.

As a self-proclaimed master at getting out of sticky situations, Nagisa’s brain was working furiously as the outspoken woman and volatile man squared off. Niall and Ethan did have the twenty pounds to pay the Russians, Nagisa knew this as he had given it to them just hours before, but he really hoped to make it out of this situation without them having to give up any money.

“Pardon my interruption,” he said suddenly, forcing himself between them, “but how about we settle this with a trace of civility?” He cast an antagonizing glance at Nikolai, “No matter how foreign that concept may seem to some of you.”

Nikolai began to speak but Nagisa held up a hand, silencing him with much personal risk as Nikolai looked murderous.

“You’ll get your money if you win one more match, double or nothing, except this time you will arm wrestle our representative, not Niall.”

Niall protested indignantly in the background that I’ll get him thish time just le me at him! while Nikolai immediately began eyeing the other well-muscled men in the room, “And who would that be?”

Rei suspected Makoto, but to everyone’s surprise, Nagisa turned to the woman, “May I ask your name, miss?”

She looked as surprised as the rest of them but supplied it readily, “Betsy Dean.”

Nagisa turned back to Nikolai with a hand gesturing towards her, “There you have it.”

Nikolai loomed threateningly over Nagisa, “Are you trying to insult me, boy?”

“I actually, I think he’s trying to insult me.” Betsy began to stretch and flex her right arm, “As if I couldn’t take this young ‘un.”

Nikolai ground his teeth and poked Nagisa roughly in the chest, “I hope you have forty pounds, boy.” With a violent sweep of his arm he cleared four glassed off the nearest table, sending them crashing to floor. “We’ll play here.”
He sat on one side and Betsy sat on the other, while Nagisa, Rei, and Niall formed a half circle around them. Anatoly, apparently the more levelheaded of the brothers, simply sighed in the background.

Nagisa stood the head of the table, “Alright, no dirty play, no touching any part of the opponent other than their hand, and both feet must remain on the floor at all times. Any questions?”

Nikolai and Betsy grasped hands and shook their heads, and during the momentary pause Rei took the opportunity to whisper frantically in Nagisa’s ear, “This is a terrible idea.”

“No one else stands a chance.” Nagisa hissed back. He check the positions of both Betsy’s and Nikolai’s elbows and then centered their fists. Finally satisfied, he cleared his throat. “The match will begin on three. One…” a considerable crowd stood around their table and everyone waited with baited breath, “two…” even the music, once powerful and deafening, seemed to fade away as Betsy and Nikolai glared daggers at one another, “three!”

The table gave a small jolt as both participants threw all their muscle and weight into their forearms. The match began with no definite lead won by either of them, their fists wavered briefly over to each side, but predominantly remained locked in the middle, dead even.

After Nagisa had given the signal to start the crowd had suddenly erupted into cheers, each member shouting support for their favorite, and it looked like they weren’t the only ones wagering money on the match.

The participants remained locked in an even competition for a solid two minutes and the contest seemed to be wearing on both of them; veins were popping in Nikolai’s forehead and sweat ran down Betsy’s brow.

Nagisa began to panic as Nikolai slowly started to inch Betsy’s arm down on the table: despite her best efforts, he was edging towards a win.

Nagisa of course had the money to pay the Russians if Betsy lost, but this was the last thing he had hoped to waste twenty pounds on.

Running low on ideas, he plopped down on the seat next to Nikolai and said in a voice dripping with sweetness, “Can you and I play next? I’m curious just how rough your hands are.” Armed with the knowledge he had gained that morning, Nagisa aimed a shameless wink at the Russian. It was a cheap tactic, but it wasn’t as if Nagisa wasn’t used to using them.

Nikolai’s reaction wasn’t as dramatic or horrified as it had been that morning, but his concentration wavered just long enough for Betsy to exert once last effort - a final burst of strength - and pin his wrist back against the table.

The crowd cheered as Betsy stood and raised her winning fist triumphantly into the air. Anatoly shook his head in the background and handed a full forty pounds to Niall, both the twenty he had lost and twenty Betsy had won him; on Rei’s insistence, Niall begrudgingly handed half of the winnings over to Betsy. Nikolai remained seated, blinking in confusion. Turning to look at Nagisa, he seemed to finally understand what had happened and let out a roar of fury far louder than anything produced by their cheering onlookers.

Nagisa laughed nervously and backed away from him, “Rei-chan, I think that’s our cue to leave…” and then he took off running.

Rei stood in shock for half a second longer before he fully understood the danger they were in and
turned on his heel, sprinting after Nagisa. The crowd parted to let them through while simultaneously barring Nikolai, allowing their favoritism to show plainly.

As they ran out the doors of the third class general room they called over to Ethan that someone else would have to look after Niall.

Rei couldn’t remember the last time he had run like this; he didn’t sprint regularly as part of his job, and his lungs were screaming and his legs ached, but there was still a large smile plastered across his face.

They dashed down the stairs to the third class barracks and finally slowed as they reached the hallway that held both their rooms. Looking at one another properly for the first time, they immediately burst into laughter.

Rei marveled at how alive he felt. He knew just how dramatic this sounded; before now he had been nothing but satisfied with his life. And yet this moment, as his chest heaved and his sides ached with laughter, he could think of no other way to describe how he felt other than wholly alive. How then, would he feel a handful of days from now, when they landed in New York?

His laughter had faded quite suddenly as he pondered this question and Rei realized he knew something Nagisa did not: due to Haru and Makoto’s increasing closeness Katsu planned on moving them out west the moment they stepped off the boat.

He straightened up, “Nagisa-kun…what are your plans when we reach America?”

Nagisa let out a low whistle and clasped his hands behind his neck, “I’m not really sure, I’m not too worried about it though.”

This wasn’t exactly what Rei had been hoping for, “Well if you wanted…I could talk to Katsu about hiring you. With some persuasion he would probably be willing to hire Makoto too.” He knew this was a bit of a stretch, but if Nagisa wanted him to he was willing to try.

Nagisa however, let out a bubbling burst of laughter and clutched his sides once more. He looked up at Rei incredulously, “I’m sorry Rei-chan, but can you honestly imagine me as a butler?” The idea sent him into another fit of giggles and Rei had to admit that he couldn’t.

“Then…I can resign, and come travel with you.”

Nagisa raised an eyebrow, “No offense, Rei-chan, but do you really think you could return to the streets after living comfortably for so long?” Rei wanted to tell him that it would be worth it, that he really didn’t mind, but Nagisa’s next sentence stopped him. “Besides, would you really leave your friends like that?”

Rei looked down to the floor. “No. I wouldn’t…” he paused, “so when the ship lands, you’re fine with us not seeing each other anymore?”

Nagisa cocked his head to the side, it wasn’t that he was fine with it, it was just what he was used to. A few days of fun, sometimes quite a bit less than that, and then a quick goodbye before it all fell apart.

“What else were you expecting?” the words fell out of his mouth and immediately felt wrong, they were cold and clean, unaffected, and Rei looked like they had cut him deeply.

Rei took a deep breath and laid his heart bare, “I didn’t expect anything, I was just hoping to be with you.” He was too young to know that while heaven gives, it takes just as easily. He also was not
aware that more often than not, it was Nagisa himself who acted as god.

“That’s not expecting nothing.” Nagisa had stopped walking and his eyes had lost all their usual warmth. He had grown uncomfortable with the direction this conversation was heading and regretfully, when people become uncomfortable they so easily fall back to the familiar hold of their habits. Nagisa had formed his because they kept him safe. “I think you’ve got the wrong idea Rei-chan, this isn’t like that.”

Rei frowned in confusion, “Then what’s it like?”

Nagisa stared at him incredulously for just a moment before he took Rei by the hand and pulled him quickly into his and Makoto’s room. Nagisa pushed him up against the door and kissed him, and this time it was much different from before. This time it was rough and forceful, and each one felt like a bite, a request for something Rei could not give him.

Nagisa pulled away and examined Rei’s uneasy expression, “You still don’t understand?”

He took a step backward and quickly and skillfully unbuttoned his shirt. He took another step backward and this time let his trousers slip to the floor. Walking backwards until he reached the bed, he settled seductively on the mattress in only his underwear. He raised a hand, inviting Rei towards him.

Rei slowly moved to the bed and took Nagisa’s hand, squeezing it gently, but remained standing.

Nagisa’s body looked fragile, if not underweight. His hip bones protruded severely and above them his ribs could have easily been counted. He had only a few bruises, mostly on his knees, but his skin was surprising soft for the sin it had known.

Looking at him made Rei sad.

He squeezed Nagisa’s hand and spoke softly, “I’m so sorry…I know it must be so hard, being on your own so for long.”

And then incredibly, he did what Nagisa had considered impossible and what Rei himself had considered the only logical course of action.

He bent down and put his arms gently around Nagisa, pulling him into a soft hug, solely meant to comfort and reassure.

Rei closed his eyes and buried his face in the nape of Nagisa’s neck while Nagisa’s eyes remained wide open in surprise. He didn’t hug Rei back.

Rei held him there for a long while, trying to convey all his feelings through this one action, since he was sure Nagisa wouldn’t listen if he said them.

Eventually, Rei raised his head very slightly and whispered into Nagisa’s ear, “I’m so sorry…” his voice was filled with all sorts of guilt and anguish and regret, “but it’s not like that to me.”

He pulled away.

“I’m going to bed. Goodnight, Nagisa-kun.”

The door had barely shut behind the butler when Nagisa curled his knees to his chest and began to cry.
Floors above in Rin’s first class barracks, Ai was not making much progress; no matter how hard he tried, his words lacked the passion that was so readily apparent in Rin’s rendition of the poems.

Despite this, Rin was nothing but patient and encouraging, but after yet another set of shakily delivered lines, he conceded that it was time to stop for the night and put a hand on Ai’s shoulder, “How about we give it a break for a bit?”

Ai couldn’t help but feel dejected, “S-sure. I’m sorry I’m no good at this.”

“Don’t say that! Your last reading was quite good, like anything, it just takes time and practice so don’t worry.” Ai still looked rather dejected and Rin had a sudden idea, “If you want, we could try reading one of her short stories instead? Stories have the space to move as necessary, so you don’t have to worry as much about how every word needs to be said.”

Ai nodded and eagerly flipped to the next consecutive story.

“What’s it called?”

Ai ran his finger across the page, “The Sun Doth Move.” He paused and read a small note at the bottom of the page, stating the title was taken from Hamlet’s letters to Ophelia, “She likes space a lot I think.”

“Well that’s probably why it didn’t sell well! Speaking for myself at least, I’m not a big fan of space.” Ai looked at him quizzically and Rin chuckled, “There’s too much going on up there that I don’t understand. But let’s hear it!”

Ai nodded and cleared his throat, and found that the prose flowed from his mouth with far more ease than the poetry had.

“Who was it that decided the sun and moon would make good lovers? Rather, who was it that decided the sun and the moon together would make a good love story? Did some unimaginative person look up at the moon one night, or the sun one morning, or perhaps up at a blushing eclipse one rare evening, and suddenly think how very painful a love like that must be? Painful, mysterious, and enigmatic; perhaps it is completely ridiculous, but the scenario nicely lends itself to metaphors nevertheless.

“And perhaps it is beautiful, but like all beautiful things, writers have beaten its beauty half to death with prose and diction. Just look what poets have done to the rose; they’ve all but killed its allure, made it clichéd and gimmicky by way of repetition - we certainly now are in need of a new rose.

“But I digress, I was speaking of the sun and the moon. These many stories and poems hinge on the idea that the sun is stable, that the moon has a thick skin, that the atmospheres around them are neither too frigid nor too blistering. These passé stories are contingent on the belief that the sun and moon can bare to be away from one another; that they are strong enough to spend most of their lives in longing, rarely together, meeting for fleeting moments only to be pulled apart again. Let me say this, no one, no human, no god, and certainly no celestial body is strong enough for that kind of love.

“What fool looks at the sun during the day, chemical and erratic and burning - people seem to forget that is what the sun does, it burns - and considers it stable enough for love? What fool looks at the moon, so bright and alone in the night sky, and thinks it is not too vulnerable to love?

“Now, if I were to subscribe to idea of this clichéd and well-trooped romance, if I were to commit to
its potential and well-worn ambience, if I were to write you a threadbare story about the sun and the moon and their hackneyed amour, it would go as follows.”

Rin scoffed and Ai looked up at him curiously.

Rin waved a hand, “Just ignore me, I’m sorry for interrupting...but, well it’s just so pretentious isn’t it?”

Ai looked down at the book, he honestly wasn’t sure.

“If an author can’t let a story stand on its own that just means they have no confidence in it at the core – she’s just trying to make up for what the story lacks.”

If Marianne Abbott could hear him, she would have raised an eyebrow and argued that her voice was so present in her work because there were many fools who tended to overlook her true themes; however she was currently fast asleep on the English moors and therefore Rin’s words lay in the room like law, and Ai began to agree with him.

“But my criticisms aside,” Rin grinned at him, “you read that phenomenally! And hackneyed? I can barely read that without stuttering.”

Ai blushed and stammered a thank you far less smoothly than any of the paragraphs he had just read.

Rin looked at him patiently and Ai cleared his throat, beginning to read again.

“How should one being to describe the Sun? She was vivid and lively and brilliant, her smile was so bright it tore right through the darkness of the Universe – all of which is expected, so we can certainly move on.

“Planets, of course, cannot speak – I shudder to think what our beloved Earth would say if it could - but with nothing else to offer, the Sun shone for the other planets, showing her friendship and gratitude by giving them the warmth to grow and prosper. Dearest of all to her was the Moon, and she shone every day, as brightly as she could, to make the Moon proud.

“In contrast to all of the Sun’s supposed brilliance, the Moon was subtle and much more shy - the other planets both knew him and simultaneously did not truly know him. There is a certain myth that circulates the public, meant to mystify and entertain people as they sit around their suites and parlor rooms telling tales: they speak amiss of the dark side of the Moon.

“As far as the Earth and other planets were concerned, only one of the Moon’s faces was illuminated – they only ever saw his front, and to them that was his sole existence. To them, the other side was left in darkness, a mystery, barely even real.

“However the Sun, gentle and patient and with permission - again, withpermission, that is important - slowly began pouring small streams of her light over him. Eventually, after many millennia of trust and patience, every part of the Moon saw equal amounts of sunlight. After many millennia of love, his whole self was finally known and understood, only by the Sun.

“The Sun, the Moon, and all the other planets, existed in this way for a long while, with many harmonious rotations. However, all was not well within the Sun. Something inside her was changing; with the planets’ many years of peace and prosperity, she had grown larger, she felt too much and all at once, sometimes exploding with blasts of heat and light – she was suddenly volatile. She no longer warmed the other planets, but burned them. All of this aside, she insisted she was still in control.

“None believed her except the Moon, as he wished for her safety far more than any of them. And so,
now plagued with unease and disquiet, the planets continued on their paths nervously, still mustering some remnants of harmony.

“It was on one of her rather quiet days that the Moon came to the Sun with joyous news: he was, in whatever modest capacity, now supporting life. A sole, leafy-green plant rose triumphantly out of the dusty and rocky terrain that had for so long been bare. It was so small and fragile, and the Moon cried tears of joy and the Sun shone upon him with pride.

“This was the Moon’s very first piece of life and he guarded it fiercely, shielding his small plant from the slews and austerity of the universe - and of course he had it warmed by the love of the Sun.

“Here our story takes a short pause to remind the reader of the history of mankind: it is filled with tales of peaceful eras that always, quickly and without fail, came abruptly to an end. If the planets could write their own memoirs I am sure their histories would read very much the same.

“And so this tale resumes as it began: with the Sun. For all her insistence and effort, she was not in control. On their last day she cried tears hot and searing, and whispered a pained apology the Moon before she collapsed – and then exploded.

“She swelled and expanded and those closest to her she all but destroyed: the verdigris earth, the maiden planet Venus, the violent Mercury, and of course the moon - her dearest love, she burnt to a cinder.

“At the end of her rupture, she shrank back down, much smaller than she had been, smaller than them all, and she looked upon what she had done in horror. And back at her they all looked, some with anger, some with fear, but only one held the overwhelming desire to comfort her.

“It should be said that the planets were not dead; their surfaces had been scorched, their earth now dry and cracked, and their rivers turned to lava, but it takes much more to kill a planet. However, it takes surprisingly little to kill other things. The Moon’s one resilient bit of life that had once thrived in the Sun’s maternal warmth was burnt to ash. She had hurt them all, and worst of all, she had hurt the one she loved.

“Filled with guilt, shame, and fear – mainly, fear of herself – the Sun fled.

“She did not promise to return, but the Moon had to believe she would, for he could bear nothing less. And wait he did, and for a long while there was no light shed on any of his faces. The Moon surely has the most craters of all the planets – so quick to love, so easy to hurt, and so difficult to heal. This should be lesson enough as to why it is wrong to push romance onto celestial objects.

“The planets eventually all forgave her, the Moon first and foremost, but the Sun had the most difficult time forgiving herself. She ran, fast and far away, both ashamed and afraid, terrified of hurting the ones she was closest to.

“The planets continued to wait for her return, rotation after rotation, none waiting as fervently as the Moon. One by one they lost faith that she would ever return, one by one they resigned to their dark fate, and still the Moon waited. He grew cold while waiting, chilled and lonely, and the other planets no longer saw any of his faces.

“And still across the universe the Sun wandered, because while goodbyes can be difficult, returning is surely harder. She wandered for millennia, she traveled far away and all over, and while she learned just enough self-control to keep herself from burning others, she held it all in, and burned herself a hundred times over. She burned herself alive with anger and loneliness.”
Ai paused as Rin’s soft snores began to fill the room. He had nodded off shortly after the Sun had taken off on her own – a far graver mistake than he would ever know – and was currently sliding down the back of his chair, slowly losing verticality.

This made Ai smile and he watched Rin sleeping quietly for a few moments before he began reading once again. This time he spoke quietly, whispering the story only to himself. He read about how the Sun traveled through the cosmos, meeting but not befriending various other planets; he read about her many, many adventures, most of which were somber rather than pleasant. Ai read about how the Moon continued to grow darker until finally, lulled to a stupor by the heat of the fire, he fell asleep just as the Sun entered most desperate and cold part of the Universe.

He slept surprisingly well, not knowing if the Sun and Moon ever met again.

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Sophia Stockwell returned to her bedroom shortly after the austere woman had marched young Elsie out of the ladies reading room. Her clothing was only partially unpacked, most of it in her dresser but a few garments still in suitcases. She reached determinately into her dresser and a moment later a heavy knock on the door made her jump. She crossed the room and opened it quickly, looking guiltily at the floor as her father entered.

William laughed, “No need to nervous, Ann Astor came by earlier and told me you and Marie had remained in the reading room. She gave me quite the earful, apparently she’s terrified of you corrupting – that’s how she put it – her darling Marie.” He said this with a smile and without a trace of seriousness. If anything, he sounded amused, and Sophia couldn’t help but laugh; there honestly wasn’t much corrupting left for her to do.

William smiled, “It sounds like you’ve made a friend. I’m glad, you should make friends and be happy.”

“I believe it is fair to say we both deserve it, father.”

He laughed, “Oh nonsense! You shouldn’t worry about me;” he hobbled into her room with one hand placed on his side and another shakily commanding an invisible cane, “I’m far too old for it.”

During feasts and ceremonies he was seen by most as charismatic, if not charming, but only she knew the truth: he was absolutely embarrassing.

He continued his old man routine until he sat down on her bed with an exaggerated sigh. He placed a hand to his chin in thought, “You know, this young Mr. Nanase is a capital fellow. He is quite reserved, but he also seems kind and intelligent. I fully believe he’ll make you happy, and that would make me happy.”

This she crossed the room and hugged him and Marie’s unanswered question floated through her thoughts, do you intend to marry young Mr. Nanase?

Sophia tried to smile for her father, “Well then I certainly intend to make you happy, Father.”

He chuckled, “As if you don’t already.” He stood up, “I’m about to turn in, don’t stay up too late. Goodnight, Soph.”

He kissed her forehead and exited the room, leaving her a storm of shame and guilt behind him. Sophia crossed the room once again, passing by the dresser and the forgotten garment within it, and instead reached into one of her many suitcases, pulling out an ivory dressing gown.
After Haru had slipped down giggling into Makoto’s lap, Makoto had returned him to his previous laying down position, trying to hide his own embarrassment by immediately launching into another story.

Over the next hour the muffled music from the party slowly died down and the shouts of laughter from the attendees had ceased, and they found themselves very much alone.

Haru was doing his best to listen intently despite his dizzy brain, and Makoto was doing his best to accurately and descriptively tell the tales of the many beings that found a home in the sky. The beasts and the heroes, constellations old and new; he covered them all, telling Haru the same stories his mother had told him so many years ago.

As time passed he slowly found himself sinking lower and lower, until he was laying on his own bench, each of them on their backs, looking up at the sky. Occasionally, the stray strands at the tops of their heads would dance and intertwine whenever the Air Pump decided to send a particularly strong gust of wind toward them.

“And that sort of straight line by Hydra, that’s the Mariner’s Compass.” Makoto frowned up at it, “I…I don’t remember the story my mother told me about that one. It’s a modern constellation but I don’t…I’m not sure. I’m really sorry about that Haru.” He brooded for a moment before forcing the thought out of his head. “Well, those are all the spring constellations anyway. Most constellations depend on the time of year and what season it is. In a few months they’ll change - we’ll be under a completely different sky.”

Makoto felt his heart sink, wondering if in a few months the two of them would be under completely separate skies. He thought he could very easily stay under this particular one forever.

Makoto hesitated, gathering his courage for what he had attempted to say earlier that night.

“Haru can I…can I see you tomorrow?” He held his breath and his question was met with no answer, “You don’t have to if you don’t want to, I just thought maybe…” he trailed off, beginning to panic at the silence, “Haru?”

He quickly sat up and turned to Haru, only to see him lying on his respective bench, breathing softly, his eyes closed.

Makoto let out a small sigh of relief and chuckled at his own anxiety. He gently shook Haru’s shoulder but he only let out a few small grunts and rolled over. Several more minutes of attempting to rouse him proved fruitless and Makoto bit his lip, beginning to run out of ideas.

Putting an arm under Haru’s shoulder, Makoto spent several minutes settling him into a proper piggy-back; he wrapped Haru’s arms around his neck and placed a supporting hand under each of his legs. Once more checking that Haru was securely positioned, he started his way back to the third class general room.

He found their modest little Heorot completely deserted, save for a pair of young lovers engaged intimately in a corner and Niall, seated exactly where they had left him, apparently deep in conversation with the fly that had bothered them earlier.

Niall looked up at them as they approached with droopy red eyes and relayed the obvious, “She didn’t come.”

Makoto had to pause and think for a moment on what he meant, “Oh! I-I’m really sorry about that.”
Haru was beginning to feel heavy and he awkwardly seated him across from Niall. Haru, still obviously asleep, slumped forward against the table and let out a small snore. “Have you seen Rei or Nagisa recently?”

Niall put a hand on his chin, concentrating quite hard, “They left about an hour ago...or three? I’m not sure, but I wouldn’t go looking for them if I was you. They probably wouldn't appreciate being interrupted if you know what I mean.” Niall winked at him several times but Makoto tried very hard not to make eye contact.

“I...I see, um...” He searched around desperately for a change of topic, “Did they just leave you alone?”

“Oh no, Ethan’s right over there.” Niall raised his hand and pointed to the couple Makoto had noticed when he first entered the room. Looking more closely, Makoto realized for the first time that it was Ethan and a tall blonde girl he didn’t know.

Makoto looked deliberately away from them and instead directed his thoughts toward Haru and what he should do. He wondered if he should just take Haru back up to his room alone, since his key would certainly display his room number, even if Makoto wasn’t certain of its exact location.

He blushed bright red as he thought this and tried once more in vain to wake Haru. Sighing and trying very hard not to imagine what kind of comments Nagisa would make if he could see them, Makoto reached into Haru’s left pocket.

Fortunately for all of jester kind, Niall was present to ensure Makoto wouldn’t make it out of this situation with his dignity intact.

“Hey man, keep it decent!”

Makoto turned an even deeper shade of red and pulled his hand out of Haru’s pocket, having found it empty.

“I-I’m just trying to find his key.” He insisted, “It’s not like that!’

“And I’m not Irish!” Niall exclaimed as Makoto reached his hand into Haru’s other pocket. This time he found what he was searching for; a large key, silver and decorative, with a small tag reading B60 dangling from it. He only hoped it was located down the same hallways as Tamura-san’s room, mentally berating himself for not paying more attention.

Bidding goodnight to Niall and wishing him luck with his estranged sweetheart, he once more attempted to carry Haru on his back, which worked perfectly well until they got to the stairs. Climbing jostled them too much, making Haru slip, and Makoto only made it up a few steps before he had to stop. Certain that his cheeks would never return to their original color, Makoto carried Haru the rest of the way in his arms, with one hand supporting his back and the other under his knees, Haru’s face rested gently against his chest.

Thankful that they didn’t meet anyone on their way, Makoto had a bit of trouble unlocking the door while still keeping a firm hold onto Haru. The door eventually swung open to a room completely dark, even so, Makoto could immediately tell the room was even nicer that the Tamuras’, making him wonder for the first time just how much money Haru’s father had.

He shut the door quickly and instantly regretted not locating a light switch before he did so. He was guided only by the moonlight spilling through the window, and he eventually located the bed by stubbing his toe on it.
He gently laid Haru on the mattress and the sleeping boy sunk into it readily, letting out a sigh of satisfaction as he stretched out upon it. Makoto removed Haru’s shoes and socks and then gently pulled the blanket over him.

Haru let out a small mumble and Makoto could have sworn he heard the phrases: Chiron, off to war, and Egypt. This made him smiled, but it also didn’t stop worry from tugging at his heart. He didn’t flatter himself into thinking today had affected Haru’s life in the grand scheme of things, even if Makoto felt that his own life had been changed in no small way. Makoto hoped today had made Haru’s life even a little bit better, though he knew that even if it had, it was still less than Haru deserved.

Makoto finally turned his back to the bed, fully aware that he had already lingered longer than most would have been considered acceptable. He had taken only half a step when something suddenly held his wrist.

Looking down, he saw Haru’s outstretched hand had caught on to the cuff of his sleeve. With what looked like great effort, Haru looked directly at him and mumbled, “We’ll dance tomorrow.”

Haru was both drunk and sleepy as he uttered this promise, but the mention of possibly seeing him tomorrow sent joy rushing through Makoto’s heart nevertheless.

“Shhh,” Makoto whispered, “You should sleep.” He gently released Haru’s hand from his shirt sleeve and placed it back on the bed, squeezing it just once before heading for the door.

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Nagisa once again dreamed he was in a field of long grass, running and giggling as a stranger chased after him, always with a kind smile and always reaching out, never quite catching him.

Eventually his pursuer began to fall behind, the distance between them growing, and Nagisa let out a whooping laugh, still charging forward.

He ran for a bit longer, finally stopping when he realized dark clouds had covered the sky. He looked back, unable to see the one who had been chasing him.

He frowned and wondered if he had run too fast, if the stranger had lost him in the fields.

The wind blew through his hair and a light rain began to fall, wetting his face like tears.

Or perhaps the one chasing him had given up altogether? Decided Nagisa wasn’t worth the effort?

He took a few steps forward and thunder growled like a warning, bringing buckets of furious rain.

Flat land and fields stretched in every direction and he began to feel very afraid as the wind howled and lightning cracked through the sky. The rain was freezing against his skin and he started to run once more, back the way he had come.

He ran without a trace of the stranger, but in the distance he spotted two large willows atop a small hill, their leafy tendrils blowing violently in the wind. Their sweeping canopies offered very little shelter, but he fell to his knees the moment he reached them. He leaned against the thicker of the two trunks, breathing heavily and shaking against the cold.

Finally catching his breath, he lifted his head. Directly between the two trunks, three bright yellow marigolds bloomed defiantly against the wind and rain.
Hesitantly, he made his way towards them on hands and knees, seeing that, while they looked similar from a distance, they were far from the same. Huddled close together with varying hues, patterns, and shapes, they each had their own special bloom.

As he watched, the flowers began to warp and mutate, growing into three blonde heads, as equally united yet individual as their blooms had been. He scrambled away in horror as their grieving faces twisted to look at him, each one weeping and crying out, their wails lost in the shrieking wind.

“Where are you?”

“Where did you go?”

“Onii-chan?”

Nagisa jolted awake, fighting and kicking against his blankets. He didn’t recall his surroundings until he completely sat up. Chest heaving, he slowly brought a hand to his face, feeling the wetness around his eyes.

He looked over the side of his bed; below him, Makoto’s bunk was empty. He curled his knees to his chest and hugged himself tightly, trying to stop shaking.

Why were you on your own when you met Makoto-kun?

This question had haunted his thoughts – and apparently, his dreams – ever since Rei had asked it that same morning. Nagisa was a disappearing act; he hid from places and people and feelings, he was always running from something. He had planned to flee a hundred miles from Rei once the ship landed.

Nagisa pressed his forehead into his knees. He was beginning to wonder why he had started running in the first place.

Uncurling his body, he climbed down his bedside ladder to the floor, quietly exiting his room.

The hallway was bright and deserted, and he crossed it on tiptoes. Reaching Rei and Ai’s door, he knocked quietly. Receiving no answer, he knocked once more, this time louder, and when met with silence still, he placed a hand on the doorknob.

What was he expecting? He was quite sure, it wasn’t as if he had thought this through. He was simply sad and afraid and very, very desperate - and to his surprise, the door was unlocked.

The room was immediately flooded with light from the hallway and he heard Rei stir. He contemplated slamming the door shut and returning to his room, but froze when he heard Rei mumbling sleepily.

“Ai-kun? I saw that you forgot your key so I left the door unlocked.” He sat up, rubbing his eyes, “It’s dangerous though, you should-” he stopped speaking as he saw Nagisa standing in the doorway. “Nagisa-kun...” He spoke slowly and his voice was guarded, “What do you want?”

Nagisa hesitated in the doorway for a few moments before shuffling silently into the room, closing the door behind himself. Despite Rei’s many protests, he proceeded to climb the short ladder up to his top bunk.

“Hey what are you doing? You-” Rei was cut short as Nagisa collapsed on top of him.

Nagisa squeezed his eyes shut and buried his face against Rei’s chest.
“I had a bad dream,” he whined, “and I’m pretty sure it’s all your fault so I think you need to take responsibility.”

Rei lay motionless, making sure to keep his hands off the smaller boy. He frowned, still suspicious of Nagisa’s intentions – his actions from earlier remained in the butler’s mind.

“And? What do you want me to do about it?”

Nagisa’s eyes widened in surprise; Rei had never spoken to him so coldly before, and his expression clouded with hurt, and in doing so, melted any persisting animosity in Rei’s heart.

“I…forgive me. I’m just confused.” Rei admitted.

Nagisa didn’t meet his gaze, “I haven’t decided anything, about what happens when the ship lands, or what I’m going to do…but I like it when you hold me.” He started to cry, “Please just hold me tonight.”

Spoken by anyone else, this plea would have seemed marginally insignificant, but Rei understood its importance because he understood - and cared deeply for - the one who had asked it. Rei had immediately obliged, wrapping his arms tightly around Nagisa, who clung to his as well.

“Thank you”

Rei shook his head, “That’s all I really wanted.”

They lay like that for a long while, holding each other like they had on the day they first met. Rei supposed that was also the night they first kissed, which, incredible as it seemed, was also only yesterday. He marveled at this fact, the day and night had seemed to stretch on forever, and even his heart felt like it had experienced many sunrises by Nagisa’s side. Rei squeezed Nagisa tightly, fully believing that time was theirs, though of course it wasn’t.

Nagisa pressed his face into Rei’s shirt, breaking his train of thought, and spoke just two muffled words.

“Rah awah.”

Rei furrowed his brow, “Sorry?”

Nagisa didn’t move for a few seconds but eventually shifted his head slightly, freeing his lips, “You asked why I was on my own when I met Makoto…” his voice shook and his fists clenched tightly onto Rei’s shirt, “I ran away.”

Rei did not know what to say, but he understood what Nagisa telling him this meant, and how hard it must have been for him to do so. He kissed the top of Nagisa’s head and whispered that it was okay, that he should try and rest.

Slowly fading to sleep in Rei’s arms, Nagisa remembered why he always ran – because he was afraid of what would happen when someone finally caught him.

****

Ai wasn’t sure exactly what had woken him up, but reason aside, he suddenly found his eyes wide open and staring into the darkness. He sat up slowly, surprised that his back and neck didn’t ache, thinking that Rin’s first class sofa was more comfortable than his third class bed.
Looking around the room, he could not immediately locate Rin, the sofa across from him was empty and the lights had all been turned off, along with the electric fireplace.

He gathered his book from the table and stood up, beginning to feel slightly anxious. A low, rumbling noise suddenly rose from behind him and he jumped, sending Marianne Abbott’s book flying to the floor. Turning around in horror, he was surprised to see the faint outline of Rin sleeping peacefully in his bed. He snored a bit, the same sounds that had caused Ai so much alarm just moments before. This migration to the bed explained both the lights and the fireplace, and Ai chuckled lightly at himself.

He picked up the book once more; as much as he wanted to curl back up on the sofa, he knew it was certainly inappropriate for a butler to sleep in the same room as his master.

He walked to the door and pulled it open, only to find himself face to face with Makoto who, for some reason, was just exiting Haru’s room directly across the hall.

They both froze in the act of shutting their respective doors and stared at one another. Their initial shock turned very quickly to embarrassment.

Makoto was the first to speak, “I...I was just putting him to bed, it’s not like - we didn’t- I know how this looks but-” and then Ai suddenly realize exactly what it looked like.

“M-me neither!” He interjected immediately, “It’s not like that either, we were reading and fell asleep - not together I mean! I-I was just leaving.”

“As was I!” Makoto proclaimed. “Goodnight!” Cheeks burning, he quickly pulled Haru’s door shut behind himself with a satisfying clink.

Ai stood in the doorway of Rin's room for a few more moments, not wishing to follow directly behind Makoto all the way down to their barracks, when he suddenly began to feel as if he had forgotten something.

Clink.

At that moment Ai performed a stunning display of silent theatrics, shaking his fists and smacking a palm against his forehead - he had forgotten the key to his and Rei’s room.

He remained in the doorway, now truly stuck. He looked hesitantly back into Rin’s room; he would hate to wake Rei up in the middle of the night simply because of his own idiocy. He reddened as he remembered that Rin hadn’t woken him up or told him to leave after he had awoken from his own slumber, meaning he really didn’t mind Ai spending the night on his couch.

Mind made up, Ai walked back inside the room and once more took residence upon Rin’s couch because, while this made sense for many reasons, he truthfully was in need of no persuasion.

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Makoto walked quickly back to his room, red-faced and embarrassed, wishing very deeply to forget every mortifying moment from that night. Though, he supposed they were wall worth it when the good moments were considered too. He entered his own room unsurprised to find Nagisa gone and he fell into bed, fully clothed.

He lay there for several minutes, eventually beginning to feel guilty. He stood back up and pulled off the expensive shirt the Tamura’s had given him, folding it carefully before placing it in his bag. He used far less care with his own trousers, shoving them roughly in after the shirt, and pulled out his
pajamas.

He once more lay in bed, this time properly dressed for it, thinking about the incredibly long, brilliant and beautiful, precious day he had been given. More than anything, it left him wishing he was more like a storm, or a flower, or a siren.

Outside the room’s sole window, a few puffy, thick clouds were making their way across the sky, with the Mariner’s Compass shining brightly between them.

Chapter End Notes

Hiii everyone!! I'm really proud of this chapter so I hope you liked it! Rin and Ai will start reading an actual book soon because if I have to write any more of Marianne Abbott's work I am going to die.

From here on out I need to pick up the pace a bit, no more 'multiple chapters per day' - I'd never finish the fic at that rate! That being said, next chapter will be the first of a few "interludes" that will flash forward to the present with Rin telling the story, so it should just be a fun little chapter.

Historical things:
-All the constellation information SHOULD be accurate, although there is of course room for error. All my information was found here!
(Interlude) Most in the World

Chapter Summary

“After nourishment, shelter and companionship, stories are the thing we need most in the world.” -Maya Angelou, (I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings)

Or

Rin learns a new word, Sousuke gets jealous, Hal is exasperated, Chelsea is moved, and Andy’s true(r) motives are revealed.

Chapter Notes

This is just a short little chapter checking back in on our friends in the future. Obviously there are many events in the main story that Rin was not witness to....um...just bear with it, idk :/

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Get turnt!”

Andy, with little grasp on the concept that there were times when it was appropriate to tell a joke and times when it was not, shouted this across the lab room. Rin’s description of the party had greatly amused him, and he felt the need to add this commentary, which, incidentally, broke the poignant atmosphere the story itself had created.

Sousuke and Rin, both aged and familiar with the slang of a very different time period, looked at each other in confusion, while Chelsea and Hal stared at Andy with varying degrees of annoyance. His smile began to falter as he realized his joke had fallen on deaf ears.

“Or...uh, not.”

A blush crept into his cheeks as he saw that Rin was now consulting Chelsea about what exactly he had meant and she, equally embarrassed and blushing, was trying her best to explain.

To his relief, Rin suddenly broke into a grin, “Well I wasn’t actually present that night in the third class general room - I guess they thought of me as a bit of a stick in the mud.” He said this with a smile, and it clearly didn’t bother him too much, “I spent majority of my evenings on the ship relaxing with Ai. Most of the things I’m telling you I learned years later.”

They fell into an uneasy silence as Rin looked wistfully at the floor while Sousuke looked anxiously at him, and Chelsea, Andy, and Hal all shuffled their feet uncomfortably. They had all been listening to Rin with rapt attention; however, Andy’s outburst had shattered the illusion, and none of them knew quite what to do. They had left the exquisite ship and were suddenly back in the outdated lab room of an underfunded land base, surrounded by the possessions of people who had long been unable to use them.
This heavy atmosphere did not sit well with Andy’s upbeat personality, and he looked around for a way to break the tension. His eyes fell upon Hal and his lips curled into a mischievous smile. Seeing a way he could work this story to benefit himself, or at least his amusement, he cast several more glances at Hal before beginning.

"So this Marie..." he leaned dramatically towards Rin, wearing an exaggerated skeevy expression that looked entirely out of place on his face, “was she pretty?"

Hal scoffed loudly in the background and Rin chuckled, "Oh definitely, she was gorgeous."

"...Blonde?"

"What do you think?"

Andy let out a dramatic whistle while Rin rolled his eyes, but Andy’s childish plan seemed to be working because Hal had pointedly looked away and was tapping his foot in annoyance.

With crossed arms and a sour expression, Hal muttered, “She sounded uptight to me, so have fun with her.”

Rin let out a laugh that broke their petty spat, "I would recommend you reserve judgment until later, that girl was a pistol dressed like a hand mirror...I might have been more interested in her if I had known it at the time." He paused for a moment and then a small, involuntary smile crossed his lips, as if he had just remembered something, "Actually no, I wouldn't have." For the second time, the shadow of some sort of unknown burden crossed Sousuke’s face and he looked to the floor.

Andy still shamelessly persistent, suddenly dropped the idea of Marie altogether, "So what about this Sophia?"

Everyone in the room glared at him except Rin, who shook his head at Andy’s naivety. “She probably would have killed you for asking, but she was also very beautiful.”

His skeeviness reaching its full capacity, Andy nudged Rin with his elbow, “So this Haru was one lucky guy then?”

“Were you even listening?!” Hal finally snapped.

Andy looked comically offended but no less cheerful, “Of course I was! Unless...wait.” He rushed over to the drawing of the young man, still lifeless and unmoving, staring kindly up at them through the liquid solution it rested in. Andy excitedly pointed a finger, “Is Mr. Chiseled-Chunk-of-Handsome the famed Makoto?” His eyes widened, "Do he and Haru...?" He wiggled his eyebrows suggestively and Hal had to pull his hand away from the drawing as his finger came far too close to touching it.

“Well just hang on a minute!” Rin chuckled at them, “We’ll get there, all this preamble is important too.”

This assertion that he might continue for quite a while was not met entirely favorably by all members of his audience; even Sousuke’s expression was grim. Seeing this, Rin mistook the cause of his husband’s distress and turned to Andy, “Is there anywhere else we could go to finish the story? My old joints can’t stand for as long as they used to.”

Chelsea, who had remained quiet and thoughtful through most of this conversation, immediately broke into vigilant nurse-mode. Following Rin’s gaze, she immediately flew to Sousuke’s side and began questioning him extensively, asking if his legs ached or if he felt out of breath, when the last
time he had eaten was and if he needed to lie down.

Andy immediately obliged, “Of course! I apologize for Hal’s terrible hosting skills, we can move to
the kitchen.”

Hal ground his teeth in indignation as Andy led them out of the lab and through several hallways,
until they arrived in the land base’s one small kitchen. One wall was lined with a stained counter
stocked with all the usual things; a coffee pot, microwave, toaster and sink were all stuffed onto the
limited space. An ancient fridge hummed beside the counter, mostly serving to simply waste space as
it kept things just a few degrees colder at best. A sole window occupied the adjacent wall and one
small table was placed in front of it.

While the state of their kitchen was a common complaint amongst most of the staff, its many issues
bothered Andy little in the physical sense - it was the implication of those issues that bothered him
greatly. While their expedition was receiving extensive news coverage, the condition of the base they
had been given showed exactly how highly their work was regarded by their sponsors.

However, if all went well today and Rin’s memories proved as useful as Andy believed they would
be, he would never again have to suffer these dismal working conditions. He didn't necessarily care
directly about having posh bases and expensive equipment, he simply believed they reflected what
people thought of his abilities - his abilities which were currently underappreciated. He wanted to be
a treasure hunter and he wanted the glory that came with the title, forgetting that after a few centuries,
most treasure hunters are, understandably, rewritten as monsters.

Hal broke his daydream by elbowing him hard in the ribs. At Hal’s indication, Andy realized for the
first time that the room held a total of only three chairs.

He gestured to Rin, Sousuke and Chelsea, “You three go ahead and make yourselves comfortable,
we’ll run and grab a couple more chairs.” He cast them all one more brilliant smile before he and Hal
hastily departed.

Rin, Sousuke, and Chelsea settled casually into the kitchen, each of them quite and harboring
three different trains of deep thought. Rin was heavy with nostalgia, and Sousuke was plagued with
a sudden onset of insecurity.

Chelsea was thankful for the kitchen’s plainness. The lab room had disturbed her much more than
the others - there was something about the cold, clean room complete with its mementos of the dead
that unsettled her heart. However none of them upset her more than the drawing of the man who
appeared so handsome and young and - judging by the look in his face - passionately in love.

It was this last factor that troubled her the most, and though she surely had never met him, she felt
certain that he of all people had earned the right to live. She supposed she didn’t yet know if Rin’s
story was a sad one, but logic combined with both a persistent nagging in her heart and the sea of
nausea rising in her stomach - seemed to dictate nothing else. She didn’t want the young man to die
and yet she felt a sick, familiar certainty that he did.

Chelsea turned to the kitchen’s one small window and looked out at the calm shores of the Atlantic.
Just as she was about to shed thick tears for the old story and its ill-fated cast, the aged narrator of
that very story reached across the table and took her hand.

“Is everything alright?” Rin smiled kindly at her.

Chelsea wiped her eyes and stammered in response, “Y-yes, I apologize. I usually don’t cry so often.
But being here, and hearing you talk about the times before…” She didn’t want to say it, “It’s just so sad.”

Rin nodded slowly, “It can be, but you’re the reason Sousuke and I were able to come here. You blessed me with your time and gave me the opportunity to finally tell this story, so for you I promise it will only make you sad in the right ways.”

Chelsea had never before felt so taken aback, certain that of all the people in this situation they had found themselves in, she was perhaps the least deserving of this sincere promise. Tears swelled in her eyes once more and she tried to smile for him, stammering a thank you. His gratitude made her feel guilty for her own unspoken reasons for accompanying them, and she once more questioned that undefined yet persistent internal tug she had let pull her all the way here.

Unable to look in Rin’s direction for even a moment longer, she turned to Sousuke, searching desperately for a conversation topic, “So...ehm, have you heard this story before?”

Alarmed to suddenly be put on the spot, he nervously rubbed his neck, “Not...not with so many details.” He cast a quick glance at Rin and then resumed staring dejectedly at the floor. He looked up in surprise however, when Rin leaned over and planted a quick kiss on his wrinkled cheek.

“You’re cute when you’re jealous.” Rin gave his husband a reassuring smile, “And please don’t worry, it was a very long time ago.”

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Several corridors away, Andy and Hal were on their way back to the kitchen, each carrying a chair. Andy had grown more quiet and considerably less charismatic as they had left their guests and while Hal appreciated his silence, it was also unnerving.

As they neared the kitchen, Hal suddenly stopped walking and met his gaze sternly, “I hope you realize what time it is, and I really can’t stay here all night. My-”

Andy interrupted him with an exasperated sigh, “Well look it’s not really my fault! How am I supposed to hurry the old man up?”

“...I only meant that I hired the sitter until eight, so I have to leave before then.” Hal gave him a look somewhere between disgust and disappointment, “And here I was thinking you actually cared about the story. You put on quite the show.”

“Oh don’t look at me like that! It’s not that I don’t care,” Andy grumbled, “but we didn’t exactly fly three people across the country just for a history lesson. This is taking far longer than it was supposed to.”

“You can’t sift through people's lives and deaths and expect it to move at whatever speed you want.” Hal said sharply.

Andy ran a frustrated hand through his hair, “Next time why don’t we do something more straightforward...” Hal’s outraged shout of WE?! was drowned by Andy’s sudden exclamation, “Mermaids! Hal, let’s find mermaids after this!”

Hal stared at him dumbfounded, thinking that this project had made him want to move to the Great Plains and never look on the ocean for many decades, and that Andy himself had given him a large and irrational hatred for the entire continent of Australia.

“Oh, uh huh. Mermaids. Sure.”
Hal started walking once more and Andy resignedly began to follow him, still speaking, “But any\textit{way}, we’ll make sure to let you go by eight.” He paused and then frowned, “Wait, I didn’t know you got custody?”

“Of course you don’t,” Hal said irritably, “I’ve only mentioned it three of the required five times it takes before you actually remember something.” He began to walk faster, leaving Andy far behind him.

“You’ve mentioned it before?” Andy called after him, sounding generally surprised, and he realized with a smile that this this gave a solid explanation to the day Hal had unknowingly come to work with a pink heart-shaped barrette clipped to the hem of his shirt.

Hal reentered the kitchen first and set his chair down irritably between Sousuke and the wall, ensuring that Andy was unable to sit next to him. The three who had remained in the kitchen glanced at each other awkwardly as Hal crossed his arms and Andy entered a few moments later, cheerful as ever.

“Hello again! Sorry about that. How’s everyone feeling? Would any of you care for coffee?”

The responses were overwhelmingly positive and he turned on the pot, whistling a tune as it brewed. He dug through the cabinets and found five mugs, each bearing some sort of corny phrase, complete with one “World’s Best Grandpa”, one novelty mug from Disney World, and another that read, “My boyfriend went to Niagara Falls and all he got me was this stupid mug”.

Andy handed them out with little regard for who received what, only making sure to hand Hal a stained mug that read “#1 Dad”, which was almost hurled back at his head.

They made light small talk as they waited, and Andy made sure everyone had the proper amounts of milk and sugar before seating himself next to Rin and beginning to mix his own cup. He placed four heaping spoonfuls of sugar into the mug and brought it to his lips, before his face twisted into a disgusted expression and he quickly pulled it away. He shook his head and whined, “\textit{Gahhhh!} So bitter.”

He began shoveling more sugar into his mug and received shocked stares from everyone except Hal, who was painfully familiar with the sight, and Rin, who suddenly felt something stir in the deep recesses of his memory.

Frowning, Rin leaned towards him, “Where did you say you were from?”

Andy turned to Rin, jabbing a thumb at his chest with a grin, “I’m Andrew Atkinson from Australia.” He paused, “Queensland to be more specific, I guess the alliteration had to stop somewhere.”

Hal frowned, “Isn’t your middle name Grady? Doesn’t alliteration end immediately?”

They began to bicker and Rin decided to let the matter drop, concluding that if they had met previously, at least one of them would have remembered.

The early afternoon proceeded pleasantly, but eventually Andy checked the clock and subconsciously began to drum his fingers on the table. He cleared his throat and, putting on his most gentle smile, addressed Rin, “If you’re feeling up to it, do you think you could keep telling your story? I hate to rush you but Hal needs to be home by eight.”

Hal sat aghast at this misplaced blame and opened his mouth to tell Rin something along the lines of, \textit{I hate to rush you, but Andy really doesn’t care about any of this and just wants you to go ahead and...}
tell him where the pocket watch is. However before he could destroy his boss’s image, he was interrupted by Chelsea’s firm, protective tone.

“We also will need to return to our hotel soon. It’s been a long day and you two,” she looked sternly over Rin and Sousuke, “need to rest.” They both began to protest but she shook her head, looking fiercer than she had all day. “You know this trip was only authorized as long as your health was kept the top priority. We can return tomorrow if need be.”

Andy’s genial expression faltered for just a moment, “Of course! Time is...of little concern.”

“Absolutely,” Hal interjected, “take all the time you need.” Andy shot him an annoyed glance across the table and Hal sunk carelessly into schadenfreude.

Rin held up his hands in defeat, “Don’t worry I get it,” he smiled at them all, “I’m a slowpoke. I’ll try and pick up the pace a bit. So where were we? Ah, the morning after everyone got ridiculously turnt? Well that was an odd day indeed...”

Chapter End Notes

Hal and Andy are going to find mermaids when this is all over because over the summer a fake animal planet documentary totally fooled me into thinking they were real.

Next chapter: we're back on the boat literally everyone wakes up late.
Also next chapter: Seijuuro?? and Kisumi???? all in one chapter??? it must be christmas.
"[...] by my pen, they beg you for your prayers. They greet those who are cast down, and those in heart, those troubled and those filled with desire, those who are overjoyed and those disconsolate, all lovers. May all herein find strength against inconstancy, against unfairness and despite and loss and pain and all the bitterness of loving." — Joseph Bédier, The Romance of Tristan and Iseult

or

Everyone wakes up late. Nagisa is honest, Rin is fooled, Haru has a revelation, and Makoto and Ai make new friends.

Chapter Notes

sorry for the long wait guys! I can't maintain a consistent chapter length despite all my efforts so this one is a bit long! sorry!! Also I wrote a quick little thing for the KNB Secret Santa so if you like TakaMido and aren't sick of me talking about space yet feel free to pop over and read it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

April 12, 1912

Sunlight invaded the large bedroom through open curtains. It assaulted every corner and bounced mockingly off every surface, ensuring that the whole room glared with bright light. Of course all of this was of supreme irritation to Haru, who was painfully awake. His head throbbed and his eyes burned, and he had to take great care not to move too suddenly - his stomach sloshed dangerously every time he did.

With great effort, he lifted his head just enough to see the clock on the opposite wall and hazily make out that time. He felt a very brief onset of panic; he had definitely missed breakfast by this point. Horrified, he thought all the trouble he would be in - before the image quickly dissipated with a particularly painful throb of his migraine. He decided that if he was in trouble, someone certainly would have come to inform him by now.

His panic placated for the time being, he allowed himself to consider the other implications of the time; the clock read just after ten-thirty and he couldn’t help but feel happy despite his all bodily pain. It had been years since he had slept in past ten; he had told Makoto so just yesterday. While he knew that logically it couldn’t be Makoto’s influence, he certainly recognized changes occurring within and around him and didn’t wish to discredit those changes, no matter how small they may be.

He sat up slowly, discovering new aches in the process, and although he had decided not to worry about the time he still thought it was odd; Rei was never late. Climbing out of bed with a groan, he saw that he was still wearing his clothes from the night before. He ran his hands over the wrinkles
and his brain worked a little more slowly than usual. He realized with a jolt that someone else, he blushed furiously as he thought *Makoto*, must have brought him back to his room and put him in bed.

Embarrassed, he took a long while to get dressed, and once he had finished he looked considerably less composed than usual; his shirt was poorly tucked in and he chose to forgo a tie altogether. Surveying himself in the mirror, he saw dark circles under red eyes and skin that looked sallow and sickly.

Thinking there was little that could be done about his disheveled appearance, he preceded down the stairs from the first-class barracks. Each step sent a harsh jolt through his skull, and he made very slow progress. Despite the menace of more stairs, he resisted the offering of food and continued down to the third-class barracks, determined to first discover the status of his butler.

Reaching Rei and Ai’s room, Haru knocked quietly. He initially thought he heard voices within the room, but after a few moments, he was met with silence. Turning around, he knocked a little more loudly on the door to Makoto’s room, thinking of everything that had happened since he had stood on this very spot just the previous morning. He received no answer yet again and dejectedly began his way back up to the first-class areas, discovering that going up stairs felt even worse than going down them.

Haru entered the Verandah Cafe panting and mildly nauseous. He leaned heavily against the doorframe and made his first observation: it was far too loud. Logically speaking, the Verandah Cafe was not as busy as it could have been; it was a little too late for breakfast and little too early for lunch, but the few guests and staff seemed to be chatting and clattering loud enough to make up for the missing occupants. The checkered floor made him dizzy and the sunlight coming through the large windows hurt his eyes, and he was just about to turn out of the place when he heard an energetic voice calling out to him.

“Wooooo, you look like a trainwreck! Have a rough night?” Sitting alone at a long table, William Stockwell waved excitedly at him. An empty plate sat in front of him, and he greeted Haru with an impressive amount of enthusiasm.

“Good morning...what are you doing here?” Haru asked, “Alone, I mean.”

William pouted, “No one came to meet me! Not a single one! I ate all through breakfast by myself, but now you’re here, and boy do you look like you have a story to tell.”

He pulled out the chair next to him and Haru sat reluctantly. While he didn’t necessarily dislike Mr. Stockwell, he was far too boisterous for Haru’s current state. A waiter brought him a menu and Haru squinted at it, certain that the print hadn’t been this tiny the day before.

William eyed him with mixed amusement and sympathy.

“What were you drinking?”

Haru looked up at him, “S-sorry?”

“Last night, what were you drinking?”

“Oh...ale, I think...or maybe mead?” Haru wracked his brain, “I-I don’t really know the difference.” He admitted sheepishly.

William let out a long whistle, “Ah, well both of those will get ya good! You’ll want to order poached egg, wheat toast, and some sort of fruit, berries or a banana, and water.” Haru stared at him in surprise and William laughed, “I have lots of experience!”
Haru nodded in gratitude and ordered as he had dictated, while William looked him over approvingly. The implication of a drunken adventure would discourage most future-fathers-in-law, but William Stockwell was not like most people, and he certainly was not the type of pot to shame the kettle. He was actually quite relieved to learn that Haru wasn’t, as his daughter would put it, “a complete bore”. In all of his misplaced goodwill, he was relieved Sophia would be marrying someone with whom she could have fun.

He interviewed Haru extensively about his adventures the night before, and Haru, who wasn’t a good liar even under normal conditions, cryptically admitted he had attended a party in the third-class general room. “I had never really had alcohol like that before.” He glanced up at William awkwardly, “Could…could you not tell my father?”

William let out a booming laugh that disturbed the few tables around them, “I’m offended you think I would!” He grinned, “Your secret is safe with me!”

Haru’s food was brought out and William ceased his questions, allowing him to eat slowly. While the most prominent symptoms of Haru’s hangover remained ever present, some of the more minor aspects began to decline, and he was surprised by how well his stomach took the eggs and toast. As he ate, Haru thought about the man sitting next to him, considering everything he had been told about him compared with everything William himself had said, and ultimately came to contradictory conclusions.

Looking up from his food, Haru turned to William, “I’ve been wondering, or well, I’m just sort of surprised...how is it that you seem to know my father so well if you’ve only met twice before now?”

William froze with a well-sugared cup of coffee halfway to his lips, “…Is that what he told you?” He stared at Haru for a few moments, absolutely stunned. “How rude of him!” Another pout broke over his face and he launched into an explanation, “You were probably too young to remember the turn of the century parties, but I imagine it was the one time the high-class parties were vaguely reminiscent of the one you attended last night.” He winked, “December 31st, 1899 was the day I met your father. Sophia and I were in London for the holidays, and your father and I both attended the party thrown by one Mr. Marshall Pembroke, a short man with large wages and an even larger ego. In his library he supposedly kept a model of the solar system that was ten feet in diameter and made of solid gold, but he was very secretive about it and no one knew if it was really true - he loved to exaggerate. Anyways, your father and I started talking at the bar-”

“Is this seat taken?”

“Not at all.”

“Have we met?”

“And I’m sure you’re familiar with phrase ‘like gasoline to matches’, and of course after several drinks nothing seemed like a better idea than sneaking up to the library to see it for ourselves. Well it was nearing midnight at this point, so while everyone else was gathering in the great hall to watch the clock tick to a new century, we were sneaking up the steps to the library.” William paused and embarrassment showed on his expression for the first time, “I’ll admit I assumed the door was locked...I almost tried to kick it open, but your father just turned the handle and walked right in.”

The library was dark, but its grandeur was still visible enough to make Katsu whistle in appreciation as the door swung shut behind them. Lit only by the moonlight filtering through the drapes, the library was clearly massive. Filled floor to ceiling with books, volumes, and maps, it really begged the question why Mr. Pembroke himself was so painfully dimwitted.
William was giggling. He hadn’t stopped giggling since Katsu had first suggested this childish escapade, and it was he who made the first stumbling steps into the library.

Not using nearly enough caution and making far too much noise, they began to explore, running their hands over the artifacts far too roughly, tripping over tables and knocking over chairs.

“We did quite a number on that room; I really don't remember breaking that many things, but the library looked pretty devastated the next morning. I think the model itself was the only thing that got away unscathed; well, you have to be thankful for little miracles I suppose.” He smiled at the memory, appreciation and awe lining his face, “It was real by the way - absolutely massive, I doubt the real planets themselves are so magnificent.”

“Oi, Will, over here!”

An impressive outline stood in the corner. Reaching well above their heads and covered in a white cloth, it loomed in the darkness like something foreign, otherworldly.

They looked at each other. William bowed as if to say, ‘You do the honors.’

Katsu gripped the cloth as a cheer rose from the grand hall below them, and it fell to the floor just as the clock struck the first toll of midnight.

The entire solar system was exposed before them, solid gold and glittering, decorated with diamonds and outlined in silver. They couldn’t stop themselves from reaching out and touching it, four hands exploring the universe. Katsu smiled up at him as the clock cried out for the final time, and it rang deeply within William’s chest.

“And of course your father, useful as ever, passed out right after we found it.” William chuckled, “I’ll admit I wasn’t much help either…”

“Happy New Year.”

William was stuck. There was that simple New Year's tradition that dictated he act, countered with the deeply rooted British traditions that kept him still.

Katsu, however, was not so held. He took a step towards William, “Happy-” paused, and then frowned. He felt his knees buckle and his eyelids grow heavy, “Oh shit-” and he was gone. Sprawled on the floor, somewhere between asleep and comatose.

“…and really the situation was probably a bit more dire than we realized at the time, blackout drunk is never a good thing,” William looked sternly at Haru, serious for the first time that morning, “I can’t tell this story without making it cautionary - I guess I’m not as fun as I used to be, but if it ever happens to you or a friend of yours seek medical help immediately.”

He said nothing and Haru realized he was waiting for a response.

“Oh, y-yes of course.”

William nodded, “Good man. Now the foolish tale of adolescence resumes! The next day you couldn’t imagine a more brutal morning. Consider the way you feel right now, only worse, and then imagine getting caught. I woke up on the library floor with Marshall Pembroke and three members of Scotland Yard standing over me, all glaring and not saying a word.” He suddenly started laughing, “And I’ll never forget, your father was lying a few feet away and he looks groggily up at them and then over to me and he just says, ‘Well this doesn't look good.’”
Mr. Pembroke started shouting after Katsu’s assessment of their situation, but William didn’t hear him. Despite the aching of his limbs and the pounding in his skull, he was laughing. Katsu started to chuckle as well and soon they were both cackling in front of the police and the shouting gentleman whose library they had destroyed.

Katsu raised his hands to his face and William’s eyes caught the flash of yet another golden planet; a planet with its own special types of wars and laws and gravity - a wedding band, that traitorous thing.

William had taken a rather lengthy pause to chuckle at the memory, but his laughter suddenly faded and a shadow crossed his face.

He cleared his throat, “Anyway, that was what greeted me the first morning of the new century. I have never seen a man so sorry as your father after that night. Your mother wasn’t too pleased with the incident, but I think Katsu gave himself a far harder time than she ever did.” He shrugged, “But that’s how I met your father at any rate, we remained great friends until you moved back to Japan and Sophia and I moved back to Australia.”

This Haru remembered. The move had come swiftly, just a few months after the death of his mother. It also had been around the time his father started to carry the mysterious pocket watch and the question surrounding it began.

He frowned, “Why don’t I remember you then?”

William shrugged and he looked slightly apologetic, “It’s not really surprising that you don’t, and it’s largely my fault. I had a reputation for indiscretion in my youth, and while I had, at least mostly, grown out of it by then, I remained a man most women did not want their husbands associating with.”

Haru’s mouth opened in surprise, “My mother didn’t like you?”

“Oh no, I believe she adored me! Rima was very relaxed in that way, but she was not very keen on allowing me around you - I don’t think either of your parents were. You had a playdate with Sophia once that ended badly; when no one was looking she made you cry. We never were able to figure out how or why, but I remember afterwards Rima told me that as your mother she had to forbid any more playdates, but she also commended me for raising a daughter who made boys cry.” He puffed out his chest, wearing an expression of fatherly pride Haru had never known, “Of course that only encouraged me! I talked Katsu’s ear off for ages trying to get him to agree to your betrothal.”

Haru’s mouth fell open despite himself.

William raised an eyebrow, “Why? What did he tell you?”

“He said the second time you two met, you planned the engagement as a way to solidify your business relationship.”

“And you believed him?” William laughed, “You must be quite trusting, he’s a terrible liar.” He frowned, “Although I suppose a child shouldn’t have to constantly anticipate that their parent is lying to them...I will speak to him about that.” He thought for a few more moments before his expression brightened once again, “I don’t know how long it was, probably years, before he finally agreed to the marriage. I doubt he ever really took me seriously though, especially after you moved back to Japan. After that we didn’t see each other for five years, so I really thought that option was off the table, until I met you both again here! I was shocked when he mentioned it at dinner the other day, I can’t believe he was so enthusiastic - let alone remembered it, this trip has really been a blessing!” He
gave Haru a smile so genuine and innocent that Haru for just a moment felt willing to marry Sophia simply to make this gracious man happy.

At the very least, Haru tried to smile back at him with the same amount of enthusiasm, but it clearly lacked conviction.

William looked at him sympathetically, “If you’re still feeling ill I recommend you visit the Turkish Baths. They have all kinds of things that should speed up your recovery process.” He looked at the clock, “You’ll have to wait a little while though, morning hours are for female guests and afternoon hours are for male guests.”

Haru stood up, “That actually sounds really great, I think I’ll take a walk around the deck until it opens. Thank you for all your help and for the food recommendations and...um, everything.” He didn’t meet William’s eye, embarrassed by his own inability to properly express his gratitude. “What are you going to do?”

William leaned back in his chair and stretched, “Well I’ve been here so long it feels wrong to break the tradition now! I’ll stay and see if anyone else straggles in, if I wait long enough I might meet the lunch crowd.” He held out his hand and Haru shook it, and then he waved Haru out of the cafe, only stopping once he was out of sight, “See you at dinner! I hope you feel better! Remember to drink lots of water!”

Haru’s plates were cleared away and William fixed himself another cup of coffee. Not ten minutes had passed when Katsu himself stumbled into the Verandah Cafe, haggard and destitute, looking sickly as his son, if not more so.

William forewent words and instead immediately began to laugh.

“What?”

Katsu stormed over to him, or at least attempted to; he stumbled twice before he reached the table.

William wiped tears from his eyes, “Oh nothing, nothing! This really doesn’t look good…” He grinned as Katsu roughly pulled out the chair next to him and collapsed into it. “You’ll want to order eggs, toast, frui-”

“You think I don’t know that!” Katsu snapped.

“Ah right, right, forgot who I was talking to!”

Katsu pressed his palms into his eyes, “Then stop talking.”

William noticed that, his hangover aside, Katsu still had not forgotten to haphazardly pin his pocket watch to his side.

They sat in silence for about thirty more seconds before Katsu banged a fist on the table, addressing a nearby waiter, “Can I get some service? I’d like to be at the Turkish Baths the moment they open.” He ordered crudely and then chugged a cup of black coffee, mumbling, “And where the hell are Ai and Rei?”

William hesitated, his brain working furiously, “I actually heard Mr. Astor give the baths a terrible review, why don’t we visit the squash court instead? You can sweat out all the toxins via exercise, it’s uh...much healthier that way.” He tried to smile convincingly but Katsu looked unswayed. Rethinking his tactic, William leaned towards Katsu with a smirk, “Unless you’re afraid to take a beating...”
Katsu’s tired eyes suddenly illuminated with some long forgotten fire, a resurfacing competitiveness, “And what the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“I mean that whenever we square off, I always finish on top.”

Katsu choked on his coffee and his face reddened with both embarrassment and irritation. He leaned back in his chair and let out a mocking laughter, “Ah but it’s been years now! What’s the appeal of playing with an old man?”

William looked as if Katsu had dealt him a particularly low blow, “As if you haven’t aged! But fine, I’m old, and you play dirty, so how could you lose? Why not join me for a match or two?”

Katsu glared at him as the last lingering thoughts of the Turkish Baths faded from his mind. Decision made, he shrugged and linked his hands behind his head, puffing out his chest, “I just hope you don’t break a hip…”

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Exiting the Verandah Cafe, Haru stepped onto the first-class promenade deck, looking out at the lower deck and the sparkling ocean beyond it. The sun was even brighter in the open air, more brutal, and Haru felt a rising seasickness as the ship rocked gently from side to side. Admitting defeat at the hands of the outdoors, he was just about to leave and wait in his room when he suddenly heard a warm, familiar voice calling out to him.

Looking directly down to the deck below, he saw Makoto, brilliant smile intact, waving his arms enthusiastically. He held up his hands, signaling for Haru to stay where he was. He watched as Makoto took five steps to the right, hesitated, and then took two steps backward.

Cupping his hands around his mouth, Makoto grinned as he shouted upward, “This is where I first saw you!”

The wind suddenly picked up, blowing roughly across both of them, and Haru gave Makoto his first real smile of the day. While Makoto had shown him there were many wonderful things in the world, Haru thought that Makoto himself was certainly the best out of all of them.

“Stay there, I’m coming down!”

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The knock was dull - not quite loud enough to fully pull Rei into consciousness and certainly not loud enough to pull him out of bed. A heavy weight lay on top of him, warm and very solid; he could feel his heart beating against it. He blinked his eyes open, not quite sure what had woken him. A groggy smile spread across his face as he recognized Nagisa sleeping soundly across his chest, looking a little blurry without his glasses, but still ethereal as ever.

He realized very slowly how late in the morning it must be, and as if his brain was trying to protect him from the unfortunate fact, he remembered even more slowly that he had a job he was supposed to be doing. Once these two thoughts had formed fully in his mind, he supposed he was probably panicking; he was supposed to be, at least in the mind of his employer, the “dependable butler”. Ai’s inexperience was meant to be guided by his seasoned seniority, and Rei himself was supposed to be proper, punctual, and, most of all, reliable.

But at the moment, all of these thoughts were occurring the back of his mind, and his panic was affecting him very little on the surface. It was as if a stricter, more controlled version of himself was shouting at him through a sheet of ice, but the Rei lying here in the warmth of Nagisa’s presence
could not be troubled by any of it.

Nagisa nuzzled his cheek closer Rei’s chest and let out a snore far too deep and graved for his tiny frame. As he watched, Nagisa’s lips parted and a long string of drool ran out of his mouth and onto Rei’s shirt. He couldn’t help but cringe and reluctantly concluded that Nagisa was decidedly less cute in the morning.

As if he had heard Rei’s offensive thoughts, one of Nagisa’s eyes suddenly blinked open. It didn’t even look as if Nagisa had really seen him, he just smiled slowly and closed his one eye, squeezing Rei slightly.

It took about ten seconds for the realization to set in, and then both his eyes flew open and he sat up in horror, quickly wiping up the drool on his face. He swore loudly and his cheeks burned with embarrassment.

“I-I’m sorry, it was an accident I didn’t mean...” He trailed off, looking up at Rei through wide eyes, as though he was actually afraid Rei would get mad at him. If Nagisa hadn’t been so thoroughly embarrassed, he would have been forced into silence once he noticed how pretty Rei looked without his glasses on.

Rei took both of Nagisa’s hands in his own and said nothing, offering a kind smile instead. Giving him a small tug, Rei gently tried to pull him back into his arms.

To his surprise, however, Nagisa resisted and his eyes flited to the large drool stain on Rei’s shirt. He crinkled his nose.

Rei let out an exasperated sigh, losing his suave, romantic exterior in the process, “Really? It’s your drool.”

Nagisa pouted and crawled even further away from him, “It’s still gross!”

Rei could feel cracks begin to form in the glass that separated this pleasant, relaxed state of mind from his usual one. Disappointed, he felt his patience waning along with the calm of their morning.

He pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes, “Well you can either get me a new shirt or deal with it.”

Nagisa, neither willing to move from the bed or accept the drool, opened his mouth to grumpily suggest that Rei could just take off his shirt - when he was stopped by Rei’s single, warning eye, glaring through the gap in his hands.

His suggestion had been anticipated, and Nagisa felt his heart jump into his throat; his embarrassment returned with yet more ammunition as he recalled his actions from the night before.

“I didn’t mean - I...I’ll get it.” Nagisa held up his hands, as if to prove his innocence, and then frantically climbed down the ladder, missing the last rung in his haste and stumbling onto the floor.

Nagisa began to tear through the first bag he saw, pulling out trousers and pajamas and uniforms.

Rei watched him, neither happy nor unhappy, he simply felt tired. Eventually he sighed, “That’s Ai’s bag.”

Nagisa faltered for a moment, “A-Ah...o-okay.” He roughly returned the garments and then turned to Rei’s luggage which, thankfully, was much better organized. He found a white t-shirt within moments and tossed it up to the top bunk, pointedly looking the other direction while Rei changed
shirts.

As he waited, scenes from the night before crashed over him in waves; how they had fled from angry Russians and then argued out in the hallway, how he had undressed and invited the butler into his bed, and how Rei chose to hug him instead. Nagisa supposed he should probably feel a bit jilted - and a small, vain part of him probably did - but he mainly felt confused. He wondered what exactly Rei wanted from him if it wasn’t that.

“Okay.”

Rei’s voice broke through Nagisa’s troubled thoughts and he turned to see Rei, fully clothed once more, waiting patiently. Nagisa climbed back up to the top bunk, hurriedly falling into Rei’s arms so that he could hide his face in the butler’s chest. Rei’s fingers began to play with his hair, brushing through the blonde locks, sometimes making them tickle his ears and neck. This action, while simple in both execution and motivation, only further muddled Nagisa’s thoughts.

His hair had been pulled - for a variety of reasons - and he marveled at how gentle all of Rei’s touches were. Everything he did seemed to communicate a certain type of caring or value. Rei always radiated safety.

“I’m sorry about last night.”

He didn’t look at Rei as he said it. Safety was something Nagisa had certainly gotten used to not having. It was one of the many things that had slowly faded from his life without him noticing. Once all of this was over and Rei was either running for the hills or left waiting hopelessly, Nagisa wondered how strongly he would feel safety’s absence.

Rei shifted slightly so he could see his face, “It’s okay.”

Nagisa raised his hands and looked at the backs of them, taking in the hard knobs of his joints and the scars on his knuckles. He flipped them over and examined the lines that zigzagged across his palms, wondering if any of them said what would happen to the two of them.

He opened his mouth, determined to try and communicate what he was thinking and feeling - something he was sure he hadn’t done recently.

“I don’t think you know how new this is to me, w-well you probably have some sort of idea already but-” he took a deep breath, focusing very hard on his next words, “the way you act...it’s different than I’m used to, so I never really know what to do. No one has ever treated me like this, or said the things you do, or touched me like this,” he clenched his fists, “and I don’t think I know how to touch you back.”

Not that Nagisa didn’t know how to touch people, he actually knew how to touch them in a variety of colorful ways, but he knew this wasn’t the same. He couldn’t touch people in ways that made them feel important, he didn’t know how to make someone feel cared for.

To his surprise, Rei reached for his hand and squeezed it slightly. He took a deep breath, and then began to struggle through a confession of his own.

“I...I think you give me a little too much credit. There are areas of relationships that I have no knowledge of, what I'm referring to - well, you probably have some sort of idea already.” he smiled at Nagisa but at its core, the smile looked sad, “And about those areas - I...I don't ever want to learn. That might be selfish or wrong of me but - but I really don't think I can. So I wouldn't blame you if you also didn’t want to learn, or couldn't, or didn’t want to try - it’s all okay.”
As Rei finished speaking Nagisa realized he had been wrong earlier; he realistically was aware that other couples usually gifted one another with immense amounts of love and devotion, but certainly no one had ever looked to Nagisa for that. He knew what Rei wanted from him, he just couldn't imagine why.

He squeezed Rei’s hand in response, unaware that he was already learning.

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Makoto had awoken earlier than usual with a demanding ache in his stomach. Blinking tiredly at the ceiling, he realized he was starving. His nerves had prevented him from fully appreciating the fine dinner place before him the night before, and he was forced to choose between the comfort of his bed and the beckoning call of breakfast.

He sat up with a sigh and realized immediately that Nagisa had not returned that night. This wasn’t exactly uncommon, and while Makoto didn’t always approve of his best friend’s choices, he knew he had very little authority to tell Nagisa what to do, and so this absence troubled him very little.

Makoto dressed quickly and went to breakfast alone. He had lived the extravagant, high-class lifestyle for just a day, but seeing the simple buffet without decorations or ornaments made him sad. He felt as if his position in the world had suddenly been reaffirmed. Yesterday he could have been or done anything, and today he was shackled once more by the restraints of the world he lived in.

He sighed heavily through a mouthful of flavorless eggs. If he was being honest with himself, he had to admit it was not exactly the grandeur that he was missing. If his fears and insecurities made certain things difficult to do yesterday, those same actions felt all but impossible to do today.

After breakfast he ventured out onto the main deck, pleased to at least find that it was another sunny day. All around him people were talking and laughing, and he walked to the railing to look out at the sea. He suddenly felt the silly urge to congratulate himself - this was his third day on the ship and he felt surprisingly at ease on the open ocean. He supposed he had to give adequate credit to the ship itself; monstrous and powerful, truly unsinkable, it gave him confidence.

His thoughts returned idly to Haru, a frequent topic as of recently, and he leaned heavily on the railing, chiding his own cowardice. He tried to think of what Nagisa would do, but Nagisa’s actions often confused Makoto even more than his advice. He turned around subconsciously, fully intending to simply follow his feet wherever they should lead him - when something small and not-so-sturdy collided with him.

Makoto remained standing, but the small thing felt the full effect of the collision’s recoil and fell to the ground. Looking down in surprise, Makoto saw a young boy sitting on the ground, looking up at him wide, tearful eyes. The child tried to scoot away from him and Makoto knelt down so he didn’t seem so large and looming, and then spoke to him very gently, “I’m so sorry! Please don’t be afraid, I promise I won’t hurt you...are you alright?”

His words seemed to quickly cement him as a friend in the boy’s mind, and Makoto suddenly found himself being clung to. The child had lunged towards him and quickly pressed his face into Makoto’s chest. With his fists curled tightly around Makoto’s clothes, he emitted several loud sobs.

Makoto was frozen in surprise; he didn’t have much experience with small children, in fact, his towering height generally scared most of them, and yet here this boy was, crying into his chest. Makoto hugged him gently and awkwardly, paranoid that he would crush the child in his arms.

“It’s okay, it’ll be okay, it-” he paused to think, “Do you know where your parents are? Are you
lost?"

The boy spoke for the first time, his voice was high pitched and broken by sobs, “I-I-I can’t f-find onii-chan.”

Stunned, Makoto looked over the boy again, noticing him clear Japanese heritage. The terms made his heart ache; he still remembered his parents sitting him down and telling him he was going to be and onii-chan. Holding this child gave him a pang of loss for siblings he would never meet but loved nevertheless.

Makoto gently patted the boy on the head, “You don't have to worry, I'll help you find him, everything will be okay.”

He gently tried to pull away so that he could stand, but the child clung to him resiliently, keeping his face pressed into Makoto’s chest and his eyes shut tightly. Makoto was at a loss, it was almost as if he was being hid behind.

“Are - are you afraid of something?”

The boy suddenly started shaking, “I-I-I...it took Okaa-san and Otoo-san away,” his voiced wailed high and piercing, “it-it’ll get m-me too...the water...”

Understanding broke across Makoto’s face and he peered over the boy’s head at the overwhelming ocean. Makoto felt dismayed – of course, of all things, it had to be the ocean.

“How can I tell you a secret?” he spoke softly and felt the boy’s head nod against his chest, “I’m afraid of water too. But I don’t mind being out here because of something my friend told me. Do you think you could look at the water while I tell you?”

The child stopped shaking and then hesitated for several moments, never giving him a definite yes or no.

Makoto kept his voice gentle, “It’s okay if you c-”

The boy slowly began to lift his head, keeping his eyes shut, he placed his tiny hand in Makoto’s large one.

Makoto led him to the ship’s edge in small steps, stopping about five feet from the railing. He knelt down beside the boy once more, “I know you can’t see where we are, but this is really great, we’re close to the railing, and I’m so proud of you. If you were to look straight down at the water right now do you know what you’d see?” The boy made a terrified face and Makoto continued quickly, “You’d realize just how far away it is. We’re so high above the waves, there’s no way the ocean can get us up here.”

The tears were already drying on the boy’s face, and he slowly opening one eye and then the other. He kept his gaze on Makoto, and never let go of his hands. After a few moments he took a single, very brief peek down at the waves before hurrying to hide his face in Makoto’s chest once more.

“A-are you sure it can’t get me up here?”

Makoto suddenly imagined the sea rising up, dragging the ship to the bottom of the ocean and claiming them all.

“Of course!” He forced the image away, knowing that he of all people should not be providing this lesson or uttering these promises, “We couldn’t be safer. The ocean won’t steal anyone away.”
The boy raised his head once more, turning back to the ocean; he no longer looked afraid, just slightly uncomfortable and suspicious.

“And onii-chan? It won’t take him away either?”

Yet gain, the phrase sent a pang through Makoto’s heart.

“He’s safe too.”

Just as Makoto said it, a frantic voice rose from behind them.

“Hayato? Hayato?!” A young man with strawberry-blonde hair and familiar bright eyes charged onto the deck.

The boy released his grip on Makoto for the first time, “Onii-chan!”

“Oh thank goodness!” The young man spotted them and immediately fell to his knees, pulling the little boy into his arms.

The young man, Kisumi Shigino, then felt two reactions in quick succession; first, he felt an overwhelming surge of relief as he held his brother in his arms. Next, looking up at the young man who had been with Hayato, his second reaction was a general paralyzing feeling of, oh my.

He stood up, “Thank you so much for keeping him safe, I was losing my mind with worry. I’m sorry for any trouble he may have caused you…” he flashed a bright smile, “I’m Kisumi by the way, and this is Hayato.” He rested one hand on his brother’s head and held the other out towards Makoto.

“It’s no problem! We were just talking a bit, he’s was not trouble at all. You must be a good big brother, he was very scared without you.” He shook Kisumi’s hand, “Oh-uh, I’m Makoto.”

“I’m impressed you got Hayato to come so close to the railing, he’s refused to leave the inner-ship for the last two days.” Kisumi looked sheepish, “Today I finally convinced him to come out on the deck, but he got scared and ran away.”

“I got lost.” Hayato mumbled, and Kisumi bent down and picked him up with a smile.

Makoto tried very hard not to feel jealous of them, “Y-yes, he mentioned that he was afraid of the ocean…”

Kisumi nodded and his face looked grim, “Yes, that’s…a fairly recent fear of his.” He looked troubled for a few moments before it cleared to a bright smile, “Really it would have been better if we could have avoided ships altogether, but of course it’s the best way to get to America.”

This surprised Makoto, who kept forgetting that, unlike himself, most people has actually planned on boarding well before the day the RMS Titanic set sail.

“Are you going for family?”

Kisumi shook his head, “If only, I’m going for work. If all goes well and the right strings are pulled I should have a decent-paying job as a firefighter lined up. Things should be good for us.” He kept talking and a broad smile on his face, as if he could see their whole bright future spread out right in front of him. “I’d love for Hayato to be able to go to school, and maybe we could have an apartment overlooking central park, one with a gym and basketball court…ah sorry! I got carried away! What about you? Why are you going to America?”
Makoto hesitated, “It…it’s a long story, it just sort of happened…”

The brothers looked at him curiously.

“My friend sort of um…stole…our tickets…”

Kisumi chuckled, “I see! Well then it all makes sense in that case. Do you have any plans at all?”

“N-no not really…” Makoto, as if he suddenly remember something, looked up at the first-class deck above them, “Well...maybe one, I…” he trailed off, still staring upward, his mouth hanging open in surprise.

Taking this shaky confirmation as the permission he needed to make an advance, Kisumi leaned closer to him, “Well then how about you stick with us? I-

Makoto wasn’t listening. He held up a hand and spoke quickly, “I’m sorry just give me one second! Sorry-” and then he was gone, running closer to the ship and calling out to the upper deck enthusiastically, “Haru? Haru! Down here!’

Kisumi followed his gaze upward and saw a young man waving shyly back at Makoto. He let out a low hum and turned back to his brother, pouting, “Well Hayato, it looks like I’ve lost already.”

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Floors above in the much stricter atmosphere of the first-class reading and writing room, Marie Astor sat alone with her legs crossed and her spine curved neatly upward. With one delicate hand she held open a light anthology of Romantic-era poetry, while her shining eyes flitted across the page. She seemed to depict the very the essence of elegance and composure - but only seemed to, because the book wrapped inside the shiny new dust-cover was, while poetic in many ways, certainly not romantic. She had tossed the real novel into the ocean before they departed from Southampton, and instead placed the innocent dust-jacket on the more indecent and mother-disapproved The Awakening by Kate Chopin.

Her concentration, however, was not equaled by the world around her; while she read, a low buzz of conversation began to fill the room, and she was finally forced to look up as a rather loud giggle erupted nearby her.

Following the gaze of every woman in the room, her eyes fell up the brilliantly blushing Rin Matsuoka, who was currently knelt beside a Queen Anne hutch positioned against the far wall. He rummaged through it with his back to his spectators, but his intensely burning ears betrayed his embarrassment.

While nowhere did it say specifically that the reading and writing room was solely meant for female passengers, it was yet another tricky rule that they had to live by - if men and women wished to enjoy one another's company, the first-class general room was considered the place to do so, while the smoking lounge and reading room remained the unspoken reprises for the opposite sexes. Therefore, the social milieu dictated that Mr. Matsuoka be giggled at and whispered about, and Marie shut her book, wondering what had possessed him to enter the reading room in the first place.

She stood and intertwined her hands behind her back, crossing the room to where he was crouching, still fully occupied by the contents of the hutch.

“Have you lost something?” Her voice was high and clear and effectively startled him.

His head whipped around and his voice cracked, “Marie!”
She inclined her head, “Mr. Matsuoka.”

He stood up immediately, “Sorry, Ms. Astor, I mean. No I haven’t lost anything - I was looking for something though.” He looked curiously down at the floor.

“Was it wrinkles?” She teased, pointing to the creases that had formed of his suit, “If so, I believe you have found them.”

Rin looked down in embarrassment and hastily tried to smooth out his clothing, “Ah n-no. I was looking for a book, the one I was reading last night was dreadful, but I wasn’t sure where to find any, so I just, well I thought…”

“Perhaps the reading room?” She supplied helpfully.

Rin had awoken early that morning and, choosing to not disturb the sleeping butler on his couch, had flipped idle to the end of Marianne Abbott’s story about the sun and the moon. Skimming the final paragraphs, he scoffed at the ending, and had resolved to find them a better quality book for them to read for the remainder of their nights aboard the ship.

Marie looked down at the small collection of books he had found, spying a Bible, a dictionary, and an encyclopedia of seafaring terms.

“I see it is a rather dry selection.” She tilted her head to the side and calculated an expression of extreme innocence, “I am actually a rather large fan of literature myself, I have a decent collection in my room if you’d care to follow me?”

Rin, blinded by all his good intentions, could not believe his luck, “Do you really? That’d be great! I’d really appreciate it.”

She beckoned him with just a finger and he followed obediently as she led him through the ship. She made certain to keep an eye on everyone they passed; it would of course be disastrous if anyone saw her bringing a young man into her bedroom.

Rin remained blissfully unaware of the dangerous implications made by this situation, and only paid enough attention to idly observe that her room was down the same hallway as his.

Ushering him quickly into her room, she closed the door and then pointed to the corner, “It’s those two.”

Rin looked around in confusion, “Sorry?”

“Those two trunks there.” She sat in a chair and crossed her legs, “I apologize but I cannot lift them.” This was, in essence, the truth; she could not lift them, but she also took pleasure in the fact that he was forced to do something for her.

“O-Oh, yes of course, sorry.”

He grunted under the weight of the trunks as he pulled them into the center of the room, and at her indication, undid the first latch. It had been stuffed well past the point of full and then roughly closed, so the lid popped open with a rather large velocity.

Standing in front of both open and overflowing trunks, Rin couldn't help but be blunt.

“Holy shit.” The profanity escaped his lips and his eyes flew nervously to the trunks’ owner, “S-sorry, I mean-”
Marie giggled behind her hand and stood from her chair, walking over to join him.

“It’s quite alright, there are a helluva lot.” She smiled at his reaction, “I unfortunately had to leave a large amount of my collection in London, but hopefully there will be something fitting for you here. What type of book were you looking for?”

Rin flushed slightly, “W-well actually it’s for my butler and I, I’m teaching him reading - well except he doesn’t really need it, he just thinks he does, he’s too hard on himself with most things, b-but anyway, the book we were using last night was pretty lousy.”

Marie’s pretty features darkened for a fraction of a second, “Is that so?” She pretended to think for a moment, “Well then I’d recommend this one.” Scattered as the trunks seemed, she must have given them some system of organization because she found the book she was looking for within seconds, “It isn’t poetry - unless you know French that is, then I can lend you the versed copy - but I think you two will enjoy this.” She held out to him and English translation of *The Romance of Tristan and Iseult*.

Rin looked at it skeptically, “Does it have a happy ending? I don’t really think he’d like something that ended sadly…”

The general concern in his voice solidified her decision and she pushed it towards him, speaking two lies without batting an eyelash, “Of course it has a happy ending! I can handle nothing less.”

Rin looked again from the novel in his hand to the two large trunks of books in front of him, “Well I suppose you’d know your own collection better than me. I’ll be sure to get it back to you before we land. Thank you so much for your help.”

Marie smiled sweetly, “It’s no trouble at all.”

She took the forefront as they exited her room, sticking her head out the door and scanning the hallway for other guests. The approach of light footsteps made her heart jump into her throat; she had been playing a dangerous game, what had she expected? Turning to meet the eyes of whoever was to be her undoing, a malicious smile suddenly broke over her face. She began to giggle loudly, placing a hand on Rin’s shoulder as she pulled him out of her room.

“Oh dear, Mr. Matsuoka!” her laugh chimed across the hallway, “You are truly a delight!”

Nitori Aiichirou stood in the hallways, crestfallen, as the pair of them left her room, apparently having a marvelous time in the privacy of one another’s company.

Spotting his butler, Rin greeted him enthusiastically, “Good morning Ai! You’ve finally woken up I see!”

Ai had trouble meeting his eyes, “Y-yes Sir, I apologize for my lateness this morning, and for falling asleep in your room last ni-”

Marie’s eyes flew curiously to Rin and who laughed nervously and quickly interrupted his butler, “It’s no problem! I got along just fine this morning. Marie was just showing me her large collection of books, she was even kind enough to let us borrow one!” He held it up so Ai could see, “Now you’ll have a chance to read some real literature.”

Ai looked at Marie in surprise, “Th-thank you, Ms. Astor.” He hesitated, “Have you ever thought of writing books yourself?” He looked at her with wide, blue eyes - eyes like hers, except the innocence in them was real. She realized that he was genuinely asking, and the question wasn’t meant to mock her.
Accomplished as she was in the arts of deception, quick thinking, and social navigation, this simple comment left her speechless. Eventually she shook her head and gave a reply born of her conditioning, “N-no, I don’t think I’m suited for it. Papa says there are only half a dozen men worth publishing, let alone any women.”

Ai seemed slightly dejected, “Oh-oh okay, it just seems like something you’d be good at.”

This was followed by a rather long and uncomfortable silence; Marie, whose triumphant mood had been officially ruined, excused herself a little less politely than usual and returned to the reading and writing room. Forgetting her prospective conquest, she examined the hidden copy of *The Awakening* in her hands, fully recognizing her own selfishness but still unwilling to condemn it.

Rin chose to return to his room before dinner, having just missed lunch, and once more his thoughts turned to the haunting institution of marriage. Collapsing into an armchair, he saw that Ai had forgotten Marianne Abbott’s anthology on the table. He picked it up and scanned the title once more: *Time (More than Enough).* It seemed so preposterous to him; surely there was never enough.

Ai headed towards his room in the third-class barracks for the first time that day, feeling as if a year’s worth of interactions had taken place in the last two minutes. He had only reached the end of the hallway, however, when a low whistle stopped him.

A tall young man emerged from a room ahead of him and stared wistfully in the direction Marie had exited. A bit older than Ai and dressed as a steward, he looked positively love-struck.

He let out another long whistle, this time it was longer, high and drawn out, and then he grinned at Ai, “Is she yours? Man! What I wouldn’t give to serve her...”

“Um...n-no I don’t.” Ai looked at him skeptically, “I think she’s scary.”

The young man placed a hand over his heart as if Ai had personally offended him, “An angel like that? I don't believe it!” He grinned and held out his hand, “The name’s Seijuuro Mikoshiba.”

Ai shook the large hand apprehensively, “A-Aiichirou Nitori.”

Mikoshiba scratched his head, “Do you know which way the squash court is? I’m supposed to change shifts with the attendant in about ten minutes but I can’t figure this ship out.”

Ai was stunned, Mikoshiba was about as far away from the squash court as he could get. “It’s all the way down the stairs to the lowest deck, it should be right in the middle.”

Mikoshiba grinned sheepishly, “Ah thanks, I’m pretty new to all this. How long have you been a butler?”

“Not too long, only about a year - maybe a little more. How long have you uh...” Ai hesitated, “been a squash court attendant?”

“This is my first real time,” he chuckled. “If required the attendants are supposed to play as opponents, and the other day I accidentally hit a man in the face with the racket - his nose bled and everything it was terrible - I imagine I’ll be fired once we land, but that’ll be fine by me.”

Ai looked at him sympathetically, “Is the job really that difficult?”

Mikoshiba chuckled, “Oh no, it’s not that, I only intended for this to be a short-term job anyways; once we land in New York I’ll have the money I need.” He smiled sadly, “My brother’s sick. Not severely, but if he goes untreated he could get pretty bad in a few years. After this trip I should have
just enough to afford treatment.

“Is he here now?” Ai glanced around the hallways, half expecting the ill little brother to pop out of a doorway like Mikoshiba had done.

“Nope! He’s waitin’ for me in New York. I worked as a coal stoker on the Cunard line for almost a year, I would go to London, and then back, and then to London again – I was gonna work the circuit as many times as I needed to until I had the money, but then when then this job came out of nowhere and offered me ten-fold what I was making, it was a bit like a miracle.”

Ai guessed that his wages and Mikoshiba’s were probably similar, and if it was truly ten times what the coal stokers were paid – Ai thought of the men shoveling coal into the furnace of this very ship and shivered, “That’s really lucky, I’m happy for you.”

“Thanks!” He shook Ai’s hand again, “I’ve gotta get going but I’m sure I’ll see you around, thanks again for the directions! And let me know any time you see that girl around!”

Ai reddened, “O-okay, her name is Marie, I-I don’t know if you knew or-”

A dreamy look crossed over his face, “Marie…” and he walked away whistling cheerfully, leaving the bewildered Ai behind him.

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Making his way down to the main deck, Haru found Makoto waiting for him with a worried expression.

Foregoing a greeting, he surveyed Haru and gave him a kind smile, “I was afraid you’d be sick after last night, have you eaten today?”

“Yes, just now…” Haru self-unconsciously brushed some of the hair out of his eyes and into its proper place, wondering if he really looked that bad. He knew that a thank you was in order but didn’t know how to express it with all the sincerity he felt in his heart. “Thank you, by the way, for bringing me back to my room last night.” He looked at the ground, “I-I don’t really remember a lot, but I’m really embarrassed...I hope I wasn’t too troublesome.”

Makoto was suddenly reminded of Haru, red-faced and mesmerizing, coming towards him with flushed lips and lidded eyes.

“N-no it’s okay, I’m glad you enjoyed yourself,” Makoto suddenly looked worried, “You-you did, didn’t you?”

Haru had to laugh, “Yes I did, I honestly haven’t had that much fun in a while.” He smiled down at the ground, “I should thank you for that too.”

Makoto held up his hands, “O-oh well Nagisa is the fun one, I just kind of get dragged along...but maybe he’ll have another idea for how to have fun tonight as well.”

“Just don’t let me drink any alcohol,” Haru joked, “other than that, it sounds good to me.”

Makoto had to work hard to suppress his excitement, “I’m glad! I’m sure Nagisa has something in mind already. Oh, actually, have you seen Nagisa? I can’t find him.”

Haru shook his head, “Now that you mention it, I haven’t seen Rei all day either, they-” Haru broke off as he had realized exactly where they could be and what they could be doing. He blushed
crimson, and Makoto, who had already suspected as much from Nagisa, tried to quickly change the subject, fighting embarrassment of his own.

“W-well it’s probably best not to worry about it, I’ll make sure to keep an eye out for them. We-”

“Why is everyone so flushed already? I only just got here!” A bubbling voice rose from behind them, and Haru turned to see a smirking young man with a child hanging around his legs. The man held his hand out to Haru, “Hi! My name’s Kisumi - sounds just like kiss me.” He threw a wink in Makoto’s direction, “My brother and I met Makoto this morning and we’ve been getting to know each other, we’re already quite chummy.”

“I can see that.” Haru immediately decided he disliked this young man and did not smile back.

The differences between Haru and Kisumi would have been drastic under usual circumstances; however, in lieu of Haru’s rather rough night, the contrast seemed almost comical. Kisumi’s glowing skin and bright eyes made Haru feel even more self-conscious with his own haggard appearance; he knew he must look like death personified.

As a final blow, the young boy hanging around Kisumi’s legs moved behind Makoto and his brother, as if to hide from Haru.

Kisumi poorly disguised his amusement, “Ah, sorry, Hayato is shy around new people.”

This apparently was not entirely true because the boy clung to Makoto just as much as he did to his brother.

“You look sick.” Hayato observed.

Kisumi laughed heartily and Makoto gave a light chuckle, but Haru glared at the child, “That certainly seems to be the prevailing opinion.”

Kisumi gave Haru a pseudo-smile and suggested they all move over by the benches so that Haru could sit down. This double-edged kindness and insult annoyed him, but Haru truthfully was in no position to refuse. Therefore he sat with crossed arms, while Hayato, Kisumi, and Makoto stood above him. He initially thought that Kisumi was standing far too close to Makoto, but that soon became the least of his concern; from his position below them, Haru had a clear view of the numerous soft touches and caresses Kisumi gave Makoto.

They were probably talking about something but Haru was certainly not listening, only paying attention to Kisumi’s pilfering hands; a grip on Makoto’s shoulder, a pat on his back, a hushed whisper by his ear, the occasional brush by his hands - and all the while Kisumi was radiant and smiling, flipping his hair and throwing brief, teasing glances in Haru’s direction.

Haru’s relief came in the form of a child.

Hayato, who also had not been listening to the grownups talk, suddenly tugged on Makoto’s hand.

“Can we go look at the water again?”

Makoto looked down at him in surprise and turned to Kisumi.

The oldest brother shrugged, “It’s fine with me, I know he’s safe with you.” He smiled and placed a final caress on Makoto’s shoulder.

Haru and Kisumi watched as the two of them retreated to ship’s edge, and to Haru’s annoyance,
Kisumi sat down right next to him, throwing an arm over each side of the bench. Then, as if every single thing he had done that day hadn’t been taunting enough, Kisumi opened his mouth.

“He’s a good guy.” He observed lightly, sounding more or less indifferent.

Haru, who genuinely considered himself saved in every way by that good guy, felt personally offended by the understatement.

Kisumi suddenly let out a roaring laugh, “Oh my, what a scary look on your face! I know what you must be thinking, why am I doing all this if I just think he’s a good guy right? If I don’t actually care that much then why am I doing this to you?”

Haru didn’t look at him, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Ahhhh so that’s why nothing has happened yet, you’re a bit of a prude!” Kisumi continued speaking and each word stuck into Haru like a snagging little thorn, “He said he wasn’t sure what his plans were once the ship landed, so I was going to suggest he travel with Hayato and me. Now, what would you say to that?”

Heat rose in Haru’s face and for perhaps the first time in his life, it was not due to embarrassment.

“I doubt he’d agree to it.”

“Oh I see. So he does have plans.” Kisumi raised an eyebrow, “Are they you? How long have you known each other?”

Haru opened his mouth defiantly but the words got stuck in his throat - he was always bad at lying - and he ultimately said nothing.

“Ahhh, so it’s like that.” Kisumi pouted, “Well that seems a bit selfish to me! If you barely know each other then you have no reason to be so protective of your territory.”

Haru turned to look at Kisumi in astonishment, and seeing him twirling his hair idly around his finger and looking carefree as ever, he finally snapped, “You’re the one who’s been mocking me for the last hour! And he’s not territory and he’s not just a good guy, he’s the most caring person I’ve ever met, and no matter what his plans are - and I guarantee they’re not you - I won’t allow you talk about him like he’s anything less than that.”

Kisumi’s finger froze in his hair as his mouth fell open.

“Now that’s more like it!” He suddenly broke into a smile, “Don’t look so upset, I was only teasing; it’s painfully clear that no one else could possibly steal his attention. I just wanted to make sure his feelings weren’t wasted on someone who wasn’t equally smitten.” He placed a hand on Haru’s shoulder, but Haru had already come to despise Kisumi’s deceptive hands too much to find the gesture comforting. “Of course I won’t really try anything, I just wanted to tease you a bit, but if you take too long,” he made a mock-fearful expression, “who knows what I’ll do? Who knows what he’ll do?”

“Like I said before, I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Haru looked away from him, shutting down once more, “If you have something to say then just say it.”

Kisumi stroked his chin, clearly feigning wisdom, “And just like that your fire is gone huh? I’m saying that despite being the most caring person you’ve ever met, he’ll grow disinterested, just like anyone would, if made to wait too long. You should trust me, I know about this type of stuff.”
Haru scoffed, “Well I’m certainly not going to trust you.”

Kisumi shrugged, looking virtually un-offended, “I suppose that’s fair.”

After this concession, the tension between them largely depleted and there was little conversation. Rather, Kisumi talked a lot and Haru replied very rarely, instead watching from a distance as Makoto played with Hayato and mulling over what Kisumi had said to him.

While he had remained resolute in his decision to defend Makoto’s integrity from Kisumi’s belittling assertions, Haru wished he felt half as confident with the rest of his claims. He really had no idea what Makoto was planning to do once he and Nagisa reached New York. Although he didn’t know if Nagisa had met Kisumi yet, he somehow doubted he would object to traveling with Kisumi after both seeing him and speaking with him. As far as Makoto’s opinion on the matter went...well, he clearly adored Hayato at the very least, and Makoto obviously wasn’t in the habit of disappointing others.

These thoughts troubled him considerably more than they should have since Haru’s father had already communicated his plan to force Haru and Rin out west the moment they landed; Haru certainly wouldn’t be present to see any of these potential events take place. He knew truthfully there was no future promise holding Makoto to him, and this was perhaps what depressed him the most.

A particularly loud lament of Kisumi’s broke through Haru’s concentration, “Ah but why are all the beautiful men already taken? Our room is right across from the most gorgeous steward I’ve ever seen - when the staff barracks aren’t full they sell them as third-class rooms, you know - but I don’t think he even knows I exist!”

Haru stared at him feeling both uncomfortable and marginally jealous of Kisumi’s complete lack of inhibition. He was saved from the task of responding by the sudden return of Hayato and Makoto.

Hayato climbed into his brother’s lap while Makoto sat down on the other side of Haru. The bench was a rather tight fit for the four of them and Makoto’s knees and shoulders brushed lightly against his. Haru flushed crimson and Hayato, who Haru was sure had been out to get him from the very beginning, exclaimed, “Hey, you look a little better now!”

The absolute best part of this new setup was that, with Haru now between them, Kisumi was unable to lay a hand on Makoto. The unfortunate part however, was Hayato’s newfound interest in Haru, made difficult by the fact that Haru had no idea how to talk to children.

The little boy looked up at him with wide eyes, “What are you thinking about?”

“Erm...the breakfast I had earlier.”

“Ooooh.” Hayato nodded for a few moments before looking up again, “What were you thinking about before that?”

Absolutely bewildered, Haru turned to Makoto for help.

Makoto chuckled and whispered, “It’ll be okay, just talk to him like you would anyone else.”

The problem was, Haru wasn’t very good at talking to anyone else either, most of the people he did talk to just thought he was boring.

Hayato picked his brain for at least an hour, asking him about anything and everything, including quite a few questions about how he knew Makoto, always followed by, “Hey, why is your face getting red again?”
Early-afternoon was fading into mid-afternoon by the time he finally seemed satisfied and, despite Makoto’s healing presence and close proximity, the sun and constant motion of the boat were beginning to make Haru feel sick once more.

“Do you need to go lay down?”

He turned to see Makoto’s face very close to him, his eyebrows knit together and his expression filled with concern.

“Um…” Haru’s gaze flicked suspiciously to Kisumi, “N-no I’m okay, I’ll stay here.”

Unseen by Makoto, Kisumi rolled his eyes. Letting out an exasperated sigh, he stood up, “Well I think we’re going to leave. It’s about time for Hayato’s nap anyway.” Hayato began to protest but Kisumi threw Haru a look that said, there, are you happy now?

Makoto’s attention was still focused on Haru, “Are you sure you don’t need to rest also?”

“You do look pretty rough.” Kisumi added.

Haru glared at him, thinking how nice it would be if people stopped telling him how terrible he looked. Sighing, he stood up as well, “I guess it probably couldn’t hurt.”

Makoto looked relieved, “I think it’s a good idea. I’ll try and find Rei and Nagisa while you’re gone,” he turned slightly pink, “we can try and meet later if you want?”

“Th-that sounds good to me…here?” Haru didn’t meet his eye.

Makoto nodded and smiled. He turned to Kisumi and Hayato, “It was nice to meet you.”

Kisumi, who had been pretending to gag as the whole time Makoto and Haru said goodbye, gave him a broad smile.

“Likewise! We-”

Hayato suddenly let go of his brother’s hand and ran into Makoto’s arms, hugging him goodbye. Makoto was positively dismayed and patted him gently, “H-hey don’t worry, I’m sure I’ll see you around.”

Hayato nodded solemnly and let go of him, turning to Haru instead. He held out his arms but didn’t look at him, suddenly shy, “It was nice to meet you.” He mumbled.

Haru hesitated and then hugged him awkwardly, “Y-yeah…”

“Alright this is getting a little too touchy-feely,” Kisumi bent down and swooped up his brother, lifting him high above his head and placing him on his shoulders, “We’ll see you later.”

Hayato was giggling wildly and Makoto chuckled as he waved all three of them off.

They had gone maybe fifteen feet toward the inner ship when Kisumi suddenly nudged Haru.

“So then, truce?”

Haru glared at him, “Pardon?”

“My leaving back there was a peace offering.” Kisumi said it like it was obvious, “I left so you could
go rest without worrying about what I was doing, aren’t I so nice?”

Haru gritted his teeth, “The absolute height of benevolence.”

Kisumi laughed and pointed a finger at him, “The height of benevolence? See that right there is what gives it away. You’ve got some rather deep pockets dontcha? You look like hell right now, but that suit is clearly expensive and your speech is definitely educated. You aren’t riding the ship aimlessly like the rest of us, you’ve got plans for when we land, or at least had plans, so which is it?” Haru simply stared at him and Kisumi looked exasperated, “The beau or the bourgeois?”

Haru stopped walking altogether, “What?”

Kisumi shrugged and walked passed him, “Well, I suppose you do have a couple more days to decide,” he looked back to smirk at him, “although I already know what I’d choose.”

He waved at Haru as he entered the inner ship and proceeded down to the third-class barracks. Haru eventually began walking again, wondering if this confusing day would ever end.

With his attention completely devoted to Hayato, Kisumi walked right passed the gorgeous steward he had mentioned to Haru. Tall with fiery red hair and golden eyes, that steward had noticed Kisumi’s existence in some capacity.

Seijuuro Mikoshiba watched the two of them disappear in earnest, fondly reminded of his own little brother who was waiting patiently for him in New York.

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Haru followed the directions William had given him up to the middle deck, discovering that the hallway to the Turkish Baths was surprisingly inconspicuous; he walked past it twice without noticing.

The hallway was also short with only two doorways, one on each wall, and they were both closed, lacking any signs or markers. With very little guidance, Haru turned the knob on the door to his right.

He was immediately greeted by a steward waiting faithfully inside the entrance. He had an incredible handlebar mustache and, looking behind him, Haru saw yet another short hallway.

“Hello, Sir, are you planning on bathing with us today?”

“I-um-yes, yes I am.”

“The cost of admittance is four shillings.”

Haru blinked at him, “Ah-yes, of course.” He shoved his hands into his pockets and pulled out several bills that had been in there for who knew how long. The steward took one of them and returned his change, gesturing that Haru should follow him.

“Allow me to show you the facilities.” He walked briskly and talked even more quickly, “These two rooms here are the steam room and the hot room, while the cooling room and shampooing room are just around the corner. The steam room is, as it sounds, filled with warm steam, while the hot room is filled with dry heat. Both provide superb relaxation, but most people have their own preference. The common practice is to first visit either the steam or hot room, followed by the cooling room, before finishing in the shampooing room.”

Haru was having a hard time listening and taking in his surroundings at the same time; the baths
looked nothing like the rest of the first-class facilities.

Done in a bright, moorish theme, the baths gave off a distinctly Arabian feel. The walls and floors were tiled with vibrant patterns of greens and blues, and intricately carved wooden beds lined the walls in each of the rooms. There were no visible portholes, and instead dyed light filtered through closed Cairo curtains, highlighting the rooms in bright reds, greens, and blues.

The steward suddenly stopped short, “However first, you will need to change.”

He held out a robe and a towel and pointed to three dressing rooms at the end of the hallway. The individual booths were separated by large wooden walls, and thick, ornately woven curtains provided privacy. The steward ushered him into the middle changing room and then pulled the curtain closed behind him.

Finally being left semi-alone, Haru breathed a sigh of relief and wondered when the Turkish Baths were supposed to get relaxing - so far he had only felt alarmed. Undressing and tying his bathrobe closed very tightly, he exited the dressing room and found the steward still waiting.

“I can take your clothes, Sir.”

Haru hesitated briefly before handing them over and the steward disappeared without a word, hurrying back to his post by the door. Haru wavered uncertainly in the hallway, and eventually placed a tentative hand on the doorknob to the steam room. He pushed it open only a few inches and thick steam immediately poured out onto the floor, coating his skin in a layer of moisture.

There were a few other men in the steam room, some chatting, others reclining in silence, and many of them wearing their robes much less modestly than Haru. He closed his more tightly still, feeling uncomfortable, and laid down in a wooden recliner in the corner, far removed from the others. He lay very stiffly at first, feeling out of place, and eventually placed the towel he had been given over his face and closed his eyes.

His thoughts turned yet again to what Kisumi had said to him and what he could have meant. He also thought Kisumi had been a little bit too harsh - Haru had not, at least in living memory, ever made a plan for himself. Someone else had always made the plan and he was the one told, sometimes forced, where to go and what to do. Being suddenly expected to come up with one was both alarming and frightening - especially when he couldn’t decipher what the conversation was built around! Whatever the cryptically implied concept was, it was lost on Haru.

One of the few images that remained in his memory from the night before suddenly rose to the forefront of his thoughts. Frozen like a photograph, it was the still image of Nagisa with his arms wrapped tightly around Rei, placing a quick kiss on the butler’s burning cheek.

And truthfully, deep down, Haru knew he was just being stupid, he was being difficult on purpose. He knew what Kisumi was implying. He knew that Kisumi had guessed correctly and, apparently, very easily. Had it really been so obvious?

While this conclusion has been surprisingly easy to come to, it fell heavily on Haru’s mind and painfully on his heart. Lying motionless in the Turkish Baths, unknown to the other guests, Haru was hit with a realization of earth-shattering force. It was there that he acknowledged for the first time how he truly felt about Makoto - and immediately wished he had not.

Haru, who did not yet know all the pain that came with loving, was learning very quickly all the terror that came with falling. He acutely felt the nervousness, the uncertainty, the fear of action, and of course, the even bigger fear of inaction.
He felt all twisted up inside; the air had been pushed from his lungs and nausea had taken over his stomach, and hurt worst of all was the organ that had betrayed him. His heart felt like the little strength it held had been brutally beaten out, and then it had been placed, bloody and aching, back inside his chest, expected to function normally despite it all.

Haru listened to it beating. He knew his own fragility and he knew his heart was a pathetically weak thing; at any moment he was certain it would surrender to the strain.

He listened still, and still it thundered, beating like the steady tick, tock of a clock, like a calculated chime, a pendulum swinging. His heart was ticking down the time - ticking down to what?

Haru fell asleep in the heat and haze of the steam room, listening to his own heart, certain he would die from the ache, from the all the terror of falling.

****

Promises aside, Makoto had a very difficult time finding Rei and Nagisa.

He searched the entire ship - the parts he was allowed to at least, although it wouldn't have surprised him if Nagisa had somehow snuck his way inside one of the many facilities off-limits to them.

After searching for nearly two hours, he returned to his room, defeated. Turning the key, he pushed the door open to reveal Nagisa, laying on Makoto’s bed, counting his money.

Officially annoyed, Makoto glared down at him

“Mako-chan!” Nagisa shouted, “Finally! Where have you been?”

Makoto gaped, “Where have I been?”

“You didn’t come home last night! Not that I’m not proud…” Nagisa wiggled his eyebrows suggestively, “but some warning would be nice!”

“You never tell me when you’re going to be gone and you were gone when I came back last night!”

Nagisa scoffed, “Oh was I? And when did you come back hmm? Three in the morning?”

Makoto reddened, “I-I...well I came back regardless! Where were you?”

Nagisa leaned back, dramatically raising the back of his hand to his forehead, “I had a nightmare and was all alone when I woke up, and without my dear friend there to comfort me I had to find comfort in the arms of a stranger…” Nagisa faked a sob, laying the guilt on pretty thickly.

Makoto was about to snap that it certainly wasn’t the first time, when he suddenly realized how relieved he felt to have finally located his friend, and all the fight went out of him. He joined Nagisa on the bed, landing on the mattress with a heavy sigh.

“Ah-sorry, it’s just been a long day. What was your dream about?”

Nagisa chewed his cheeks and didn’t look at him, quietly mumbling an answer.

Makoto thought he heard something about “thunder”, “alone”, and “scary flowers”, and then a final, louder and red-faced, “stupid Rei-chan.” Makoto searched for something he could possibly say, not sure how to comfort him after such a dream, but thankfully Nagisa spoke first.

“Mako-chan, can I see your hand for a second?”
Makoto was confused but immediately held it out, and Nagisa rolled up his sleeves to compare their hands side by side.

Makoto’s were much broader, not rough per se, but with a certain rugged warmth. They were hands that looked like they had been designed to hold someone.

Nagisa then turned his gaze to his own hands; his fingers were longer and thinner and very soft - he had, most fittingly, a thief’s hands. It was hardly his own fault that he didn’t know how to use them to make someone feel cared for.

“Ah...okay, thanks Mako-chan.” Nagisa rolled his sleeve back down and whatever answer he had found appeared to depress him.

Makoto incorrectly concluded that Nagisa was lamenting his own small stature, and he opened his mouth to say he was sure Nagisa probably wasn’t done growing, when his friend suddenly rounded on him.

“Anyway where were you last night Mako-chan?”

Makoto stammered a lot at first and clumsily tried to dodge the question, but he soon found himself relaying every detail. He didn’t know why it was so easy to do, or why it felt so good to finally say all those things out loud, he just felt happy, and was excited to finally tell someone else about it.

Nagisa listening intently and interrupted him surprisingly little. In truth, he was trying to learn something.

When he had finally finished speaking, Nagisa rubbed his chin wisely and immediately began to give him advice. He spoke at length about different romantic advances and the importance of boldness, before he realized that was all what he would do. Makoto was after something different and Nagisa thought for the first time that it was possible Makoto knew something he didn't and, whatever it was, it had certainly been working for him up until this point.

“Uh, actually ignore all that, Mako-chan, everything I just said.”

Makoto raised an eyebrow at him.

“Actually”, Nagisa suddenly stood up and crossed his arms, “there is only one thing I demand you do.”

****

Haru was awoken by an elderly man abruptly pulling the towel off his face.

He sat up immediately, alarmed, but the old man simply chuckled.

“Sorry to wake you Sonny, but I didn’t want you to die! You’ve been in here for over an hour now.”

The man was very short and very wrinkly, and Haru only recognized him as another steward when he stood up.

He pointed a bossy finger at Haru, “You should get yourself to the cooling room pronto, and then come visit me in the shampooing room. I’ll get you all fixed up.”

“Ah th-thank you,” Haru stammered, and then the man bustled off, disappearing out of the room.

Haru gathered his towel and proceeded to the cooling room. Running a hand through his hair, he
realized it was soaking wet from sweat and steam.

The first thing he noticed in the cooling room was a large, marble drinking fountain, and he immediately rushed towards, taking in all the fluids he had undoubtedly sweat out over the last hour and half.

His thirst sated, he looked up, straight into the mirror that hung above the fountain. To his surprise, he looked much better. His skin was still pale but not so sallow, and the bags under his eyes had all but disappeared, while the irises themselves looked far less cloudy.

He stayed in the cooling room a shorter amount of time than he probably should have, only about ten minutes, but he suddenly felt very eager to leave the baths; if his nap had really lasted as long as the steward had said, it must be getting quite late.

Inside the shampooing room, the old steward ushered Haru into a chair and laid him back, adding a variety of products to his hair and scrubbing out the sweat and grime from the last two days.

The steward’s name was Wallace but he insisted Haru call him Wally, and he talked extensively and almost entirely about his family; his wife had passed away years before but he had many stories about his son and granddaughter.

Haru liked the man and didn’t find his presence overwhelming, but he had a rather hard time extracting himself from the conversation and communicating his need to leave.

The previous steward returned with Haru’s clothes and he changed quickly, tipping Wally all the money he had in his possession before leaving. He was thanked profusely and waved out of the baths by Wally alone, while the steward with the handlebar mustache stared after him feeling rather miffed.

Haru was about to finally exit out to the main ship when the door to the left, the door he had not tried, suddenly opened - and out poured echoes of laughter and splashes.

He froze, listening, but the door swung shut and he was forced to backtrack to it. Pulling it open, his gaze fell upon a large, sparkling swimming pool.

Wally suddenly appeared at his shoulder wearing a large beam, “I see you’ve found our freshwater pool. She’s state of the art, only one other like her in the world - and heated, of course.”

Haru’s eye shone with excitement and he took a few steps inside the room, seeing that the pool was deep; five to six feet, and incredibly long, with stairs and a row of changing room set against the adjacent wall. There was one man swimming laps and two others sitting on the stairs talking.

Haru was positively transfixed.

Wally looked from Haru to the pool and back again, “Would you care to take a dip, Sir? We have swimsuits available for purchase if you aren't traveling with one.”

Haru hesitated for several seconds, fully considering it, completely forgetting he had already given Wally all the money he had.

“I...no, I should be going.” Haru tore his eyes away from the pool, “I will be back though. Thank you for all your help.”

Wally bowed him out of room and Haru exited the Turkish Baths for real this time, all his thoughts still tied around the pool, he already began to plan his return trip.
Deep in thought, he made his way back to his room, desperately in need of a clean change of clothes. He rounded the corner to the first-class barracks and found someone already standing outside his door, fist raised and knocking.

Haru stopped, “Rei?”

The butler jumped and his head whipped around quickly, “Haru! Ah - Mr. Nanase…” Rei shuffled his feet and Haru wondered why he wouldn't meet his eye, “I-I apologize for my tardiness this morning, and um...this afternoon...and all day.” Rei glanced at his face for just a moment, “I assure you it will not happen again.”

Haru was stunned. He could not believe that Rei, who had never been a second late in his memory, seemed genuinely afraid that he was in trouble.

“It doesn't matter to me, you know that.” Haru tried to smile, “Did you have fun?”

Rei looked up at him in surprise. Truthfully, he and Nagisa had hardly left his bed, talking and cuddling all morning and afternoon. He blushed, “Y-yes. I feel very happy right now.”

“I’m glad, you really deserved a break.” Haru paused, “I haven't seen my father all day so I don’t think he’ll have noticed your absence either.”

An invisible weight seemed to lift from Rei’s shoulder as he heard this, and he appeared to breathe normally for the first time. That was of course, until his expression suddenly darkened.

“Good lord, what has happened to you?” He had noticed Haru’s disheveled appearance for the first time, “It’s getting late, you should get dressed for dinner.”

“Y-yes, of course.” He led the butler into his room and Rei searched intently through his suitcases, finally pulling out a fresh navy tailcoat and trousers.

Taking them from Rei, Haru suddenly remembered something, a promise from earlier.

“We…we still have another half-hour right? Do you think we could visit the lower deck before dinner? Maybe just for a few minutes?”

Haru had been largely successful in blocking out thoughts of Makoto since he had woken up from his nap, but of course the thoughts could not be ignored for long. They had promised to meet later that day, and while “later” was hardly specific, and even though Haru was now frightened of being alone with him, he knew it would do very little good if he just left Makoto waiting by the benches for hours while he attended dinner.

Rei chewed his lip and checked the time once more, understanding exactly what Haru was asking.

He had spent the whole day with Nagisa and it still felt like far too little time, and while he knew they would certainly be pushing it to make it to dinner on time, his heart sympathized with Haru regardless.

The butler eventually smiled, “It should be fine if we hurry.”

Haru thanked him and then quickly changed clothes. They exited his room together, following the many staircases down to the third-class areas.

The sea was just beginning to swallow the sun as Haru and Rei walked out onto the main deck. It was emptying with the setting sun and they had no trouble locating Makoto and Nagisa standing by the railing. This search was also aided by the fact that the two of them were apparently having some
sort of very loud disagreement.

Nagisa was poking Makoto in the chest and speaking with a determined tone, “Make him live up to his promise! Ask him to dance Mako-chan!”

Makoto held up his hands and replied frantically, “Nagisa, shhhh! Someone is going to hear you! Plus he doesn’t remember so it doesn’t matter, I-ouch! Nagisa!”

Nagisa has spotted Haru and Rei and, ignoring Makoto’s protests, had begun to fiercely elbow him in the ribs. He lowered his voice so that only Makoto could hear his hushed whisper of, “Ask him ask him ask him!”

“Nagisa, no!”

“You ask him or I will!”

They bickered until Haru and Rei stood directly in front of them.

“Haru! Rei! H-hi!” Makoto’s voice cracked horribly as he greeted them. He addressed Haru, “How are you feeling? You look much better.” He went red as he said it.

Nagisa rolled his eyes dramatically and let out a loud groan, and Rei had to grab his hands so that he wouldn’t pretend to gag at Makoto’s tactlessness.

“Honestly Mako-chan, you’re so embarrassing.” Nagisa gave Makoto a total of ten seconds to complete the task he had given him. When Makoto made no such action, Nagisa broke free of Rei’s hold and grabbed both of Haru’s hands. He cried out, “Dance with me Haru-chan!” and he was gone, prancing around the deck with a vice-grip on Haru’s wrists, pulling him along like a doll, while Haru protested loudly and tried to break free.

Makoto panicked and tried to run after them, “Nagisa stop! He doesn’t feel well! Nagisa!”

“I can’t hear youuuuu! Haru-chan and I are getting friendly!”

Nagisa had sashayed the two of them decently far away from their friends, and the few people that remained on the deck gaped at them. Haru felt nauseous from both embarrassment and the spinning, but Nagisa cackled merrily.

Makoto looked after them in horror and Rei suddenly appeared at his shoulder. He cleared his throat, “I believe I have an idea.”

Nagisa spun Haru around a few more times, but his mood suddenly plummeted; although he was moving at a rather quick pace and his vision was largely obscured, he could still tell that he was not being paid attention to. Scanning the deck for his friends, Nagisa’s mouth fell open as he spotted Makoto and Rei, roughly thirty feet away, proceeding across the deck in a formal waltz.

Nagisa was absolutely appalled, “Hey no fair, Mako-chan! He’s mine!”

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He released Haru immediately, allowing him to spin off into the distance, and ran indignantly after his thieving best friend and unfaithful amore.

Willingly relinquishing Rei to Nagisa, Makoto chuckled and jogged over to where Haru had ricocheted.

“Ah sorry about that, are you alright? That can’t have helped your nausea.”
“N-no it’s okay.” Haru looked up at him and felt his throat close up, “I-I’m actually feeling better now.”

They held each other’s eyes a little longer than usual, and it would have been hard to tell who looked away first. Two sets of crimson cheeks burned furiously, and Haru cursed himself and Kisumi and his own heart once more for getting him into this mess. He hated it - he hated his interest and he hated how he felt. Having gained insight on his own emotions, he felt like he had consequently lost the ability to talk to Makoto freely. Not that it had ever been easy, but it had at least been possible. Now Haru felt as if his tongue had swollen up and his vocal chords had snapped, and he was certain that any word he spoke would surely be wrong. It was his nerves that made him afraid to say anything at all, but Kisumi’s remarks from earlier also made him afraid of what would happen if he said nothing.

He glanced up and there Makoto was, watching him with those ever-kind eyes and smiling that perfectly warm smile, and Haru’s heart was surely going to collapse from the all the rapid beating.

Makoto watched Nagisa now putting Rei through his paces. He thought that while Nagisa clearly knew more about wooing than he did, and while his friend’s intentions were certainly good, all of Nagisa’s advice just wasn’t right not for him. He wanted to figure out his own way through this, he believed that made it more special.

He chuckled and gestured to where Rei and Nagisa were still dancing, “It’s easier when you’re sober.”

Haru couldn’t look at him, “Not necessarily...”

Makoto took a deep breath and a step back. Placing his left hand behind his back and raising his right one - the way he had seen all proper gentlemen do - he bowed. He looked up at Haru and tried to keep his voice calm, “Would you like to dance?”

All the air was crushed out of Haru’s lungs. He opened his mouth and no sound came out.

“Haru! Hey Haru!” They both whipped around to see Rei sprinting towards them wearing a panicked expression and holding open his pocket watch, “Dinner started five minutes ago we have to leave!”

Haru’s brain worked very slowly, and when he finally processed what Rei had said, he felt relieved. He turned to Makoto, his mouth still hanging open, and he immediately chided himself for feeling that way.

Makoto gave him a reassuring smile, “It’s okay, maybe another time.”

And Haru knew he couldn’t do it. He was too afraid, he didn’t know how to like some, he - “he’ll grow disinterested, just like anyone would, if made to wait too long” - and all his fears aside, Haru knew that was the worst outcome of them all.

“L-later.” He stammered, “Later...I-I’ll come after dinner. Here.”

“Really?” Makoto seemed surprised, “Okay great! Then I’ll be here!”

Rei hesitated awkwardly on the edge of their conversation, only just now realizing he had interrupted something important.

“Uh....” he checked his watch again and looked at them apologetically, “I’m so sorry but we really need to leave.”
Haru nodded and they bid a quick goodbye to Makoto and Nagisa before heading back inside the ship.

Haru retreated with Kisumi’s warnings hanging heavily on his heart. He knew he was trying to force something he didn’t feel ready for, but he was afraid of what would happen if he did not.

Makoto and Nagisa looked after them as they walked away, and Makoto’s brow furrowed.

“Did Haru seem okay to you? I mean, did he seem upset about something or more nervous than usual?”

Nagisa shrugged, “I wouldn't know, aren’t you supposed to be the expert?”

Makoto frowned. He did not like this pronouncement; it made him worry what would happen if he got something wrong.

Chapter End Notes

Happy 1 year anniversary! hopefully i will be finishing the fic in another year (considering chapter output time and the number of chapters i have planned that seems about right!). Special thanks to everyone who has left comments and kudos you really keep me going!!

I can't wait to get out boys back in their natural habitat (aka the swimming pool) probably not next chapter but definitely the one after that! I'm really excited for the next three chapters (well the rest of the too), so i should be able to crank them out faster than I have been!

I have limited space here but if you have any questions feel free to HMU on tumblr!

Historical things:
-Beyond descriptions of the design and features of the Turkish Baths, I could find very little information about the actually process of a visit, so i largely drew from what a traditional TB experience would be like and inferred a lot of things (especially with the clothes/towel/robe). Artist drawing of the Olympic's (the Titanic's sister ship) baths in 1911, and a modern render.
-Photo of the swimming pool! Scientists were amazed to discover it is still filled with water after all this time...bah dum tss.
-The Awakening by Kate Chopin was published in 1899 and I have recently had the pleasure of re-reading it (I could not get Marie out of my mind the enter time)! While it was largely frowned upon at the time is was published (adulterous woman + indifference to her children was a big no-no) I think Marie would have loved it for those very things. YOU CAN READ IT FOR FREE ON GUTENBERG! Even though no one asked, my favorite quote is, "'You have been a very, very foolish boy, wasting your time dreaming of impossible things when you speak of Mr. Pontellier setting me free! I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose. If he were to say, 'Here, Robert, take her and be happy; she is yours,' I should laugh at you both.'"
-ALSO Marie's line where she talks about her father's view on female writers is ACTUALLY an almost direct quote from TS Eliot "there are only half a dozen men of letters (and no women) worth printing." So you know, fuck TS Eliot :)
-Picture of the squash court where our darling Sei works
-Speak of Sei, a coal stoker is one of the people who shovels the coal into the furnace on ships and trains. They are also called firemen but of course i wasn't gonna put that since it's Kisumi's prospective profession ;) The Cunard Line was the White Star Line’s main rival at the time, and where Sei worked before he had a change of profession.
-Tristan and Iseult um...(spoiler) does not have a happy ending. It is essentially a mixture of Romeo & Juliet and Guinevere & Lancelot, but with a Cornish knight and Irish princess and set in the Middle Ages. @Marie WhY yOu ALwAys LyInG
Break It to Me Gently

Chapter Summary

“ Basically we are all looking for someone who knows who we are and will break it to us gently.” - Robert Brault

or,

Rei is tricked, Rin basically writes fanfiction, and Makoto and Haru finally have their dance.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Haru and Rei were just under ten minutes late to dinner. Katsu glared at them both, but they were spared any further repercussions because they were, incredibly, not the tardiest.

Sophia Stockwell arrived fifteen minutes later, joining them just before the third course. Standing before the table, she was flushed and disheveled, and appeared to have gotten dressed in quite a hurry.

She cleared her throat, “I apologize for my lateness, I lost track of time.” She didn’t look sorry; she appeared inconvenienced if not slightly annoyed.

Her father waved his hand and smiled, “Ah don’t bother us with a lie dear, it’s quite alright.”

Her scowl faded a bit, and she had enough humility to feel guilty in response to her father’s boundless kindness and understanding. Sophia scanned the table quickly, and although she attempted to conceal her disappointment, the corners of her mouth pulled slightly downward when she realized the only seat left was at the very end of that table, next to Haru.

“Pardon me.” The skirt of her dress brushed by him as she sat down. She folded her hands in her lap without another word, and then raised her chin, gazing straight ahead into the dining room and paying him no attention at all.

William resumed entertaining the table with a story he had begun before she arrived. Haru also had not heard the beginning of it, but was intrigued nevertheless. Apparently, earlier that day, his father and Mr. Stockwell had played a few matches in the ship’s squash court. Haru had never seen his father so fundamentally humiliated; Katsu was seated stiffly next to Mr. Stockwell and looking as if he regretted the decision very much.

“And then, after a severe beating, he starts wheezing, drops his racquet, and then passes out!”

William’s voice echoed across the dining room, “Well that’s one way to get out of paying up after losing a bet!”

There was a scattering of laughter from the other guests while Katsu’s face grew red and he gritted his teeth. He did not enjoy being the laughingstock of the table. Like most people, he would rather be feared than laughed at. Unlike most people, he would rather be feared than liked.
“You made me play when I was clearly ill,” he snapped. “It was your fault! If you had just let me go to the Turkish Baths like I wan-”

William scoffed, “As if I could ever make you do anything!” he caught Haru’s eye and winked before continuing his story, “And then the asinine court steward ran off to get the medic, so I had to carry him all the way back to his room.”

“Which was dangerous to me personally!” Katsu fumed, “You should have waited for the medic! It could have been serious!”

William let out a booming laugh, “What could he possibly have said? ‘This man is suffering from a severe hangover’? I had already diagnosed that much! Besides, I probably know how to handle one better than a medic anyways. His books are nothing when compared to my experience!” He began counting on his fingers, “A wet cloth to the forehead, holding the trashcan while he vomited, you name it, I did it!”

There was a scattering of awwws across the table, while Jacob Astor and Arata Tamura congratulated William on being such an upstanding friend and spectacular human being.

“I didn’t ask you to take care of me!” Katsu snapped. “So don’t expect a thank you, it hardly matters to me what you do.”

William put an elbow on the table and leaned towards him, speaking quietly, “I chose to take care of you for the same reason I choose to make fun of you,” he grinned, “If I don’t, surely no one else will.”

“I don’t need anyone to take care of me,” Katsu hissed, “I don’t care if no one loves me.”

William looked momentarily furious, but it quickly faded into a heavy resignation. He took a sip of wine, “Well then, it’s a good thing I never said I loved you.”

Katsu gave him a funny look and then turned away.

While their conversation had taken place in relatively hushed voices, they were still receiving several curious looks from the table, and William cleared his throat, addressing them all once again.

“Now Clara - my dearly departed,” he clarified dramatically, “we were never really on great terms, but I’ll be damned if she couldn’t hold her liquor! Clara could have drank us all under the table and then mopped the floor with us in a game of squash.”

Haru turned to look at Sophia, who still stared fixedly ahead, but now her nose was wrinkled and she appeared extremely annoyed. Haru watched her for a moment to see if she would turn to look at him - she did not, but in the process Haru noticed that she had very green eyes.

Not that they were particularly kind - for the most part, her eyes were stubborn and challenging, with an underlying indications of aggression. The only marginally comforting thing about them was their familiarity. It was the familiarity of her eyes that made him speak.

Haru cleared his throat and addressed her, “Your mother passed away?” He hesitated, “I-I’m sorry to hear that. My-”

“Don’t be,” she snapped her head towards him, “she was horrid.”

Haru was taken aback, but he had already started speaking and the rest of his sentence was coming out whether he wished it to or not, “-mother died five years ago.”
She blinked, “...Ah, I-I’m sorry.” She looked down at the table. “Really - I’m sorry, I’ve always
been so tactless...it’s been years since my foot has left my mouth.” Her tender expression suddenly
curlied into a grimace, “But really - isn’t it stupid? We don’t know the first thing about each other...”

Haru was uncertain if this conversation was going well or not, and looked around for something to
say, “Why...why don’t you like your mother?”

She began immediately, without hesitation, like someone who had waited so long to finally voice a
complaint. “You shouldn’t get married if you don’t want to and you shouldn’t have a child if you
never wanted one. Well, I realize that’s a rather idealistic way of thinking and life isn’t always that
simple.” She was forced to recognize her own hypocrisy, and her gaze flicked to Marie, “I suppose
some people would feel badly for her. But on the receiving end of her neglect...well, it’s hard to
muster the sympathy.” She turned back to Haru and saw that he had no idea what she was talking
about. Sophia condensed her answer, “She never wanted to be a mother, and I would argue she
never was one. My father and I only had each other, even when she was alive, and I would do
anything to make him happy.”

Finally understanding, Haru nodded. His mother had been nothing but compassionate, but the same
certainly could not be said about his father.

“I had breakfast with you father this morning,” Haru said, “He was very kind to me. I had no idea
we had known one another before now, but he said you made me cry once.” He scratched his head,
“I don’t remember it though.”

Sophia covered her mouth with her hand. Haru couldn’t hear her laughing, but her shoulders
bounced up and down as if she was, “I...I think I remember that, actually.”

“You do?”

She nodded, “I’m actually a bit older than you - though I’m sure you wouldn’t know that. I’m
twenty.”

Haru blinked. Apparently two years can mean the difference between having a memory and not
having one.

“Still, I only remember it vaguely,” her eyebrows scrunched together, “we were swinging - well you
were. Well, no, you weren’t, but I wanted to. You didn’t know how to make the swing move by
yourself, and I didn’t want to push you, but I also wasn’t willing to wait for you to figure it out, so I
pushed you out the swing.” She turned to him apologetically, “I suppose I could have taught you,
I’m very sorry about that.”

Haru shook his head, “N-no, it’s alright, I don’t remember it anyway. It actually impressed my
mother, at least, from what I’ve heard at least. She was apparently very fond of your father, though I
suppose most people probably are.”

At the head of the table, William Stockwell never remained silent for less than a minute, the constant
center of attention.

Sophia looked at Haru sympathetically, “You mother sounds wonderful.” Her gaze traveled up the
table to where Katsu sat, “I’m sure you both miss her very much.”

Haru was stunned for a few moments. The distance between father and son aside, he knew it was
true.

“We do.”
They fell into an awkward silence, both of them unsure how to continue the conversation under such a weight.

This depressing turn aside, Haru did feel slightly placated; Sophia’s discussion of her mother seemed to prove that she did not wish to be married or have children, though he would never ask her outright, lest she misinterpret his intentions.

He was, of course, wrong on both accounts. She adored children and wanted very badly to have a marriage built around love and devotion and not economic strategies - so Haru was correct in the assumption that she did not wish to marry him. When Haru wasn’t looking, she pressed a palm gently to her stomach.

After the last course had been served, a sweet Waldorf Pudding, the evening was clearly drawing to a close.

Jacob Astor stood up and stretched, “Good gad, I’m stuffed!”

Chairs scraped backwards as everyone else began to stand, and just like that, dinner was over. For the first time, Haru felt it had ended far too quickly. Surrounded by the elegance and grace of the first-class dining room and its guests, he had been able to fully ignore the plan he had made for later that evening.

But now dinner was over and Makoto was waiting for him and all the air had been sucked from his lungs and-

A hand gently rested on top of his own.

Sophia was turned towards him, her green eyes watching him, looking concerned.

“It was pleasant talking with you, Mr. Nanase.”

Haru stuttered, “L-Likewise. I-I meant yes, yes it was...thank you.”

She gave him a smile that was full of unrestrained pity and shook his hand lightly before standing and walking away.

The other members of the table were also bidding their goodbyes. The Tamuras kissed one another on the cheek and squeezed each other’s hands as if it would a long while before they saw one another again. Rin was frozen, feeling both baffled and miffed, as Marie bypassed him entirely. Without lending him so much as a glance, she followed Sophia toward the reading and writing room.

Haru followed the other gentlemen towards the smoking lounge. He had not considered this part, and he tried to come up with about the best way to excuse himself.

Standing before the two great doors that marked the entrance to smoking lounge, Haru cleared his throat, “I-I’m actually not feeling well. The pudding uh...gave me a bit of a stomach ache. I think I’m going to go lay down for a bit, I apologize…” He faltered under the suspicious gaze of his father.

“You know I actually believe I read something about that in the British Medical Journal,” William interrupted, “Something about how extremely flavorful food doesn’t sit well with some people; it’s too strong, like a sensory overload, too much nutmeg and vanilla. It can cause serious problems if you aren’t careful. You really should lay down.” He threw Haru a wink.

The other gentlemen considered this for a moment and, with Haru’s health falsely at stake, there was no real opposition; they all agreed he should go rest. Haru bid them all goodnight and then hurried
away, pretending to head the direction of the first-class barracks before doubling back, towards the main deck.

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Inside the smoking lounge, Katsu grabbed William by the elbow, not quite hard enough to hurt, and steered him into a corner away from the others. “Don’t think I don’t see what you’re doing.” His voice was a growl, “I demand to know why you insist on undermining my authority.”

William raised his eyebrows in feigned innocence, “Well if I don’t do it no one els-”

“Oh shut up!” Katsu let go of him and stormed back towards the others.

The atmosphere of the first-class smoking lounge was considerably less festive than it had been the night before. Without the added spectacles of Makoto and Nagisa, the conversation and card games were actually quite boring. Several gentlemen even approached them with questions regarding the whereabouts of the two vagabonds, which did little to help Katsu’s mood. This, in addition to Haru’s absence and the fact that Rin chose to retire early, taking Ai with him, left them with few numbers and sluggish conversation. Of their original group, only Katsu, William, Arata Tamura, and Jacob Astor remained, while Rei waited faithfully a few feet away, fully alert and attentive, but without much to do.

William yawned and gestured to Rei, “Might as well let the boy off, Katsu.” It was hard to tell if Katsu or Rei gaped the widest. “What do you say?” William addressed Rei, “Do you have somewhere to be?”

Katsu grumbled that the affairs of his staff were none of William’s business, while Rei stood tongue-tied. He was a butler; the majority of his job was simply being available at all times, and never before had his own schedule been taken into consideration, at least not by Katsu.

He stuttered, “I-I had sort of, ehm, loosely planned an engagement for this evening.” He swallowed, “Sir.”


While Rei had heard that he owned some sort of lead manufacturing company back in Australia, he was beginning to suspect that Mr. Stockwell was actually in the business of granting wishes.

Katsu glared at him for a moment, eventually turning that same gaze to his butler, “Fine. Rei, you’re dismissed. Make sure Haru and yourself arrive punctually to breakfast tomorrow.”

“Yes, Sir.” Rei bowed and thanked them both before quickly exiting the smoking lounge. He rushed down four flights of stairs and across two hallways before he finally entered his room.

He quickly changed into his pajamas and, first poking his head out to make sure the hallways was empty, crossed the hall and knocked on Makoto and Nagisa’s door.

Nagisa intentionally made Rei wait a long time. Truthfully, he had seen the butler return to his room. Recently, the sound of footsteps always sent Nagisa flying to the peephole, so he had, with joy, witnessed all of Rei’s nervousness and fidgeting before he knocked.

Finally opening the door, Nagisa arched his eyebrows.
While Rei had been working, Nagisa had been reflecting, and he had come to the conclusion that he, as of late, had been far too affectionate to the butler; it was time to make him sweat a bit.

“Oh, hello Rei-chan, Nagisa glanced around the hallway like he was expecting someone else, “this is a surprise. What can I help you with?”

Rei’s chest swelled as he inhaled deeply, and he said, in one hurried breath, “I just came to say that I am going to bed now, but Ai has left his key in the room once again and therefore I am forced to leave the door unlocked tonight as well, so if you need anything or have another bad dream or...or anything, you can just come in.”

Nagisa leaned against the doorframe and smirked, “He’s forgotten it again, hmm?”

Rei reddened, “Y-yes. Apparently he has misplaced it.” Yes, he had lost it - inside Rei’s bag, buried deep within a sock. “We’ll have to leave the room unlocked until he is able to find it.”

Nagisa waved a hand, “Okay, thank you for letting me know.” He closed the door in Rei’s face and watched through the peephole and Rei’s shoulders sank and he stared at the door wearing a pained expression.

“Goodnight, Nagisa.” Rei murmured, turning around and crossing the hall. Standing in his own room, he felt humiliation rise in his cheeks and tears fill his eyes, and he raised a hand to clutch his chest as despair and rejection sank into his heart.

Luckily, this torture was short lived; not twenty seconds after Rei had first entered the room, the door opened again. Nagisa stood in the doorway with his mouth open, preparing to speak, but seeing Rei’s face stunned him, and he immediately forgot whatever witty thing he had been about to say.

“Ehh, what’s this? Were you really crying? I’m sorry I closed the door in your face, but I had to change you know.” He held out his arms and gestured to his own, newly administered pajamas. He walked into the room, wrapping his arms around the butler. “Let’s go to bed okay? I’m sorry.” It was barely nine o’clock and he wasn’t even tired, but Nagisa loved the suggestion all the same. He wondered what was wrong with him.

Rei sniffled a bit and Nagisa pressed his face into the butler’s chest, hiding a smile, “Rei-chan is so silly, if you wanted me here all you had to do was ask.”

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Rin had retired from the smoking lounge with a very clear purpose, and it certainly was not heading to bed early.

Many people, when confronted by his fondness for literature, felt it was rather uncharacteristic, but then, they misunderstood it fundamentally; his fondness was for stories, not specifically novels. He was equally thrilled by radio shows and the few moving pictures he had made time to see. He loved the complexities of some stories and the simplicities of others. He loved the adventure, the action, the romance - and of course he was a bit of a romantic.

Therefore he had extracted Ai and himself from the smoking lounge with plenty of the night still ahead of them and with plans to get through a hefty chunk of The Romance of Tristan and Isseult.

At Rin’s instruction, they dragged the cushions and comforters from his bed, and each created their own small nest from the bedding, occupying the sofa and armchairs by the fire. Rin turned all the lights off except for the electric fireplace, which he turned up as high as it would go.
Across from him, Ai sank into his pillows. He looked exhausted.

“Since you read last time I can do it tonight,” Rin offered, “we can take turns. I don’t know much
about this book but Marie seems to think we’ll enjoy it.”

Ai tried to thank him but was stifled half-way through by a yawn.

Rin settled into his blankets. Clearing his throat, he began reading by the light of the fireplace.

He was not disappointed; love and lust, lies and betrayal, secrets and cleverness, the story appeared
to have it all. Compelled by a love potion, the gallant knight Tristan began a secret love affair with
Iseult, the wife of his lord.

Rin appreciated the struggle that took place between Tristan's obligation to duty and the pull of his
own heart. He wondered idly if Marie had forced this particular book on him for a reason. If so, he
appreciated the gesture very much, and was impatient to learn which of Tristan’s commitments won
out in the end.

Ai liked the book simply because he liked love stories, and he especially liked love stories that
seemed impossible despite it all. He knew some people probably felt that the love was illegitimate
due to its origins, but Ai liked the concept of the love potion because it gave Tristan and Iseult an
excuse - they were in love and they couldn’t help it, was it really their fault? Ai sympathized with the
lovers because he knew more than most people about feelings that refused to be ignored.

Several chapters flew by and Ai valiantly stayed awake longer that Rin had thought he would.
Despite his efforts however, he eventually slumped sideways onto the sofa, snoring softly. At least
this time he had a blanket and pillow.

Checking the clock, Rin saw that it wasn’t too early in morning. He fingered the pages and chewed
his lip. It wasn’t exactly a long novel; Marie had been wise and given them something they would be
able to complete before the ship landed so that they would not be forced to return it to her unfinished.
Rin watched his butler for a few moments and then continued to read, albeit a little guiltily.

He read for a few more hours, until he finally sped through the final chapter, wearing a very deep
frown. Marie must have forgotten the ending before lending it to him, or else had gotten the editions
confused - perhaps there was another version where both main characters actually survived.
However, as it stood, they did not have their hands on that hypothetical version and both protagonists
were dead, and he knew Ai was surely going to cry buckets when he learned the ending.

The butler was still sleeping soundly, he had the blanket pulled all the way up to his nose and it
fluttered softly whenever he exhaled. Rin watched him, feeling a small ache in his chest. What would
it have taken to get the lovers a happy, long life together? Really - the ending could have been
mended in just a few lines, maybe a page or two.

Rin stood up and turned off the fireplace. The novel in hand, he stumbled through the dark room
until he found his deck, where he lit a low lamp and sat down. Pulling out a sheet of paper and
fountain pen, he began to write. After a moment he stopped and crumpled up the paper. He pulled
out another sheet, this time tearing it so that it was small enough to conceal inside the pages of the
real book. He began writing once more, his script long and black and curling. He paused, he
scribbled out, he revised. Well-meaning but perhaps a little naive, he wrote Ai a happy ending when
he knew there wasn’t one.

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Haru hurried through the hallways but slowed just before exiting the inner-ship. He wavered in the doorway for a few moments, taking deep breaths. Seconds trickled by, and then whole minutes. He stood there for as long as he could, but Haru knew that time was never forgiving, and delaying the inevitable didn’t make it any easier. Therefore he steeled his nerves, stepping onto the deck and into a world that was quiet.

From where he stood, Haru could see Makoto. Laying on a bench with his hands clasped behind his head, Haru wondered if he was asleep.

The sea breeze had departed for the time being, leaving a terrifying silence in its absence. The deck was empty except for the two of them. Gentle waves lapped at the sides of the ship. The air hung heavily, the way it did on a battlefield in the moments before the first canons of war. It was thick like the intake of breath before a lover’s confession, and frozen like time, when a pair of strangers’ eyes meet across a crowded room.

Although Haru was fighting an anxious churning in his stomach, he still felt it; the weight of the evening. His nerves aside, he recognized that there was something especially peculiar about tonight.

Makoto didn’t move until Haru stood directly above him. He gave Haru a broad, upside-down smile and sat up, gesturing for Haru to sit next to him.

“How was dinner?”

Haru sat stiffly, perched on the edge of the bench. He felt his throat grow tight. “It was okay.” He honestly couldn’t remember. He fiddled with his hands in his lap, “Earlier, when Rei and I had just met you on the deck, I thought I overheard Nagisa say something that confused me…last night did I say anything to you…about dancing?” He blushed, “I did, didn’t I? And that’s the reason Nagisa was acting like that?” He’d been mulling it over in his mind, and it was the only conclusion he could come to.

Makoto wasn’t sure what to say in order to best console him, “You…you did, but you shouldn’t worry about it. Nagisa was just teasing, you don’t – we don’t have to if you don’t want to.”

Haru’s head hung lower with every word spoken. He had expected as much, it made sense, given Nagisa’s enthusiasm and his own vague memories of the night before, but having his suspicions confirmed did not make him feel any better. All his conviction from earlier had dissipated, and while he recognized the importance of asking Makoto to meet him here, that didn’t mean his trembling confidence could withstand the resolution.

“Did I say anything else last night?”

Makoto shook his head. “No, not…not really, I mean you said other things but nothing like-not uh…” he scratched his head, “Are you worried?”

Haru squeezed his knees together and said nothing.

“Do you want me to tell you what happened? I think I would be afraid if I didn’t remember what I had done or said. If you want, I can tell you everything we did last night.”

“I’d really appreciate it,” Haru met his eyes very briefly, “I remember some things but there are…some gaps.”

“I don’t mind,” Makoto grinned and then pressed his lips together, working hard to remember every detail, “Well you probably know that the night began in the third-class general room, and that while Rei and Nagisa went to dance we kept Niall company.”
Haru nodded, “I remember that, he was very upset over something…” he frowned, “his missing his girlfriend?”

Makoto chuckled, “Yes exactly, he was sort of a mess and difficult to look after, but it’s hard not to feel sympathy for the broken-hearted.”

Haru nodded again without looking at him; over the past day, he had certainly learned the feeling.

“And during that point you um…drank…a lot. I’m really sorry – especially since you probably hadn’t had alcohol like that before - I should have done a better job keeping track of it.” Makoto’s eyebrows knit together and he looked at Haru with wide, remorseful eyes.

Haru felt himself collapsing under the weight of that gaze.

“It’s not your job to look after me.” His cheeks burned as he said it, and he knew that just about everything that had happened up until this moment seemed to prove otherwise.

Makoto shook his head and Haru was finally spared as the corners of his mouth pulled upwards into a smile, “I know it’s not, but I really don’t mind it.” He held Haru’s eyes for a few moments before looking away. He coughed uncomfortably. “But, uh, once…once I realized just how much you had drank, I brought you onto the deck for some fresh air and to get you away from the crowd. We were by the railing and you said you liked the way the ocean sounded…” he hesitated, “and that’s when you asked if we could dance.” Makoto had strongly considered editing this part, but the whole point of him retelling the night before was so that Haru knew what really happened; a lie now would be complete violation of Haru’s trust. “But you couldn’t stand properly, so I had you lay down on the benches instead. You asked me to tell you some constellations, do you remember any of those?”

Haru processed this new information slowly, it was about as bad as he had suspected. He frowned up at the sky, not really in the mood to strain his brain any further, “No-no I don’t think so, I-” a sprinkling of bright stars caught his eye and he stopped, “Was…was there one called the Mariner’s Compass?”

Makoto’s mouth fell open in surprise, “That’s amazing Haru! I didn’t even have a story for that one! I know my mom used to tell me one but I can’t remember…” he scratched his chin and seemed to fade away for a moment, before his attention snapped back to the present, “so it’s amazing that you remembered it!”

Haru was not used to being so heavily complimented, “It-it’s not that impressive…I don’t remember any of the others.”

“I’m sure you would if we reviewed a little; you listened intently and asked so many questions.” Haru frowned and Makoto smiled kindly, “Don’t worry, I thought it was fun. After a while I got kind of sad, talking about my mom so much, and you-you…” Makoto’s mouth went dry, “You cheered me up. I told you some more constellations and then you fell asleep right there on the bench.” He chuckled nervously. Guilt hung heavily on his heart, an immediate reaction to his apparently not-so-strong dedication to the truth. “I looked for Rei and Nagisa but eventually I ended up carrying you back to your room, I found the key in your pocket.” He skidded over just how embarrassing that whole processes has been. “Right before I was about to leave your room you stopped me and said we would dance tomorrow.”

Haru was silent as he finished, and Makoto rubbed his neck uncomfortably; he wasn’t quite done.

“When I saw Nagisa today I told him everything that happened, I shouldn’t have I was just…very excited and happy, and then he just sort of…latched on to the dancing idea, and that’s why he was so
Haru shook his head, “It’s okay I’m - I don’t mind you telling him.” Embarrassing as it was, Haru finally had his own foggy, patchwork picture of the night before, “Thank you for telling me.”

“It’s no problem…” Haru looked at the ground and Makoto cleared his throat once more. “I-I’m sorry if this is strange - I just have this feeling...like something is bothering you, it seemed like that all day.” Makoto tried to smile; he felt like he was talking too much. “Is everything okay? You can tell me if it isn’t - I mean you don’t have to b-but...you can. I promise it’ll be okay if you do.”

Haru felt his throat tighten and his heart pounded against his chest. A trickle of sweat ran down his forehead.

“I feel...I feel really nervous.” He admitted.

Makoto nodded knowingly, “I’m nervous too.” He chuckled a bit and let out a shaky breath, and Haru realized it was true. Briefly forgetting his own anxieties, he finally saw how Makoto shuffled his feet and the way his hands shook. Makoto was just as afraid as he was – but that didn’t mean he was quite as cowardly.

“If-if it’s alright...I want to tell you something.” Makoto scooted closer to him, “It’s...kind of odd. Um...I-I guess I just feel like I know you, so much and so well already. I know that probably sounds presumptuous, since it’s only been a few days...” his brow furrowed, “I really don’t understand it...but I feel like I know who you are, and what your heart is like...and I think who you are is really amazing, Haru. I think you’re brilliant and thoughtful and interesting,” Makoto’s shaking hand reached across and squeezed Haru’s fingers, “and brave...really brave, and I don’t know how to do this or what to say...but-but I really like you.” He glanced at Haru’s face, looking away quickly, “And I know that given...given everything, and your situation and...and mine...it’s really unreasonable and - and unrealistic for me to feel that way, but I don’t want you to feel like you have to do or say anything, I don’t expect you to...I just want you to know.”

Haru felt odd. A numbness had spread through his face, was embracing his entire body. “I...” He felt like he had been pushed off the edge of the planet. “I’m going to throw up.” He felt sick from the free fall.

Makoto was stunned, but Haru had no time to clarify. He stood up, wobbling slightly. Covering his mouth, he rushed to the ship’s edge and vomited spectacularly over the railing. It stung his throat and burned his nose, and he hung limply over the ship’s edge, watching dazedly as the ship’s famous Waldorf Pudding fell into the Atlantic. He stayed there for a moment, but looking down at the waves made him dizzy and he sank to his knees. His head hung limply onto his chest.

He could hear Makoto’s voice through all the haziness of his brain, but he sounded very far away.

“Haru? Haru! Are you alright?”

And suddenly Makoto was on his knees beside him, with softness and warmth that Haru into gratefully.

Makoto stilled as Haru slumped against his chest. While every instinct screamed at him to wrap Haru in his arms and hold him tightly until the morning, Makoto tried very hard not to touch him. If he had caused this, if Haru was afraid of him, then there was a chance such close proximity could be unwanted, could even be harmful.

Makoto used his sleeve to brush the remaining flecks of vomit off of Haru’s face, trying to keep the
panic out of his voice, “Haru’s what’s wrong? Can you hear me?”

Haru said nothing, and Makoto wasn’t sure if he could - his breathing was erratic, coming out in long wheezes and sharp gasps.

Makoto pushed the hair away from his face, relieved to see that at least Haru’s eyes seemed to be lucid and cognizant.

“Haru, do you know who I am?”

His eyes snapped up and his gaze locked onto Makoto, and in that moment everything fell into focus. Haru nodded, and then started to cry.

“I’m sorry, I-I’m so sorry, I’m-” A long, broken sob shook his body, “s-sorry, I’m-“

Bewildered, Makoto finally broke his resolution not to touch him. He placed his arms around Haru’s shoulders and held him gently.

“Haru, I’m sorry, you didn’t do anything wrong. It was me, I’m so sorry I-I shouldn’t have said anything, I-”

Haru began to shake his head vigorously from side to side, tears still streaming down his face, “It-it’s not that.”

Makoto gazed at him sadly, he clearly didn’t believe him. “Then why are you crying?” His voice was weak and wracked with guilt.

Haru was silent for several seconds and then suddenly, all in one breath, “Because I couldn’t say anything and then I threw up and now you’ll think I’m crazy and gross and you won’t like me anymore!” The final few words came out in a high wail.

Makoto was floored, “What? Where on earth did you get that idea?”

Haru sniffled and looked at the ground, “Well-well Kisumi said you wouldn’t…” He still wasn’t able to hear how positively stupid this sounded.

Makoto looked at him dubiously, “Kisumi said I wouldn’t like you if you threw up?”

“Not-not exactly…” Haru began to wipe his eyes, “He said you’d get bored if I didn’t say – didn’t tell you...if-if I wasn’t honest then you’d get bored and wouldn’t like me anymore…and when the time came I wasn’t able to say anything…I vomited instead, and after that…I just - I thought…” He shook his head and looked up at Makoto with wide eyes, “You really still do?”

“Of course I still do!” Makoto said it loudly, his voice bordering on a shout. He immediately looked embarrassed, “I just feel really badly for making you feel like that.” He raised a hand Haru’s cheek under the pretense of wiping away more tears, but kept it there even after they were all gone, “Is that why you were nervous?”

Haru nodded pressed his face into Makoto’s chest. The deck was hard and their legs were bent at uncomfortably odd angles, but for the time being Makoto wrapped his arms around him and Haru was safe.

He felt like a child. Not that Makoto treated him like one in any capacity, he just felt ashamed, like a little kid throwing a temper tantrum, like a problem Makoto was always forced to look after and always had to worry about.
Makoto had called him brave, and Haru didn’t believe it, although he wanted very badly to be brave someday. Not the Makoto needed it right now, but if the day came and his foundation/footing was shaken, Haru hoped he could be someone strong enough for Makoto to lean on. And while Haru didn’t know how he was supposed to go about this, or what he should do in order to become this braver person, he knew where he could start.

Haru shifted so that his head was nestled under Makoto’s chin.

“I like you too.” He mumbled.

His ear pressed to Makoto’s chest, Haru heard his heart jump upward, heard his shaky inhale, and then felt the strong arms around him squeeze a little more tightly. Haru had no idea how long they stayed like that, all wrapped up around each other, but eventually Makoto pulled away.

“Do you think you can stand? We should move back to the benches,” he smiled, “they’re probably more comfortable at least.”

Haru nodded and stood up. He was fine now; his legs felt sturdy and all his tremors had faded away, but Makoto kept an arm around him just in case.

They sat closer together than before, with their knees touching, and Makoto never released his hold on Haru’s shoulders. Haru wanted very badly to rest his head on Makoto’s warm chest once more, but he suddenly became very self-conscious of his breath. The inside of his mouth still tasted sour and acidic, and he was terrified of bringing his vomit-breath anywhere near Makoto. He kept his head up straight, if not slightly tilted away from Makoto, and tried to think of something to say. He had no idea what either of them were supposed to do now. He snuck a glance at Makoto.

Makoto wasn’t looking at him, he was looking at the ground in fact, and appeared slightly discouraged; his brow was furrowed and his bottom lip pouted forward.

“Can we dance now?” Haru blurted out. His voice sounded very small, “I don’t feel as nervous now.” He blushed, contrasting the statement.

Makoto frowned, looking skeptical, “Are you sure you’re feeling better? Maybe we should wait for a little while? Besides…” he used his free hand to reach across and grasp Haru’s fingers, “I think just sitting here is nice.”

Haru nodded and slowly rested his head on Makoto’s shoulder, breathing determinately through his nose.

Makoto pulled him closer, “Are you cold?”

Haru shook his head, and they were quiet for a time.

What Haru had yet to say, was that after the few days they had spent together, he felt like he knew Makoto’s heart as well. He had learned its warmth and its kindness, and now that Makoto was so close to him that he could hear it thundering away, Haru could tell there was something wrong.

“Is everything okay?” Haru kept his head down as he asked, but listened intently as Makoto hesitated, trying to form the right words inside of that gentle heart.

Eventually, Makoto shook his head, “I...I probably shouldn’t bring it up, I don’t want to make you sad right now.”

“I’ll have a hard time being happy if I know there’s something bothering you.” Haru said it evenly,
Makoto chewed on his lip, “Well… I just thought… aren’t you supposed to be getting married?”

Haru had to sit up. He had to stare at Makoto in complete disbelief, because despite everything, he still didn’t get it.

“NO!” he exclaimed, and then quickly backtracked, “Well I mean we are, but-but I don’t like her – mean I do like her but I just think she’s nice,” he stopped to think, “well okay she’s not exactly nice b-but, but I don’t want to marry her! I don’t think she wants to marry me ether.” Haru squeezed Makoto’s hand between both of his own, “Compared to you she’s… well there’s no comparison. Compared to you she’s nothing.”

Makoto simply blinked at him in surprise, and Haru suddenly considered that this may not have been the precise question he had wanted to ask, but his answer seemed to have placated him nevertheless.

Makoto looked down at his lap, “She was kind to me at dinner.” He frowned, “Well, kind of. She definitely wasn’t mean.”

This made Haru smile, and he returned his head to Makoto’s shoulder. “She’s… prickly, I think.”

This made Makoto chuckle, and just like that, everything returned to normal.

Haru looked at their hands, examined the ridges and bones and the way they intertwined. Makoto’s fingers were a little darker, his own hand was a little smaller.

“I never told you before,” a lump formed in Haru’s throat, “That night... the night that you found me,” and once more, tears were threatening to fall down onto his cheeks, like so many more that had been shed over the last few days, “just before that, at dinner, I had learned that my father arranged the marriage several years ago, without me knowing.”

Makoto turned to look back at him. He raised a thumb and wiped away the tears that clung to Haru’s eyelashes. He wasn’t exactly worried about Sophia; he knew Haru was hardly the type to two-time anyone, but it was their future on the docks in New York worried him; it was the thought of losing Haru once and for all in the sea of disembarking passengers that truly terrified him. But while he wanted desperately to ask they were going to do once the ship landed, he didn’t want to ruin this moment by doing so.

He held Haru’s face in his hands, “I’m glad you’re here.” He whispered.

Haru closed his eyes, “Me too.”

In just handful days Haru had gone from wishing he was dead to glad that he was alive, and while the circumstances that had led him to the edge of the ship remained largely the same, he felt fundamentally changed. Makoto had shed sunlight upon his life, and the diamonds and gold that couldn’t shine in the darkness had suddenly glittered to life, and now he saw the warm in every day and the gems within the people close to him. Makoto had told him things got better, Makoto had made them better, and as Haru thought about all of this, he realized that the great change within himself wasn’t absurd at all; he was here with Makoto, of course he wanted to live.

He tugged at Makoto’s hand, “Can we please dance now?”

Makoto considered him for a moment, “Are you sure you’re feeling up to it?”

Haru nodded vigorously and Makoto stood up with a smile. Taking one of Haru’s hands between his
fingers, Makoto folded his other arm behind his back, bowing to him for the second time that day.

Haru suppressed a giggle and stood up, linking his hands behind Makoto’s neck, while Makoto arms wrapped around his waist. He pulled Haru close to him and held him tightly, and Haru tried very hard to stop his cheeks from flushing as Makoto began to glide them around the deck in an intimate, impromptu slow dance.

Dance lessons had been forced on Haru as a child, and he knew that, from a professional standpoint, there were many things wrong with Makoto’s leading; his rhythm was bad and the steps had no recognizable pattern, but Haru somehow felt freer, felt lighter.

He looked down at their feet and realized that the reason Makoto was holding him so tightly was because Makoto was actually holding him up; just the tips of Haru’s shoes remained on the deck.

Haru looked up at him questioningly, but the moment their eyes met, Makoto smiled and swiftly spun them around. For a brief moment Haru’s feet completely left the ground and he emitted a loud gasp, making Makoto chuckle.

They paused for a moment, and with his feet fully planted on the ground once more, Haru started to giggle.

“Was that okay?” Makoto asked.

Haru smiled at him and nodded, resting his head on Makoto’s shoulder. They began to move around the deck once more.

The wind blew, the stars twinkled above them, the ship rocked gently from side to side, and they held each other. They held each other for a long while. Time passed as it tends to.

There were several times where one of them would reluctantly pull away, “It’s getting late,” he’d say.

The other would nod and give a sad smile, “We should say goodbye.”

The first would press their foreheads together, “Goodnight.” he’d say.

“Goodnight.” whispered the other.

And then again, “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight…”

And neither of them would move, so very unwilling to part.

They would both laugh, and then the first would say, “A little longer?” and they’d begin again.

So few times in life does a heart live in complete weightlessness, unbound by any troubles or worries or burdens. So rarely are people able to go to this place, this heaven. So rarely are they able to exist in the blissful feeling of a heart come home.

This is where they stayed.

The thing that eventually dismantled this enchanting place was, predictably, the sun, which will continue to rise with no regard for what happened the night before.

Makoto’s voice was hoarse, neither of them had spoken in quite some time, “Haru, does the sky look
lighter to you?”

Haru’s eyes had been closed. He opened them and looked to the East. Short rays of sunlight where seeping across the horizon, like cream pouring into tea, slowly spreading across the whole sky.

“Oh my god…” he turned back to Makoto, “I didn’t notice…”

“Neither did I.”

They both laughed.

Makoto took both of Haru’s hands and squeezed them gently, he was of course, never one to be disappointed by a sunrise, “You should go, try and get a little bit of sleep at least.”

Haru nodded, “Goodnight.”

“Good morning.” Makoto winked.

Haru smiled. He stood on his tiptoes and leaned forward - and then he remembered. He honestly never imagined he could go so many hours after vomiting without brushing his teeth.

He pulled away from Makoto and covered his mouth with his hand. In the wake of everything, the dancing and the warmth and his own happiness, he had entirely forgotten about his breath. He wondered if it had smelled terribly all night.

As panic began to rise inside chest, Makoto stepped towards him. He took the hand covering Haru’s mouth and, raising it to his lips, gently kissed the back of it.

“Please don’t worry about it.” He whispered, “Is this okay?” He tilted his head to the side and leaned forward, pressing an equally soft kiss on Haru’s cheek.

Haru was through with tears for the time being, even tears of joy, and so he wrapped his arms around Makoto one last time. They held hands as they walked back inside the ship. They let go to head to their separate barracks. They both smiled, even when apart.

Although they were unaware of it, among all of their friends, they were the only two who laid in bed alone that morning. Held only by blankets, neither of them remained awake for very long, both ready to testify that falling asleep in sunlight wasn’t so bad.

Chapter End Notes

!!!! FINALLY!!! SOME /STUFF/ IS HAPPENING!!!!!!! The next few chapters are honestly gonna be a real treat AND get into some of the questions raised in the prologue! As always, feel free to hmu on tumblr!

Next Chapter: Haru and Makoto go swimming!!!! :D

Historical Things:

-there honestly aren’t many for this chapter, only a little link for info on the Waldorf
Pudding if you're REALLY interested! It was technically served on the last dinner on the 14th, but I've have a very hard time finding info about any meals preceding that day so ¯\_(ツ)_/¯
Chapter Summary

“I can promise you books and conversation and all my heart.” - Gabrielle Zevin

-or-

Rin gets punched, Rei #DidNotDeserveThis, and 1910s swimwear is not sexy at all but Haru is still probably horny.

Chapter Notes

Minor fyi, the fic rating has officially been changed to "Mature" ;))))) TBH I am probably overreacting because this chapter is only a LITTLE spicy but I just wanted to be safe!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

April 13, 1912

Haru wasn’t sure if he had actually slept at all, or, at the very least, he was certain that most people would not have considered it sleeping.

Curlend beneath soft covers, he swayed on the brim of unconsciousness, acutely certain that he was awake but feeling quite hazy, existing in a wonderfully fluffy and peaceful sort of glow. He laid that way for hours, and saw the sunrise through closed eyes, watching as light flooded the room in warm reds and golds from behind his eyelids.

Gradually, Haru heard the steady rise of footsteps and chatter passing by his door, and his eyes fluttered open.

All his clothes had been tucked away and all the furniture was set just so, and although nothing about the room had changed in the slightest, Haru didn’t view it with quite as much hostility as he had the day before. The curtains had been left open, and from his spot on the bed he could just barely see the pale blue of the morning sky. The room felt simply like a room, and not the cage he was used to.

He glanced to the clock on the opposite wall and saw that it was just after 7:30; in a little under half an hour Rei would be at the door, coming to wake him for breakfast.

Haru felt tired, but not as much as he should have.

Momentarily extracting himself from his bed, he tiptoed across the soft carpet to the room’s only desk. His sketchbook lay inside a small corner drawer, and he felt a small tinge of guilt for leaving it rather neglected since his first day on the ship. Clutching it to his chest, he carried it back to bed.

Propped up on pillows, he opened the sketchbook carefully in his lap. This particular sketchbook had been with him for a few years now, and some of the sheets had torn and were in danger of falling
out, but he knew exactly where he was turning, and pulled the pages apart with purpose.

His gaze fell on one drawing he had of Makoto, standing on the main deck, gazing absentmindedly out at the ocean. Haru ran his fingers over it gently, refusing to acknowledge that in a few days - upon landing in New York - this drawing would be all he had left of him.

It was messier than Haru would have liked, and he smudged at some of the more crude parts with his finger. At the time he had simply been drawing to alleviate some of the anger and frustration that had swelled within him, but now he wished he had been much more careful. He now knew that Makoto deserved large canvases and the best of materials, deserved all of Haru’s attention and effort and every drop of his artistic ability.

Looking at it closely, Haru also spotted a few points that he had blatantly gotten wrong; the real Makoto had much kinder eyes than he had depicted, and a stronger jaw. There was something wrong with the lips too, though aside from the missing scar, Haru wasn’t exactly sure what it was. The real Makoto’s lips were more…alluring? Haru blushed and immediately snapped the sketchbook shut.

Abandoning it on his bed, Haru began to get dressed, because he wanted to see Makoto, and he knew his drawing could never compare to the real thing.

He dressed quickly, but made sure to look over his reflection once in the mirror. He looked spiffy enough, but also comfortable. He had a rather impressive pair of dark circles under his eyes, but knew there wasn’t much he could do about them. It took a rather dramatic double-take for Haru to realize that he was smiling.

He hurried down to the third-class barracks, and was keenly aware of a certain spring in his step, an unfamiliar excitement for the day.

When he knocked, the door opened almost immediately, making him jump slightly. Makoto stood before him fully dressed and smiling, but with his brow slightly furrowed, confused by Haru’s reaction.

They stared at each other and Haru suddenly felt embarrassed, “H-Hi,” he faltered, “sorry, I...I thought you’d still be asleep.”

Makoto shrugged sheepishly, “I couldn’t.”

A wide grin broke across Haru’s face and he wasn’t sure if he was pulled into Makoto’s arms or if he had leapt into them, but the next moment he was there and everything in the world seemed to fall into place.

Makoto’s lips brushed by Haru’s ear, and at a loss for what to say, he found himself whispering the same simple phrase he had murmured just hours before, “Good morning, Haru.” They pulled apart slowly and Makoto had to hold onto the doorframe to steady himself, feeling the return of a dizzying, ambient sort of happiness. Not knowing what else to do, he gestured to the door, “Do-uh-do you want to come inside?” He realized Haru had never been inside his room before, and he suddenly felt embarrassed by its plainness and small size, two things which had never bothered him before. To his relief however, Haru shook his head.

“A-Actually, I was wondering if you were hungry?” Haru asked, “I thought maybe we could eat at the Cafe Parisien again.” He shuffled his feet, “...And-well, there’s something I want to do later, but it’s a surprise. We’ll have to wait a bit though, it doesn’t open until noon.”

“That’s fine with me!” Makoto tried not to sound overeager, “Are you sure there isn’t somewhere
you need to be? I don’t want you to get in trouble.”

Haru froze for a moment, “No, I...I think it’ll be fine.”

Makoto was not entirely convinced but nodded anyway, and let Haru led the way up to the finer parts of the ship.

****

Not ten minutes after Makoto and Haru had left the hallway, the door opposite of Makoto’s swung open, revealing a groggy Nagisa and an only partially-dressed Rei, who was struggling to keep the door open and tuck in his shirttail at the same time.

“Rei-chan, I can’t believe you’d wake me up so early,” Nagisa rubbed his eyes, wearing an impressive pout, “How am I supposed to spend the night with you if you don’t allow me to have my beauty sleep? You know I’m quite delicate, I-”

He was placated into silence as Rei swiftly grabbed him by the shoulders and pressed a quick kiss to his forehead. The butler pulled back apologetically, “I’m really sorry, but I need to wake Haru. I don’t think I can stay in bed late like yesterday ever again, it was very unprofessional of me.” He smiled and the corners of his eyes crinkled in unmistakable affection, “But I do hope you’ll reconsider your decision, because as chaotic as you make my mornings, I find I’m happier when I wake up with you.”

Rei began to fix his tie and didn’t notice the series of dramatic faces Nagisa made as he processed the butler’s words. Nagisa hovered in the doorway to his own room, “Will I see you later?”

Rei had been in the process of looking over his uniform, making sure everything was in order, when this simple question stopped him. He stared at Nagisa, who was trying hard to look as if the answer mattered very little to him. Rei checked the hallway, making sure they were alone, before he stepped forward and softly kissed Nagisa, this time on the lips.

Intimate as they were, they didn’t kiss each other very often, and this gesture only frustrated Nagisa further, because the moment he realize what was happening, it was already over. He prided himself on his arsenal of kissing techniques, but before he could move or respond, Rei was already pulling away, wearing an innocent smile.

“Of course you can. If it were up to me, I’d see you every day.”

Nagisa’s face contorted slightly; they hadn’t discussed their plans for New York since the night they had argued, and Rei could tell his comment, with all its implications and connotations, had rang loudly through Nagisa’s ears.

“Sorry, I-I didn’t mean-we...we’ll talk about it later, okay?” He squeezed Nagisa’s hand apologetically, “I really have to go now.”

Nagisa nodded, turning away from him without saying a word.

Rei regretted leaving Nagisa at such an awkward moment, but unbeknownst to the lovesick butler, he was about to have bigger problems.

****

The Verandah Cafe was filled with the pleasant, mixed aromas of coffee and tea. It was also teaming with guests, as it should have been, and William Stockwell was thankful that he did not have to dine
alone for yet another breakfast. In light of company, he was positively radiant, and talked animatedly to every member of their table, despite the early hour. A man of many talents, he could whimsically jest with Arata and Riko Tamura, and then suddenly lean towards Jacob Astor and begin drawing up business deals.

Marie sat prettily in lilac dress and white gloves, chatting cheerfully with Sophia, who sometimes was forced to lean down so that the shorter girl could whisper into her ear. Rin hovered frustratingly on the outskirts of this conversation, trying repeatedly - and in vain - to insert himself into their discussion.

To no one’s surprise, the only person at the table not partaking in the merriment was Katsu, who instead remained in a rather sour mood; as the hands of the cafe’s clock approached, and then passed, eighty-thirty, it became apparent that he was missing one member of his family and one member of his staff.

Neither Haru nor Rei had appeared for breakfast. Ai had immediately began to serve them by himself, and though no one at the table seemed to have any complaints about his service, nor any questions regarding the absence of his son, Katsu felt entirely humiliated.

Rei hurried through the doors of the Verandah Cafe half an hour after breakfast had begun. Out of breath and sweating slightly, he bent down and whispered urgently in Katsu’s ear, “I’m very sorry, Sir, but I can’t find him, I’ve looked everywhere.”

Katsu’s nostrils flared for just a moment, but he saw the eyes of the table start to flick towards him, and he restrained his anger, “It’s fine. Help Ai, and resume looking after breakfast.”

Rei nodded and set about his task, while Katsu turned back at the table, trying his best to look genial, although he spied Jacob and Ann Astor whispering to each other behind their hands.

William witnessed this entire exchange and his mood faltered slightly. He knew Katsu had a dangerous temperature, and he could see a terrible rage building within the man he had known for so long.

****

As it turned out, a romantic second breakfast at the Cafe Parisien was not in the cards for Makoto and Haru. The cafe was packed with easily three times the crowd it had held just a few days ago, and the two boys considered themselves lucky to simply make it inside the door. They waited in a long line simply to speak to the maitre’d, who explained in a patient but tired voice that one of the ship’s head chefs had become violently ill just that morning, causing food orders to become severely backed up, and in turn creating incredibly long dining times.

Haru felt his heart sink as the man apologized, stating that the approximate wait time would be one to two hours. Makoto turned to him wearing a questioning expression, and Haru desperately tried to think of an alternate course of action; the Verandah Cafe was certainly out of the question, as he knew his father and company were already dining there. They could eat in the first-class dining room, but Haru hated that idea to the very core, unwilling to face the judgmental, prying eyes of the privileged.

Makoto immediately recognized the signs of stress rising in Haru’s face, and offered the only alternative he knew of, “Why don’t we eat in the third-class dining room? It will still be crowded, but we won’t have to wait and no one will pay us any attention.” Haru still looked unsure, and Makoto persuaded further, “Plus, Nagisa is probably already in there.”
Haru nodded solemnly and this time Makoto took the lead, taking them back down several flights of stairs. The clattering of cheap plates and silverware echoed down the hallways as they approached the dining room, indicating that breakfast was in full swing for the steerage guests. Makoto held the door open for him, but Haru only took a few steps inside before stopping.

Very little had been done in way of decoration, but the room was nicer than Haru had expected. Several long picnic-style tables were laid out in rows, and on the side of the room opposite them, Haru spied a similar table set with food.

He realized immediately that Makoto had been correct, no one paid them any attention at all. All the men, women, and children were intently focused on their own friends and family and on the food set in front of them, but spared no scrutinizing glares for strangers. Haru, who stood out spectacularly in his expensive and well-tailored suit, earned no odd looks whatsoever.

This occurred to such a dramatic extent that a tall young man in a paperboy hat walked straight into Haru without seeing him. Haru felt himself stumbling, and he certainly would have landed on the ground if he hadn’t been saved by Makoto’s steady hand, placed gently on his lower back.

“Woops! Sorry mate!” The young man turned to look at them and his face broke into happy recognition, “Oh, it’s you! What a coincidence!” Having apparently regained his regular status as the cheerful twin, Niall stood before them, looking much happier than the last time they’d seen him. He pointed to a table towards the back of the room, “I’m leavin’ now, but Ethan’s still sittin’ with your pesky friend that’s good at cards.” He began to walk away, but waved after them enthusiastically, “I’m off to woo the misses.”

Makoto and Haru looked at each other, both feeling rather dumbfounded, and Makoto chuckled, “Well I’m glad he’s feeling a bit better today at least.” He led the way to the breakfast table and began to fill his plate with eggs and toast, and Haru looked over the table curiously. The food wasn’t extravagant by any means, but it was fresh and hearty, and Haru readily helped himself to several scoops of potatoes.

“So you always eat like this?” He wondered idly.

Makoto let out a sudden, barking laugh that startled Haru, and gave his answer while chuckling, “No-oh no, not ever, we-” he noticed Haru staring at him in horror, and the laughter died in his throat, “It-it’s not that bad...we manage.” he finished awkwardly.

Haru simply nodded and looked away from him, and Makoto began to worry about bringing him down here. They obviously came from different places and were accustomed to different things, and while Makoto felt that he understood the sheer size of those differences, he suspected that Haru did not; almost immediately, Makoto had experienced the first-class cafe, dining room, and smoking lounge, so from the beginning he had understood that Haru existed in a realm that was whole worlds away from his own. Haru, on the other hand, had spent very little time in the third-class areas. Makoto knew that Haru wasn’t stupid, and had likely made many educated guesses regarding the several not-so-pleasant aspects of Makoto’s life, but having those parts materialize in front of him, suddenly very physical and very real, was quite another matter. Makoto was afraid that the shock would lead Haru to decide it was too difficult to connect with someone from another planet.

Once Haru had finished getting his food, Makoto tried to leave the unpleasant conversation behind them, “Let’s see if we can find Nagisa and Ethan,” he said, and took off in the direction Niall had pointed.

As it turned out, Nagisa saw them first, and gave an exaggerated wave as they approached.
“Mako-chan! Haru-chan! Over here!”

He and Ethan were sitting opposite one another, and for the sake of maintaining the balance of the table, Haru was forced to sit next to him while Makoto sat next to Ethan. Haru was feeling a bit uneasy, but the table wasn’t very wide so Makoto’s knees brushed against his own, and he knew that surely he would be able to survive.

“We ran into Niall as he was leaving,” Makoto explained to Nagisa. “He pointed us in your direction.”

Ethan snorted, looking both exhausted and highly cynical, “That idiot doesn’t consider the day a success unless he’s had his heart broken before lunchtime.” He set down his coffee a little harder than necessary, “It’s barely even ten! That’s far too early to start playing Romeo!”

Both he and Nagisa had already finished eating, and it seemed that they had only remained at the table because they lacked anything better to do. They spoke very little, allowing Makoto and Haru to eat, and Haru was surprised by how relaxing he found the whole affair.

Ethan finished his coffee and stood up, announcing that he was going to go get more. “It’s just so early,” he yawned.

Nagisa hummed in response, “Hmmm, early...early...” he frowned, and then sat up straight, looking alarmed. He suddenly had a tight grip on Haru’s arm, “Haru-chan! Aren’t you supposed to be somewhere? Rei-chan left to wake you up almost an hour ago!”

Makoto’s gaze snapped towards him and his eyes clouded with worry, “Is that true? Haru I really don’t want to get you in trouble - if you have somewhere to be I really think you should go.”

Haru looked at the table. “It-It’ll be fine,” and his tone was final. “Anyway, I want to be here.”

Nagisa watched Makoto reach across the table and take Haru’s hand, and for the first time in his life he realized he was the third wheel.

Makoto spoke softly, “I-I want you to be here too, b-but-”

Nagisa flushed crimson but was spared any further embarrassment by Ethan’s sudden return.

Makoto let go of Haru’s hand, and Haru shifted uncomfortably, “Really, I...it’s fine.”

Ethan blinked several times; he was smart enough to know he had missed something, but experienced enough to know not to ask. Everyone did their best to behave normally, but the table settled into an uncomfortable silence nevertheless. Makoto and Haru resumed eating, though their worries weighed heavily on both their minds.

Nagisa watched them sadly, suspecting that their troubles weren’t very different from his own. This was his first time seeing either of them since the previous afternoon, and though he hadn’t yet had the opportunity to question Makoto about his evening, he felt that he could guess - within a reasonable parameter - what had happened.

Certainly something had happened - something good - that fundamentally changed the way they interacted with one another. Their stolen glances were still frequent, but entirely less longing. They were more tactile - as proven a moment ago - and simultaneously appeared both less and more nervous.

Watching them made Nagisa feel sick; he knew it was wrong to force his own romantic pessimism
onto two people who were both radically different from himself, but his most recent conversation with Rei had left him in a rather sour mood. Because essentially, it came down to the one thing: what was Haru willing to give up? Would he give up his life, all of his status and his wealth, or would he give up Makoto? While he didn't doubt the validity of Haru’s feelings in anyway, Nagisa remained pessimistic because, while he wouldn’t trade Makoto for all the world, he had given up lovers for much less.

And if Haru did dolefully say goodbye to Makoto at the end of their journey, well, Nagisa wasn’t really in a position to blame him for it, given his own fluctuating attitude towards Rei. Still, if that was the case, he wasn’t exactly looking forward to seeing his best friend hurt, hurt badly, considering the way things were going.

Still, he couldn't help but think that all of their outcomes were linked anyway, that each ending hinged on the actions of everyone else, and each of those actions only existed as the consequences of some other reaction, spiraling into a lengthy chain of cause and effect and circumstance.

He felt like more was being asked of him than he had left to give.

Nagisa’s brain was beginning to ache when Haru interrupted his thoughts - by pointing out perhaps the worst possible thing for Nagisa’s current mental state.

“Why is that man over there glaring at us?”

Nagisa lifted his head and Ethan and Makoto both turned around, looking in the direction Haru had indicated. Ethan immediately whipped his head back around and shrunk down in his seat, hissing, “Don’t stare don’t stare don’t stare!”

Nagisa gazed across the room, gulping as he met the eye of the larger, angrier, and bearded Russian brother. Nikolai stood motionless, staring daggers at him from his own table at the other end of the dining room.

“N-no reason,” Nagisa turned back to his friends, “but try and eat fast, we may need to make a run for it.”

Makoto and Haru looked at each other in dismay, and Ethan, who already knew why the man was glaring, had slid down as far as he could in his seat, hissing, “Hey - I can’t see, what’s he doing? Nagisa is he looking? Is he coming over here? Nagisa! Is he-”

Nikolai slowly stood up, keeping his gaze fixed in their direction. Nagisa gripped the edges of the table, preparing to give the signal to run. He felt the sudden pressure of a hand on his shoulder, and having accumulated a lifetime of unfortunate reflexes, Nagisa’s hand wrapped tightly around Haru’s knife. Gaze hostile, he whirled around, fully prepared for a fight, but all of his aggression was met by the dark and beautiful smile of Betsy Dean.

She grinned down at him, “Hey boys, I hope y’all are doin’ okay!” She winked at Nagisa and then raised her head to meet Nikolai’s gaze; he remained standing where he was, now looking uncertain. Never breaking eye contact, Betsy stretched, flexing her muscular arms and displaying all the power that lay beneath them - power that Nikolai had already witnessed. Looking slightly terrified, he sat back down, completely mollified.

Betsy sat down on the other side of Nagisa and threw an arm around his shoulders, accidentally punching Haru’s bicep in the process. He rubbed it indignantly, certain he would have a bruise.

Nagisa cleared his throat, “Everyone, this is Betsy Dean - well I supposed Ethan knows her already -
but she-” he stopped. Ethan, Haru, and Makoto were all staring at him in mild apprehension, and Nagisa suddenly realized he was still holding the knife. He quickly returned it to Haru’s plate, “Um s-sorry,” he hesitated, but decided to charge on with the conversation, “but Betsy helped us out of a big pickle the other night - and uh, today, it seems.”

She smiled at him, shrugging, “Oh it’s nothin’, y’all just seemed like you were in trouble.”

Ethan emerged from his gallant position under the table and was now staring at her, “You’re my hero.” He said solemnly.

They all laughed, and with Ethan’s declaration, the awkward ambience that had crept over their table ever since Nagisa asked Haru if he had somewhere to be officially dissipated.

Makoto and Haru finished eating as Nagisa, Ethan, and Betsy performed a dramatic retelling of the night they had met the prickly Russian brothers, and with Betsy’s presence, they were able to finish their breakfast not just without being attacked, but with a cheerful, warm atmosphere.

Just as Haru had pushed his plate away from himself with a groan, feeling entirely too full, he heard a sudden shout from behind him, and he officially decided there were too many people at their table.

Kisumi, with Hayato in tow, suddenly appeared beside them, “Well aren’t you two a sight for sore eyes!” he winked. “It’s been too long.”

“It’s been since yesterday,” Haru muttered.

“Well I’m so glad you missed me then!” Kisumi grinned broadly and sat down next to him, though Haru suspected it was only because Hayato had been quicker to claim the prized seat next to Makoto.

Makoto went ahead and handled the introductions as Haru was currently far too bitter to do so.

Under the guise of shifting in his seat, Kisumi leaned over to whisper in Haru’s ear, “I see you’re slumming down here with the rest of us today, how interesting.”

Haru had just enough time to turn to him, both feeling and looking wholly offended, before Nagisa took hold of Kisumi’s attention.

“‘Kisumi’ was it?”

From his position, Haru could see Kisumi analyzing Nagisa, could see his pupils dilate and his throat tighten.

Kisumi leaned forward, his expression very near a leer, “Why yes, just like kiss me.”

Haru scoffed at the line, not knowing it was the same one he had tried on Makoto just the previous morning.

A dangerous look crossed Nagisa’s face, a look Makoto had seen far too many times before, and just like that, the hunt/game/chase/pursuit was on. Thus Haru spent the rest of the morning essentially invisible while Nagisa and Kisumi, both positioned on the same side of the table with Haru between them, talked through him.

They were all briefly relieved of the flirtation when Nikolai stood up once more, making them all turn to watch his movements while Betsy tensed in her seat, but he only approached the buffet table and began refilling his plate.
They all returned to their original positions save for Hayato, who continued to stare at the man curiously, not knowing why everyone had been sent on such a high alert. He watched as the man filled his plate with food and then brought it back to his seat, setting it down in front of a boy who shared the same thick, brooding eyebrows as the man. The boy looked to be about Hayato’s age, maybe a little older, and caught him staring almost immediately. Feeling shy, Hayato raised a hand and waved. The boy had a chicken leg in his hand, but waved enthusiastically back at him, shaking grease all over his table. Hayato laughed, but Kisumi, who was now receiving a much exaggerated version of events from Nagisa, ordered him to turn back around.

The danger averted, Kisumi and Nagisa had continued their flirtatious banter, and Nagisa was currently retelling the same dramatic story he had told just a few minutes before - though this time he heavily inflated his own heroics and left Rei out of the tale entirely.

Haru, frustratingly, was not sure who he should shoot dark looks at first; Kisumi, who had so shamelessly gone after Makoto just the previous morning, intentionally making Haru feel confused and upset and jealous, or Nagisa, whom he knew Rei had so hopelessly fallen for.

Makoto seemed none too pleased with the turn of the events either; he had never been fond of Nagisa’s turbulent love life, but now having found someone himself, found someone for the first time ever, he felt all but repulsed by Nagisa’s methods.

Nagisa and Kisumi spent the rest of the morning making the entire table uncomfortable, but it took Haru’s indignant shout of, “Kisumi that’s my foot!” before they all decided to leave.

They all stood up, hesitating slightly as they each realized they would have to walk past the Russian brothers in order to leave the dining room. Betsy offered to lead the way, but Haru insisted Kisumi go first, since he had been the last to arrive and neither of the brothers held animosity towards him.

A hand on each of Hayato’s shoulder, Kisumi steered him in a straight line down the aisle between the tables, his brain filled with Nagisa’s terrifying descriptions of the Russian brother’s exaggerated aggression.

Hayato however, who had neither listened to Nagisa’s tale nor considered the men intimidating in any way, stopped right in front of the Russian’s table. This caused a small pile up, and Kisumi bumped into his brother, and Haru ran into him, and Makoto ran into him, and so on, and they all stared in horror as Hayato raised his hand to the boy who sat wedged between the two large men.

“Hi, I’m Hayato. Do you want to be friends?”

Everyone stared. Though he knew it was impossible, Kisumi could have sworn the entire room went silent. One of the brothers sat mere inches from Hayato and Kisumi, and cast an eye over them suspiciously, leaving Kisumi to wonder why Hayato, normally quiet and shy under most circumstances, had now chosen to approach the frowniest child he had ever seen in his life.

The Russian boy stared down at Hayato, biting his lip. His eyebrows furrowed, and he finally gave a short reply in a language Hayato had never heard before. Hayato opened his mouth but no words came out, and he eventually shook his head apologetically.

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The boy scratched his head, now looking embarrassed, and repeated the same line again, this time more slowly. Hayato frowned and shook his head once more, and Russian boy turned expectantly up at the two men who sat on either side of him, but neither of them offered a translation - not out of cruelty, but out of curiosity. Anatoly - the brother who appeared to be balding prematurely - inclined his head to Hayato, as if telling the boy to try again.
The child looked down at the table and, with a huff, started to speak in highly fragmented English, “I-you...you...you...face-” he sighed heavily and clenched his fists, looking embarrassed. He suddenly sat up straight and raised his hand, tapping on his cheek several times.

Hayato appeared to be nonplussed, and slowly brought a hand to his own face, discovering a large glob of mashed potatoes that had stubbornly stuck on his cheek - something Kisumi had failed to notice due to his preoccupation with Nagisa. Hayato examined the clump of mashed potatoes in his hands and, earning a collective cringe from every adult present, stuck it in his mouth.

The Russian boy began to laugh and Hayato beamed up at him, but Kisumi seemed to have finally found his nerve and gripped Hayato firmly by the shoulders.

“Ha-Ha-Hayato did you make a friend? That’s great, friends are great, look at you stepping out of your shell that’s. Just. Great!” Kisumi forcibly steered his brother past the table, and the line that had accumulated behind them finally began to move once more.

Nikolai pretended to lunge as Ethan passed by, causing him to yelp and take off running, but the Russian man made no move to pursue him, and simply laughed at the Irish boy’s cowardice.

Makoto, eternally fond of children, tried to smile at the Russian boy, but after Hayato’s departure the child’s expression had returned to its prematurely ingrained frown, and he glowered up at Makoto.

Makoto gulped and felt the urge to run after Ethan, wondering what could have happened to make a child so grim.

Out in the hallway, Hayato had started to cry. Kisumi knelt down beside him, feeling sympathetic but determined to prevent a friendship between his brother and the boy with the two very dangerous relatives.

As Kisumi and Hayato fell behind, Makoto and Haru uncertainly took the lead. They began a course back to the third-class barracks without really thinking, but the rest of their party, spearheaded by Nagisa, had different ideas.

As they passed by a set of stairs leading up to the main deck, Nagisa quietly held Betsy, Ethan, and Kisumi back, and they watched in silence as Makoto and Haru disappeared from view.

“I was thinking we take this up to the deck,” Nagisa whispered. “It’s a beautiful day and well,” he pointed in the direction Makoto and Haru had disappeared, “who wants killjoys?” He felt a little bit rude, but reasoned that this course of action achieved two goals; first it gave Makoto and Haru ample time alone, and it also separated himself and Kisumi from the strain of their judgement. “They’d probably rather be alone anyway.”

“They were shooting you lots of dark looks,” Ethan admitted.

“What do you expect?” Kisumi reasoned, “You can’t bring the married couple to the party.”

“But you bring the children?” Betsy raised an eyebrow.

“Actually, I’ll have you know that I was just about to put him down for a nap.” Hayato tried to protest, but the crying had made him sleepy, and he already appeared unsteady on his feet. Kisumi bent down and picked him up, “I’ll meet you guys on the deck.”

****

Makoto and Haru didn’t realize they were alone until they stood directly in front of Makoto and Nagisa’s room, and perhaps there was some truth to Nagisa’s argument that they were entirely
absorbed in each other.

“Do you think we should go back?” Haru asked dubiously.

“Somehow I don’t feel like this was an accident.” Makoto furrowed his brow, “I’ve known Nagisa for a long time and well…I think that whatever is going to happen is going to happen, whether or not we try and stop him.”

Haru hummed in agreement, “That’s the same feeling I get from Kisumi as well.”

“I will try and talk to him later, but…well I’d be lying if I said he hasn’t always been like that.” Makoto looked at the ground, feeling frustrated. His gaze suddenly snapped up, “Not that - I don’t - I’m not like that, um in-in case you were wondering.”

Haru started to laugh and wrapped his arms around Makoto’s neck, “Really? You certainly had me fooled.”

A harsh voice suddenly rose from a room several doors down, and they both jumped, separating immediately.

Makoto rubbed his neck, “Do...do you want to come inside?”

Haru nodded and Makoto held the door him, and the moment they were both inside the room they were faithfully in each other’s arms once more. They were learning very quickly the pain of the distance placed between them whenever they were in public, and the demand of closeness whenever they were alone.

Makoto was the first to yawn. Still holding Haru in his arms, he flushed to a deep scarlet and tried to stifle it, “Sorry I-I promise I’m not bored-” he yawned again, louder this time, making Haru chuckle.

“We didn’t get much sleep last night did we?” Haru eyed the room’s bunk beads. Each mattress was small; it would be a challenge to fit them both one. They’d have to lay very close. “Do you want to take a nap?”

Makoto looked confused, “Wasn’t there somewhere you wanted to go?”

“It’s still not open.” Makoto cocked his head to the side but Haru shook his head, “It’s a surprise.”

Makoto smiled at Haru’s sudden coyness, glancing to the small bed, “I mean...are you sure? Napping isn’t very exciting.”

“I’m tired too,” Haru took his hand, “it sounds wonderful.”

Makoto slid all the way against the wall to make room for Haru, and he held the covers up

Both feeling embarrassed and neither quite sure why, they took off their shoes, and Haru hung his suit jacket over the desk chair. Makoto climbed into the bed first, sliding all the way against the wall to make room for Haru. He held the blanket up as Haru followed him, and then let it drop around them.

Makoto’s arm wrapped around his waist from behind, deeply warming him despite the blanket’s thinness.

“Are you comfortable?”

Haru took hold of his fingers and nodded, “Are you?”
“Yes,” Makoto’s lips brushed by his neck whenever he spoke, and his nose was pressed into his hair. Haru smelled like fresh cotton and Makoto inhaled deeply, letting out a happy sigh, “This was a great idea.”

Haru hummed in agreement, certain he was already dreaming.

****

Lunch descended upon the Verandah Cafe with all the force of a raging storm. As Rei prepared to serve everyone drinks, he made the briefest eye contact with Katsu, shaking his head slightly.

The chair scraped loudly as Katsu stood up, making the entire table turn towards him, “Rin, Rei, Ai, a word please.”

He led them out into the hallway, smiling genuinely at every table they passed. When he turned on Rin and his wait staff, Rei thought it best to preemptively apologize.

“I-I’m sorry, Sir but we really can’t find him - Ai and I checked all the first class areas several times over.”

“And I checked outside on all the decks,” Rin interjected, preparing to remind Katsu that he was neither his butler nor his son.

Katsu however, remained unimpressed with their answers, “Well there must be somewhere you’re not looking! He hardly could have jumped ship now could he?” His face flushed with anger as he glared down at them all, and none found themselves able to meet his eyes. Katsu gritted his teeth and then stood up straight, checking to make sure his pocket watch was still pinned faithfully to his side. “Let’s all attempt to get through lunch like normal, and then I expect you to find him before dinner.”

Rei and Ai answered immediately and in unison, “Yes, Sir.”

Rin hesitated before muttering a simple, “Yes.”

The door to the Verandah Cafe suddenly began to open, and William Stockwell emerged behind it.

“This doesn’t concern you!” Katsu barked, trying to shut the door in his face.

William pushed back, looking offended, “I know you’ve always been overbearing, but now you’re gonna stop me from using the loo?!”

Katsu suddenly stopped pushing and William toppled into the hallway. He smoothed out his suit, looking embarrassed, “Oh…Well, carry on then.” He turned to Rei and Ai, “As I ordered.” They didn’t move and Katsu jabbed a finger at the door, “I believe there are people inside who are still waiting for lunch?”

Rei and Ai both leapt into action. Neither however, had prepared much foresight, and they tripped over each other spectacularly, stumbling to the floor.

Katsu fumed and pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes.

Continuing down to the first-class lavatories, William pulled Rin aside with a warning, “You really better find him soon, for his own sake.”

****

Out on the deck, Betsy, Ethan, Nagisa, and Kisumi were having a grand time. Rather, Nagisa and
Kisumi assumed everyone was having a grand time, when really it was just the two of them, while Betsy and Ethan were both squirming and feeling slightly nauseous.

They had successfully duped Makoto and Haru, and Nagisa was glad they hadn’t followed their group out to the deck. He didn’t need a ‘holier than thou’ attitude from two people who had never experienced a romantic relationship until a few days ago.

Despite their absence however, there existed a tiny Makoto and Haru inside his head, and every now and then the Haru would tap his foot in annoyance, and the Makoto would give him a disappointed shake of the head, and he would hear, echoed from an experience several years ago, ‘You should value people more, Nagisa.’

He felt hostile and bitter towards them both, but only because he knew that they were right, and he was on verge of doing something very reckless. But at his core he felt guilty, and that made him all the more volatile.

It was just past lunchtime, and Nagisa was ready to cut to the chase. He leaned towards Kisumi and looked up at him through his lashes, “So, Kiss-Me, what are your plans for this evening?”

Because neither Betsy nor Ethan felt the pull of Kisumi’s charms, they were the first to spot Rei slowly making his way towards them. They both had seen Rei with Nagisa the night of the party, and while they didn’t believe it was their place to shame Nagisa for his actions, they both thought it was at least pertinent to warn him that Rei was coming right for them.

Ethan started to whistle loudly and Betsy, never fond of subtleties, whacked Nagisa on the arm and threw her head in Rei’s direction.

Nagisa felt his tongue tie in a knot and lodge itself in his throat, and he coughed several times. He had enough experience to know that his bad behavior always caught up with him in the end, though never quite this fast, never while the truly bad behavior had yet to been committed.

“Rei-chan!” His voice squawked horrible, “What are you doing out here? Shouldn’t you be working?”

While he was sure Rei hadn’t seen him with Kisumi, the butler still appeared in distress; his sleeves were rolled up and beads of sweat clung to his forehead, and he hadn’t noticed them at all until Nagisa had called out to him.

“Nagisa!” Not acknowledging the three other people present, Rei moved right in front of Nagisa, standing very close to him and looking distraught, “Have you seen Haru? He’s been missing all day and his father—” he hesitated, and then his face broke into a weary smile, “actually, Nagisa-kun, we need to stop meeting this way.”

Nagisa’s heart plummeted, and then, sitting shamefully in the very bottom of his stomach, it did several backflips. Rei’s comment had been both good-natured and nostalgic enough to really do a number on his cocky attitude, and feeling both miserable and guilty, he smiled despite himself, “If I didn’t know better I’d think you want him to go missing.”

“Oh no - well, well I did meet you…” Rei stammered. He blushed, and for the first time he seemed to realize that there were other people present.

Nagisa cleared his throat, “I think he and Makoto are back in the room, they were headed that way last time I saw them.”

Rei looked at him like he’d just told him the location of a very crafty unicorn, and bashfulness
forgotten, he grabbed Nagisa by the shoulders and kissed him roughly, taking off with a cry of "Nagisa you're the best!"

Betsy and Ethan stared at him. People who were not part of their group stared at him. The entire deck stared at him, because Rei had kissed him in broad daylight. Kissed him in broad daylight, and then run off, leaving Nagisa alone to suffer the embarrassment that the butler's indiscretion had caused. Kissing at the party had been different, because it had been on the cheek, because it had been dark, and because the room was collectively too merry and too drunk to pay them any attention. Now, everyone on the deck was quite sober, and though he looked around at them all, he was unable to meet any of their eyes.

Betsy and Ethan felt the sneaking suspicion that they were forgetting something, and their heads turned in unison towards Kisumi, having yet to gauge his reaction. Nagisa swallowed hard, preparing to apologize for Rei’s interruption, for his own negligent morality, and for the finalized decision of who he truly wished to spend his night with.

Kisumi, however, was not looking at any of them. He was attentively watching Rei walk away, watching with his head inclined at a certain angle and his lips pressed together in a certain way, indicating that a certain lewd analysis was currently taking place.

Eventually he turned to Nagisa, still looking cheerful, and slapped him on the back, “Not bad! Not bad at all, if I do say so myself.” He stretched, “I’m going to go wake Hayato. This was fun though, I don’t get to hang out with people my age very often, but I’m sure I’ll see you all around. Have a good rest of the day!” He walked away whistling, as if the entire matter was largely inconsequential to him.

Both Betsy and Ethan turned to stare at Nagisa, certain that he must be the luckiest man on the planet. Nagisa indeed felt quite relieved, but he still found himself struggling with some persistent, lingering embarrassment. Even so, he couldn’t help but smile; Rei had kissed him in broad daylight, and Nagisa, experienced as he was, had spent far too much time kissing in the dark.

****

Once Kisumi knew he was out of sight of his new friends, he lost the cheerful swing in his step. He didn’t feel disappointed exactly, just a bit lonely, but he in no way believed Nagisa had been the great lost love of his life. Whatever Haru may think of him, Kisumi really didn’t believe in stealing people away from someone who was bound to value them more than he ever would. Still, he knew he would never be able to convince an unbiased jury of his innocence in all matters of the heart.

By the time he turned down the hallway that led to his room, Kisumi had effectively berated himself enough to feel unworthy of romance for the next several years. A hand on the doorknob, he felt wholly ready for his own nap, when a friendly voice stopped him.

"Well aren’t you looking uncharacteristically grim today?"

Squinting in annoyance, Kisumi looked up, not entirely sure if he should feel offended or not. The handsome steward he’d been mooning over for the last several days now stood before him, but Kisumi only frowned at him, feeling rather disinterested.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” he snapped.

The steward looked taken aback, “N-Nothing I was just - well you seem upset is all....” he seemed to realize his comment had not been taken kindly, “and I noticed your brother wasn’t with you so I thought maybe-”
“What? No-no I-nothing.” The steward was now glaring at him, angered by Kisumi’s coldness, “I was just trying to make conversation, forget it. I’ll let you go.” He began to walk away without so much as a second glance. He had an incredibly long and purposeful stride, one that could probably carry him away in just a few steps. His cheeks were flushed with anger, the same shade as his flaming hair, and despite his resolve to remain indifferent, Kisumi couldn’t help but be attracted to his suddenly fiery demeanor.

Kisumi quickly slid in front of him, blocking his path, "He-he's napping right now - my brother - that’s why he’s not with me.” He felt the courage rising in his chest, giving him the fortitude to try one last time, “I-I’m sorry for getting so angry at you a moment ago; you were right, it hasn’t been a good day and I’m feeling a bit odd.”

The steward seemed to scrutinize him for a moment, and eventually sighed, “Well I can hardly blame you for being protective of him,” he gave Kisumi a crooked grin, “don’t worry about it.”

“You’re room is across the hall isn’t it?” Kisumi pointed, “That one?”

He nodded, clearing his throat, “Lately I’ve been feeling a bit homesick and seeing the two of you together always reminds me of my own little brother, that’s why I asked about him. He seems like a good kid.” Kisumi’s eyes widened and the steward scratched his head, “I guess Momo was never a well-behaved child, but still, there’s something about your brother that seems familiar to me…sorry, I know that sounds a bit odd.”

“N-No it’s...I understand.” Kisumi fidgeted with his hands, wondering where all his charm from that morning had gone, “I was just about to wake him up. Actually…earlier today I told him he couldn’t be friends with another boy who had some uh…dangerous relatives. He’s pretty upset, probably mad at me too. If-if you don’t have anywhere to be, and if you want to…do you think you could come in and talk with him for a little while? He doesn’t make friends easily, and we move a lot.”

The steward hesitated for barely a moment, “Sure! I mean, only if you think he’d like to meet me. What’s his name?”

“Hayato,” Kisumi’s voice lowered as he began to open the door, flooding light into the dark room. “And yours?”

Kisumi turned back to look at him, “It’s Kisumi, sounds just like-” the young man stared blankly back at him. He was simultaneously intense and handsome and kind, and Kisumi suddenly changed his mind, “eh-nothing, nevermind.” He tiptoed into the room, whispering, “What’s your name?”

The steward hissed back, “Seijuurou Mikoshiba.”

It was a strong name, and Kisumi thought it suited him. He knelt down beside the bed where Hayato was still fast asleep.

“Hayato?” Kisumi gently shook him awake, "Hey Hayato, I have someone here who wants to meet you.” Hayato slowly blinked up at the pair of them, rubbing his eyes, “This is Seijuurou, he's staying across the hall from us. He works on the ship.”

Hayato suddenly sat up, his eyes growing wide, "You work on the ship?"

"That's right." Seijuurou knelt down beside Kisumi, so that he was eye-level with the boy.
Hayato tried to imagine him repairing the engines or ordering the crew around the bow, "Aren't you afraid?" he asked.

"Well I work in the squash court," Seijuurou smiled, "So I don't actually do anything important."

Hayato frowned, "Squash court? Is that like the ship's garden?" he looked at his older brother, "Is that where the food comes from?"

The two older boys both started to chuckle, and Seijuurou answered him patiently, "It-it's a game, with a racket and a ball. I mostly provide the players with supplies and fetch them water whenever they require it. Sometimes I have to fill in and play against them when they're alone though, and that always ends badly - I gave someone a bloody nose earlier today."

Hayato started to laugh and Kisumi stared at him, trying to determine if this was true or simply something he had told Hayato to amuse him. Seijuurou met his gaze and nodded grimly, "They'll likely fire me once we land," he whispered.

Once he had stopped laughing, Hayato turned eagerly to Seijuurou, "Can I play with you?"

"I-I'm really sorry," and Seijuurou truly looked heartbroken to deny Hayato’s request, “but it's only for first-class passengers and their guests.”

Kisumi had a sudden spark of brilliance and placed a hand on his brother's shoulder, "Maybe if you're super nice to Haru he'll bring you there. He - well he's pretty mad at me right now, but if you ask him extra nicely I'm sure he'll take you." Seijuurou looked at him dubiously and Kisumi smirked, “What? Don’t we look like we have friends in high places?"

Hayato was bouncing up and down on the bed, "Can we go ask him now? We know which way he went, he-"

Kisumi hesitated, "He's...having some alone time with Makoto right now, but maybe we can ask him tomorrow."

Seijuurou brought a hand to his chin, thinking quickly, “I work from early afternoon ‘til close tomorrow, so...so if you come between those hours, I will be the one working.” He finished awkwardly and an attractive blush crept into his cheeks once more. Kisumi sent a silent prayer to every god he knew that Haru wasn't one to hold grudges.

Looking slightly disappointed, Hayato had settled back down on the bed. Kisumi quickly thought of something else to distract him, “You know Hayato, Seijuurou told me he had a little brother just like you.”

Hayato’s eyes lit up, "Really? Is he here?"

“N-No, he's waiting for me in New York,” Seijuurou answered reluctantly, “and he’s a bit older than you.”

"Oh." Hayato’s hopes had clearly been thwarted once more.

Kisumi and Seijuurou looked at each other, not sure what do now. Seijuurou cast an eye around the room, "Uuuuhh..." his gaze fell on something on the desk, "wow these look cool, what are they?"

Hayato stood up and, after inspecting the desk, turned to him skeptically, "You've never played jacks before?"
Seijuurou shook his head, "Could you teach me?"

They sat on the floor and Hayato patiently explained the rules, holding his one rubber ball like it was a small sacred treasure. They played several rounds, and the game was occasionally interrupted by Hayato’s interjects of “I can’t believe you didn’t know how to play,” and “aren’t grownups supposed to be good at this sort of thing?”

Kisumi watched them from the bed, laughing and adding his own commentary; he couldn’t tell if Seijuurou was actually bad at jacks or was simply pretending.

They passed almost an hour that way, until it was time for Seijuurou to return for work.

Kisumi walked him to the door, "Thank you, I think you really cheered him up-” he blushed, “-cheered us both up.”

"No problem, I had fun.” Seijuurou’s eyes shone brightly and he gave Kisumi a terribly crooked grin, “I'll see you tomorrow?"

Kisumi swallowed and felt himself fall fast and incredibly hard, “Y-Yes, tomorrow.” Seijuurou began to walk away and Kisumi called after him, "Or-Or, tonight? If you’re free?” His face fell into a fatally natural pout. He batted his eyelashes, looking both desperate and delicate, and in that moment, a single thought ran through Seijuurou’s mind, one that both confused and alarmed him; he looks very pretty like that.

Seijuurou’s brow furrowed and he stood motionless in the hallway, his brain working overtime with the task of processing this development, because guys weren’t pretty. Girls were pretty and he liked them for it, but guys were not pretty. He had never consider them to be...but Kisumi was?

“Hey - uh, is everything okay? You look like you’re having a crisis.” Kisumi was now gazing at him with mild concern, “You don’t have to come by if you don’t want to.”

Seijuurou shook his head roughly, trying to chase away his doubts, “I..I’ll see if maybe I can drop by when I get off work.”

Back inside his own room, Kisumi felt a sudden surge of energy. He picked Hayato up off the ground, spinning him around several times and letting out a triumphant whoop. After one too many spins Hayato started to protest and Kisumi put him down, flopping onto the bed himself.

Hayato hummed from the floor, still fully engrossed in his game, "He was nice."

"Yes, he was," Kisumi fluffed his pillow and stared up at the ceiling. "They usually aren't that nice."

****

On top of a small mattress and under a thin blanket, Makoto and Haru slept wonderfully, entirely oblivious as noon came and went. Amid the chaos and panic of everyone’s frantic searching, no one thought to look in the small, private sanctuary of the third-class barracks, and Makoto and Haru remained undisturbed – Rei, unfortunately, would arrive at the room just a few minutes too late.

Haru awoke first and tried to guess how much time had passed by the steep angle of the sunlight streaming through the window. He turned to Makoto, who was still sleeping softly beside him. Haru scooted closer to him, appreciating the opportunity to stare at Makoto all he wanted, without being embarrassed. Haru wished he had his sketchbook with him now, wished he had another chance to truly capture the length of Makoto’s eyelashes, the tip of his nose, the peak above his lips...Haru thought it was a glorious thing, to share a space with someone, share a moment, entirely unknown by
the rest of the world.

Makoto’s face suddenly pulled tight; his nose wrinkled and twitched, and he let out a small sneeze, momentarily tensed, and then relaxed again, still deeply asleep.

Against all his best efforts, Haru started to laugh. It was a deep laugh, echoing and loud, and it shook the small bed.

Makoto’s eyes slid open.

Haru tried to apologize, but couldn’t quite form the words through his laughter. Makoto smiled sleepily, ready to play along with Haru’s amusement even though he truly had no idea what was going on. When he finally stopped laughing, Haru apologized, but Makoto told him not to worry.

“Did you sleep well?”

Haru nodded and scooted closer to him, “Do you want to go now?”

Makoto smiled at him and it wasn’t quite a smirk - Makoto didn’t smirk - but it was certainly teasing, “You seem very excited.”

Haru blushed, “I - only a little.”

Makoto took his hand, “Let’s go.”

They put on their shoes and, stepping out into the hallway, moved slightly away from each other. They didn’t discuss it, but they both recognized the necessity of a few inches placed strategically between them.

Haru walked a few steps ahead of Makoto. Though he told himself that this was simply because he was the one leading way, he also recognized that he was feeling a bit eager. He turned down the hallway to the Turkish Baths and was greeted by familiar face.

“Hello, Wally.”

The old man smiled, “Brought a friend today I see.” He looked down and made a note on his clipboard, “Come for the Baths?”

Haru shook his head, “Not today.”

Wally nodded in understanding and Haru paid the entrance fee, and then he was off, already across the hall, throwing open the door that led to the pool. It lay glistening and undisturbed, and Haru felt like singing.

Wearing a wide smile, he looked back at Makoto, excited to see the eager expression this reveal had evoked.

But Makoto hadn’t followed him into the room. He had stopped just outside the doorway, and his face had gone grim.

“Don’t worry if you don’t have a swimsuit,” Haru said quickly, “I don’t either. But Wally said yesterday that they’re available for purchase.”

This did nothing to alleviate the tension that had built in Makoto’s face, and Haru couldn’t say with certainty if he had heard him.
“Hey,” Haru gently gripped Makoto’s arm, “is everything okay?”

Makoto jumped slightly as Haru touched him, “What? Oh, y-yes of course, I’m fine.” He gave Haru a very strained smile. Makoto knew logically that it was ridiculous to be afraid of a shallow pool on a ship that was currently crossing the Atlantic Ocean, but he had been unable to suppress his immediate reaction regardless.

Haru’s heart sank, and he suddenly felt very selfish. Why had he assumed Makoto liked water the way that he did? Even worse – why had he assumed that Makoto knew how to swim? Makoto had probably never had the opportunity to swim in a clean, well-maintained pool, so why had Haru thought he would enjoy the experience? Feeling ashamed, he stared up at Makoto, unable to find a way to apologize for the sheer weight of his mistake.

Wally interrupted his thoughts with a polite cough.

“Should I...bring the suits then?”

Haru didn’t turn away from Makoto, looking to him for the answer.

“Y-Yes, yes please.” Makoto responded.

Wally looked him over, “Whooo boy, we’ll try and find one for you, Big Man.”

Under usual circumstances, Makoto would have blushed and Haru would have laughed, but now they both felt rather out of their element, and the comment fell around them awkwardly.

Making sure Wally had disappeared, Haru squeezed Makoto’s fingers, “Are you sure everything is alright?”

Makoto nodded and tried to say something, but no sound came out, and he eventually shut his mouth.

Wally returned carrying two swimsuits, frowning as he passed one to Makoto, “This was the best we could do.”

Haru paid for the suits and Makoto made sure to thank them both.

After a quick bow, Wally wished them a good swim and exited the room. Haru tried to catch Makoto’s eye, but Makoto was turned pointedly away from him.

“Well,” Makoto cleared his throat uncomfortably, “we should get changed.”

Haru nodded slowly, and they entered adjacent dressing rooms, each weighed down by armfuls murky thoughts and undeclared feelings.

Haru had just finished pulling off his shirt when, seen out of the corner of his eye, a slight movement made him stop. There was a small amount of space below the walls separating each cubicle, and Haru could see the bottom half of Makoto’s legs and shoes from under the separator.

He watched as Makoto finished untying his shoes. Haru started to do the same, but moments later Makoto’s trousers dropped to a messy pile around his ankles, and suddenly the task became very difficult. Still bent over his shoes, every muscle in Haru’s body froze and he simply stared. Stared at the bare, tan and muscular calves, visible to the knees. He knelt over his shoes just long enough to see Makoto’s underclothes join his trousers, and then he stood up very quickly, banging his head on the door to his changing room.
“Are you alright?” Makoto voice rose anxiously from the cubicle beside him.

“Yes-” Haru’s voice cracked terribly, “yes fine - thank you…” He felt the heat rising in his face and he tried to focus on putting on his swimsuit without inviting any further embarrassment.

They emerged from the changing rooms at roughly the same time, both feeling shy. The swimsuits where striped white and navy, covering from shoulders to knees with several black buttons at the collar.

All of Makoto’s buttons had been left open, revealing a prominent collarbone and the peak where his chest began, and Haru suspected this was because he genuinely had not been able to close them. The suit seemed small in almost every area, and was pulled tight over strong muscles, muscles that rippled every time he moved, muscles, Haru realized, that were much larger than he had always assumed.

Perhaps his clothes were too big, because Makoto’s everyday look gave no indication of such a powerful chest, jutting out like the bow of some powerful ship and then narrowing at his waist. Haru could see the outline of the perfect V that was Makoto’s hip bones, and his mouth went incredibly dry.

“H-Haru? Is everything alright?”

He realized he had been staring. Hard. With his mouth open.

“N-nothing you just - you’re really…” a painfully familiar and terribly absurd phrase rose to his mind, “-a Big Man, whooo boy.”

Makoto turned bright red and Haru thought he surely had lost his mind, but granted Makoto’s many good graces, he pretended to laugh, and Haru felt eternally grateful.

He cleared his throat and stepped towards the pool, wishing very much to swim off some of his embarrassment, “Are you sure you’ll be alright? I’m sorry – I shouldn’t have assumed you were fond of water, I feel like a jerk.”

Makoto turned towards the pool, and again Haru was stuck by the sight of him, this time from behind, as the swimsuit strained against an incredibly defined back. Somewhere, very far away, Makoto was speaking.

“No really, it-it’s okay, I…” he hesitated “I can swim, but I think I’ll sit on the stairs if that’s alright? I’ll watch you.”

Haru felt this was a rather unfair compromise, but he wasn’t sure what else he could suggest and he really needed to get in the water to try and calm down, so he simply nodded.

Haru led the way into the pool, but unfortunately didn’t make it very far. The water was freezing, and the first step had been quite jarring. Wally had claimed the pool was heated, but Haru wasn’t so sure. He shivered and spoke to Makoto over his shoulder, “Sorry it’s um...it’s cold.” He took a deep breath and steeled his nerves. Behind him, he heard Makoto start to speak, but he had already jumped, entering the water with a perfect dive.

The water chilled him, but it was refreshing, and he felt better for being in it. When he rose to the surface, he could hear Makoto chuckling.

“You’re much braver than I am.” Makoto smiled as he slowly settled onto the third step, rubbing his arms a few times to warm up, and then folded his hands in his lap, politely turning in Haru’s direction.
As he’d said, he really intended to watch Haru swim.

Haru tried very hard to keep this out of his mind as he began to swim laps, roughly at first, as he shook off the stiffness and embarrassment that had seized his body. Makoto always gave him butterflies, but this was something else entirely; this was heat creeping up his neck and tension building down around his groin, and it would be wrong to say that he had no idea what had come over him. It was the same way he felt in the middle of the night sometimes, when he was cold and alone and longing for the touch of another person – inevitably, a touch that he always supplied himself.

Haru swam until he was exhausted, swam until the feverish frenzy in his body had been replaced with fatigue, and then finally stopped to rest on the opposite end of the pool. Almost immediately, he could hear Makoto clapping.

“That was really incredible, Haru! I would have had to stop long before now.”

Haru rubbed his neck, feeling embarrassed, “You really don’t have to do that.” He mumbled. His newly recognized desires aside, he still felt an incredible shyness whenever Makoto smiled at him.

Under the guise of catching his breath, Haru used the moment to remind himself that this was Makoto; Makoto, who made him feel safe, Makoto, who had called him brave several times over, Makoto, who liked him, Makoto, who would accept him no matter what he said or felt.

Feeling like his head was on right for the first time all morning, Haru swam over to the stairs where Makoto sat, breaking the surface right in front of him.

Droplets flew everywhere - he had come up too fast - and water splashed upwards, spraying Makoto’s face. Haru saw him flinch.

“Oh-oh no I-I’m sorry.” Haru raised his hands, but didn’t know what to do with them, didn’t know how he could possibly help.

Makoto shook his head, wiping his cheeks slightly, “No it-it’s okay.” Haru still looked upset and Makoto smiled warmly at him, “Really, I’ll be fine.”

Haru moved to sit beside him on the stairs. He leaned his head on Makoto’s shoulder, feeling like a failure in every way, “I really am sorry about all of this, you can pick what we do from now on.”

He felt Makoto shake his head, “Don’t be, I really am enjoying myself. You’re really good at swimming. I’m just sorry that I can’t do more, I know how excited you were.” He felt around in the water and found Haru’s fingers, “I take it you like water?”

Haru nodded against his shoulder, “When I was a kid, our house in Japan was pretty far inland, but it had a large pool, so I’ve been swimming since then.” His expression softened at the memory. “The last several years we’ve pretty much been living in and out of hotels for long periods of time, but most of those have had pools, some even had several, so it’s just something I’ve always done.” He cast a sideways glance at Makoto, “You – eh – don’t like water...I’m guessing?”

It was Makoto’s turn to nod, and then he was silent for a long while. Haru wasn’t sure if he would say anything, but Makoto eventually cleared his throat, “Our home was on the Northern coast. It used to storm a lot, and it flooded often. My dad was a fisherman, and we had a little shop where my mom would sell and trade the fish he caught. Even when I was a kid the ocean always seemed...menacing? We relied on it so much, but we also knew that it didn’t care about us at all, and could make or break us any day.” Makoto hesitated, “Still I...I understand using the water for food,
or for transportation, but just swimming in water for fun...doesn’t really make sense to me.”

Haru nodded slowly; as much as he liked water, he could certainly understand why Makoto felt the way he did.

“Is that how you parents died?” He asked, “In a storm, or a flood?”

“No,” Makoto answered stiffly, “My parents were killed.” He bowed his head slightly, hiding his face.

Haru lifted Makoto’s hand out of the water and raised it to his lips, softly kissing the back of it, “I’m sorry.”

Makoto looked at him then, and Haru watched as his expression slowly changed from grief to wonder. He gently rested his head on top of Haru’s. “You always know how to cheer me up.” He whispered.

“I feel like I should be saying that to you, though.” Haru said, smiling as Makoto raised Haru’s own hand to his lips.

Makoto suddenly stood up, looking much more cheerful, “I can swim though! The basics at least, it was sort of necessary given where I grew up.”

Haru watched, slightly surprised, as Makoto waded out into the middle of the pool. He closed his eyes in concentration, and moments later, he was drifting across the pool’s surface, floating shakily on his back. Haru could tell Makoto was giving the task a fair amount of concentration, even though he was trying hard to make the task look natural.

Haru swam out to join him, briefly analyzing Makoto’s form.

“Try and lift your chest a bit.” He suggested. Makoto’s brow furrowed in confusion and Haru placed a hand on his lower back, “Arch here, it’ll keep you upper body out of the water.” Makoto did as he instructed and Haru grinned, “Perfect, just like that.”

Makoto closed his eyes once more, and every now and then his face would tense momentarily as he struggled to maintain his balance. Haru held a reassuring hand under his back just in case. They passed a lot of time that way, with Makoto floating lazily and Haru making little adjustments to his form, both fully enjoying themselves.

Once he was confident that Makoto wasn’t going to slide under the surface, Haru slowly removed his hand, and Makoto was entirely at peace on the water. His eyes were still closed and his lips parted slightly, the epitome of relaxation.

“Try and keep your chin up,” Haru’s voice grew soft and quickly turned into a whisper, “it will keep your airways clear.” His hand was cupping Makoto’s face, slowly tipping his head upward. Before Haru knew it, he was leaning over Makoto, looking down on long eyelashes splayed over strong cheekbones and pillowy lips marked by a thin white line in the corner-

Makoto’s eyes flew open, startling them both.

Haru gasped and immediately pulled backward, but Makoto lost the delicate balance he had achieved and sank into the water. His head went under.

Panicking, Haru reached for him in the water, but Makoto surfaced mere seconds later, spluttering slightly, but largely unharmed.
Haru however, was distraught, “Makoto I’m sorry - I’m so sorry I don’t - are you okay? I didn’t mean-”

Makoto was coughing. He likely had inhaled water, and Haru tried to think of some way he could help. He swam to the edge of the pool and grabbed Makoto’s towel, bringing it back to him while Makoto continued to gulp and gasp. Not wanting to startle him again, Haru gently cupped his face, blotting away some of the wetness with the towel.

Makoto was still wheezing, but tried his best to reassure him, “Haru, don’t worry, it’s okay, I’m okay.”

Haru looked ready to cry, and continued to press the towel to his cheeks and brow, “Makoto I’m so sorry I...I don’t know what happened – I don’t know what I was doing, I’m so-“

“Really, it’s okay,” Makoto reached up to hold Haru’s hand. His eyes crinkled as he gave Haru an innocent smile, “I survived, didn’t I?”

Haru let go of the towel and it dropped into the pool. Soaking up water, it began to sink. He laced his free fingers with Makoto’s. He could feel Makoto’s breath on his face, chilling his wet skin, dusting by his cheeks and freezing his lips, making every nerve within them come alive.

Makoto squeezed his fingers, and Haru closed his eyes. He felt a warm hand in his own, a solid body held against him, and a soft kiss pressed to his lips. Makoto’s arms wound around his waist and Haru stood on his tip toes, sealing their lips together. The kiss was wet, drenched as they both were, and messy with all of their mutual inexperience; they bumped noses frequently and sometimes their lips made funny noises whenever they briefly pulled apart, but Haru’s heart was racing and he knew he’d never felt this way before, never in all his life. Perhaps only in other lives, but certainly never in all his eighteen years had he felt so accepted and so safe and so wanted. Haru felt like he was growing up and growing happier, growing stronger.

Forgotten by them both, Makoto’s towel sank to the bottom of the pool.

They took their time, and it was a long while before they finally pulled apart. Haru rested his head on Makoto’s shoulder, and spoke with his lips pressed against Makoto’s neck. “I’m going to miss you,” he closed his eyes, “I’m going to miss you so much.”

Makoto’s bottom lip quivered. He felt like his heart was breaking, breaking preemptively, for the goodbye they hadn’t said yet. “Haru…come with me - come with me, please?” His voice broke.

Haru raised his head, staring at him with wide, blank eyes.

“I...I don’t have a lot of money, and I won’t be able to give you all the things that I want to, but I promise I will always keep you safe and I’ll always treat you the way you deserve. If I couldn’t see you every day, I-I can’t imagine it-” Makoto hesitated, growing worried because Haru could still only gape at him. “I just...I feel like you’re the person I’m supposed to be with.”

That seemed to finally bring Haru back from wherever his thoughts had carried him. “I feel like that too,” he whispered, squeezing his eyes shut, “I…I don’t know…”

Makoto wrapped his arms around him, “I’m sorry I-I shouldn’t have said that all at once. I know it’s a lot for me to ask of you, and I wouldn’t be angry if you didn’t want to, but think about it, please?” He brought a hand to Haru’s head, gently stroking his hair, “But whatever you decide, I want you to know that wherever you are, wherever you go, even if it’s far away, I’ll always be on your side and I’ll always be rooting for you.”
Haru raised his head. He placed a hand on either side of Makoto’s face and pulled him back down, crashing their lips together once more.

Makoto was startled at first, but then firmly gripped his waist, kissing him hard. One of Haru’s hands tangled in Makoto’s hair and the other groped at his chest, and he could feel Makoto’s fingers pressed against the base of his spine, holding Haru tightly against him. Their swimsuits clung to their wet skin, and Haru could feel Makoto’s body moving beneath the fabric, moving against his own, and Haru’s hand was falling lower, sliding down Makoto chest and coming to rest in the slot above his hip bone. His thumb and forefinger fit against the groove perfectly, as if there was some sort of weathering on the bone where Haru had held him there before. He could feel Makoto’s tongue dancing just behind his lips, and the water no longer felt cold but piping hot, and Haru was set ablaze by the sheer joy of knowing he would never need anyone more than he needed Makoto in this moment.

Soon, far too soon, a steady set of footsteps began to build out in the hallway.

Haru and Makoto sprang apart and did their very best to act natural, looking in opposite directions as William Stockwell swung the door open. Standing in the doorway, he stared down at them sternly. He looked as if he’d just been forced to swallow a very hard truth.

“You father is looking for you,” he spoke only to Haru, “he’s very angry, he has everyone out searching.”

Haru met his gaze and answered evenly, “Right now I am swimming with my friend.”

William gave him a weary smile, “While I admire your attitude, I really think you should go.”

They stared at one another, and a brief moment of understanding passed only between the two of them, because, unlike Makoto, they had both seen Katsu Nanase at his worst.

Haru hesitated for a moment, weighing his options - though of course there weren’t any - and then nodded. He turned to Makoto, “I’m sorry about this.”

“N-no it’s fine, I don’t want to get you in trouble.” But no matter how many times he said it, he already had.

Haru led the way out of the pool and insisted that Makoto take his towel, since he had effectively sunk Makoto’s original one, but William called for Wally and another towel was brought immediately. Both feeling rather dejected, they entered their separate dressing rooms and quickly changed back into their clothes.

William was still waiting once they had finished, “I really am sorry to be the bearer of bad news. It’s not the role I’m used to playing, and I can’t say I’m terribly good at it, but he has everyone out looking and I think it’d be best if you got back to him as soon as possible.”

Haru tried to appear unaffected, “Where is he?”

“I believe he told anyone who found you to send you to his room.”

Haru nodded stiffly and then led the way out of the swimming pool and back down the hallway that would put them back in ship’s main corridor. They were already in the first class areas, so his room wasn’t far.

Haru turned to Makoto, “Again, I...I’m really sorry. Thank you for coming with me, I had a lot of fun.”
“N-No it’s fine! I’ll see you later maybe?”

“Sure,” Haru did his best to hold it together, if only for Makoto’s sake, “that sounds nice.” He turned to William, “Thank you, Mr. Stockwell, I-I apologize for all the trouble.”

William placed a steady hand on his shoulder, “It’s nothing.”

Haru nodded to them both once before he began to walk away. Heading back up the corridor, he turned a corner and vanished from sight.

Makoto watched him go, feeling sick.

“You should probably get back to the lower decks,” William turned to Makoto, and for the first time since Makoto had known him, he looked genuinely upset, “I know it’ll be hard, but try not to worry, he has friends who will look after him.”

Makoto eyes widened and he looked at William like he’d just descended from heaven, “Thank you, really, thank you so much - I know I can’t be there all the times when I would like to, so I really appreciate it.”

William frowned, “Well-well no I didn’t mean me…I, on the contrary, am Katsu’s friend,” he face grew grim, “which is why I need to have a very serious talk with him regarding his parenting.”

“Do you think that will help?” Makoto’s hopes felt a bit dashed.

Mr. Stockwell stretched lazily, “Five years ago? I would have said yes. Now? Well I have no idea.” He sighed heavily and eyed Makoto, “You know I still don’t really understand it.”

“Understand what?”

Mr. Stockwell suddenly pointed a finger at him. His expression was playful, but there was some indignation in his voice, “My daughter is definitely prettier than you.” They stared at each for a long moment. Makoto felt entirely bewildered and Mr. Stockwell looked uncharacteristically serious, and then he laughed, dropping the accusing finger with a shrug, “Well, I should know better than anyone that there’s no logic in these matters.” He began to walk away, waving at him without looking back, “Have a good day, son!”

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As Haru proceed to his father’s room, dragging his feet, he tried to imagine what lay in store for him; his father wasn’t exceptionally fond of corporal punishment, but Haru also knew he wasn’t beyond striking someone if thoroughly angered. He could order Haru not to see Makoto anymore, but then again, that would be a rather difficult punishment to enforce, unless Katsu had the persistence of will to follow him everywhere for the remainder of their time aboard the ship. His father had already made it clear he wasn’t fond of spending time with his son, so this was unlikely. Katsu could also decide that simple patience was the best course of action; a few more days till they arrived in New York, and then once away from Makoto, Haru would surely return to his morose, passive, and obedience self.

Haru thought again of what Makoto had asked him. It was true that they hadn’t known each other for very long, but that was not the thing that prevented him from fully committing to Makoto’s request. He firmly believed that he was meant to be by Makoto’s side, but still, he found himself held by an insurgence of cowardice, or, more accurately, a failing of strength. No matter how courageous Makoto may think him, Haru didn’t know if he was brave enough.
Turning down the final hallway, he stopped in his tracks. The door to his own room hung ajar.

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Makoto walked back to his room, feeling cold and lonely and just generally defeated.

Entering the third-class barracks, he turned the corner to find Rin, hands on his hips, waiting resolutely in front of his and Nagisa’s room.

Before Makoto could move a muscle, before he could say a word, Rin had rounded on him. “Where were you?” he demanded.

Makoto gulped. He was still soaking wet and had already dripped an ample amount of water in the hallway, so he saw no point in trying to lie, “I-we...we were swimming.” He looked down at the floor. He heard several small pops as Rin curled his fists in anger, heard him angrily blow air out of his nose, heard him take several heavy steps towards him. “I-I know you don’t trust me,” Makoto lifted his head, and his eyebrows had knit together in sorrow, “and I don’t blame you at all. I know you’re worried that I’m taking advantage of him, and I know there’s nothing I can do to try and convince you otherwise.” Even as he said it, the new swimsuit Haru had bought him was folded under his arm, seeping water into his shirt, “I’m sorry for all the trouble I’ve caused him, and you, and everyone else,” Makoto never broke eye contact, “I’m just glad he has a good friend like you who will always look after him.”

Rin clenched his jaw, “That’s right. I will.” He was angry, but he was not ignorant in the face of real honesty. He hadn’t expected the truth in Makoto’s words, nor the pained look on his face, and all of his anger swelled, vast and monstrous, and then dissipated. “Look, I...well I wish I could say I didn’t come here to yell at you.” He rubbed his neck awkwardly, “For me, for his father, for everyone, this entire thing is just....really unexpected. I’ve known him for years and he’s always been...well he’s always had some fanciful ideas, but no one really saw this coming, and I don’t think either of you really understand how impossible it is.” His mouth set in a thin line, “Or how dangerous. I believe your intentions are good, but in this situation it just doesn’t matter.”

Makoto looked at the ground again, “I...I don’t want to get him in trouble.”

Rin’s anger flared once more, “Well you are, it’s – oh, oh no wait-” panic seized his body, because of all the things he had expected, he had not expected Makoto to start crying.

Heavy drops slid down his cheeks, peaked at his chin and then fell to the floor, joining the already sizeable puddle. Makoto’s voice broke, “I-I didn’t mean to-“

A powerful roar, a mighty battle cry, rose behind the door to Makoto’s room. It was muffled at first, but then burst as Nagisa surged into the hallway. Before Makoto or Rin could achieve any sense of clarity, he had crossed the hallway and, ejecting a powerful grunt, sunk his fist into Rin’s cheek.

Rin stumbled backwards, squinting and clutching his face, still not entirely sure what was happening. Nagisa drew back his fist, preparing to strike a second time, but Rei suddenly emerged out of the room as well and was quick to seize him. They struggled for a few moments, but Rei eventually had him restrained, holding both of Nagisa’s hands behind his back.

Nagisa felt betrayed, “Rei-chan let go of me! Rei-chan! Aren’t you on my side? Rei-chan!”

Rin finally seemed to comprehend the situation and stomped towards them, still clutching his cheek, “WHAT THE HELL WAS THAT FOR?!?”

Nagisa threw his head back and spat at Rin’s feet, “YOU MADE MAKO-CHAN CRY!” The
words seemed to give him new strength and he broke free from Rei’s grasp.

His honor forgotten, Rin backed away immediately, raising his fists in a weak defense. Although it injured his pride to admit it, he knew that Nagisa had probably been in more fights than him.

“No, stop it—” Makoto tried to step in, but Nagisa either didn’t hear him or didn’t intend to listen, “Nagisa, I said stop! He—he’s like you.”

That held them both. Rin and Nagisa turned on Makoto with mutual indignation, “WHAT?”

“Remember when you first met Haru? How cold and suspicious you were? That’s just how he feels,” he nodded to Rin, “but he has more to be worried about because Haru has money, so...so the concern is more valid. Haru also has more things that he needs to worry about, so it’s harder. He was just explaining all that to me...he didn’t do anything.” Makoto bowed his head and started to cry again, “Nagisa I-I think you should apologize.”

Nagisa pressed his lips together and turned to Rin, “I’m sorry you weren’t quick enough to block me.”

Rin’s face flushed and he clenched his jaw, but found he couldn’t fully muster the anger to retaliate. Feeling powerless, he watched Nagisa walk over to Makoto and put a hand on his shoulder.

“Well Mako-chan, still that—that’s nothing to cry about, so it’s hard, that...that’s okay? It’s okay if it’s hard…” Nagisa could see Rei watching him from over Makoto’s shoulder. “That’s no reason not to try…”

“There’s too much isn’t there? Too much in the way, too many problems…” Makoto looked up at him, and his eyes were filled with hope and despair and heartbreak, “It’s not going to work out is it?”

Nagisa pulled Makoto into a hug and could feel him shaking. Turning his head to the side, he finally met Rei’s eyes. Nagisa felt close to tears as well, and he answered in a whisper, “No, probably not.”

Makoto let out small whimper, and his muffled crying turned into a heavy sob. Nagisa turned back to Rei and Rin, “Can you two leave us alone for a bit please? Rei-chan can come by later,” he glared at Rin, “but you’re never allowed back.”

Rin felt like he’d been offended enough today and decided to let the comment go. He walked up to Makoto and put a hand on his shoulder while Nagisa glared daggers at him.

“I promise I’ll make sure he’s okay.” Rin hesitated, “You-you’ve helped me realize that I’ve done a pretty bad job of that lately, so I’m grateful to you, but I will take it from here.” With that somber promise, Rin left. There was nothing he could do here, but he knew that Katsu was furious and Haru would probably need him.

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Haru’s heart pounded against his rib cage as he slowly pushed the door open, imagining a burglar or murderer or some other daring criminal, but every theory proved incorrect; what lay on the other side of the door was a well-dressed monster. Legs crossed and arms folded, Katsu Nanase sat in an armchair by the window.

Haru stopped just inside the door.

“Where were you?” Katsu’s voice was flat, and he seemed oddly calm.
“I was swimming.”

“Alone?”

Haru hesitated for only a fraction of a second, “No.”

Katsu stood up. He walked to where Haru stood, stopping right in front of him.

“Do you think we have always had money?”

Haru blinked, “I-I’m sorry?”

Katsu clenched his jaw, “When I was your age I faced poverty, and hunger, and struggles that you have never dealt with. I would gladly entrust everything I have built to someone else if it were possible, but as it stands, you are the only child I have. You do not have to be happy about it, I am not happy about it, but I will not allow you, or him, or anyone else to ruin everything that I have worked for.” His eyes flashed, “Do you understand me?”

“Yes.”

“Yes?”

“Yes, father.”

“Your mother worked for this too, I’d think you would at least try and behave respectably for her sake.” Haru felt his heart constrict. “I expect you to be on time for dinner.”

“Yes, father.”

“Very good.” He left, closing the door behind himself.

Haru crossed to the bed. Tears began to roll down his cheeks as he reached for his sketchbook with shaking hands. The one drawing he had of Makoto, the one he had stared at so longingly just that morning, had been torn out - torn out and torn to pieces.

Chapter End Notes

I cannot begin to apologize for the wait for this chapter, all I've wanted is to work on this fic but it feels like the world has been conspiring against me TTuTT I've had finals + summer study abroad in Japan + summer classes so it's all just been a mess and I've had very little time to actually write, BUT all my classes are over now and I'm going to the beach for a whole week tomorrow so i plan to write write write and get the next ch up as soon as possible!

On my study abroad I WAS lucky enough to make it Iwami and it was a dream come true I cannot begin to tell you, there are some pics here if you're interested at all :3 (also i deadass broke my foot in Iwami and had to wear a boot for six weeks but that's another story).

ALSO Candice and I be poppin’ big bottles because this the ch that breaks 100k *throws confetti* idk i realized a few days ago that that also means I made yall wait 100K for one single kiss and that made me kinda nervous about it so i hope the kiss
lived up to all of your expectations!!

Additionally, y'all can pry SeiKisu from my cOLD DEAD HANDS.

Literally a special thanks to all of you for being so patient with me, we're getting to the main meat of the fic now and I'm really excited for you guys to read what's coming! Next Chapter: the origin of the infamous drawing Andy and Hal discovered :D

Also irrelevant but who's hype for the starting days movie?? just a few more days til the DVD!! lmao sorry...i feel like i haven't talked to any of you in so long so im just like...HEY GUYS WHAT UP?

Historical Things:
-To all my knowledge no chef actually became violently ill eh heh
-A note on 1910s swimwear: It's pretty much all terrible looking....THIS is kind what i had in mind for Makoto and Haru's swimsuits.
Chapter Summary

“I leave you my portrait so that you will have my presence all the days and nights that I am away from you.” - Frida Kahlo

or

Seijuuro is in over his head, Nagisa's past is revealed, Katsu is verbally abused, Makoto models, and Haru creates another drawing.

Chapter Notes

In an ironic turn of events, the first life claimed by this titanic au is my own.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Haru knelt beside his bed in tears. He pressed his face into the comforter and squeezed his eyes shut, balling his fists around the sheets. His body shook and he stayed there for a long while, slumped over the bed.

Eventually he sat up, shifting slightly, so that he was positioned in front of the remnants of Makoto’s drawing. Slowly, he began to reassemble it, picking apart the pieces and fitting them back into place, so that a broken mosaic of Makoto formed before his eyes.

It took a surprisingly long time, and once he had finished Haru slid back down onto the floor, sitting with his back pressed against the bed. A few minutes later, there was a knock on the door.

“Haru?” Rin’s voice rose anxiously from the hallway. “How bad was it?”

Haru pulled his knees to his chest. “Go away.”

“C’mon, don’t be like that.”

Haru said nothing in response and heard Rin emit an exasperated sigh. There was a pause, and then a small creak as the doorknob turned slowly. Discovering that is was unlocked, Rin pushed the door open.

“I’m just trying to hel-” his eyes fell on Haru, still sitting dejectedly on the floor, “-aw shit.” He crossed the room. “That bad, huh? You can’t sit here, c’mon let me help you.” He took hold of Haru’s arms and began to pull him up, and Haru gave no significant protest until Rin moved towards the bed.

Panic suddenly seized him. “Wait no, stop!” He shoved Rin roughly away, just as he began to sit down. The push had been harder than he’d intended, and Rin fell rather dramatically to the floor, landing flat on his back.
He sat up quickly, offended. “What the hell was that for?”

Heat rose in Haru’s cheeks and he mumbled a weak apology. “Sorry...you were about to sit on it.”

“Sit on what?” Rin stood up, and his gaze fell for the first time on the shredded drawing. “Oh—wow. That’s...that’s really harsh.” Haru settled back at the foot of the bed. After a moment of hesitation, Rin joined him. “Did he go through your things to find that?”

Haru shook his head. “I don’t think so, I left my sketchbook open on the bed.”

“I see.”

Haru wrapped his arms around his knees. “I thought after we arrived and I couldn’t see him anymore...I’d have that at least.”

Rin nodded slowly. “Maybe you could try and tape it back together?”

Haru glared at him.

“Or...or there may be a photographer on board?” Rin suggested. “You never know, I can ask around—although I suppose we’d have to have it developed after we dock.”

Haru’s eyes grew wide. “That would be nice.”

“Okay, I’ll ask around.”

Haru didn’t look at him. “Thank you.”

Rin cleared his throat, and they sat uncomfortably in the silence of two people who hadn’t talked seriously with one another in some time and were trying to figure out how.

When Rin spoke again, his voice was filled with dismay. “What were you thinking, Haru? Why didn’t you come to breakfast? Or lunch? You had to know how much troubled you’d be in.” He drummed his fingers on his knees. “Would you have even come to dinner?”

Haru still didn’t look at him, but answered honestly. “Probably not...and yesterday he wasn’t at breakfast or lunch—neither were you, or Rei or Ai—so I thought maybe it would be alright.”

Rin snorted, “Yesterday was an extremely isolated case, you know that. Katsu was just hungover.” He said it with a smirk, and Haru almost laughed, but instead he bowed his head to hide his face.

“I think I wanted to pretend—just for a little while—that I could choose where I wanted to go and what I wanted to do. Even if it was just small things like where to eat, I wanted to know what it was like to decide those things for myself.”

This seemed to surprise Rin and he sighed heavily, leaning back against the bed and looking up at the ceiling. “I can understand that.” He glanced at Haru out of the corner of his eye. “Is that what this is about then?” He twisted around to point at the drawing above them. “Being able to choose your own...uh...company?”

Haru tensed and leaned away from him. “I’m not trying to make some sudden bid for independence, I’m just...making choices that feel right.” He looked at the drawing. “And he just happens to be a very big part of that.”

“Ah...” Rin scratched his head. “This probably won't surprise you, but I really don't understand it.”
“Don’t say ‘it’.” Haru glared and turned towards him. He had been prepared to argue and defend, but instead he frowned. “What happened to your face?”

Rin flushed in both embarrassment and anger. “Got hit.”

Haru’s mouth fell open. “By who?”

“….Nagisa.” Rin spoke the name through gritted teeth.

Haru closed his mouth and leaned back against the bed, slightly stunned. “Why?”

Rin hesitated, which was already cause for suspicion. “Well—you have to understand—your father had everyone out looking for you, and I remembered Rei saying Makoto’s room was across from his and Ai’s, so I went down to see if that’s where you were. It obviously wasn’t, but while I was knocking he came around the corner—”

Haru frowned. “How long ago was this?”

“Barely ten minutes ago.” Rin didn’t meet his gaze. “And—well I started talking to him…a bit…and I started to tell him, even if he didn’t mean to, how much trouble he had put you in, and—and then he started to cry—”

“You made him cry?” Haru’s voice escalated to a shout in seconds.

“Well no one informed that it was an offense worthy of corporal punishment!” Rin’s voice rose sarcastically. “I didn’t mean to—it surprised me, I really didn’t intend for it to happen. I was just saying things that were true, and then the next moment Nagisa was flying out of the door and punching me in the face.”

Haru crossed his arms and settled back against the bed. “I would have hit you too.”

Rin chuckled and started to say that he would have a much easier time blocking one of Haru’s punches, but considering the look Haru gave him, as well as his friend’s current mood, Rin thought he risked Haru actually hitting him and changed his mind. Instead he rubbed his bruised cheek.

“Damn that cargo-carrying delinquent.”

“What?”

“You seriously don’t know?” Rin’s eyes sparkled with mischief. He leaned in closer and lowered his voice to a whisper. “Well, I doubt he would want me to tell you which is precisely why I’m going to. Do you remember in Japan—”

Haru’s eyes grew wide as he listened. The tale was shocking yet oddly believable, and Haru recalled a few of the details as Rin spoke; something about the missing heir to a shipping empire. For just a moment, Haru forgot all his own troubles. When Rin had finished he leaned back, stunned.

“I remember that, and all the papers said he was presumed dead.” He frowned. “I don’t think even Makoto knows.”

“Well, he’d have to be a talented liar to keep the secret for so long.” Rin stroked his chin and tilted his head to look at him. “Are you feeling any better?”

“Yes…yes I suppose I-” Haru stopped. Rin’s expression was innocent, but Haru shoved him, hard. “You made all that up just now.”
“I assure you I did not.” But the corner of his mouth was pulling upwards, he was trying not to smirk.

Haru crossed his arms and refused to look at him. “Go away.”

“Sure thing.” Rin stood up. “You’ll be at dinner, right?”

“Obviously.”

“Okay.” But he didn’t leave. He walked to the door and then hesitated, oscillated on the carpet, and then turned back around, rubbing his neck. He cleared his throat. “…I know he’s important to you, and you know I want to be supportive—” Haru looked at him skeptically. “…I do, even if I don’t understand, but I’m also afraid he’s going to unintentionally ruin your life.”

Haru met his gaze and spoke with unwavering conviction. “He’s saving my life.”

Rin’s lips tightened and he stared at Haru for a long moment before slowly nodding. “Well… I guess you’d be a better judge of that than me.”

Haru looked away from him. It was hard to admit that Rin was trying, in his own way. “Thank you, by the way,” the words felt strange, “for coming here…I’m grateful.”

Rin’s eyes widened in surprise. “It—it’s no problem.” He shuffled his feet. “I’m going to go put ice on my face.”

That made Haru chuckle, and Rin left without another word, closing the door behind himself. Haru stayed on the floor for several more minutes, surprised at having had a near-pleasant conversation with his once-close friend. Eventually, he stood up and began to get dressed a whole hour earlier than he needed to. Once he was properly adorned, Haru headed down to the ship’s main deck.

It was a chilly night, and the deck was mostly empty as dinner approached for all the classes. Haru walked straight out to the bow, watching as the ship cut through icy waves, charged with a sense of purpose that he personally had never felt. Below him, the ocean churned angrily. Above him, murky clouds rolled across the sky. He couldn’t see a single star.

Haru stood at the ship’s edge and reminded himself that he may be able to see them tomorrow, or perhaps the next day, but he still felt defeated. He thought about the Mariner’s Compass, and although he couldn’t see it, he imagined it guiding him carefully across the earth. He was no sailor, but he hoped it would help him nevertheless.

He recalled the tremor in Makoto’s voice as he admitted that he could not remember the myth his mother used to tell him about the Mariner’s Compass. This gave Haru a sudden idea, and he latched onto it urgently, with immediate devotion; he would compose a new story, one that they could both turn to whenever the other was not there. It would probably be rather unoriginal—he was even less of a storyteller than he was a sailor—but he thought it would be nice to give Makoto something, even as simple as a story. He imagined surprising Makoto with it, and the thought made him smile.

He stayed on the bow until it was time to head to dinner, enjoying the night air and the crisp sound of the waves, and then he turned and walked back inside the ship. Despite his time outside, and despite his every effort to the contrary, Haru entered the dining room feeling wholly miserable. He was right on time and sat with the usual crowd, between Rin and Sophia.

Marie sat on the other side of Sophia in a pale pink dress, which sharply contrasted with Sophia’s dark green frock. She raised an eyebrow and, expressing an amount of concern that was believed by all the adults at the table and none of the children, asked what happened to Rin’s face.
Rin, seeing that Haru was still clearly upset, tried to cheer him up by recounting a highly dramatized version of the events in a hushed whisper. Marie giggled behind her hand and Sophia let out a low chuckle, but Haru only managed a small smile.

Noticing his depressed state, Sophia changed the subject as appetizers were served and inquired further about his mother. Haru appreciated the return to their previous evening’s conversation, and he answered all her questions openly, but remained fairly downtrodden.

Even Marie, after several sharp jabs from Sophia, made an almost genuine effort to converse with him over the main course and asked his opinion on the current climate of the steel industry. Haru answered to the best of his knowledge, although truthfully, it had been a fairly slow pitch. Marie must have assumed—quite correctly, he feared—that most people at the table held a rather low opinion of him, and her question gave him the opportunity to gain some small amount of professional credibility.

Rei and Ai helped in less obvious ways, and made sure every guest was pleased with their food and given swift service. Rei occasionally whispered a prominent name or company in Haru’s ear, both of which Haru was terrible at remembering, and he felt wholly grateful to all of them.

He tried his very best to meet his friends halfway, but their joint efforts were largely in vain. He felt, and looked, perpetually on the verge of tears, no matter the subject or conversation presented. This only upset him further, because after the last few days he had liked to consider himself a changed person; he had believed that he was better, he wanted to be better, and he wanted to appreciate his life, especially now that Makoto was in it. But now that Haru was once again confronted with the overwhelming persistence of his misery for the first time since meeting Makoto, he now not only felt sad, he felt guilty for feeling sad.

Katsu gave no indication that he had noticed a change in his son’s mood, but nevertheless seemed to subtly work against everyone’s collective efforts; he engaged Jacob Astor over dessert, asking him the names and occupations of some of the major players on the West Coast, reiterating loudly that California was his final destination.

While this statement certainly upset Haru, it also served as a rather harsh reminder for someone else at the table; William Stockwell observed their conversation with an ever-sinking heart. He had been noticeably less talkative that evening, and spent the entire meal watching Haru and Sophia. He had analyzed every word, glance, gesture, and smile, and concluded that they were perfectly pleasant towards one another. He looked up at Katsu, seated proudly at the head of the table, his pocket watch pinned faithfully to his side. William was unfamiliar with the comfort of cordial exchanges and polite gestures, but he knew well what it was like to mingle in fire.

He turned back to Sophia and Haru and admitted to himself that there was absolutely nothing brewing between them. Feeling miserable, he exhaled slowly, and let go of that dream; it had only been a surrogate anyway, the unfair byproduct of another, much greater dream.

Once dinner had concluded and the guests were bidding one another goodbye, William pulled Haru aside, out of earshot of the others. William clapped him firmly on the back. “Son, what the hell is going on with you?” The words were harsh, but he gave Haru the most reassuring smile he could muster.

Haru could only gape in response. He had not expected such a straightforward acknowledgment of his unhappiness, especially from someone who was much more stranger than friend. Kindness where one does not expect it can be overwhelming, and William’s warm smile added to the already painful ache in his chest until he could no longer bear it. Thick, heavy tears swelled in Haru’s eyes and then he was off, crying in the middle of the first-class dining room.
William raised both his hands, beginning to panic. "Ah c’mon, don’t-don’t cry please, it’s okay…” He cast a quick glance around them. He was terrible at comforting people when they were upset, which was why he worked so incredibly hard to keep everyone cheerful in the first place. He patted Haru awkwardly on the shoulder. “Listen, I-I’ll keep him distracted for the night, okay? You go and take care of yourself—deal with whatever business you need to.”

Haru sniffled, feeling pathetic. “Really?”

“Of course!” William chuckled and squeezed Haru’s shoulder reassuringly. “Aren’t you too young to be this sad? Just wait ‘til you're old, then you’ll have all sorts of things to be miserable about.”

“Are you sad?”

Haru began to wipe his face and his watery blue eyes pierced the air, cutting straight through William’s bravado. He stopped smiling, feeling like he had been suddenly re-targeted by someone he had known and envied years ago. He examined Haru seriously, deciding him to be neither wickedly calculating, nor cunning in any devious sense, but prone to honest observation, with a deep understanding of people.

“Yes.” He cleared his throat. “I have been for a few years now. But you know, it’s interesting, because even when you’re old, you’re still sad about the same things as when you were young, so I urge you to go take care of them now. Don’t worry about tonight, just go do what you gotta do, I’ll handle the rest.” He grinned widely, and it was the type of genial smile that would have made Haru believe anything he said. “Just act like everything’s normal until we get into the Smoking Lounge. Once he’s gone, you’re free to do as you see fit.”

“Thank you, Mr. Stockwell, I…I really appreciate it.” Haru blinked up at him. “He seems pretty determined this evening though, are you sure you’ll be able to distract him?”

William chuckled heartily. “Perhaps, but I have years of practice on my side.” He bowed and then made a dramatic gesture with his hand, indicating that Haru should go first.

That made Haru smile and he thanked him once more before hurrying off to join the throng of men heading towards the Smoking Lounge. William trailed behind, maintaining a spot at the very back, but pulled Katsu aside just before he crossed through the doors. None of the other gentlemen noticed their disappearance and proceeded into the room without them. The door swung shut, leaving the two of them alone in the hallway.

“What do you want?” Katsu turned to him, his voice dripping with all its usual animosity.

William leaned forward, a loose smile lining his lips. “Well that’s certainly a loaded question. How are you feeling?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Well I was thinking...” His middle and index finger walked a straight line up Katsu’s arm, reaching all the way up to his neck before William broke the trail, throwing the same arm around Katsu’s shoulder. “Since we didn’t make it to the Turkish Baths yesterday, we could venture an excursion this evening.”

“That’s ridiculous, they’re closed.”

William inclined his head. “I’m sure at least one of the stewards would be willing to reopen if supplied with adequate patronage.”
Katsu shrugged him off and reached for the doorknob. “That’s enough. I would greatly prefer the genteel company offered by the Smoking Lounge.”

William frowned, running very low on ideas. He cast around for some other point of persuasion when suddenly the shattered look on Haru’s face burst behind his eyelids and he felt small pricks of anger stinging the back on his neck. He pressed a hand against the door, forcing it shut with a thud.

“Listen Katsu, we both know that every time I suggest a rather poor idea, you’re reluctant at first and then inevitably cave in anyway, so for once why don’t we just get on with it?”

Katsu appeared to be cut from stone, staring blankly at him as if he had been slapped. William removed his hand from the door and jabbed a thumb in the direction of the Smoking Lounge, displaying his innate ability to gall him like none other.

“Or you can go puff cigars with boring people who will clamor around to kiss your ass.”

That returned Katsu from his daze and he raised an eyebrow. "Funny, I thought that was you.”

They stood petrified, as if lightning had struck the boards beneath their feet. William’s lips sagged open. “Did-Did you just…?” They stared at each other, both slack-jawed and gaping, equally shocked, equally jarred.

William burst out laughing.

“That-I didn’t say that.” Katsu’s cheeks grew crimson. The quip had left his lips faster than anything, before he had any time to think or process. “I had too much to drink at dinner, I-I have certainly lost my mind-”

William straightened up, still clutching his stomach, but his laughter had receded into light, rolling chuckles, and then built to a severe, hacking cough. He covered his mouth with a handkerchief for several moments, turning away and allowing the tide of coughs to slowly ebb away.

Katsu stood awkwardly beside him, his callousness melted to an odd sort of lukewarm. He raised a hand halfway to William’s shoulder and then pulled it away.

William turned back to him eventually, pulling down the handkerchief to reveal his still-wide smile. He resumed the conversation as if nothing had happened.

“Well, I can’t say for sure whether or not you’ve lost your mind—that jury had been out for a very long time, but you certainly got me good.” He threw his arm around Katsu’s shoulder, and this time it stayed there. “Hey don’t worry, I probably would have made that joke if you hadn’t. So, whaddaya say?”

Katsu hesitated a moment. Inside the Smoking Lounge he could hear laughter and several voices calling for the two of them.

His gaze slid sideways. “...is it true there’s a steam room?”

William grinned broadly at him, and they proceeded back down the hallway side by side.

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Inside the Smoking Lounge, Haru waited for roughly five minutes. After his father and Mr. Stockwell both failed to enter, he slowly poked his head out into the hallway. Seeing neither of them, he closed the door and waited another ten minutes just to be safe, and then quickly excused himself. Rin tried to protest, but Haru was already gone, the door swinging shut behind him.
He raced down to the third-class barracks. Away from the haze of the Smoking Lounge, Haru felt a great pressure rising in his chest, a powerful emotion swelling inside his heart and tipping over the sides. He stood in front of Makoto’s door and tried to pull himself together, but he didn’t hesitate long.

The door opened after the second knock and he was greeted by Nagisa, who appeared rather weary, considering he had recently punched Rin in the face. Haru, having been prepared to frantically leap into Makoto’s arms, was forced to restrain himself.

Nagisa’s eyes widened and he stared at Haru only briefly before stepping aside and holding the door open, ushering him into the room.

“Mako-chan, it’s for you.”

Makoto sat on the bottom bunk with his shoulders slumped and his head hanging towards the floor, but he looked up as Nagisa spoke.

Makoto and Haru locked eyes for the briefest of moments, and they each realized immediately that the other had been crying. Haru crossed the room and dropped to his knees in front of the bed. He felt Makoto’s arms wind around him and heard the small creak of the door as Nagisa slipped out into the hallway.

Makoto hadn’t changed his clothes and was still damp from the pool. His skin was pale and uncharacteristically chilled, but he wiped at his eyes with one hand while holding Haru with the other.

“Sorry I...I don’t know why I’m crying.”

“It’s okay, Rin told me.” Haru tried to press his forehead against Makoto’s shoulder, but Makoto pulled away from him slightly, looking at his face.

“Haru I’m so sorry, I never wanted to put you in a situation where-” He stopped, his expression growing grave. “Wait—are you supposed to be at dinner? You should go, right now-”

“It’s fine.” Haru’s voice was soft. “Mr. Stockwell is taking care of it.” Makoto appeared unconvincing, and Haru gently smoothed out the lines that had formed across his forehead. “Really, it’s okay this time, I’m not expected anywhere.”

Makoto stared at him for several seconds and then nodded slowly. They stayed there for a moment, and then Makoto drew his arms around Haru’s waist and tugged gently, pulling him off the floor and into the bed. They lay under the covers, close like they had earlier that day.

Makoto started shivering, and Haru stroked his face. “You should change your clothes, you’ll catch a cold.”

Makoto’s arms tightened around him and he spoke beside Haru’s ear in a voice that was both shaking and breathy. “In a minute.”

Haru held Makoto tightly against his chest, trying his best to keep him warm. They lay together for a long time, and it wasn’t until Makoto realized that some dampness had transferred to Haru’s own shirt that he crawled out of bed in search of dry clothes.

Haru lay under the covers with his eyes closed, listening to all the characteristic zips and clinks of clothes being removed and replaced. After a moment, the rustling stopped, and Haru felt the mattress dip as Makoto climbed back into the bed. Haru rubbed a steady rhythm up and down his back, doing
his best to return some of the flush to Makoto’s skin, and Makoto snuggled gratefully against him.

He spoke against Haru’s chest. “How angry was your dad?”

Haru sighed, running his hands through Makoto’s hair. “He...he doesn’t yell, well-he does sometimes I guess, but mostly he just...intimidates. It’s scarier that way, when he’s angry but calm. He said my mom would be disappointed in me, and he said terrible things about you…” Haru’s voice faltered and Makoto squeezed him reassuringly. “Earlier, I felt so miserable. I’m fine now-” he clarified, “-but it made me afraid of what I’ll feel like when I can’t see you anymore. I thought I was getting better, and I wanted to get better, but now I’m scared that I won’t ever be able to make myself happy, or be okay even if I’m on my own.” His hand stopped moving in Makoto’s hair. “I don’t know if it’s possible.”

Makoto’s heart sank. “It is.” He said it with conviction. “It absolutely is.”

They fell silent and Makoto hid his face because he didn’t believe what he had said, even though he knew that it was right. He knew he had to try, even if over the last few hours, he too had wondered how he would ever be happy again. But he sincerely did want Haru to be happy, even if it was without him.

They didn’t speak for a long while, because although they were content for the moment, holding one another in tender reassurance, they questioned their place in eternity.

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Back inside the Smoking Lounge, Rin was sulking. He didn’t feel abandoned exactly; that was a bit too dramatic of a term, but with Haru, Katsu, and Mr. Stockwell all vanished or missing, he felt alone.

Mr. Astor seemed to feel their absence as well and clung to Rin’s side much more than he usually would have. Rin knew that having the richest man aboard the ship hanging by his side was a great opportunity, certainly one that he should take advantage of, but he didn’t feel much like talking business that evening.

Mr. Astor clapped him on the back offered to buy him a glass of the ship’s most expensive bourbon. “Let’s talk over your contracts.” He gave Rin a toothy smile, eager with sunken eyes, and Rin realized that Mr. Astor was wealthy enough to make a few bad deals simply in exchange for company. “Or perhaps you’d like to discuss a bit more...stimulating subjects? I hear your father is recently passed. Usually parents arrange these things, as William and Katsu have done for their children, but I’d be willing to lend you a hand.” He squeezed Rin’s shoulders. “I know we’re well past the days of dowries, but I have the ability to make my daughter very appealing to you.”

Rin almost laughed in his face. All the wealth in the world could not get him engaged to Marie Astor, and he was certain that she felt the same. Although he liked her more each day, it was only in a friendly sense, and he trusted her less with each of their encounters. He stared speechless at Mr. Astor, and wondered how a boar had somehow raised a fox without knowing.

He realized then that this small urge to marry was only a fraction of the pressure placed on Haru at the moment, and the thought was more than enough to make him want to leave.

“My apologies, but I’m feeling a bit tired. I think I’ll retire.” He turned to Ai, who stood a few feet away. He had been listening but pretended he wasn’t. “Let’s leave.”

Ai’s eyes flared in excitement. “Are we going to finish the story?
“Erm, I had thought not.” Rin felt sorry to disappoint him; it was clear Ai had waited eagerly for this all evening, but they were close to finishing Tristan and Isolde and Rin had still not finished rewriting the ending to a happy one. “Maybe we could talk a break from lessons tonight?”

Ai nodded and still looked excited, and Rin felt glad that he was never difficult to please. When he was sure Mr. Astor was not looking, Rin bought them a bottle of the ship’s less expensive bourbon and they went up to his room. They drank and laughed, and put on one of few records Rin owned.

Eventually, Ai fell asleep drooping over the side of the couch with a happy, drunk smiled on his face. Rin covered him with a blanket and then turned to stare at his desk. He honestly felt a bit too intoxicated for the task set before him, but he was determined. He lit a single candle and brought it over the desk, retrieving Tristan and Isolde from where he had hidden it under a stack of contracts.

He looked over what he had written the previous night with a critical eye, crossing many things out and making notes. He scribbled for hours until eventually he fell asleep slumped sideways in his chair. He stayed there until morning, snoring softly as candle wax dripped slowly onto the desk.

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Down in steerage, Kisumi paced anxiously around his room. He had been nervous all afternoon and into the evening, and while it was an emotion he had not felt in a long while, it had returned for him with vengeance. He had been distracted all day; on the way back from dinner—a depressing affair during which he could only pick nauseously at his food—he had bumped into five people and two walls.

Still, as the evening dragged on, his nerves grew slowly into prickles of irritation as no knock echoed against their door. Hayato became increasingly disappointed as his bedtime approached, and Kisumi was on the verge of giving up. While he was certainly not pleased with being stood up, he felt more irritated with Seijuurou's broken promise to Hayato; his brother did not make friends easily, and Kisumi knew Hayato was already deeply attached to the friendly young man, and was just as eager as he himself was to see him again.

Just a half hour before Hayato’s bedtime, the knock finally came. Kisumi decided to be cold to him, but he had never been very well committed to anything before, and his resolve melted when he opened the door.

Seijuurou looked positively exhausted. Dark caverns formed beneath his honeyed eyes, tired and bloodshot, reminding Kisumi of golden rays falling relentlessly across sunbaked desert.

“I’m so sorry.” He leaned against the doorway panting, as if he had run there. “We were short staffed tonight and I had to stay after to help clean up. Did you wait long?”

Kisumi struggled to respond and was saved the trouble by Hayato appearing at his leg, looking shyly upwards. Seijuurou knelt down to speak to him and his voice went soft.

“Sorry I kept you waiting, but I brought a surprise to make up for it.”

He leaned back and reached behind the door, pulling out a small black ball and an adult-sized squash racquet. Hayato’s eyes grew wide like saucers, and Kisumi smiled despite himself.

Playing with a racquet and ball in such a small space was most likely not the greatest idea; they knocked several things off the desk and likely disturbed the neighbors, but Hayato laughed more loudly than had in a long while, and Kisumi would not have dared intervene, even after his brother’s bedtime came and went. Kisumi sat on the bottom bunk while Seijuurou guided Hayato’s hand, showing him how to hold the racquet—in truth, it was comically far too big from him—but he
caught on quickly and was soon able to hit the ball without assistance, even managing a few brief volleys against the wall.

Seijuurou grinned as he watched him, standing proudly with his hands on his hips.

“Tomorrow you can play on a nice big court.” He made eye contact with Kisumi as he said it, to confirm that the plan had not changed.

“That’s right.” Kisumi smiled. “You’ll have to be very nice to Haru tomorrow before you ask him, and make sure you say please and thank you.”

Hayato was pointedly not listening to either of them; he had lost control of the ball and it had rolled under the bed. Kisumi and Seijuurou both moved to retrieve it, kneeling on their hands and knees, their heads and shoulders under the bed. The process took several minutes and it was dark and surprisingly dusty for a brand new ship. Kisumi’s hand found several cobwebs before it finally closed around to the ball. He sneezed, and beside him Seijuurou laughed.

He quickly sat up and felt blood rush to his head. “I got it.” He said it with an air of dizzy triumph, but his voice shrank when he saw Hayato, already fast asleep on the bottom bunk. He sat dejectedly back on his heels, a weak chuckle escaping his lips. “You’ve gotta be kidding me.”

“What?” Seijuurou’s voice came out muffled. For some reason, he was still knelt underneath the bed.

“He fell asleep.”

“Hm, well I guess it’s late.”

Kisumi sat back on his heels and hummed in agreement, surveying Seijuurou’s position. His chest and shoulders filled the whole space, pressed floor to bedframe, with his hindquarters raised comically in the air.

“Hey…are you stuck?”

A solid ten seconds of silence followed this question. When Seijuurou finally answered him his voice was much higher pitched than usual.

“...No.”

“Ah, okay.”

He obstinately remained there for another several minutes. Kisumi would have been happy to help him if he asked, but Seijuurou only struggled in silence, occasional grunting, occasionally wriggling in vain.

Kisumi leaned against the wall and enjoyed the opportunity to unashamedly stare at him, wondering what generous action karma was rewarding him for.

Eventually Seijuurou let out a heavy sigh and lay still. “I don’t want to wake him,” he said quietly.

Kisumi chuckled. “It’s fine, he’s a heavy sleeper.” He stood up and gently lifted Hayato into his arms. The child mumbled a bit but his eyes remained closed, and Kisumi began to slowly sway back and forth, lulling him back to heavy sleep. “Okay, try now,” he whispered.

There was a small scraping and creaking as the bed shifted and Seijuurou finally broke free, his face emerging a very deep shade of red.
Kisumi laid his brother back down and tucked him in for good measure, pulling the blankets up to his chin. When he was finished he held out the squash ball.

“Do you need this back?”

Seijuurou waved a hand. “No it’s fine, we can stand to lose a few.”

“That’s very kind of you.” Kisumi began to set it down on the desk when he noticed a single blue dot printed across the surface of the ball. “What’s this mean?”

Seijuurou grinned at him. “That means it’s for beginners. I’m only sorry we didn’t have any children’s racquets.”

“He seemed to get on just fine without it.” Kisumi smiled at his consideration. “Thank you for playing with him.”

“No problem.” Seijuurou rubbed his neck, looking embarrassed.

Kisumi cleared his throat. “Are you leaving now?”

“I-I wasn’t planning on it, do you want me to leave?”

Kisumi was trying to work out how to answer no without it sounding like he cared either way, when Seijuurou’s stomach suddenly growled, loud and echoing like the cry of some great beast.

“...Are you hungry?”

Kisumi reflected that he had seen a variety of sides of Seijuurou that evening, and at that moment realized that Seijuurou was significantly less cool than he had originally thought. Somehow, Kisumi found it charming.

Seijuurou appeared bashful as he placed one hand on his stomach. “I got off after dinner ended.”

Kisumi turned away from him and began to rummage through his things. “I brought some bread back from dinner. There’s not a lot, but you can have it if you want.”

Seijuurou stepped eagerly forward. “Thank you, I’d really appreciate it.” He hesitated. “You’re sure you don’t want it?”

“Nah, I don’t feel like eating.”

Kisumi passed him the bundle of bread and they stood awkwardly. Seijuurou held the bread with both hands and cast an eye around the room, not sure what to do.

Kisumi cleared his throat and gestured to the top bunk. “We can sit if you’d like.”

“Sure.” Seijuurou answered. “Should I turn off the light?”

“What?” Kisumi’s neck almost snapped as he whipped his head back around to stare at him.

Seijuurou gestured to Hayato. “So he can sleep.”

Kisumi emitted a dizzy little laugh, choppy and high pitched.

“Ah...y-yes of course.”
They climbed up to the top bunk in the dark, sitting cross-legged across from each other. Because it was easy, they talked about their brothers. That said, Kisumi talked the most at first, while Seijuurou listened and ate his pitiful dinner.

Kisumi couldn’t see him very well through the darkness, but it was clear that Seijuurou was not a very pretty eater—when he wasn’t looking, Kisumi brushed his fallen crumbs off the bed. Still, he was clearly hungry, and Kisumi found his lack of manners almost endearing. Once all the bread was gone—including the newest accumulation of crumbs that had fallen between them—Seijuurou talked a lot. He talked about his own brother and his family, but he didn’t monopolize the conversation, and asked Kisumi a number of questions as well. It took a long time, easily another hour, but eventually, because they ran out of other things to discuss, they talked about themselves.

“What would you be if it was all taken care of?”

Seijuurou sat with his back to the wall, his legs dangling freely over the edge of the bed. They had been quiet for several minutes and the question was posed out of the blue.

Kisumi tried desperately to sound interesting. “Well I-I have a job lined up as a firefighter once we land.”

“You told me that already.” He smiled kindly as he said it, and Kisumi only felt a little embarrassed. “I mean if you could be anything, if money or training wasn’t an issue, and you didn’t have to worry about providing for Hayato. What would you wanna do?”

Kisumi could see Seijuurou staring thoughtfully into the darkness, like he was imagining his own future, laying out the groundwork for his three-bedroom house and white picket fence, sketching out the foundation for his own piece of the American Dream.

Kisumi worked hard not to laugh, but a scoff still escaped his lips. He did not believe it, and he had no reason to hope for it, and he had never once delude himself or his brother into thinking it was possible. Seijuurou turned to look at him, his lips curled in a sad smile. He saw Kisumi’s doubt and then began to speak, sharing with him the details of his delicate little dream, fragile like a piece of paper, folded up and sent out like a prayer.

“My brother and I have always really liked to play sports, it’s why I like the job I have now so much. I…I think it would be fun if we could get really good at just one thing, and then were able to play together professionally.” He smiled and his voice shrunk to a whisper, like the words he was speaking were somehow scandalous. “We’d even have our own trading cards, and children would try to collect a pair of the Mikoshiba brothers. We’d be the sponsors for all kinds of products and we’d never have to worry about money ever again.”

He stopped abruptly, and Kisumi stared at him. It was a terribly innocent dream, so simple and honest. It broke Kisumi’s heart.

“I’d be an actor,” Kisumi blurted out. Truthfully he had thought about it at length before, but he still thought it was embarrassing and had never told anyone. “I-I know it’s stupid, and Hollywood doesn’t have much interest in poor immigrants, but I’ve always thought it sounded fun, and I think I’d be good at it.” He shrugged and looked away. “And then like you said, we’d never have to worry about money. I-I’d like Hayato to get a good education.”

Seijuurou didn’t immediately say anything, but he hadn’t laughed either, which seemed like a good sign. He pinched his chin like he was thinking. Eventually he smiled. “Well you definitely have the face for it.”
Kisumi cheeks flared crimson in the darkness. He coughed. “You really think so?”

“Sure.” Seijuurou leaned forward like he was inspecting him. “I can see the headshots already.” He started to pull away again, back to his position against the wall, but then he stopped. “You still have a dust ball in your hair.” He chuckled. “I think that would make a good one, what do you think?”

Kisumi opened his mouth but the words all twisted and collapsed when Seijuurou bent towards him, his hand reaching out, accidentally brushing by his cheek, lifting a piece his hair. Seijuurou had intended for it to be innocent but was stunned by how soft Kisumi’s hair felt between his fingertips, and although he pulled the dust ball free and let it fall forgotten to the ground, he did not take his hand away.

Kisumi swallowed. His main problem was always getting ahead of himself, always charging forward without thinking, always ten steps ahead of the current situation. He lay back on the bed, still propped up on his elbows. Seijuurou did not understand until he saw the way that Kisumi’s eyes glittered through the darkness, like a flare sent out against the midnight sky, his eyes burned as clear as any verbal invitation.

Slow, slow as anything, Seijuurou knelt over him. He didn’t kiss him, but he had started to. It was only half a second, a brief weight pressed to Kisumi’s bottom lip and then he stopped. He told himself that it didn’t count because he had stopped. He hesitated, wavering mere millimeters above Kisumi’s shining face. He felt Kisumi’s breath, sweet and warm blowing across his skin. Seijuurou stayed there for a long time while his thoughts ran too wild for him to catch or pin down, too fast for him to gauge the situation, too quickly for him to decide a course of action. He had already demonstrated the extent of his creative skill, but somehow in this area it was difficult to let himself dream.

Kisumi looked back at him with eyes wide and patient, staring up at him with the longest eyelashes Seijuurou had ever seen. Each time he blinked the ends of those eyelashes curled and kissed the top of his cheeks. His face was shining, more beautiful than any in Hollywood, more stunning than any actress Seijuurou had ever fancied. The thought of Kisumi dressed in sheer and posed like a pin-up girl suddenly burst into his mind, and his heart began to beat like two cymbals jarring away inside his chest. He felt like he could hear them crashing loudly around his ears, and he started to sweat, his nerves making his fingers shake. He had stayed there for too long now, he had made it weird. And Kisumi was still staring at him, watching him with those eyes that flashed like lighthouses, guiding him to shore but warning him of the rocks, warning him to mind the cliffs. He couldn’t move.

Kisumi watched uncertainty flood Seijuurou’s face, watched each conflicting thought roll across his expression like dark clouds. He had assumed that Seijuurou had never kissed a man before, but now he wondered if he had ever kissed anyone at all. The strength of his hesitation seemed to prove it so. Kisumi felt terrible.

“It’s okay.” Kisumi turned his head to the side, looking away from him. “It’s late, I think you should go.” His voice was soft, and he said the last part as a kindness. Though it sounded cold, it was meant to give Seijuurou an easy escape option, so he didn’t have to make up a reason to leave.

“Ohay.” Seijuurou pulled away from him and Kisumi sat up properly. “I-I think so too.”

He quickly began to climb back down to the floor. His brain felt broken; the million thoughts raging inside his head moments ago had faded to a single deprecating little voice whispering you messed up. He hesitated in front of the door. He wanted to say that he was sorry, that Kisumi was beautiful, that he would go back to his room and think about this all night long. He already felt regret sinking into his skin like hooks, already wanted another chance.
But Kisumi hadn’t moved from the bed. He watched Seijuurou from across the room, and the embers in his brilliant eyes sputtered and went out. They grew cold and smoky, and Seijuurou couldn’t bring himself to say anything important or anything that he needed to.

“Will you still come by the Squash Court tomorrow?”

Kisumi hesitated for just a moment longer than normal.

“If we can, I know Hayato really has his heart set on it.”

Seijuurou pulled the door open just a little, and a thin strip of light from the hallway ran across the floor. “Okay, I’ll see you tomorrow then.”

“Bye.”

Seijuurou thought about saying something charming, like a soft goodnight or sweet dreams, but the drained look on Kisumi’s face killed his courage. Although he wanted to flee as far away from the room as possible, he waited out in the hallways with his fingers on the door handle, making sure it closed as quietly as possible so as to not wake Hayato.

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Rei walked back to his room with a heavy weight hanging around his shoulders. He hadn’t exactly been dismissed for the evening, but with Katsu, Haru, and Rin all occupied, he felt it safe to assume he would not be needed, and he was looking forward to turning in early.

He passed by Nagisa's door without knocking. He didn’t feel angry, and he did want to see Nagisa, but he felt that he no longer knew how to behave around him, and he couldn't see what good it would do him to fall any further, if Nagisa’s pessimistic advice to Makoto earlier had been a meant for him as well. His determination to spend the night in pensive solitude aside, he had by now learned of Nagisa’s fondness for peering through peepholes, and he wasn’t wholly surprised when, ten minutes later, there was a knock on his door.

Rei had just finished changing out of his uniform. He gazed at the door with mixed emotions and took his time answering, gathering his courage.

Nagisa stood in the doorway, shuffling his feet and looking at the floor. He held a pack of playing cards in his hands and fiddled with them nervously.

“H-Hi,” he stammered. “I was wondering if you wanted to play cards? I can’t find Niall or Ethan, but I thought maybe just you and I could play?” He had, in fact, not been spying on Rei through the peephole—his own room was occupied after all—and happened to catch the butler simply by chance.

Rei gazed evenly at him, and while his expression was not cold, it lacked its usual affection. His voice was steady. “I’m sorry Nagisa-kun, but I don't really feel up to it tonight.”

Nagisa seemed to visibly deflate. “Oh-okay. Another time then…” But he didn’t turn away. “Rei-chan, I’m sorry about earlier. What I said when Mako-chan was upset. I...I could have picked a better time to tell you.” He bit his lip. “But I was hoping we could still spend time together?”

Rei stared at him, feeling oddly numb. He stepped to the side and held the door open.

Nagisa hurried inside. Though relieved, he felt alarmed by Rei’s apathy. He fixed his mouth into a wide grin, trying to make up for the sudden rift between them.
“I was thinking we could play poker, but with an extra component.”

His voice was bubbly, but Rei frowned at him, looking suspicious. Nagisa climbed up to Rei’s top bunk without invitation, and Rei hesitated for a moment before following him up. They sat facing each other, though they weren’t quite touching.

Nagisa began to shuffle. “The rules are normal, but every time one of us loses, the winner gets to ask any question he wants, and the loser has to answer honestly.”

Nagisa watched Rei’s eyebrows arch in surprise; the butler honestly felt relieved, being vaguely aware of other, less virtuous ways of playing poker.

“That sounds...interesting,” he admitted.

Nagisa smiled and dealt the cards. Although he was not without his own motives, he was glad Rei at least seemed receptive to the game. Unfortunately for Nagisa, and possibly as punishment for his scheming, Rei won the first five hands. Rei, apparently seeking retribution, did not go easy on him.

After the first round, Rei gazed at him steadily. “How long has it been since you’ve seen your family?” He didn't blink as he asked the question and appeared entirely unapologetic for broaching the subject. Nagisa gaped at him and wondered if Rei had always had a minor sadistic streak, or if it was Nagisa himself who had created it.

He looked down at the bed and began to resshuffle. “Seven years.”

They hadn’t discussed Nagisa’s family since the night he had admitted that he had run away, and the memory of his own tearful confession was embarrassing to recall. He prayed that Rei would not ask him why. At the end of the next round, Rei turned his wrist to reveal a pair of Queens.

“Do you have any siblings?”

Nagisa pulled the cards from his hands rather forcefully. "Yes."

He spent a long time shuffling before the third round, hoping to sway his luck, but it was no use. This time, Rei promptly handed back the cards before Nagisa could reach for them.

“Brothers?”

Nagisa swallowed. “Sisters.”

With the fourth round won, Rei finally began to proceed with some caution, speaking softly with his eyes downcast.

“Do you miss them?”

Nagisa flinched visibly at the question, his face clouding with both betrayal and disbelief.

Rei swallowed, and for the first time he felt guilty for prying. "N-nevermind you don't have to answer that, I'll ask-"

"Yes."

Nagisa squeezed the cards in his hands, so hard that they bent and he had a hard time shuffling them. He was trying not to get angry, since he knew the sway of the cards was not Rei's fault. He also knew that, if luck had swung the other way, he wouldn't have gone easy on the butler.
Rei began to feel very ashamed and found himself genuinely hoping that he would lose. However, just as wishing for victory does not yield success, wishing for defeat does nothing to ensure its occurrence; Rei won for the fifth time, and Nagisa braced himself.

Rei thought quickly, and then changed course.

“Your family is wealthy, aren’t they?”

Nagisa’s mouth fell open in surprise, and several seconds of silence slipped between them. When he did speak, the words were drenched in disbelief.

“How the hell could you know that?”

Rei smiled at him for the first time since he’d entered the room. “Win a round and I’ll tell you.”

That made Nagisa smirk, and his spirit felt slightly renewed. He had to resist the urge to shout when he won the next round, and threw down three tens in triumph. He scrutinized Rei, wanting to finally proceed with his original scheme, but newly curious about the source of the butler’s knowledge. Not knowing when he would win again, Nagisa chose the latter.

"How did you know?"

Rei pointed at Nagisa’s collar bone. “The tie.”

Nagisa blinked. Tonight he wore a simple gray t-shirt, but he was suddenly reminded of the evening he had spent in the first-class smoking lounge.

“You wouldn’t have known how to tie it yourself otherwise—most people can’t unless they’ve been trained. Although I suppose that could have been a faulty assumption since Haru isn’t very good at it, but still, it was a good hint.” He paused, and then continued more carefully. “I also thought your last name sounded familiar, 'Hazuki’ … they’re a shipping family that owns a large amount of land on the north-western coast of Japan, right? They primarily work in importing and exporting?”

Nagisa's eyes widened and his lips grew very thin.

“I wasn’t sure it was the same, and I doubt Haru recognized it, but I think Rin might know.”

“Well that’s just great.” Nagisa finally spoke, his words sharp as razors. He began to shuffle once more, grinding his teeth. “Mr. Steel Empire Prince Heir Dickbag knows all my business...perfect! And the Matsuokas were always looking down on us-”

Rei leaned forward with interest. “So you knew who Haru and Rin were before-?”

“Well I wouldn’t say I knew them, just recognized their names and remembered some stuff. It’s obviously been a while.” He dealt the cards roughly, more like randomly throwing them than dealing. “But that stone-faced Nanase, the one you work for, I remember him just from stories. ‘The Hang Man’—that’s what my dad used to call him, he was thrilled when their family moved to Europe, and he’d be pissed as hell if they ever came back.”

That made Rei chuckle loudly for several moments. “Believe it or not, Europe is where they found me,” he said, “Rin’s father was the one who primarily dealt in steel, him and Katsu both, actually, but I think Rin is trying to forge his own path now that his father has passed.”

Nagisa paused, feeling as though several pieces of information had suddenly clicked into place. “I see…” He stared down at his cards without really seeing them.
“I won't tell anyone,” Rei offered. “I don’t know if you were worried about that or not.”

Nagisa looked up at him, his eyes wide and honest. “Thank you.”

They gazed at one another rather shyly, each of them having surprised the other. Eventually Nagisa looked away and a soft blush crept into his cheeks. “Rei-chan, I think you’re trying to distract me.”

Rei cleared his throat with a small cough. “My apologies.”

Nagisa smiled, glad that Rei seemed to have warmed up to him again. They played another round in silence, but it was a content silence, outlined in warmth. Nagisa won the next hand, and that suited his intentions perfectly. He fixed Rei with a hooded gaze, and Rei squirmed beneath the look.

“What would you like to ask me?” He barely got the question out before Nagisa moved.

The cards scattered across the bed and several spilled onto the floor as he slid into Rei’s lap. He placed a hand on each of Rei’s cheeks and kissed him hard, probing his lips and then slipping his tongue inside Rei’s mouth.

They had never kissed like that before, and Rei stiffened at first, but just as Nagisa contemplated pulling away and re-assessing, Rei wound his arms around him. Nagisa considered his options and tried to take it more slowly. Rei wasn’t a bad kisser necessarily, but it was fairly clear that he had no idea what he was doing. One of Rei’s hands rested on his knee, and it gently rubbed back and forth, a kneading sort of motion, and Nagisa felt sure it would eventually slide up his thigh and hold him earnestly at the apex of his legs, but it never did. Nagisa pulled back slightly and spoke in a breathy, wet whisper beside Rei’s ear.

"Is this okay?"

Rei’s lips were flushed and glossy, and he nodded only once. He held Nagisa tightly, not willing to let him move from his position on his lap, but he looked worriedly around at the scattered cards. “It’s going to be difficult to play like this.” He murmured.

To hell with the cards, Nagisa wanted to say, but he knew that was more than a little crass. Instead he gathered as many cards as he could from the bed and shuffled them quickly. He held out the deck.

“New rules: whoever pulls the highest card gets to ask a question.”

Rei’s hand hesitated above the deck. “Can I assume that all of your question will be...like this?”

Nagisa smirked. “Try not to lose on purpose.”

His scheming adequately rewarded, Nagisa pulled the two of diamonds and felt more than a little disappointed when Rei won. Nagisa took their cards and placed them on the bottom of the pile. He was worried that Rei would ruin the mood by asking more well-intended questions about his family, but instead Rei just looked at him, looked sad.

“I’m going to miss you.”

Nagisa’s heart felt like it was trying to soar, wanted so badly to break into the sky, but it was held down by some unknown shackle—probably fear. Like a great bird restrained by jesses, his heart dropped back down and landed in his stomach. He swallowed and began to fidget with the cards, but Rei gently took them from him and held his hand.

“That’s not a question Rei-chan.”
“Then...are you going to miss me?”

Nagisa pressed head against Rei’s shoulder and squeezed his eyes shut.

“Yes.”

Nagisa didn’t move from his position while Rei drew a new card and then handed him the pile.

Nagisa’s new card was far higher, and from his position with his head resting on Rei’s shoulder, he leaned forward and began to kiss his neck. Rei shuddered as Nagisa laid him down, freeing his hands and sliding them under Rei’s shirt, groping his chest and back.

“Is this okay?”

"I-I-" Rei's voice caught in his throat, coming out in wheezes and terrible gasps. He seemed hypersensitive to Nagisa’s fingers; each touch made him jerk and twitch, like he wasn't used to people touching him—or not used to touching himself. Nagisa had just begun to pull his hands away when Rei finally answered him in a strained whisper. “No….” and then again, just a hair louder. “No.”

Nagisa nodded wordlessly and set Rei's clothes back in order and then lay down beside him, holding his hand. Rei turned his head away, determined to hide his face, but Nagisa could see the thin, wet trail of tears that ran down his cheek and jaw.

Nagisa pressed his face into Rei’s shoulder. “I’m so sorry Rei-chan.”

Rei didn't move for a moment, and then slowly turned to look at him. “Can we play one more time?”

Nagisa was surprised but nodded immediately, happy to grant Rei nearly any wish at that moment. The cards had been easily forgotten after the last hand, and Nagisa again gathered several of them in a small pile. He drew first and pulled the King. He was glad, because he wanted to ask if Rei hated him now. But Rei drew next, and pulled the Ace.

Rei looked at him, his eyes terrified but honest. “Is it okay...if that’s never okay?”

Nagisa blinked several times. He understood. “Yeah-yeah of course it is, Rei-chan.” Nagisa brought his hands to Rei’s cheeks. He pushed the hair out of his face and wiped his eyes. “Really, it’s okay.” He didn’t know what else he could say, but he wanted it to be better. Tears slid down Rei’s cheeks in small currents, curving their way around Nagisa’s fingertips.

“Aren’t you angry?”

Nagisa stared at him. “Of course not! Why would I be?”

“Because I...I misled you.” Rei gulped in air and his speech became frantic. "I knew what you wanted and I knew I could never and I still—I tried so hard to get you to love me.” He inhaled, and his voice broke apart in one small sigh. "I'm still trying."

Nagisa swallowed hard. He did not address the second part of Rei’s statement because he sincerely did not know if he could.

“I-I mean, I did want that.” He admitted. “You’re very handsome, I would never lie about that. But I’m fine Rei-chan. Really, it’s fine. You make me laugh, and you’re fun to be around, and-and you make me feel better about myself and you treat me well...” Nagisa flushed deeply, but he knew that while these things were hard for him to say, Rei deserved to hear them. "Listen to me very carefully,
Rei-chan, you have not disappointed me. I'm sorry if I made you feel like that was the only reason I was spending time with you."

Rei nodded slowly, listening carefully. When Nagisa finished, Rei swallowed hard and looked away from him. “I can’t explain why…”

“You don’t have to,” Nagisa said, “I can’t explain it either, why I am... the way that I am—I’ve never once looked at a girl, not once if my whole life. It’s the just way people are; we're all different, and I couldn't tell you why. But I'll tell you what I do know.” He propped up on his elbows and looked Rei straight in the eye. "Rei-chan, I have been a lot of places and I’ve seen a lot of things. I have met a lot of people who like a lot of things. Some are so terrible it makes me sick to even think about them, some are so awful and dangerous and harmful to others. If people can exist who like those types of things, Rei-chan, the way you feel seems like the most normal thing in the world to me."

Rei stared at him in response, his eyes wide with wonder, with gratitude.

"So don't be sad, okay?” Nagisa grinned at him. “Let's go to bed.” It was an abrupt change to his evening’s plan, but Nagisa welcomed it and quickly climbed back down the ladder and turned off the light. It wasn’t until he laid back down beside Rei that he realized his mistake.

“Unless you want to be alone, that is?”

Rei’s reaction was immediate.

“No-no please stay.” Rei blushed and his eyes slid sideways. “I want you here.”

He leaned towards Nagisa, placing a gentle hand on his cheek. He pulled him into a kiss, not quite as wild as earlier, but still deep, still undeniably epic, and it left Nagisa spinning.

Rei pulled away, looking embarrassed, and then shrugged an explanation.

"I do like kissing you and-and stuff..."

Nagisa wrapped his arms around Rei’s waist and nodded against his chest. "Okay, I’ll just be careful from now on, and tell me if something is ever wrong or too much, okay?"

“Okay.” Rei held him in return, burying his face in Nagisa’s hair. “Thank you.”

He felt that those two words did not do justice to the emotion roaring through his chest, but after the night he had experienced and the day he had endured, it was all he had left to offer.

They did not fall asleep for a long time after that, and spent the time holding each other and whispering soft things and sighing; sometimes sighs of tiredness, more often than not deep sighs of affection, and occasionally sharp, bitter sighs of dread—dread for the day that they finally docked.

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Haru led the way up to the first-class barracks, still slightly shaken by the evening’s abrupt turn of events, but he felt better with Makoto by his side; after he had confessed the fate of the drawing, Makoto had suddenly sat up and insisted that he draw another one. They walked closer together than they should have, with the backs of their hands brushing lightly against each other, but they met no one on the way up to Haru’s room.

Haru closed the door behind them. Almost immediately, the comfortable silence that had led them
there grew into a quiet shyness. They had a hard time looking at each other, and although Haru knew they had come up here for a reason, he found himself unable to move. He stared at the floor for several seconds and then felt the warm pressure of Makoto’s hand on his waist. He raised his head and saw Makoto smiling timidly down at him. He raised a hand to Haru’s face, and Haru leaned in towards him, but then Makoto’s eyes fixed on a spot over Haru’s shoulder and a shadow crossed his face.

Haru turned and his gaze fell once more on the shredded drawing. He opened his mouth, but he wasn’t quite sure what to say. Makoto approached the bed and peered over the ruined image of himself standing on the deck, looking out at the Atlantic.

He stared at it for a moment and then took Haru’s hand.

“I’m sorry.”

Haru shrugged. “It’s not your fault.”

“Still…” Makoto picked up one of the fragments. “This is a really awful thing to do.” He looked down at the drawing for a moment longer and then suddenly smiled. “We’ve come a long way since then though, did you ever think it was possible?”

They were still standing, but Haru leaned his head against Makoto’s shoulder. “At the time I didn’t, at the time...well I couldn’t imagine anything good ever happening to me,” Haru reached out and took his hand. “But it doesn’t seem so crazy now.”

Makoto shifted, Haru thought to rest his head on Haru’s own, but instead he turned and placed a soft kiss just above Haru’s ear. He gestured around the room.

“So where should we start?”

Haru cheeks had flushed crimson, and he had a hard time speaking.

“Um-in the armchair maybe?”

Despite their mutual desire and dedication to producing a quality drawing, the process did not go well for either of them. Haru couldn’t decide where or how to position Makoto, who appeared uncomfortable nearly everywhere. Makoto sat very stiffly in the armchair, and Haru had a difficult time capturing the angle of his legs. They next tried with Makoto at the desk, gazing seriously at several blank documents, but Makoto’s neck soon ached from craning downward, and the area was awkwardly lit. Finally, they tried by the window; Makoto pulled the curtain back with one hand, peering blankly out into the darkness. Haru sat on the bed with his legs crossed and sketched a few noncommittal lines. He tapped his pencil against the paper and eventually sighed. He wanted it to be a good drawing, one that would make him happy when he felt alone, a drawing that would move and amaze, even after he and Makoto were gone. But what he had in front of him was neither moving nor amazing, and at the moment it only made him feel slightly irritated. To a certain extent he knew that you could not rush these things, but he also knew that they did not have a lot of time. He set the sketchbook aside and flopped back onto the bed, staring at the ceiling.

“We can take a break now, this isn’t going the way I expected.”

Makoto moved to sit beside him. “Sorry, I know I’m not very good at this.”

Haru rolled his head to the side so that he could see Makoto’s face. “It’s not your fault.” He reached out his hand and without a word, tugged slightly on Makoto’s sleeve.
Makoto met his gaze and his eyes grew wide in understanding. He shifted closer to Haru, so that he was bending down to look at him. He hesitated for a moment, until Haru nodded in affirmation, and then he leaned closer, making sure he did not crush Haru in the process, before softly kissing him. Haru brought his hands to Makoto’s face and held him there, keeping his lips pressed heavily against Haru’s own, and all the pain and frustration of the day faded away, because he was kissing Makoto for the second time that day, and he still had a hard time believing it.

Makoto pulled away from him slightly and smiled, really smiled, big and goofy, showing all his perfect teeth. His breath rolled across Haru’s lips, sending a thrill of electricity across his skin. Makoto’s chest expanded whenever he breathed in, and each time Haru felt the pleasant pressure of Makoto’s weight on top of him. It felt like a promise of protection, pushing down against him and making him feel safely held, guarded by the strong bars of Makoto’s arms. Haru watched him thinking, watched as thoughts and questions formed behind his eyes, the type that he knew Makoto would never voice.

Haru tipped his head upward and kissed him once more, harder this time, holding them together because air was only a nuisance, breathing felt unnecessary. He balled his fists around Makoto’s shirt almost roughly in order to tell him that it was fine. Makoto’s hand hesitated above him for a moment, and he ultimately only had the nerve to rest it on Haru’s waist. He held him hard though, like he was afraid Haru would disappear beneath him. In a few days Haru supposed it would, but for now they were timeless; it was the healing sort of kiss, and brave, like it was willing to challenge eternity.

Haru had just begun to feel the warm sensation of fingers pressed against his stomach, had just begun to feel the flick of a tongue against his own, when the sound of heavy footsteps rose out in the hallway.

They both froze, holding their breath as a pair of terrifyingly familiar voices met their ears. One was cheerful, the other darkly cynical.

Haru’s face drained of all color. “You have to hide.”

They scrambled out of bed and Haru gazed frantically around the room; Makoto’s stature ruled out most tiny hiding places and Haru crossed them each off mentally until the only possible option burst into his mind. He wordlessly tugged on Makoto’s hand, gesturing towards a large armoire in the corner. He was grateful that Makoto was endlessly good natured and gave no complaints about being stuffed tightly among the hanging shirts and ties. Haru shut him in and hastily turned off the light before diving back into bed and pulling the comforter up to his chin. Holding his breath, he waited and listened.

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“Of course they would want to take it!”

“Well clearly I hadn’t the faintest idea, it would have been pertinent for you to inform me.”

“Pardon me, but I assumed you knew that the Turkish Baths were just that, baths! Of course they won’t let you keep that pinned against your chest.”

They bickered as they passed by Haru’s door, stopping only one room down. Haru heard his father begin to fiddle with his keys.

“And they expect me to just hand it over?”

“They’ll obviously keep it safe, this is an elite establishment.”
“I am, understandably, not willing to take that risk.”

Mr. Stockwell let out a pained sigh. “We’ll have to pay them extra now, I hope you realize that. It was difficult just getting them to reopen after hours—and then you had to storm out. We’re looking at quite a hefty sum.”

“We? I was under the impression you were treating m-what are you doing? You’re certainly not coming in.”

The door was pulled shut with a thud and Mr. Stockwell’s voice continued to build in the hallway, emitting a long string of complaints.

Through the door that connected their two rooms, Haru heard his father’s heavy footfalls in the adjoining bedroom. Listening carefully, he heard the creak of the safe door being pulled open and then quickly closed.

Mr. Stockwell greeted Haru’s father enthusiastically when he returned and their footsteps receded together back down the hallway, accompanied by a brisk dialogue of humor and bickering. Haru was surprised that it was—though the thought made him uncomfortable—entertaining to listen to them; it was almost, but only almost, endearing. A single thought, small and fickle, rose in his mind like a fragile bubble rising to the surface of a pond. He considered it briefly, watched it floating in the water, examined it from all angles before he quickly shot the thought back down and the bubble popped, leaving the pond smooth and clear like it had never existed at all. He snorted, dark and condescending, directed at himself. No, he thought, it was impossible; his father did not feel.

He waited until he could no longer hear their footsteps and then leapt out of bed, hurrying over to turn on the light. He wrenched open the door to the armoire and there was something about Makoto, looking relieved but alarmed, stuffed among the shirts and ties, that made him laugh. He took Makoto’s hands and helped him climb out of the armoire, dislodging several shirts in the process. His hair was slightly mussed, and Haru knew it had nothing to do with his time spent in the dresser.

“Everything should be fine now. Sorry...I wasn’t expecting that.” He raised a hand and gently began to smooth down Makoto’s hair. “Any of that...”

Makoto blush deeply and then looked at the ground, falling uncharacteristically quiet. Haru watched him, and then without meaning to let out a short, emphatic sort of sigh.

Makoto looked up at him.

“What’s wrong?”

Haru turned red and finally pulled his hand away. “Oh n-nothing, you’re just...very handsome.”

Haru’s mouth snapped shut the moment he finished speaking and his eyes grew wide, stunned by the directness of his own worlds, but Makoto’s lips parted slightly and he appeared the most surprised out of either of them.

“Am I really?”

The impossible question left his lips and fell into the room, hogging all the spaces, hanging oppressively in the silence. Haru could neither breathe nor speak; he felt like both laughing and crying because he could tell from the look on Makoto’s face that the question was genuine. Even worse, Haru now had to find a way to answer him.

He stepped forward, slowly winding his arms around Makoto’s neck. He rested his head on
Makoto’s shoulder, because it was too hard to look into his face which was simply that handsome. It was the type of handsome that made him weak, the kind of beautiful that created an ache in his chest so painful that he had to shy away.

“That’s part of the reason I wanted to draw you the first moment I saw you, but that was from so far away.” Haru lips brushed the side of Makoto’s neck as he spoke. “I never dreamed I would be able to touch you, or hold you, or kiss you. Sometime when we’re together I…I lose my composure and I think that’s why.” He blushed and his eyes slid sideways. “I-I’ve never…”

He stopped there, and let the silence speak for him.

Makoto’s hand pressed against his lower back became more firm, and Haru knew he understood. “It’s all new to me.” Makoto looked him in the eyes. “I’m so worried about doing something wrong.”

“It’s new to me too.” Haru took a deep breath and forced himself to step back. He smiled, “But we have time.” Not a lot, he knew, but maybe just enough. “Right now, I have an idea.”

He took Makoto’s hand and led him to the opposite side of the room, turning on more lamps as he went. He stopped in front of the door that adjoined with his room with his father's. It had been locked since they boarded the ship, but Haru thought it may be open since his father must have used it to cross into his bedroom earlier that day. He remembered climbing the stairs to find his door hanging open, and the thought of his father coming through the adjoining door and then intentionally opening the front door just to scare him suddenly seemed absurd and almost comical.

Although he was certain this was how his father entered his room, the adjoining door was firmly locked once more, and Haru rattled the doorknob several times in vain. He blew air out his nose, frustrated at being thwarted again.

“Do you need to get in there?” Makoto stood just behind him, staring at the floor like he was ashamed.

Haru leaned back in surprise. “Can you?”

Makoto knelt down in front of the lock, inspecting it. “I think so, Nagisa taught me how.” He peered up at Haru out of the corner of his eye and, seeing that Haru was in no way about to criticize or admonish him, let himself smile a little. “I don’t like it, but it has come in handy before.” He turned back to the lock. “Hmm, you probably don’t have hair barrettes, but do you have something small and narrow? It doesn’t have to be sharp.”

Haru thought for a moment and then began to rummage through his desk. He returned to Makoto’s side a moment later carrying a silver letter opener, inlaid with pearls. He had received it as a present from his father on his tenth birthday and had never used for anything before, especially not opening letters. Makoto’s eyes bulged when he saw it, and while he worked he seemed just as concerned with not damaging the letter opener as he did with unlocking the door.

It took several minutes, but Haru was fascinated by the entire process and asked Makoto many questions, which he answered patiently and in detail. Eventually the lock clicked open, and Haru kissed Makoto enthusiastically on the cheek before leading him through into his father’s bedroom.

It was almost a perfect copy of Haru’s own room, but with several telling differences; it was certainly messier, and dirty clothes and empty liquor bottles were strewn across the floor. It was very dark, but the curtains were pulled back and they could see the little lights in the night sky through the window. A large safe sat at the back of the room and it was lit in an odd way that seemed both hooded in
shadows and illuminated by moonlight, making it look much smaller than it truly was. The safe was dark and smooth, with the silvery dial set directly in the center, as big around as a fist. It was the same as the one that sat in the corner of Haru’s room, though of course he had nothing to put in it.

Beside him, Makoto stared at the safe in dismay. “I can’t do that.”

Haru chuckled and squeezed his hand. “It’s okay, I think I’ve got this one.”

He crouched down and almost immediately realized that he had a problem: the dial was only numbered to 60, which eliminated the combinations that aligned with both his mother’s birth and his parents’ anniversary. He had learned over the years that these were the two combinations his father used frequently, and their large family safe was numbered right up to 99 so that no dates were left out. He tried a few combinations with no real confidence, and eventually let out a heavy sigh.

Makoto watched him patiently, eventually offering his assistance once more. “If you want I can go get Nagisa? I’m not sure how much he knows about this type of thing, but he may be able to help.”

“Let me try a few more first,” Haru sighed. “We may get there though.” He sat down properly on the floor, assuming he was going to be there for a while, and tried to think. He felt certain that the safe’s numbering must have alarmed his father as well, and he wondered what his father turned to whenever he was opposed. Katsu Nanase was challenged so rarely after all, and the occurrence was hard to imagine until recently. Haru stared at the safe and the bubble rose again, this time larger, so solid yet so hard to trust, and he peered over the edge of the pond, looking down into the clear water, into the place of memories, into the history that he had been a part of but did not know. He remembered the sound of bickering in the hallway and recalled the fondness in William Stockwell’s voice two mornings before: December 31st, 1899 was the day I met your father. But that didn’t work either, the year was still too high. Haru blinked and raised his hand. His fingers turned startlingly white as they crossed into the moonlight. While everyone else was gathering in the great hall to watch the clock tick to a new century, we were sneaking up the steps to the library.

The dial spun smoothly beneath his fingers, silent as he set it to the number 1. He turned it in large circles, stopping and starting again on the same number, spinning the dial round and round in a pattern, always pulling away, always returning, resting finally on the number 0. All things considered it was a relatively simple combination, 1-1-0.

There was a brief moment of silence, a small flutter of reticence, and then the safe creaked open. He heard Makoto’s small intake of breath behind him, and Haru’s hand disappeared inside, reemerging a moment later with the pocket watch clutched tightly in his fist. The long chain trailed behind, glittering in the moonlight. Haru, despite years of insistence that he did not care what was inside it, felt momentarily breathless. The watch wasn’t as heavy as he had anticipated, and he was struck with an uncharacteristic amount of curiosity, but then he shook his head slightly, and passed it over to Makoto.

Makoto blinked up at him, and feeling a sudden warm rush of affection, he realized that Makoto had no idea what was going on. He was not a part of their cold, clandestine world, and was unfamiliar with the gossip, mystery, and intrigue surrounding the small object he now held in his hands.

Somehow, Haru found it endearing and gently kissed him on the cheek once more. “Happy New Year.” He stood up. “Let’s go back.”

Makoto nodded slowly, and Haru led the way back into his bedroom. His sketchbook had fallen to the floor during their brief engagement in the bed and Haru picked it up quickly, suddenly very motivated. He moved around the room, getting things ready; he turned off the main lights but switched on the electric fireplace, positioning an armchair for himself adjacent to it.
Makoto waited patiently, holding the watch like it was a fragile egg, cradled in both his hands. Haru took him gently by the arm, standing him at an angle beside the fireplace. He smoothed out Makoto’s hair and readjusted his shirt, positioning his arms by his sides. The firelight kindled in his eyes, igniting them a brilliant type of golden-green. All the lines of his face were cut with strong shadows and angles, but he looked nervous again, now that they had returned to drawing.

“You look great, very handsome.” Haru encouraged. He allowed a small blush to creep into his cheeks. “But then, you’re always handsome.”

The word still seemed foreign to Makoto and he blushed brilliantly, his eyes wide and staring in a tragic sort of stunned surprise.

Haru felt an eruption of affection in his heart and reached up to touch that face that was so beautiful, so kind. He stood on his tiptoes and leaned forward. Makoto’s lips were warm, and heat from the fireplace crept up Haru’s back, seizing his body. He slipped his tongue across the barrier of his own lips and felt Makoto caress it with his own.

It took every ounce of his will to not knock the watch to the floor and pull Makoto away from the fireplace and back onto the bed, but he felt the cold pressure of watch pressed between his side and Makoto’s hand, where Makoto was still valiantly trying to hold him despite it, and he pulled back.

His face must have shown how deeply he regretted it, and how much turmoil it had caused him, because Makoto didn’t look hurt; he simply tucked a hair behind Haru’s ear and smiled.

“Drawing?”

Haru let out a shaky breath and took a step back. “Thank you.”

He returned to the armchair once more, rechecking its angle in front of the fireplace, and tried to summon the necessary composure. He took a deep breath and forced his eyelids shut. When he opened them again, he tried to look at Makoto through his Artist Eyes, working very hard to focus on the angle of his limbs and the way the shadows fell over his face, instead of the way his lips curled in two great waves, wet and shining like the sea.

“Okay, that looks great.” He cleared his throat and turned to a new page in his sketch book. “Now just flip the watch open, and I’ll draw you looking down at it.”

Quickly, without any ceremony or hesitation, Makoto did as he was told. Haru watched him intently, trying to gauge his reaction, but Makoto’s expression sank into something Haru had not expected; he looked upset.

Makoto tilted his head towards Haru and his eyebrows knit together. “Haru...I don’t think—”

“Don’t show me.” Haru looked pointedly at the carpet as Makoto began to turn the watch towards him, “I...I just want you to know.”

“Haru I really don’t think it is what you think it is. I...I don’t think I should be touching it.”

The strain in Makoto’s voice cut through Haru’s determination and he very slowly lifted his head.

The silence that followed was absolutely consuming. Haru felt all the air left his lungs in one great sweep.

The photo had been fitted very delicately, a perfect circle cut around her face, adorned with Pacific eyes and a soft smile. Haru remembered the day it had been taken, less than a month before his mother had gotten sick. His father had caught wind of new experiments with color photography at a
small studio in London and they had all gotten portraits done. Haru had only seen this photograph in its finished form once. The final prints had arrived in a thick envelope the morning after his mother’s funeral; they had taken so long to develop, and his mother’s health had deteriorated so suddenly, that they forgot the photographs had been ordered in the first place.

His father had disappeared after the funeral, having been near-inconsolable during the ceremony. He did not reappear until the next morning, and Haru sat up all night with Rei and Rin, who had done their best to comfort him despite their inexperience. He was sitting at the breakfast table when his father arrived home, exhibiting sore movements and sunken red eyes. Haru had watched him sift through the mail that morning, had watched his face grow pale as he opened the thick manila envelope and the photographs spilled out across the table.

It was unplanned, but they left London that same day. They packed only what was necessary and had the rest sent after them by post. As far as Haru knew, they had not told anyone that they were leaving.

“Haru, I’m so sorry.” Makoto had crossed the room to comfort him and crouched down in front of the armchair, gently holding the watch out in front of him. He passed it to Haru without a word, and Haru looked down at it properly. Makoto gently took his free hand. “Should we put it back?”

Haru had only seen the photo once. He had hardly seen any photographs of his mother, in fact, since her death. They had quickly and quietly disappeared, one by one, until all that Haru had to cling to were the poor portraits he had drawn as a child. His father had probably not destroyed them, but they were hidden away in a place Haru did not know. Haru felt anger rise in his chest and thought about his father carrying this photo with him every day, pinned to his chest like some medal or honor, like a religious man carries a rosary, martyred, it seemed, to the memory of Rima Nanase. Haru recalled the safe guarded by the date his father had met William Stockwell, and somehow, oddly, that was not the part that made him angry.

“We’ll keep going.” Haru’s voice was firm. “It’s mine too.”

Makoto watched him carefully, and then decided he didn't need to ask Haru if he was sure. Haru’s brow had set in a deep glare, but he gave in readily when Makoto pulled him into a hug. He felt Makoto’s strong hand on his back and could hear the low murmur of his breathing, interspersed with the soft rhythm of his heart.

“She’s very beautiful.” Makoto’s voice was a quiet murmur by his ear.

Haru hummed in agreement and closed his eyes because Makoto was also terribly beautiful. He took a deep breath and allowed Makoto’s warmth to heal him; he didn’t want to draw Makoto angry. Eventually, Haru pulled away and passed the watch back to him.

Makoto stood up and swiftly kissed him on the forehead. He moved back to the fireplace and Haru readjusted his sketch book. Makoto held the watch open naturally now, and he seemed far more comfortable than he had when they had tried this earlier. Haru smiled in relief and began to sketch his outline. He made a few short lines and then stopped.

“Are...are you going to look at it?”

“Huh?” Makoto blinked back at him. While he held the watch open at his side he was not looking at it. Instead, he was staring up, looking directly at Haru. “Oh-Oh sorry, do you want me to? I didn’t know.”

Haru blushed. “N-No...it’s fine.”
He felt embarrassed with Makoto watching him as he drew, as ridiculous and unprofessional as he knew it was, and he couldn’t help but flush under the look Makoto gave him. His expression was not quite as inflamed as it had been before, and betrayed a more delicate feeling. It was sweet and sent concentric flutters through Haru’s chest. Makoto’s eyes were earnest, his smile was soft, and he looked at Haru like he held ever star in the sky.

Haru thought about that look at length the whole time he drew and tried to remember where he had seen it before. It was full of warmth and affection, a little bit of pride, and something else, something stronger, an odd element that he had lost access to a number of years ago.

His pencil froze. The sketchbook slid to the floor as he stood up swiftly. “Sorry I...I need to get something.”

He crossed to the corner that held all of his suitcases. He opened the smallest trunk—reserved solely for all his old drawings and sketchbooks—and after a few moments of searching, pulled out a black leather-bound sketchbook from several years ago. It was old and crumbling, and the drawings in it were none too impressive. He had filled its final page a year or two after his family had moved to London, so he must have been around eight at the time.

He tore through the pages and after several moments of searching found what he was looking for. The drawing was above the usual skill level for his age, but hardly significant by any means; the proportions were off and the background was lazy, but one aspect of the drawing captivated Haru’s attention and squeezed sharply at his heart.

It had been drawn in the morning, and he had been sitting beside his mother. She sat at the kitchen table with her legs crossed, clutching a cup of tea between her thin fingers. She was smiling, grinning prettily up at his father who, though intentionally not pictured, was sitting just off the corner of the page, reading the morning newspaper. His mother looked blissful, and Haru could never understand it. She saw something in his father that made her smile like that, that made her love. That was the same look, the way Makoto gazed at him now. And Haru knew, he knew that Makoto loved him.

Haru tore the drawing out of the sketchbook and walked back over to the fireplace.

“Sorry about that.” He sat back down in the armchair and tried to keep his voice steady, “we can keep going now.”

He could tell Makoto was curious, but he nodded and said nothing, he only smiled a bit.

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For Wally the steward, seeing Katsu and William stroll proudly into the Turkish Baths felt surreal in the highest sense of the word. It was almost, he thought as he watched them, like the two boys from earlier had left for a few hours and then returned, suddenly decades older and decades weary.

He stood behind the attendants’ table as he facilitated the transaction. The man with cleanly parted dark hair seemed at first to be a perfect copy of the shorter boy with the stunning blue eyes. Except this man’s eyes were a bitter coal, so dark that his irises were not visible, and he appeared sadder, though it seemed impossible to match the sorrow of the young boy Wallace had seen earlier; melancholy—or perhaps mourning—acted as the very core of this man, and manifested itself in his voice, in the roughness of his hands, and in the valleys cut across his forehead.

Like the second boy, the other man was a champion of physical form, also assembled with the glowing combination of brown hair and green eyes. His features were different, much more western, but he was equally as handsome and seemed just as compassionate, just as polite, though much more
The illusion was only truly broken when he observed the interactions between the two men. When they spoke they were not timid, and displayed only the ease of two people who knew exactly where they stood in relation to one another, and recognized precisely the position they occupied within the other’s thoughts. They held themselves upright like statues, their shoulders set with confidence, like they had achieved their most significant work before reaching forty, and now, having lived all their greatest days, were wholly content to dawdle around for decades, already sure of their place in history.

Wally, who was closely approaching eighty, thought them to be the largest fools of all, even more so than the boys from earlier. He still entertained his theory though, if only because it amused him.

“Back for another dip?”

They looked back at him in surprise, and eventually William’s eyes widened in understanding; he had, after all, been the one to retrieve Haru when he went missing earlier that day. Wally’s comparison made him laugh, but ultimately it was Katsu who answered the man.

“The steam room, if you don’t mind.”

He said it evenly, but there was a trace of condescension in his voice. Wally gathered them each fluffy towels and robes and led them to the changing rooms. Although Katsu thanked him for his trouble, Wally felt that the platitude was not genuine.

In truth, Katsu had only thanked the man because he felt embarrassed for his outburst the first time around, when the steward, under the pretense of looking after his clothes, had attempted to take his pocket watch; it wasn’t even the same attendant—the previous one had been younger—but the thanks hung awkwardly from his tongue.

He took his time in the changing room and attempted to relax, shaking off the embarrassment and discomfort of the last half hour; he comforted himself with the promise of the steam room and the thought of his pocket watch safely upstairs.

In the changing room beside him, William burst into another fit of coughing. Katsu listened and waited. He had recently noticed a new hoarseness in his old friend’s voice and a sudden pallor of his skin. Katsu hadn’t been sure at first because it had been so long since they’d last seen one another, but now he felt certain that William was ill. There was a hollow thump on their adjoining stall wall, as if William had fallen back against it.

Katsu cleared his throat. “If you’re sick stay far away from me.”

William shot back a sarcastic comment, unintelligible through his wheezes.

It was a brief, callous interaction, but they did not often grant one another large gestures of concern—they were only that type of friends in the direst of circumstances. They emerged from the changing room a few minutes later, and Katsu’s eyes immediately fell to William’s bare chest.

“Where the hell is your robe?”

While Katsu’s robe was knotted tightly and a towel hung from his shoulders, William had simply tied the towel around him waist. William shot him a crooked grin.

“I lost it.”
Katsu snorted and turned away from him, leading the way through the Turkish Baths. Stopping in front of their desired room, he turned the handle and steam quickly began to pour across the floor, rolling out in great waves across his ankles. He squinted; it was less like steam and more like a heavy fog, and he couldn’t see halfway into the room. He hesitated in the doorway, but William pushed passed him and was soon swallowed up. He spoke as nothing more than a dark outline in the mist.

“I paid them to increase the intensity a bit.”

“That seems unnecessary.”

“It’s mysterious, I like it steamy.”

Katsu could hear the smirk in his voice. Standing well into the room, William could hear the grit of Katsu’s teeth.

“How very rude!” William instead laid down in one of the recliners, linking his hands behind his head. “I am the one who paid the bill.”

“You’re the one who insisted we come here.” Despite his own objection, Katsu sat in the recliner right beside William’s.

William raised the two glass bottles he held folded under his arm.

“I’ve got scotch and rum.”

“No thank you.”

William shook a bottle at him. “Ah come on, you’re nicer to me when you’re drunk.”

Katsu eyed the bottle and eventually snatched away the scotch. “I’ll try and remember to be mean this time then.” He tipped the bottle upside down and William heard several deep gulps.

That made him smile, and William eyed the rum he had been left with. He opened it and took a brief swig, humming a few bars of A Pirate’s Life for Me.

“Say, do you think we drink too much?”

Katsu looked at him out of the corner of his eye and scoffed. It was the kind of joke they could laugh at with a mixture of dark humor and self-awareness, a perhaps serious problem that they chose to ignore and laugh at instead. William hadn’t been drinking as much recently though, alcohol tended to make him cough more. He only took a few sips before setting his bottle on the ground.

They were quiet for a short while, during which Katsu drank enthusiastically and William watched him from the corner of his eye, planning his words carefully and wondering why he felt so anxious; there had been a time when he was able to confront his friend without much thought at all. The Ice Man—that’s what Clara used to call him, gilded in frost, capable of creating a chill in the sunniest of
atmospheres, on the warmest of days. But William had never thought that was quite right; in his opinion, which he felt was more accurate than most, he had always thought of Katsu as Atlas, forever straining under the weight of the sky without gratitude or recognition. Sitting in the recliner beside him, his shoulders sagged beneath the burden, and William wanted only to relieve it a bit, or carry it himself, if Katsu would ever let him. When he felt Katsu was adequately prepared—which meant fairly drunk—William began with caution.

“Do you really plan to move out to California when we arrive, or was that something you just said to frighten him?”

Katsu looked at him suspiciously, but he didn’t yet have enough of a reason to be angry. “Well, I’m sure you understand the situation, I don’t see that I have much of a choice.” He stroked his chin—something he never did when sober—and began to mutter to himself. “And I would have quite liked to do business with the Rockefellers, but my hands are quite tied. What else can I do? What a wasted opportunity…”

William fiddled with his thumbs, pointedly looking away. “I don’t see how it could hurt to stay in New York for even a little while.”

Katsu was quiet for a moment, but William didn’t look up at him. When he finally spoke, it was with a question of his own.

“Why do you like my son so much?”

William had to stop and consider the question; truthfully, Haru didn’t seem like he’d be much fun to go for a drink with, and he offered none of the raucous conversation William was accustomed to, or favored.

“I don’t know.” It wasn’t helpful, but it was the truth, and Katsu scoffed at him. “He looks like you.” It wasn’t answer to the question, just an observation. William sipped at his bottle. “He’s handsome.”

Katsu looked away from him, his face and neck flushing. William wished he could pursue that thread of conversation, explore that flushing of his neck, but there were other, more important issues at hand.

“But,” he began slowly, “tonight he stood crying in front of me, heartbroken and miserable—miserable because of you.”

Katsu’s eyes flicked towards him.

“I wanted to say that you’re not really a bad person, but then I realized I have no right to tell him that. If he’s never known you to be humorous or kind or affectionate, if he has only ever experienced your criticism, then it’s not my place to try and convince him that those positive sides of you exist.” William wanted to say that he wasn’t even sure if they still did, but his resolve was failing and he looked away. “You’re a bad father, and even though I—” he stopped, and thought better of it, “—and I’m not willing to excuse that.”

Katsu stared back at him with an expression carved from stone. Feeling embarrassed, William fingered the bottle in his hands and after a moment’s deliberation he began to chug.

Behind Katsu’s cold eyes, his thoughts were moving incredibly fast; his memory had been triggered, prompted to examine the last time he’d been utterly told off—it had been a great many years. In his mind’s eye he could see William standing in the rain, his expression darker and more grave than it was now. He stood up.
William wasn’t sure what else he had expected. Katsu began to walk away and he was afraid he had said too much, pushed a little too hard, and Katsu was leaving again, storming out once more—but instead Katsu only turned sharply on his heel and began to pace back and forth in front of the recliners. It appeared, William thought, that Katsu’s relationship with his son was a much more sensitive topic than one would suspect; his composure seemed to peel away with each step and his hands flew through the air as he spoke. He started to repeat himself, his words growing increasingly incoherent, tipping into a rant.

“I believe I don’t need to reiterate to you how difficult it is to look after a child when you’re on your own, especially when you were never actually good at it to begin with. I’ve had to deal with traveling and business, I have had absolutely no help from anyone. And oh yes, you do the whole single-parent thing so well, I’m sure.” Katsu jabbed a finger in his direction. “Because you haven’t had to work! Your business isn’t just struggling as you say, it’s failing. Mr. Astor told me in private that you haven’t turned a profit in years now, you’re living off savings. Still, I’m sure you remember what it’s like—it hasn’t been easy.” The words fell from his lips like rushing water and he welcomed them, welcomed any opportunity to shove blame away from himself. “And where do you get off criticizing me, when you haven’t had to work as hard as I have, you don’t know anything about what we’ve been doing these last several years, you don’t know anything about my son—” his voice cracked “—or me. You don’t know anything, so how dare you, how dare you judge us when you’re nothing but an intruder, a perfect stranger in all regards.”

William was on his feet in seconds, his left hand still gripping the bottle of rum.

“So assuming I don’t know anything—a point which I do not concede—whose fault would that be?” His voice trilled with sarcasm, but it was anger that truly possessed him, and his free hand curled into a fist. “Who left London? Who packed up all their things without telling me? Hundreds of miles away in twelve hours, who left?” He pointed an accusing finger right back at Katsu. “You.”

In the following ten seconds of perilous silence, Katsu realized that he had made a mistake; he had started an argument in which he was undeniably, undoubtedly the guilty party. He was responsible for a great many things and he knew it, and without question this was one of the worst things he had ever done, but up until now he had done a good job of escaping the regret. He had ignored it, the way you blur out the part of your history that’s difficult to look at; he obscured it with lies, covered it in excuses, and dismissed whole years as inconsequential. But those years stood in front of him now; the golden years, the grand days of great men, now looked painfully back him through the veil of well-aged eyes, the color of pine.

William took on the role of persecutor, harsh and merciless, and laid out each fact with the frigid air of a lawyer. In truth, he was simply a jilted bard who knew only a single story, a sad one, his own.

“In the winter of 1899, Sophia and I took a short holiday in London. We were supposed to return to Melbourne shortly after Christmas.” He hesitated, because it’s so difficult to pinpoint a beginning. “And then I met you. Just now you mentioned my financial woes; would you like to know why the business started by my great-great grandfather failed? January 2nd I wrote a letter turning over all fiscal decisions to my investors. I stayed in London for years because of you.”

Katsu found it impossible to raise his eyes from the floor. “I never asked you to do that.” It was a weak defense, because Katsu knew that eventually he probably would have, even if it hadn’t been with so many words.

“By the time I returned to Australia the money was gone, all the assets depleted. Each of my contacts had either died or abandoned the company while they could, there was nothing left. I suppose I was lucky, I got back just in time to watch the bank repossess my childhood home.” His voice was
sarcastic, but his eyes were dangerous. “If you had dawdled in leaving I may have missed it.”

He paused here, and Katsu realized that it was time for him to offer answers. He raised his eyes from the floor, although it was hard. He cleared his throat.

“That was just after Rima had passed—I was obviously upset. I needed time away, time alone, time out of the city.”

William began to shake his head, slowly from side to side. His lips split into a dark grin and his teeth flashed. He didn’t look crazed exactly, but like Katsu’s words were absurd, like they were almost funny.

“You’re so full of shit, you know that? Because I told you—remember after the funeral I told you—I said I would be whatever you needed, I would do whatever you needed, I said it didn’t have to be—it didn’t have to be some kind of way, just as long as we were still friends. As long as I could still see you, that was all I wanted, that was all I asked from you.”

Katsu’s face grew hot. He blinked several times and raised a hand, covering his eyes. William got them almost perfect, those words from so many years ago. He remembered the two of them standing alone on the grass, in the company of marble monuments and private mausoleums—the western burial, to the surprise of many, had been at Rima’s request. The sun was just beginning to set, and he had been crying. The air still smelled strongly of freshly disturbed earth.

William had wrapped him in arms like two strong oaks, warm and bracing like the forest. He had said it then.

I will be your anything. I’ll be whatever you need, it can be however you wish, however much or little you want, just as long as we’re still friends.

He had left it optional, left it innocent, but Katsu had been the one to slowly raise his head, the one that said, Let’s go back to your house.

Outside the realm of Katsu’s memory, William began to yell.

“—and that night! I tried to stop you that night, remember? I said I thought it was a bad idea, I said it was too soon and you insisted.”

Katsu opened his mouth but William shouted him down.

“And don’t say you don’t remember because I know you weren’t fucking drunk that night!”

Katsu bowed his head. Actually he had been, but he had lied about it, because he knew that Will would have refused him otherwise; he was hardly a pillar of morality, but that was one of his rules—no blurred decisions, no drunken consents. His lie aside, Will had resisted him plenty that evening, citing Katsu’s turmoil and emotional state. He yielded eventually of course, folded beneath persuasion of his lips.

William paused. His breath came in loud exhales like a bull, but the comparison faltered in consideration of the strain in his voice, weak from shouting and all his coughing earlier. As he spoke the final line of the story, he became oddly calm.

“You left less than twenty-four hours later.”

And there it was. Their whole history—the end of it anyway—laid out before them. Katsu had never heard it relayed back to him before, had only ever seen it as silhouettes and snapshots in the wake of
bad dreams. There were parts William didn’t know about, like the photographs that arrived the next morning, but Katsu knew that even that would not excuse him for all his mistakes. What could he say? And that was what he said.

“I don’t know what you want me to say.” He stood motionless and waited for words to come to him. When they did, he realized they were nothing other than the truth—it seemed like such an easy thing, yet so hard to admit. He cleared his throat. “I know leaving was a mistake, I knew it immediately. You think I didn’t regret it? Of course I did.” He paused. “I still do.”

He heard William exhale, long and slow, and for the first time all evening there was no fight left in either of them.

“So don’t leave this time.” William took one step towards him, and then another. “Don’t leave again.”

There was plenty of warning, plenty of time between the reach and the touch for Katsu to turn away from him, to push William’s hands away. But he only watched them, watched them slowly raise and reach out, watched them cross the empty space between them. He felt Will’s fingers, strong and reassuring, pressed against the nape of his neck. Katsu leaned into his shoulder and realized that, even if it had been years ago, Will had been the last person to hug him. Katsu said his name, small and incredibly soft, whispered across his skin like cool water.

There was not nearly as much warning for the approaching footsteps outside the room, or the sudden creak of the door as it opened. They withdrew quickly, standing feet apart in seconds.

Wally poked his head into the room.

“You boys okay? I heard shouting.” He frowned. “It woke me up.”

Katsu had turned away, both reeling and embarrassed in equal parts, and the responsibility of a cover fell to William. He cleared his throat.

“Sorry I...I stubbed my toe.”

He saw Wally raise his eyebrows through the steam.

“Three or four times?”

Will chuckled and waved a hand. “The steam makes it hard to see.”

Wally stared dubiously back at him, his expression unreadable. Eventually he decided to accept the excuse, even if he did not believe it.

“Alright, well let me know if you need anything.”

He shut the door and William gulped like a child who had just been scolded. He suddenly felt very tired and sat back in one of the recliners.

Katsu was still standing turned away, his arms crossed and his head bowed. Eventually he spoke, the words hoarse and buried in his throat.

“That was...humiliating.”

William laughed, “Aw c’mon it’s fine, he’s harmless. Let’s just try not to disturb him again. And I did stub my toe earlier, before we came here.” He bent his leg and began to examine his big toe.
which appeared entirely free of any defect, but he inspected it for a long time, keeping his leg bent. The process pulled his towel awkwardly, hitching it up to around his thighs.

Katsu did not realize that he had been staring until Will turned to look at him, his expression deadpan and his eyes dancing.

“See something you like?”

Katsu turned away. He felt incredibly dizzy, and blamed it on dehydration.

“I...I’m stepping out, it'll only be a moment.”

He hurried away and William called after him, “You know there’s a drinking fountain in here!”

Katsu knew, but he needed the air anyway, needed to be somewhere that wasn’t so hazy or humid or hot. It took him a few minutes to find a second drinking fountain because he didn’t dare bother Wally with a question now. The chill of the water was welcome and he let it run off his lips and down his throat, dripping onto his chest. It was so cold that is seemed to slow his frantic heart, and when he straightened up his head felt clear.

He took a wrong turn on his way back to the steam room and ended up at the front, back by the entrance of the Turkish Baths. Passing by the changing rooms once more, something caught his eye. In the room adjacent to his own—the one William had occupied—something white and fluffy was crumpled on the floor. He knelt and picked it up, a smug smile creeping up his lips; it was William’s supposedly lost robe, balled up and hidden in the corner. Katsu decided to return it to him by throwing it triumphantly in his face. Slowly, he began to unroll the robe, drawing out the folds. The smirk on his lips sank, falling down, falling back in time to the worst period of his life. Horror descend on his shoulders like a heavy rain, running cold and sharp down his spine, and ultimately it was dread, not love, that melted away the final icy barrier to his heart.

He stared down at the robe in his hands, suddenly holding it very gently because on the right-hand sleeve, spread out in the shape of a butterfly, was a large splotch of blood.

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Haru set down his pencils with an air of triumph. He leaned back slightly, appraising the drawing, looking over its smaller details, double checking his proportions.

“There,” he said, “what do you think?”

Makoto moved quickly from the fireplace. He had relaxed over the past hour, but still seemed relieved that they were finished and shook some of the stiffness out of his limbs. Haru scooted over so that Makoto could sit down, so that the two of them were squeezed double in the same armchair.

Makoto eyes widened as Haru held the drawing out to him. Makoto had never had a photograph taken, nor had he ever been drawn before, but that wasn’t the part that felt strange. As he stared down at the drawing—it was amazing, certainly, but he had not doubted that it would be—he was hit with a breathtaking feeling that this was the most important thing he had ever been a part of. Looking down at himself, simply the model for what Haru had created, he felt accomplished. But Haru was looking anxiously at him, and he did not have time to work through the feeling. Because this wasn’t for him, it was for Haru; as long as he was happy nothing else mattered.

“It’s incredible, Haru.” Makoto gently took hold of one corner while Haru held the other. “You’re very talented.” He examined it closer, and the look on his own face made him blush. “Was I really looking at you like that?”
“You were.” Haru leaned over and kissed his cheek. He reached for the pocket watch and Makoto passed it readily. Haru leaned his head on his shoulder and gazed once more at the photo of his mother. It was nice, sitting together like that. He smiled. Look who I’ve found mom; isn’t he handsome? Look who loves me.

Perhaps ironically, Haru did not feel the aura of the drawing’s significance the way Makoto did. He only saw it as something he had hoped would comfort him when he could no longer see Makoto, but he now decided that he no longer needed it. He had always been told that his mother had eyes just like him, and he gazed thoughtfully into them for the final time. He believed she would support his decision, he thought she would be proud of him. He gently shut the watch.

“We should put this back.”

Makoto nodded and removed his arm from Haru’s shoulders. Haru carried the watch and his two sketchbooks across into his father’s room and knelt down to open the safe once more. He positioned the watch exactly the way he found it, and then tore out two separate drawings—the one he had done years ago, and the one he had completed not ten minutes ago. He angled his body so that Makoto could not see, and then scribbled a single sentence across the top of the drawing of his mother. He looks at me the way that she looked at you. He placed the two drawings face-down at the bottom of a three-inch stack of documents and bonds, and then quickly shut the safe.

Makoto stood behind him, looking anxious.

“Won’t he be angry when he finds that?”

“He won’t find them until he’s cleaning out the safe after the ship docks.” Haru stood and gazed firmly at him. “We’ll be long gone by then.”

“We-” Makoto’s voice seemed to break in two. “You mean…?”

Haru smiled at him. He did not feel afraid at all. “You know I was thinking, when we’re traveling maybe I could draw portraits for money or even for tips. You know, pull my own weight a little.”

Makoto looked incredulously back at him, like he didn’t dare believe his ears. Haru nodded only once.

He staggered under the speed and force of the hug that Makoto pulled him into. His foot got twisted up in one of his father’s crumbled shirts on the floor and he almost fell, but Makoto held him tightly and they laughed a little. It was dark in the room and Haru couldn’t see Makoto’s face, but he felt the wet chill of tears against his cheeks, cold like small chips of ice. Haru understood the feeling and let himself unravel, standing in the canopy of Makoto’s arms.

“We should go back.” He said eventually.

He felt Makoto nod and they slowly pulled apart, holding hands as they walked back into the other room.

Haru wasn’t quite sure what they should do now that the drawing was completed. Feeling a bit embarrassed, he began to return the furniture to its proper place. Makoto stood awkwardly by the door and fell suddenly quiet.

Haru smiled at him. “Are you okay?”

Makoto, who had looked so happy, so relieved just moments ago, now appeared terribly afraid. He looked at the floor.
“Are you sure?”

Haru stepped towards him and took his hands. “Of course I’m sure.”

Makoto took a deep breath. “I-I won’t be able to—I mean I can’t give you all the nice things you have now, even though I want to. We won’t be able see as many things or go to so many nice places. It won’t be as...as easy, or as comfortable.”

Haru emitted a small chuckle of relief—he had been worried that Makoto regretted extending the invitation to come with him. Haru squeezed his hands.

“Makoto I-I feel like I’ve had everything, anything I could ever want or need, and I still wasn’t happy.” He raised a hand and gently held Makoto’s cheek. "I've seen the world, and now I just want to be with you."

He stood on is tiptoes and leaned forward, pressing kisses soft all over Makoto’s face. The skin beneath his lips flushed brilliantly and Makoto smiled.

“I know it’s probably a dangerous idea…” he leaned his head on Makoto’s shoulder, “but can you please sleep here tonight? I don’t want to be apart from you right now.”

“Of course.” Makoto kissed the side of his head. “Anything you want.”

Haru grinned and stepped back. “You can borrow some pajamas if you want, they may be just a little bit small though.”

He returned to the armoire and withdrew two folded sets of pajama shirts and pants. He held one of them out to Makoto.

“Are you tired now?”

“Kind of.” In truth he wasn’t tired at all, but with the drawing completed he wasn’t quite sure what else they should do.

“Okay...” Haru reddened. “I-uh I’ll go over here.”

He crossed to the opposite side of the room and they changed clothes with their backs to one another.

“Are you finished?”

“Yes.”

Haru turned to look at him and had to suppress a laugh. The shirt fit Makoto decently enough and only appeared a little tight, but the pants ended several inches above his ankles.

“I’m sorry I don’t have anything else.”

“It doesn’t bother me.” Makoto shrugged and smiled. “Usually I don’t sleep in this much.”

Nagisa would have been proud of him, if Makoto had intended the connotation that the line implied, but he meant it innocently, and Haru blushed but said nothing. He quickly moved around the room, turning off all the lights, and then he climbed alone into his bed.

Makoto stood awkwardly at the foot of the bed, as if he was awaiting permission. Haru looked up at him through his eyelashes.
“I’m cold.”

Makoto’s eyes widened. “Do you want me to turn the fireplace back on?”

“No.” Haru looked down at his comforter. “If you could just hold me...that would better.”

Makoto was under the covers and at his side in seconds.

“Sorry...” he seemed to realize all his earlier faux pas and spoke in a whisper beside Haru’s ear. “I’m not so good at this.”

He wasn’t, and Haru was glad. He shook his head. “I’m not either.” He shifted and rested his head on Makoto’s chest, humming softly as Makoto’s warm fingers slid underneath the hem of his shirt and gently rubbed the bare skin on his back. Haru closed his eyes, listening to the faint rhythm of Makoto’s heart. It was the happiest he had ever felt in his life. He had never felt like he could see his life before, could only see a few days in the future, maybe at most a week or two, but now he felt like he saw it all, each year and decade. He saw the rest of his life before him, saw every meal, each smile and holiday.

“Hey.” He suddenly raised his head. “When’s your birthday?”

Makoto’s hand on his back paused. “November 17th. Why?”

Haru smirked. “I’m older.”

“Well I’m taller.”

Makoto leaned forward and kissed him quickly, and Haru giggled against his lips. It was the silly, childish type of conversation he felt they deserved to have years ago. He lay back and watched the outline of Makoto’s face through the darkness. He marveled at how light the world suddenly felt, and then realized that this would be his every night, his every evening before sleep, for the rest of his life; lying closely beside a beautiful boy who loved him.

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The door echoed loudly behind Katsu as it swung closed, sealing him once more into the vapor and dew of the steam room. It didn’t affect him this time though, because his purpose was firm, his mind remained clear. William’s lips twitched upward when he saw him, but fell back down when he noticed the robe clenched in Katsu’s fist. He stood at the end of William’s recliner and raised his hand, holding it out.

“What the hell is this?”

William’s eyes flicked to his face and then quickly away.

“You know what it is.”

Katsu did. During the terribly short period of a single month, he had once seen those same red spots appear on the sleeves of expensive dresses and in the folds of lace handkerchiefs.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

William pouted. “I guess I just didn’t want my illness to be the only reason you started to be kind to me.”

Katsu scoffed. “Bullshit.” He said this with certainty, both because he would never extend kindness
simply for that reason, and because if he did, William would be perfectly happy to bask in any attention given to him.

“Yeah okay you’re right.” William shrugged and gave him a small smile. It lightened the mood only briefly, because the real answer came next. “I didn’t tell you because you’re narcissistic enough to see my illness as a punishment on yourself.”

Katsu swallowed. “That—that’s not true at all.”

William groaned and leaned back in his recliner. “I’ll admit, it does give your life a sort of symmetry doesn’t it? That we should both be taken by the same thing...” His eyes flicked upward, and he looked almost disappointed. “Look at you, you’ve already decided that I’m going to die.”

“I—of course I haven’t.” Katsu’s voice shrunk. “You’re not dead yet.”

“Might as well be, you’re convinced I’m going to.” William stared at him, appraising, searching. “You think it’s what you deserve, don’t you?”

“No. No I-stop that.” Katsu felt frustrated and turned his eyes to the floor. “Stop saying those things.”

William looked away from him for a moment, like he was thinking. “Sorry.” When he turned back he was grinning again. “I think I’ve gotten quite good at executing gallows humor, but I don’t think you’d appreciate that right now either.”

The knot between Katsu’s shoulders loosened a little, and he let himself smile. “No.”

“I just need to find my audience, I suppose.” William frowned. “Sophia doesn’t like it either.”

Katsu let the robe fall forgotten to the floor and knelt down beside William’s recliner.

“What do the doctors say?”

William blushed at having him suddenly so close and fiddled with his thumbs. “A little of this, a little of that, all garbage.” He spoke slowly, as if to gauge Katsu’s reaction. “There’s a doctor in New York who supposedly is very good. He’s the real reason Sophia and I are traveling there.”

Katsu fell silent as he heard this. He knew from experience that the best of doctors can have very little effect on the outcome. William saw him thinking this and cleared his throat.

“It’s not quite the death sentence it used to be, you know. Medicine is getting better all the time.”

Katsu stared blankly into space for several seconds, like the steam could give him instructions, like it held a list of all the things that needed to be done. His eyes snapped upward.

“It will likely be very expensive, correct?”

“Ah.” William returned to fiddling with his thumbs. “I suspect so.”

“Let me help.” He felt more than a little offended when William laughed at him in response. “I’m serious, let me pay for it. It’d be far more worthwhile than most of the things I spend my money on anyway.”

William’s expression was cautious, like he didn’t dare hope.

“Why would you do that?”
Katsu swallowed. “Because I don’t want you to die.” It astounded him that something so grim, so simple, was incredibly difficult for him to say.

“What a coincidence, I don’t want me to die either.” William hesitated, and then posed the question slowly, tilting his head to the side and looking up through his eyelashes. “So you’ll stay?”

Katsu looked affronted, like he hadn’t expected this outcome following his offer. Eventually he inclined his head. “I suppose.”

William’s eyes widened and watered only a little. He looked positively ecstatic, like he’d just been given new life. He made a movement with his hand, like he was about to reach for Katsu again and then thought better of it, folding the hand back in his lap.

“This isn’t how I go, Katsu, I promise you that. Both because I can feel it, that a bedridden goodbye is not the way our story ends, but also-” he hesitated, “-because I wouldn’t do that to you. You don’t deserve it.”

Again, was the word that hung invisibly in the hazy air, suspended between them as obviously as her corpse, but they didn’t dare mention it. With the cage inside his chest newly opened, Katsu felt his heart beat anxiously for the first time in years, terribly fragile, significantly more delicate than anyone would have supposed. It hadn’t hit him until now, the fact that he may have to go through it again, may have to feel cold fingers go limp in his own, may have to watch another pair of gorgeous eyes close forever.

“Here.” William shifted his legs to the side, making room for him at the end of his recliner. Katsu moved and sat next to him.

William seemed entirely at peace despite the turmoil his words had caused, and was busy planning their future in New York. His fortitude amazed Katsu, and he admired him for it.

“Perhaps we can split the fee for a large penthouse and save both our families some money. How many bedrooms? Five or six? Oh but the servants-” He screwed up his face like he was running calculations. “Upper east side or closer to Central Park? Ah but you’ve never been to New York have you? That’s cute, you’re like a child.”

“It may be a bit of an unsavory arrangement for an engaged couple to live together, don’t you think?” He said it to humor William, to cheer him up by mentioning the betrothal he’d sought for so many years, but William’s lips sunk into a frown.

“Oh right, about that, I’ve changed my mind. He can’t marry her.”

Katsu’s mouth fell open. “What? But it’s all you’ve ever wanted!”

William shrugged. “I’ve had a change of heart.”

“But-but-” a horrible scenario suddenly burst into Katsu’s mind, “-no one else will ever offer again!”

“Not my problem.” Will leaned back in his seat, his lips twisted in a wicked smile. “Besides, he seems a bit occupied at the moment.”

Katsu flushed. “So...so I’ll get rid of him somehow, it can’t be that difficult.” He sounded confident, but truthfully had no idea where to begin.

William let out a hearty laugh. “Katsu please, never in your whole life have you ever had anyone whacked.” He smirked. “You’re not even good with criminals! Remember that time we got mugged
in Vauxhall gardens? You called the man a cur and then nearly pissed yourself when he pulled out a knife.”

Katsu’s mouth dropped open, offended. “Oh I’m sorry, did I forget the part of the story where you valiantly saved us instead of hiding behind me? I don’t think so.” He shifted in his seat, as if visibly smoothing his ruffled feathers. “And I certainly was not implying that I’d-I’d have a hit taken out on him—” William started to laugh and Katsu glared, “-what? Is that not what it’s called? I just meant there must be some way to separate them.”

“That certainly is not something I want to be involved with executing, they’re clearly enamored. Don’t you think it’s charming? In a naive sort of way?”

For all the effect these words had on Katsu’s expression, William may as well have been talking to a glacier. He chalked it up as a loss and tried again.

“Even if he was out of the picture, it wouldn’t have worked. It doesn’t take a genius to see that there’s nothing between them—Sophia and Haru, I mean.”

Katsu raised his eyebrows. “I fail to see how that matters.”

“It matters to me.” William’s expression grew very serious. “It’s easy for you to say that because you wanted to be married. Myself and Clara did not, and Sophia is the product of an unhappy, unwanted marriage. She has seen it in action and knows all its faults and trials. I could never force that on her. Really, I’d be fine with her marrying just about anyone as long as she truly wanted to be with them.”

Katsu’s lips sank into almost a pout and he felt annoyed.

“Even a penniless foreigner from steerage?”

“Ha,” William took a sip from his bottle, “well that I’d have to mull over, but probably. I’d try and dress him up, maybe see if I could get him into a few good circles. Rags to riches and all that. Of course I know that’s a bit more difficult in your case.”

Katsu clenched his jaw and then let out a long sigh, one that felt like it had been pent up inside him since he’d stepped foot on the ship. He leaned back on his hands.

“I think you have misunderstood me—I don’t care that he’s a man—” he said the second part in a whisper though, even though they were alone.

William raised his eyebrows.

“-I don’t. I was alarmed at first, yes—” he looked away and muttered something unintelligible, something about casting stones. “The issue is that he’s far too careless, dangerously so. He uses far less caution than—” he stopped, his sentence skidding to a halt like a heavy foot pressed to the brakes. William watched him for a moment, because Katsu had come very close to saying we. He tried again, “-than he should be. He doesn’t understand that this is the type of thing that could ruin us.”

About halfway through William had started nodding, and the agreement that made Katsu feel slightly vindicated. He listened eagerly as William cleared his throat.

“Well, the times are not that different, I wouldn’t dare say that they were. Even so, he hasn’t seen...some of the things we’ve seen. He hasn’t seen the arrests, or his friends standing trial.” Katsu looked confused and William paused; he often forgot that he was by far the more debonair of the two of them, the Beau Brummell, the illustrious dandy. “That said, I know I’ve seen them even more than you have, but you can’t exactly blame him for not understanding.”
“No one survives a scandal like that.” Katsu’s voice grew resigned. “He’s not exactly suited for business, but it’s far better than having to cobble shoes or nail down railroad ties. He’s had no manual training, he has no experience of that sort at all.” He paused. “Nor have I, for that matter. I had to work hard in the beginning, sure, but never like that. We would be entirely unprepared.”

“So tell him that.”

“What?”

“Tell him you’re fine with it but it’s dangerous.” William made a gesture with his hand. “Give him tips.”

Katsu sat motionless, and looked as if he couldn’t decide whether he wanted to laugh or chide. His mouth opened and closed but no sound came out, stunned so completely that basic speech escaped him.

“And how exactly,” he began slowly, “am I supposed to explain the source of that knowledge?”

William shrugged. “Well, you could always tell him the truth.”

“Please don’t take offense but I would rather be trampled to death by a carriage in Central Park.”

That made William laugh, loud and echoing. He held up his hands as if to say, oh well, I tried.

“What was I thinking? That would require you have a perfectly honest conversation with your son, so of course it’ll never happen.”

Katsu glared at him, the words painfully true despite their humorous delivery. He looked at the floor.

“I did something bad today.”


Katsu waited a few moments to watch him smiling, because he knew he wouldn’t be soon. “You found them here, didn’t you? Earlier today? Thank you...” He imagined Will acting as both intruder and confidant, being kind to them, being reassuring. “Afterward—or rather while you were here, I went into his room. I wasn’t looking for anything—just checking it again in case he had come back. But while I was there I...I did something.”

His confession was easy from that point on, and he spoke cleanly, without emotion. He didn’t make excuses, he simply said what had happened. William’s lips sank with every word, and when he was finished William could only stare at him, not revolted but close, disappointed and crestfallen. His voice was a whisper.

“Katsu...”

“I know.” He wrung his hands. “Look, I know I—”

“That’s really fucked up.”

Katsu swallowed. “I know.”

“Everyone makes mistakes, everyone has flaws, but yours are-” William’s voice faded away and he slowly began to shake his head, like Katsu’s flaws were daunting to even consider. “-they’re the worst kind when mixed together. When they all surface at once I...I don’t know you.”
Katsu felt his newly freed heart plummet.

“I think you should apologize.”

Katsu inclined his head. “I...I’ll try.” He knew it was a reasonable enough request, even if it was daunting for a man like himself.

William watched him for a moment longer and then sighed, shifting to the side and creating more space on the recliner. “Come here.”

Katsu scooted a few inches forward, and William didn’t try and touch him, but they both felt a bit better.

“Did I ever tell you what my father used to say, about saving graces?”

“No.”

William clicked his tongue. “Yes I did, that night with the goat and the skinny dipping.”

Katsu screwed up his face; he had absolutely no recollection of such a night. Sometimes he felt certain that William pieced together various aspects of made-up shenanigans simply to mess with him.

“Count Lipton’s goat,” William elaborated.

The name sparked something in Katsu’s brain: they had stolen it. “Oh right,” he frowned, “Tchaikovsky.”

“Precisely.”

Katsu only remembered its name because William had thought it was hilarious; several times that night he had turned to Katsu and asked, Hey, do you think Count Lipton knows his goat’s secret?

“But I digress,” William cleared his throat and Katsu settled in for a long explanation. “What I’m about to describe to you is, in almost every way, the opposite of the hero’s fatal flaw: the sinner’s saving grace.” He stroked his chin wisely. “It is the one element, aspect, relationship or deed that acts as the redeeming component of someone who would otherwise be considered unlikable or unsavory.” He brought a hand to his chest. “Take me for example: I drink too much, I gamble too much, I profit from the underpaid labor of others, I partake daily in the act of sodo-”


William laughed. “No, I was just making sure you were paying attention. So what then? I’m not a good person by any means, but certainly not the worst that they come. Still, with death possibly approaching, it’s an undesirable position to be in. What I need, what men like you and me both need, is a saving grace.”

Katsu looked at him in confusion; not confusion at the concept per se, he just didn’t know why William was telling him this, but he seemed to enjoy hearing himself talk, so Katsu sat quietly and didn’t interrupt.

“In essence, it is one final tally mark in the ‘pro’ column, if you will. Something to barely push our moral character over the edge when we stand just across the gates of death. With it, we are no longer bad men. I am a good father, and that is my saving grace: I love my daughter more than anything.” He paused for just a moment. “Yours was that you were a good husband.”
Katsu frowned, sensing that this was not all.

“But?”

“Well,” William looked uncomfortable, “like everything else, saving graces have expiration dates.”

Silence followed these words, long like the decades.

“It works the same way with people.” Will said finally. “For a while your foul mood and temper were excusable, understandable even, in light of her death.” He looked very sad. “But it’s been too long, it’s been years and people just don’t care anymore.”

The corners of Katsu’s mouth twitched downward and William’s expression softened.

“I do, of course, but I’m different.”

Will looked him softly in the eyes for a few moments, sweet and glowing like honey and butter, but then his expression hardened and the lesson resumed.

“No one is willing to excuse your actions anymore, and that includes me.” He paused. After that his words were quiet, but he got them out. “Rima is gone, and now you’re just a bad person.”

He knew that he was playing a dangerous game with Katsu’s temper, but these were things he had resolved to say. Still sitting at his side, Katsu’s face had gone oddly blank. Eventually, he raised his head and met his gaze. His expression was a little hurt and a little sad. He looked the way William liked him best—honest.

“I’m sorry-” his voice cracked, “-that I left. But I wasn't actually a good husband, and you were the only person in the world who knew that. I couldn’t face you.”

William leaned back in his recliner, as if he had just taken a blow. Katsu had hurt him, it was undeniable and he had felt the pain of it deeply over the last several years, but he understood that it was not the greatest guilt that weighed on Katsu’s heart.

They had talked about it before, had talked about it a lot, in fact. Their timeline, the period between the birth of the feeling and the first touch that held something just barely beyond friendship, all so hard to pin down and precisely identify. It always ended with Katsu saying he had made a vow. He was determined to be guilty, and William was determined to absolve him.

William wanted to speak, to say the perfect thing, but he knew the moment was ruined a few seconds before it happened; he felt the cough rise in his chest, felt it squeezed out of his diseased lungs.

It was particularly bad this time. His body shook and the veins in his temples throbbed to the surface, forming little trails across his red, straining face.

Katsu leaned in close to him, his eyes glossed over, his voice frantic. He kept asking if there was anything he could get him, some water perhaps, but of course William could not answer him. His cough silenced any attempt at speech and he simply shook his head. Katsu could only sit and watch him, could only sit and listen to the decay of his best friend. It was the same feeling of uselessness, the same sense of helplessness that had consumed his life years ago, surging forward like a demon returned to haunt him. He was a monster of men by many standards, but now he sat powerless, defeated so utterly by a few rampant bacteria. It was the type of thing that shattered his world view, and he was reminded again of how desperately he need control, how terrified he became if he did not have it.
“I’m okay.” William’s coughs were fading and the words rose hoarsely from his throat. It hurt him to speak, but it was clear that Katsu needed the reassurance. Feeling exhausted, William leaned back in his recliner. A small bit of blood stained the corner of his mouth.

“Here.” Katsu knelt and picked up the robe from earlier.

“Thanks.” William took it and wiped his mouth on the hem. He let it fall again to the floor and then chased the rest of the blood back down with some rum.

Katsu watched him, feeling miserable.

“Can I get you anything? Would you prefer some water?”

William shook his head. “No, but-” he reddened and looked away, “-can I hold your hand?”

It was absurd, considering how old they were, how deeply Katsu blushed. He did it quickly though, without hesitation, and held William’s fingers firmly in his own, squeezing them in reassurance. A moment passed, barely the length of a heartbeat, and suddenly they were not aristocrats or finance moguls or decedents of blue blood; they were simply two men in their forties, sitting red-faced looking in opposite directions, holding hands. Katsu felt a bit ridiculous, felt embarrassed about how embarrassed the action had made him, but it was sort of pleasant also, that they weren’t done being shy, despite the years.

“Will…” Katsu knew it was pitiful, but he said it anyway. “You can’t die. You can’t. Not ever.”

William was quiet for a moment, and Katsu suspected his condition was worse than he had let on. When he spoke, it was with a surprising amount of strength.

“You know I’ve always believed in you, believed you could be better.” He gently ran his thumb over Katsu’s knuckles. “I’ve always been in your corner, and I always will be. I won’t die.”

He believed it, and Katsu almost did. They talked quietly for a while, making plans for New York that were far too grand to be practical. Eventually, Will sighed and sat forward.

“I’m sorry, do you mind if we go? I’m feeling a bit light-headed.”

“Of course.”

Katsu helped him up and they left the steam room, returning to their respective changing rooms. Katsu finished dressing first and waited just outside, reflecting on all the dietary restrictions and modified exercise regimes that he had become familiar with during Rima’s illness.

He frowned and called out.

“Didn’t I see you smoking a cigar this morning? Are you trying to die?”

William called back to him, and Katsu imagined him shrugging. “Well if I’m supposed to be avoiding things that are bad for me I probably shouldn’t have visited the steam room either.”

Katsu felt like he’d been slapped. “Really?”

“You’re asking if I should have spent hours in a room filled with extremely moist air?” William’s voice rang with sarcasm. “No not really.”

“You’re a child! Do I have to babysit you?” Anger flared in red splotches under Katsu’s collar. “I should throttle you myself and get it over with.”
“Then why don’t you come try it?” There was an edge in his voice, something like a dare, something seductive.

“Ha, nice try.” Katsu smirked, imagining the scene of bare skin and extremities on the other side of the privacy curtain. “I’m not falling for that.”

“I never intended to trick you.” William countered, his voice confident. “I think you’re going to walk straight in here because you want to.”

Katsu’s mouth snapped shut and his face grew very red. Silence descended upon them, setting the stage for their western-style stand-off to determine who had the strongest fortitude. It was a short contest; Katsu emitted a resigned sigh and finished off the rest of William’s rum, because the sudden tightness of the clothes around his waist told him that he had already lost.

“Goddammit.”

He heard William laugh triumphantly as he stepped forward. Katsu brought a hand to his throat as he parted the curtain and began to loosen his tie.

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Haru was awoken by the sound of raucous voices out in the hallway. The room was dark and he couldn’t see the clock on the opposite wall, but outside the window the sky was just beginning to grow light.

The early hour had not been relayed to the two people out in the hallway however, who spoke in slurred voices that easily passed through the ship walls. Haru did not have to strain to hear William Stockwell laughing gleefully as he smacked every door handle on his way down the hall, accompanied by the repeated sound of Haru’s father frantically hushing him.

Haru’s heart leapt into his throat as his own doorknob began to rattle. Beside him, Makoto’s eyes flew open and Haru pressed a quick finger to his lips.

“Woops!” His father slurred heavily on the s. “Wrong door.”

Mr. Stockwell broke into another manic giggle, and their voices passed a few feet further down the hall. Although his father was now attempting to insert his key into the correct lock, it took him a surprisingly long time to open the door. When he finally managed it, there came a sound like a light scuffling in the doorway, and then his father’s voice rose stern and offended.

“You’re not coming in.”

Mr. Stockwell emitted a noise that was part protest, part pout, and part whine. It was wholly unintelligible, but Haru’s father immediately spoke a number of soft phrases to pacify him, starting with you should rest and ending with another time, okay?

Even with their argument resolved, they stood whispering in the doorway for several minutes, and it was a long while before Haru finally heard the door creak shut. He did not allow himself to relax until he heard the heavy sound of his father’s deep snores in the next room.

The danger subsided, he enjoyed for the first time the warmth of Makoto’s body pressed against him, and the charming way Makoto’s messy morning hair fell in odd patterns across his face. They smiled at each other.

Makoto raised a hand to his cheek. “Good morning.”
Haru blushed and kissed him, sweet like cinnamon, warm like summer air. He remembered that he was indebted to Mr. Stockwell for this, and for the night before, and he resolved to thank him privately at breakfast.

He pulled away slowly and looked apologetically up at Makoto.

“We should go in case he wakes up.”

Makoto nodded in understanding and they climbed out of bed. They dressed quickly; for Makoto, this meant simply tying his shoes and throwing on his jacket, but Haru dressed for breakfast, even though it was still a few hours away.

He no longer felt self-conscious stripping down to his underwear in front of Makoto; it seemed inconsequential in scheme of things, and Makoto stood by the bed, politely looking away from him. Haru, entirely undressed, thought about going over and kissing Makoto while he patiently waited, but decided against it. Truthfully, it was a course of action that he desperately wanted to pursue, but he knew it wasn’t a good time. When they both finished dressing, Haru led the way down to the main deck.

The wind blew brisk and cool over the empty deck, and to the east the first few rays of the rising sun were peaking above the horizon. The morning air rejuvenated Haru, and he didn’t feel as sleepy as he should have. He looked back at Makoto who appeared far more tired than he did, but glowed beautifully in morning rays, his hair tossing in the wind.

They walked straight out to the bow, and in the absence of other passengers they were free to hold hands. Makoto’s fingers were warm and strong, and they slotted into Haru’s own with such perfection that he felt certain nothing could ever undo them.

Below them, the ocean was calm. It rippled only from where the ship cut through the water, making the end of each white-capped wave sparkle in the sunlight, shining like a jewel. Haru squinted; just below the surface he saw a flash of gray, the unmistakable curve of fins.

“Look!” He pointed down at the water. “Makoto look, dolphins!”

Makoto’s gaze followed where he was pointing and he gasped loudly as one leapt high above the waves, whistling cheerfully before it re-entered the water. Together they leaned over the railing, Haru severely, Makoto slightly less, watching as at least ten dolphin swam alongside the ship, jumping up and clicking at one another, splashing heavily on their way back down. Only once, Haru felt the cool caress of ocean spray against his cheeks. It felt refreshing and tasted like salt. It made him happy. The dolphins swam beside the ship for a long while, until the sun had risen high above the horizon, and then they peeled away, off into the Atlantic, and disappeared from sight.

Makoto and Haru stayed where they were, resting their arms on the railing with their shoulders touching. Somehow, the dolphins had reminded Haru of his resolution and the tale of the mariner’s compass. He had worked on it for a couple hours the night before in this very spot, had been working on it in his sleep, apparently, because a single line suddenly burst inside his head, rising unrestrained to his lips, whispered softly in the air between them.

Makoto leaned a little closer to him and cocked his head to the side. “Sorry?”

He had not heard. Haru flushed, stunned by his sudden admission. He looked at Makoto, patient and kind, with his face was illuminated, flushed by the sun, and Haru felt sure he had seen him like that somewhere else before. Feeling shy, Haru raised his head and spoke again, only slightly louder, barely more than a whisper, barely audible at all.
“I said I love you.”

He watched Makoto’s crumble beneath his confession, watched his softly lips fall slowly open, watched his immortal green eyes grow wide, round like two huge moons. Haru felt the sudden pressure of strong hands on his waist and his feet left the floor as Makoto lifted him into the air, spinning him once, twice, three times. He was grinning wider than Haru had ever seen him, and when he put Haru down he still held him very close, holding him captive in his dazzling smile. He pressed his forehead against Haru’s own.

“I love you too.”

Haru felt his face flush even though he had known it before. He smiled as Makoto leaned down, his lips heavy against Haru’s own. It was the type of kiss that promised forever. It was wet, and tasted cool and salty like the sea.

They held each other there for a long time, not knowing where the next sunrise would leave them.

Chapter End Notes

Wow i have so much to say about this chapter (how could I not? It's been a year....)

Beginning with the most important; a long time ago (like way back in 2015) I got a couple comments asking me if Rei was asexual. I had to sit down and think about it for a second and then i was like *shoots finger guns* HE IS NOW. I worked really hard to keep it as respectful and accurate as possible, however as I am not asexual myself there is plenty of room for error, so I am absolutely open to criticism and will gladly attempt to rewrite/update this chapter's reigisa scene if you would like to leave feedback on how to make the scene better or more accurate.

The second thing (and one of the most exciting!!), is roughly a year ago I commissioned Natsui on tumblr to draw Katsu and William as Pokemon Gym leaders. I set the image as my phone background as motivation to complete this chapter,......which means it has been my background for 12 months and now im having a hard time changing it OTL

Also since last chapter, Free! Starting Days has been subbed in English!! and we got three new movies announced yay!!! With the addition of these new characters to the franchise (namely Asahi, Ikuya, Nao and Natsuya), I'm trying to decide if (and how) I should include them in this fic without the execution seeming rushed; when I began this fic they existed only in the high speed 2 novelization. HOWEVER, I think I may have thought of a pretty neat way to give them cameos in the fic, but i don't know if that's something people would be interested in? let me know!

Finally I want to reiterate that I don't intend to drop this fic. The length is partially to blame for the wait for this chapter, but also this past year I began taking my first ever creative writing classes (and even won a creative writing scholarship yay!!), but the demand of work for class left me exhausted and burned out and largely unable to work on this fic the way I would like to. Still, I think of WAPP every day and never intend to let it go, even if the update schedule remains abysmal. I hope you enjoyed this chapter, I really think it's one of my best!
Next Chapter: Everyone's favorite old men have a fight during breakfast; eggs fly, injuries occur. After being bandaged up, all our favorite characters have a friendly bracket-style tournament on the squash court.

EDIT (10/30/2017): As of this date, this fic is officially going on hiatus. It is difficult for me to type this, although honestly I should have made this decision a long time ago. The third season of Free! was announced yesterday and I honestly think my time should be spent writing a different, much better makoharu fic; I began this one four years ago and my writing has grown and changed so much since then, and hell, Free! has also changed so much since then. I'm not saying this fic will never be finished (I've had every chapter planned out for years now), but I'm saying it will be a while, and I don't see myself working on it in the near future. I apologize to everyone who has supported me as I worked through this fic and I greatly appreciate all your kind words! Please be patient with me as I attempt to move on to another makoharu fic <3

End Notes

Special thanks to my wonderful beta Candice (shadesofthesea) for editing this chapter!!

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